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## Everyday Ecologies in the Writings of Georgia Authors Tina McElroy Ansa, Melissa Fay Greene, Mary Hood, and Janisse Ray

Rachel G. Wall

*Georgia Highlands College*

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EVERYDAY ECOLOGIES IN THE WRITINGS OF GEORGIA AUTHORS: TINA  
McELROY ANSA, MELISSA FAY GREENE, MARY HOOD, AND JANISSE RAY

by

RACHEL WALL

Under the Direction of Pearl McHaney PhD.

ABSTRACT

“An ounce of action is worth a ton of theory.” –Ralph Waldo Emerson

Four Georgia women authors focus on different but equally important components of life: the natural environment of Janisse Ray, relationships in Mary Hood, culture in Tina McElroy Ansa, and sociological history in Melissa Fay Greene. While the focus of the writings by these authors overlap, their various approaches examined together reveal the essential areas where contemporary society has lost its way. All four argue how not to live by pointing out examples of negative actions and the consequences of human carelessness. Through compelling stories, these four authors show us how to preserve and improve our environment, our relationships, our culture, and our history. Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray are all from Georgia and write about both Georgia and the world from the perspective of contemporary Georgia. However, these four authors do not defend or deny the atrocities of the South but rather attempt to make reparations through better ideas, improved behavior, and a portrayal of southern places and people that acknowledges the wrongs of present and past and brings healing and growth to humans and to the environment. What unites all four authors is their dual purpose and more importantly a dual positive effect. Readers are entertained, but they are also motivated to act more consciously in their own relationships and in their environments. All four authors promote the theme of nurture and care, often by revealing real people or characters who are careless or who fail to nurture.

INDEX WORDS: Tina McElroy Ansa, Melissa Fay Greene, Mary Hood, Janisse Ray

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McELROY ANSA, MELISSA FAY GREENE, MARY HOOD, AND JANISSE RAY

by

RACHEL WALL

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016

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Rachel G. Wall  
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RACHEL WALL

Committee Chair: Pearl McHaney

Committee: John Holman

Randy Malamud

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Office of Graduate Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
Georgia State University  
December 2016

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to my family: my husband Kevin, my son Parker, my daughter Elaine, my mother Marlene Goodrum, and my brother Rick Goodrum. I also thank my friends Jennifer Basye, Kathy Bridges, and Connie Watjen. I am grateful for their encouragement, support, and patience during this lengthy project.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Historical Review

Almost every book or article on the subject of ecology or ecocriticism alludes to *The Machine in the Garden* by Leo Marx. This study, published in 1964, examines the history of the “pastoral ideal” in contrast to technology in America. To explain his own study, the author says, “In fact, this is not, strictly speaking, a book about literature; it is about the region of culture where literature, general ideas, and certain products of the collective imagination—we may call them ‘cultural symbols’—meet” (Marx 4). The first chapter establishes its thesis by a specific reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne (not normally considered the Concord, Massachusetts, early ecologist that Thoreau or even Emerson are) sitting in the woods observing nature in preparation to write. The title of this introductory chapter is “Sleepy Hollow 1844,” and the crux of this reference is that “the event” that becomes Hawthorne’s focus in this reflective piece is the interruption of the train going past, which disturbs his musings on nature. It is interesting to note that Hawthorne was considering nature when disturbed by the sound of the train although his contributions to literature are not nature writing or transcendentalism but highly imaginative Romantic fiction. This idea of the connections between all forms of writing, which can all be thwarted and hindered by technology and “progress,” is central to my thesis.

Indeed, by 1844 the train had become a symbol not only of technological advances but a “favorite emblem” of “the overall progress of the [human] race” (Marx 27). Hawthorne’s exact lines in question are: “But, hark! there is the whistle of the locomotive – the long shriek, harsh, above all other harshness, for the space of a mile cannot mollify it into harmony” (qtd in Marx 5). Marx asserts the gendered tone voiced by the train itself in contrast to nature: “Most important is the sense of the machine as a sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic

satisfaction. It invariably is associated with crude, masculine aggressiveness in contrast with the tender, feminine, and submissive attitudes traditionally attached to the landscape” (Marx 29).

Apparently the other sounds in Concord that day like the sounds of laborers and cow bells did not bother the writer, but the machine disturbed the harmony of nature and the daily work of the community.<sup>1</sup>

Leo Marx traces the history of the pastoral image to reveal that Hawthorne was by no means the first to write about this nature/technology dichotomy. As early as ancient Rome, Virgil was writing about landowners politically displaced to the city and thereby viewing a patch of land where they dreamed of returning as idealistic in contrast to his current abode. For example, Virgil wrote of a landowner character who contentedly sits on the land he has had returned to him, and “the woods ‘echo back’ the notes of his pipe” (Marx 23). Marx points out that the echo is often used in the pastoral as “another metaphor of reciprocity. It evokes that sense of relatedness between man and not-man which lends a metaphysical aspect to the mode” (Marx 23). The idealized image of a green valley in contrast to exile from that land is not new then, but the American complexity with the pastoral vs. technology has become something unique, especially since America itself began as a pastoral idea of an unspoiled land, but that green space is now dwindling due to development. For decades many Americans have adopted an attitude of contempt for urban life and have fled to the suburbs. Marx calls this flight “an inchoate longing for a more ‘natural’ environment” and judges “the result that we neglect our cities” and join the “wilderness cult”(5).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Leo Marx’s *Machine in the Garden* asserts that Shakespeare’s last play *The Tempest* was probably based, at least in part, on America as Prospero’s island. The New World was first described as a new Eden or as a natural paradise abundant with fruit and greenery. Marx argues that “to depict America as a garden is to express aspirations still considered utopian—aspirations, that is, toward abundance, leisure, freedom, and a greater harmony” (43).

<sup>2</sup> Marx continuously refers to “unimproved nature” (76) when he discusses early colonial and travel writers who brought back news to Europeans of the lushness of the new American landscape. This portrayal of the New World

It is this contrast between the natural world and jarring technology that supports Marx's thesis that America has always had a love/hate relationship with technology and that our ages-old idealization of the pastoral conflicts with our interest in progress in a way that is distinctly American in its contradictions. Interestingly, Marx associates the machine (the train in Hawthorne's piece) with the sophistication of art and the complexity of "history" (24). Furthering this paradox, Marx explains, "In one way or another... these works manage to qualify, or call into question, or bring irony to bear against the illusion of peace and harmony in a green pasture" (Marx 25). As far back as colonial times "the forces of industrialism have been the chief threat to the bucolic image of America. The tension between the two systems of value had the greatest literary impact in the period between 1840 and 1860" (Marx 24). Technology (industrial or even our current virtual reality of cyberspace) "brings a world which is more 'real' into juxtaposition with an idyllic vision. It may be called the *counterforce*" (Marx 25).

Marx notes the Hawthorne episode as the earliest known literary conflict between machine and nature in the way we recognize it since the advent of modernity. Marx further argues that after 1844 "a new, distinctively American, post-romantic, industrial version of the pastoral design" emerged (Marx 32). Although a longing for simpler, more natural spaces has existed since ancient times as pastoralism existed in contrast to the stress of the city, machines brought the contrast with the natural into sharper focus. Indeed, at the end of the nineteenth century, "Hawthorne, in seizing upon the image of the railroad as counterforce, is re-shaping a

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as a natural haven (or *asylum*) of purity may have affected the politics of the time that would eventually lead to American independence associated with Thomas Jefferson's "pursuit of happiness" (Marx 88).

conventional design to meet the singular conditions of life in nineteenth-century America” (Marx 32).<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2 Introduction

Four Georgia women authors focus on different but equally important components of life: the natural environment for Janisse Ray, relationships for Mary Hood, culture for Tina McElroy Ansa, and sociological history for Melissa Fay Greene. While the focus of the writings of these authors overlap, their various approaches examined together reveal the essential areas where contemporary society has lost its mindfulness in relationships. All four argue how not to live by pointing out examples of negative actions and the consequences of human carelessness. Through compelling stories, these four authors show us how to preserve and improve our environment, our relationships, our culture, and our history. This study analyzes the literature by these four Georgia women authors in particular but reveals thematic and didactic connections between them with an ecocritical perspective that broadens to a more universal perspective.

Ecocriticism is a relatively new critical field emerging in the late twentieth century facilitating the study of literature’s representation of the natural world. However, the word ecology was coined in 1869 by German zoologist Ernst Haeckel (Howarth 72), and the term ecocriticism was first used in 1978 in an essay by William Rueckert called “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.” Surprisingly, this field that has existed for some time has only recently begun to enjoy real institutional presence in the way of courses and anthologies devoted to literary naturism or environmentalism.

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<sup>3</sup> Although the Hawthorne moment provides the impetus for Leo Marx’s argument in *The Machine in the Garden*, Marx reveals how other nineteenth-century authors, such as Emerson and Melville, juxtapose the pastoral with technology as well (Marx 280).

One major problem of current society is that it seems content to separate fiction from other genres of writing such as journalism and “self help” and certainly to separate literature from the sciences. This compartmentalism reflects our fragmented postmodern society, but perhaps we long to and need to fix this fragmentation by unifying fields and genres for ecological and human improvement. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Nick Carraway notes of Tom and Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*, “They were careless people; they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness” (136). In the roaring 1920s at the height of the Jazz Age, Fitzgerald recognized the carelessness of people with other people’s lives. Other American writers have focused on the carelessness of humans with their environment. Writers Tina McElroy Ansa, Melissa Fay Greene, Mary Hood, and Janisse Ray promote unique themes by combining the study and portrayal of human carelessness to both the physical environment and to human relationships in order to point out the error of society’s current ways. With the advent of a boom in technology such as the internet and smart phones, which should have improved communication, the problem has ironically become worse. This study reveals how the writings of Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray promote better communication across fields of study and better everyday attentiveness in human relationships.

In this anthropocene era where the damage we see to nature has been done largely by humans, Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray provide writing that can be more useful to readers in nature conservancy and help in improving our relationships for better everyday ecologies. Writers whose topic is nature have probably found this subject challenging, but Janisse Ray at least has discovered an appropriate treatment of nature in literature by blending nature writing (and conservancy) with human stories for a compelling genre. Although nature writing is nothing new, this study reveals that the blending of environmental writing with narrative is not

only unique but an important shift in literature. Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray offer writing that combines the environmental and sociological research and activism with the narratives that entertain and nurture. These four authors share the common theme of everyday ecologies, meaning that they all advise a more mindful way of living with other humans and with nature. Each has her own unique ecological focus, but they all contrast care with carelessness to promote the theme of care in human relationships and care for the natural environment.

Most of the writings that Laurence Buell notes in his important book *The Environmental Imagination* are exclusively nonfiction works like Mary Austin's 1903 *The Land of Little Rain* or the poetry of William Cullen Bryant in which nature is the subject. However, Buell points mostly to the fact that most nature writing in the literary canon does not reveal or inspire much in the way of true concern with nature itself because it is more concerned "with the process of seeing, not the objects seen" (74). Even Thoreau who is Buell's central focus often compared his view of Walden to "a more romantically remote elsewhere" (70): "Yesterday I came here to live. My house makes me think of some mountain houses I have seen, which seemed to have a fresher auroral atmosphere about them as I fancy of the halls of Olympus" (*Walden* 3). Speaking of social movements, Buell quotes heavily from Marx's *Machine in the Garden* where Marx notes that "Anti-urbanism is better understood as an expression of something else" but apparently not "about the location of meaning and value" (12). Buell goes on to say that what is most troubling about most writers with whom we associate an appreciation of nature is "that the biota itself is not likely to be anyone's primary concern" (14). Indeed,

The forest of American scholarship is the far more blurry highly symbolic Delta landscape of William Faulkner's "The Bear," built from chant-like reiterated and generalized images: a forest where treeness matters but the

identities and the material properties of the trees are inconsequential. (10)

Similarly, Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* represents the natural environment through "the aesthetics of the not-there" often reducing nature to mere eye candy by describing her nature observations as collecting bits of light and beauty (Buell 73). In contrast, Mary Austin's "protagonist is the land" (Buell 80). Furthermore,

Austin endows her Indian figures with a more substantial self-sufficiency made possible by their powers of adaptation to the physical environment. In fact throughout her book she gives priority to the environment rather than these human-interest stories, which are austere limited to interspersed vignettes. (Buell 80).

Although Austin's focus is the land and biota itself, her work makes for rather dry reading. Unlike the nature writers who have gone before her, Janisse Ray does not privilege the needs of the environment over human needs, but rather, she equalizes human and environmental interests. Ray's values approach is made clear by her method of organizing her first and most important work to date, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, which alternates natural history and human stories by chapter. Ray herself has acknowledged her awareness of the fact that readers would not be interested in a book about "a damn pine tree" (Reading). Therefore, she deliberately organized her book to appeal to the human psychological interest in stories while weaving in alternating chapters on natural history.

Ray is not the only author studied in this dissertation, but this study is organized around Ray's *Ecology* as the concept around which contemporary human life should revolve. The name "ecocriticism" actually means "house judge" (Howarth 69), and this study promotes the idea of nature as home becoming more prevalent in our way of thinking of the environment because

conscientious and careful living is what Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray all emphasize in their writing. The interconnectedness of human, plant, and animal life as well as the land on which we all reside is the focus of this research. The problem is that humans have caused damage in relationships and in the natural environment, and literary criticism has not been able to do much in the way of practical improvement. By choosing their particular niche carefully and by writing about manageable ways to improve daily life, Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray seek to make a difference and can inspire and enable readers to improve what contemporary civilization has yet to correct.

What unites all four authors is that they have a dual purpose and more importantly a dual positive effect. Readers are entertained, but they are also motivated to act in their own relationships and in their environments. Flannery O'Connor famously said, "People without hope not only don't write novels, but what is more to the point, they don't read them" ("The Nature and Aim of Fiction") In Ansa we see the possibility that environmentalism has its limits if it puts humanity in a secondary position to the environment. Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray all prioritize humans but also promote environmental conservation. All four authors promote the theme of nurturance and care but often by revealing real people or characters who are careless or who fail to nurture. Their common themes offer hope for improvement in all living relationships.

The methodology for this study is primarily a close reading of the four authors, but I make thematic connections between them. For instance, I discuss how particular characters are portrayed or how ironic twists of plot affect the reader, but similarities in the works' underlying messages are the main focus. Although I do not specifically examine the writing of Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray with the gaze of Ecocriticism, which takes the approach that women are especially attuned to nature and nurture and analyzing literature through that lens, the works of

these four writers certainly invite an Ecocritical study as well. Since I am working with fiction and nonfiction, genre is an area of contrast. However, I propose that the similarity of thematic purpose is precisely what makes these Georgia authors address a common concern despite their many differences.

All four authors share a similar agenda, and the fact that they do have an agenda is evident.<sup>4</sup> They are trying to effect positive change through their works, and it is change that goes beyond simple entertainment. *Ecology* is the scientific study of the distribution and abundance of living organisms and how the distribution and abundance are affected by interactions between the organisms and their environment. My theoretical approach to studying contemporary texts with an ecocritical gaze enables this study to focus on literary references to changes in natural ecologies and how human behavior affects ecology for all living things. The stories of relationships (fictional or nonfictional) become analogous to natural ecologies presented with sensitivity to expose what else might be affected beyond one's own daily actions. The everyday ecologies studied here are moments of the preservation of natural environments which parallel the themes of preserving relationships between humans.

Earlier American women authors importantly wrote about nature and therefore are considered environmental, and Mary Austin certainly utilized a narrative style in her nonfiction text. Despite Austin's contribution to nature writing, her single-minded focus on the beauty of the land and nature does not truly inspire one to environmental action as Janisse Ray does. In contrast to writers who do not have actual nature as their true subject, Mary Austin's "protagonist is the land" (Buell 80) although today's readers may find Austin's nature writing somewhat dull especially compared to Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*. We must

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<sup>4</sup> Janisse Ray has shared at readings that when she started writing a novel, other writers told her one cannot have an agenda when writing a novel.

respect the way Austin “gives priority to the environment rather than these human-interest stories” (Buell 80), but Ray provides a fresh and unique way of linking humanity and environment because her ecological autobiography is more than human interest. Building on Thoreau’s mid-nineteenth century work, Annie Dillard’s 1998 *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* represents the natural environment through “the aesthetics of the not-there” (Buell 73) often reducing nature to mere objectification by describing her nature observations as collecting bits of light and beauty. Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* won a Pulitzer Prize, and there is no denying that Dillard’s contribution to nature writing and to elevating it to the level of “literature” is important. She asserts in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, “What I call innocence is the spirit’s unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion to any object. It is at once a receptiveness and total concentration... These are our few live seasons. Let us live them as purely as we can, in the present” (Dillard 82). Dillard continues, “The gaps are the thing. The gaps are the spirit’s one home, the altitudes and latitudes so dazzlingly spare and clean that the spirit can discover itself for the first time like a once-blind man unbound. The gaps are the clifts in the rock where you cower to see the back parts of God...” (269). Despite Dillard’s obvious contribution to ecological literature, Eudora Welty criticized Dillard’s writing mainly because it was so self-centered. Welty remarked, “Annie Dillard is the only person in her book... Thoreau’s wisdom had everything to do with the relationship he saw between nature and the community of man” (*A Writer’s Eye* 183), but Dillard’s focus seems exclusively on nature rather than on true ecological relationships between nature and humanity.

Dillard’s approach, style, and themes were significant, but there are other writers who have now progressed farther with the message of ecological activism. Janisse Ray, in sharp contrast to Dillard, is a nature writer who always connects humanity with the natural environment. Her

agenda is to make humans aware of their need for nature and of mankind's responsibility to nature. In *The Prince*, probably the most famous early how-to guide on how to maintain power, Machiavelli's argument structure always showed two alternative ways of leading and urged his audience to avoid one extreme or the other, but if you had to pick one or the other, the one that kept your position of power was the ultimate choice. This selection is a different, often ruthless and unscrupulous kind of choice, but it still involves care. So too the literature in this study advocates applying ecological principles to our human relationships; however, if there comes a time when one element must be sacrificed for the other, humans come before environment, but hopefully we rarely have to make that hard choice.

In some ways, new technology has increased our communication with others and ushered in a higher level of knowledge and understanding of the world, but in other ways, technology has driven us farther apart because the quality of our communication in the form of texting is reduced compared to talking on the phone or sending a letter. Technology certainly gives greater opportunities to raise awareness and to conserve nature, but the increase in cell phone towers and development of cities, highways, and more air pollution are all literally trampling on nature more than ever. Both Emerson and Thoreau (the two most important Transcendental theorists) had some prophetic things to say about materialism and new things that may hurt humanity in the end.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, our current approach to nature is a bit too Disney-fied to be true environmentalism. There are huge aquariums in every big city now, and they may raise some awareness of the importance of preserving wildlife and natural habitats. Unfortunately, much of

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<sup>5</sup> The following Emerson poem could be applied to today's technology-obsessed world as well: "Things are in the saddle/And ride mankind/ There are two laws discrete, Not reconciled- Law for man and law for thing/The last builds town and fleet/ But it runs wild/And doth the man unking."

these expensive projects are purely for spectacle and to increase tourism for the city where they are located. The money and effort would be better spent on conserving the oceans and natural habitats for wildlife in the wild rather than creating these artificial locales and manipulating nature for spectacle.<sup>6</sup>

Randy Malamud argues:

Whatever ‘awareness’ a zoo visitor reaps, I suggest, is undesirable: rather than fostering an appreciation for animals’ attributes, zoos convince people that we are the imperial species – that we are entitled to trap animals, remove them from their worlds and imprison them within ours, simply because we are able to do so by virtue of power and ingenuity.(2)

Malamud goes on to say that “people cannot appreciate an animal’s essence when it is displayed in captivity alongside a hundred others with which it does not naturally share living quarters, in an artificial compound that they pay to enter”(2). Furthermore, “Zoos offer a convenient way to indulge cultural appetites for novelty and diversion; but spectators delude themselves if they believe they garner the experience of animals”(Malamud 3).

Greg Bateson’s whole body of works is seminal to the idea of blending the sciences and the humanities and really interconnecting all research by focusing on the interconnectedness of all life. Bateson’s 1972 *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* reveals his amazing idea to find the intersections between the hard and soft sciences. Bateson’s own education and expertise were

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<sup>6</sup>William Cronon’s research concludes that even mankind’s environmental preservation efforts have manipulated nature. For instance, people have destroyed villages huts and displaced people in order to create a more “natural” environment as a tourist attraction. He asserts that our ideas of untouched nature or wilderness as entirely “other” are “entirely a cultural invention” (Cronan 70).

remarkably interdisciplinary, and so he began to incorporate ideas drawn from biology, sociology, anthropology, and psychology into one inquiry focused on the human mind. In the late 1960s and 70s, Bateson actually taught a class where he attempted to blend these seemingly disparate subjects into one educational quest. Although his students often seemed to have difficulty figuring out what exactly they were supposed to be learning, Bateson was “trying to build” a “sort of science” that was not a “hard science” but to come to a “meaning” (Bateson xix) that included the other sciences. Bateson found that his students “were trained to think and argue *inductively* from data to hypotheses but never to test hypotheses against knowledge derived by *deduction* from the fundamentals of science or philosophy” (xx).<sup>7</sup>

In introducing *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Bateson asserts:

I believe that it is simply not true that the fundamentals of science began in induction from experience, and I suggest that in the search for a bridgehead among the fundamentals we should go back to the very beginnings of scientific and philosophic thought; certainly to a period before science, philosophy, and religion had become separate activities separately pursued by professional in separate disciplines.

The crux of Bateson’s important work is the unique notion of “an ecology of mind,” which he once defined as: a new way of thinking about the nature of order and organization in living systems, a unified body of theory so encompassing that it illuminates all particular areas of study of biology and behavior. It is interdisciplinary, not in the usual and simple sense of exchanging information across lines of discipline, but in discovering patterns common to many disciplines.

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<sup>7</sup> Author of *A Sacred Unity* : Bateson’s ultimate focus was on *epistemology*, which is “the processes of knowing.”

Greg Bateson's idea of blending the sciences for a combined inquiry is intriguing if one believes that literature (stories both fiction and nonfiction) should be a part of this search for truth and application to human lives, particularly for healing not only the planet but also for healing relationships. In some ways, current scientific research seems to have privileged ecology over human relationships. This study asserts that Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray promote natural ecologies and are even more concerned with human ecologies.

In my interview with Janisse Ray, she aptly explains,

An ecology is a system with a lot of parts that work together, usually in synchronistic ways. Fragmentation of this system creates exponential damage. This is true of biotic communities and is also true of human communities. Fragmentation lessens and weakens humanity. That means that our work, as ecologists and as humanitarians, should be toward restoring wholeness. To get there, we have to study and try to understand wholeness, which necessarily is going to ask the question about the human potential for violence – toward each other and toward the earth.

Tina McElroy Ansa was born in 1949 and grew up in Macon, Georgia, which she uses as the inspiration for her fictional town of Mulberry in her novels. Ansa graduated from Spelman College in 1971, the same year she became the first black woman to work for the morning newspaper of the *Atlanta Constitution*. Ansa now lives on St. Simons Island, and since 2004 has hosted the Sea Island Writer's Retreat held at Sapelo Island, Georgia. Ansa's greatest influence was Zora Neale Hurston who also wrote proudly about women of color. Critic Nagueyalti Warren shows the parallels between Ansa's 1996 novel *The Hand I Fan With* and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; there are universal lessons in Ansa's own body of work. Warren argues for Ansa's "feminine gaze" with each of Ansa's heroines undertaking a journey

that “leads her back to knowing herself” (366). Ansa has published *The Baby of the Family* in 1991 and *The Hand I Fan With* in 1996. This series traces the life of Lena McPherson from childhood to middle age. The other Ansa series includes *Ugly Ways* (1993) and *Taking After Mudear* (2007), which follow the early and later years of the four Lovejoy women: three sisters and their unforgettable mother. The stand-alone novel *You Know Better*, published in 2002, revolves around multiple generations of Pines women.

Ansa’s focus is on African-American women in Georgia, but she is known for incorporating magical realism in her novels because they all include ghosts. Sometimes these spirits are good, and sometimes they are evil, but the spirit world adds great depth and interest to Ansa’s works. Beyond just interest, Ansa’s ghosts help her weave a message about women’s value and strength and about respecting self, others, the natural world, and the spiritual world. Like Greene, Hood, and Ray, Ansa infuses a theme of care in a careless world through all of her fiction.

Mary Hood’s fiction includes short story collections *How Far She Went* (1984) and *And Venus is Blue* (1986) as well as a novel *Familiar Heat* (1995) and a novella *Seam Busters* (2015.) Hood’s latest work *Seam Busters* centers on a down-to-earth mother Irene who returns to work as a seamstress in a factory while her son is deployed in Afghanistan. The characters and conflicts of *Seam Busters* augment Hood’s settled theme of care contrasted with the carelessness of contemporary society.

Hood portrays both careless and careful characters who show readers how *not* to live as well as how *to* live full lives by maintaining healthy human relationships and by preserving our natural environment as much as possible. As with the other four writers, Hood creates great beauty in her fiction, but there are also violent conflicts and even tragedies (brought on by

carelessness) in her novel and stories. Hood's theme of care is everpresent, and the works of Ansa, Greene, and Ray share this theme as well.

Melissa Fay Greene gained early critical acclaim with *Praying for Sheetrock* in 1991. She then went on to publish other significant works of nonfiction: *The Temple Bombing* (1996), *Last Man Out*, *There Is No Me Without You* (2006), and *No Biking in the House Without a Helmet* (2011.) *Praying for Sheetrock* is set in McIntosh County of coastal Georgia and *The Temple Bombing* in 1958 Atlanta. Since Greene lives in Atlanta, it might not be all that surprising that Georgia plays a role in the author's nonfiction topics, but Greene uses Georgia in a way that goes beyond mere setting.

Greene reveals the racism of the south and the segregationist government of Georgia in the late 1950s when she uncovers how the Nova Scotia miners, whose stories are told in *Last Man Out*, ended up vacationing on Jekyll Island and how these racial issues even changed public perception of historical events. In speeches and interviews, Greene has spoken about the importance of writing what is true rather than what sells as some so-called journalists write more fiction than truth. Melissa Fay Greene works as a sleuth, researching disasters and other real-life drama to get the story behind them. Greene uncovers the truth and exposes it through hard work and determination. She remains an insightful journalist with important research as well as a compelling literary style.

Janisse Ray began her publishing career with her important ecocritical and autobiographical *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* in 1999. She has also written *Wild Card Quilt* (2003), *Pinhook* (2005), *Drifting Into Darien* (2011), *The Seed Underground* (2012), and a book of poems *A House of Branches* (2010.) Ray studied writing at the University of North Georgia in

Dahlonge, and she is known as a nature writer and environmental activist. She resides in south Georgia with her family including a niece she and her husband Raven recently adopted.

Ray focuses on processes used today for commercial development of the land that destroys the natural environment and for food production, which these distributes GMOs in abundance that destroy nutrition in our food. Ray exposes these destructive processes, which negatively impact the interconnectedness of humans and nature. Ray's works, like Thoreau's, are usually a blended genre: nature writing coupled with human stories but all nonfiction (except for her collection of poems), but her message is always similar: people need to be aware of what we have been doing to the land and to living creatures, and we need to stop ruining the earth and nurture it instead. Ray also writes about human relationships, but her priority is the land and everything living on the land. Therefore, Ray shares a thematic thread with Ansa, Greene, and Hood.

All four women authors use Georgia as the central setting from which they reveal a universal theme of the importance of care for other humans and for the natural environment. This study analyzes individual texts by each author and shows how all four authors point out human carelessness but write to promote the need for greater care with each other and with the natural environment on which humankind depends. Through a wide variety of genres and subjects, Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray teach readers about everyday ecologies to improve relationships between all living things.

Images of care in contrast to carelessness permeate the texts of all four authors to promote the theme of care. Greene is careful to research and preserve accurate history and culture. Ray is careful of the land and its human and non-human inhabitants. Hood highlights the care of people and relationships as does Ansa. In addition, Ansa brings in an appreciation of the

spirit world, and all four emphasize women and the south primarily. Greene and Ray both use fictional techniques to make their nonfiction come alive, whereas Hood and Ansa write realistic fiction by relying on the techniques typically reserved for nonfiction, such as accurate reflections of contemporary culture. Therefore, my methodology of ecocritical study is confluent with my close reading and thematic study because all four authors share so much in place, purpose, and result.

This study argues that these authors examine human ecologies and inspire improvement in human relationships just as conservationists study natural ecosystems and choose to leave them to the wild or to fix anything people have damaged. Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray promote such care in their works of fiction and nonfiction to inspire humanity to make better choices for all ecologies every day. The academy today is more specialized than ever; scholars study for years on niche issues, works, experiments, and analyses. This study analyzes the literary works of four Georgia women authors who emphasize “wholeness” for humans and for the natural world. This compartmentalization in academia does not promote wholeness and perhaps should begin to take a more holistic view of research and writing with an agenda to improve society and the environment. It might be some time before the hard sciences bridge the gap between science and the arts, but these four writers show that literary arts have the power to improve the world.

## 2 CARE VS. CARELESSNESS IN MARY HOOD

Georgia author Mary Hood has won several honors for her short stories as well as much praise for her novel *Familiar Heat*. Before his death in 2016, Pat Conroy wrote the introduction to Hood’s *A Clear View of the Southern Sky*, which won the Townsend Award in 2016. Since the 1980s when Hood first published her fiction, there has been limited critical scholarship on Hood’s works despite the number of times her works have been anthologized. Fortunately, critics

such as Jan Nordby Gretlund have discovered Hood's promise as a subject for critical attention, and editors like Rosemary M. Magee have found Hood's views as a Southern woman writer worthy of inclusion in *Friendship and Sympathy: Communities of Southern Women Writers*. It is difficult to account for the limited scholarship on Hood's work or to make sense of the irony that Gretlund, of Denmark, has been studying Hood while many in her home state have never heard of the author. Although Hood has not been as prolific a writer as Lee Smith or Gail Godwin, her handful of works deserve further examination. In addition to her fiction, Hood is clearly interested in Southern history and in nature preservation. Her essay collected in *The New Georgia Guide* raises questions which are also the subject of many of her stories. Her essay, entitled "Tropic of Conscience," significantly notes: "We no longer know paradise or wilderness except as a myth" (105). Reviewers have noted her concern for the changing environment, and these interests blend well into Hood's fiction because of their link with human connections to one another. A major theme that ties her varied stories and her novel together involves a revelation of how our carelessness with what we value most often becomes our own undoing.

Hood's fiction reveals fragmentation with a longing for the way things ought to be, not just for the way things used to be. Rather than perpetuating the fragmentation and incoherence which post-modernity has tolerated if not recommended, Hood's fiction is more closely aligned with modernism's exposure of such fragmentation while lamenting what has been lost. Her works suggest that our own carelessness with what we value most causes contemporary fragmentation as evidenced by the breakdown of marriage, family, friendship, and faith. Indeed, "Mary Hood's stories imply existential and social questions: in the flurry to compete, have we wasted our resources and compromised our ideals" (Aiken 29)? Although her stories are most often set in the South, Hood's characterizations and themes remain applicable to individuals of

any region because she explores human struggles to align our everyday lives with our lofty worldviews, and this dilemma seems distinctly postmodern. To serve her positive thematic purpose, Hood often makes her characters deliberately careless with the natural environment, with others, and with themselves. However, Hood's crafting of the stories and much of their content reveal the value of acting carefully. She often creates characters who take great pains to achieve some good in one area of their lives but who simultaneously neglect a family member, spouse, or even themselves.

A good example of Hood's use of characterization to promote her theme of the importance of care is found through her portrayal of the extreme carelessness of one character in contrast to the forethought and care of another. Lovingood, in "Lonesome Road Blues" is extremely talented and precise as a musician but careless with his health and his relationships with others. Hood's "seamless connections between narrative voice and characters" (Yow 136) allow readers to see the meaningful contrast between Lovingood's professional care and his personal neglect. The third-person narrator offers Lovingood's philosophy of quality music: "This was the real thing. Authentic, no electric instruments, no drums, no pop undertow dragging you from the fields toward the city, just clean, clear bluegrass, classic" (5). Still, the "genius" musician takes poor care of himself, not sleeping or eating well and maintaining a look and attitude "as though he didn't give a damn" (*How Far She Went* 6). Artists stereotypically do not take care of themselves and go to extremes while on the road, but Hood's story reveals how important that balance between art and the health of the human being is.

In "Lonesome Road Blues", Hood sharply contrasts the female character whose namelessness also suggests the idea of carelessness with the touring musician Lovingood because this woman has clearly planned her offer of an evening at her home with a home-cooked meal

for this stranger well in advance of Lovingood's concert. She had laid out the towel, soap, and razor for him ahead of time without even knowing if this celebrity -- a stranger-- would come with her. While he naps and then showers, she proceeds to cook him a meal requiring seven different pans to stir, and later to wash, as well as two pies from which he can choose. She launders his shirt and lets it dry outside, intending to iron it before his evening concert. As he leaves, Lovingood's thanks sounds disrespectful under the circumstances: he calls back, "Thanks for the groceries" (20), vastly understating any appreciation for the feast he has just enjoyed. As she delivers him back to the concert hall, he says, "Take care of her, boys" (Hood 20). His curt speech shows that Lovingood knows he should appreciate and return the care this woman though a stranger has given to him: a moment of connection and humanity of which his current life is devoid. Hood's theme is made clear through the heartbreaking ending when the woman hears Lovingood using the payphone to call a girl whose phone number had been handed onstage. The reader may note Hood's careful attention to detail because the note was passed to Lovingood at the end of the song "False-hearted love" (*How Far She Went* 5). The contrast between one stranger and another is startling. Both women apparently have a romantic interest in Lovingood after hearing him sing, but only one was imaginative and courageous enough to risk not just speaking to him but also preparing the feast and the other preparations at her home without any assurance that he would accept.

The reader, like the nameless woman who had planned and cooked and washed for this man, feels utterly disappointed at his ingratitude. In fact, Lovingood's calling the girl from the audience, whose "brightly painted" (6) youth is seen in the story for only a moment, seems like a slap in the face for the woman who had taken a chance on human connection, and the reader feels the sting of the insult. Unlike the girl who had simply sent up a note onstage, the woman

that readers have grown to respect was not thinking just of herself but of what would truly help Lovingood. She didn't want to impress him with flash or excitement; she wanted to meet the needs that she recognized in his soul -- the needs of rest and comfort and sustenance.

Hood's portrayal of Lovingood as someone who tastes what is real and true for a moment but then ultimately rejects it is realistic in postmodern society. Such a blatant rejection of goodness shocks the reader into realizing Hood's thematic purpose in the story. Our connection to people, not our independence from them, is what matters. Postmodern society tells us through social media and other forms of media that it is much more exciting to experience temporary romantic encounters than to have to work at a long-term relationship, but Hood's works refute such advice by showing us that such lives feel meaningless and empty. In most of her works, Hood points out everyday human selfishness in order to startle the reader into examining what we too have sacrificed for stubborn pride.

Hood illuminates a similar self-destructive carelessness in "Solomon's Seal" where the husband and wife are careful with their individual hobbies of gardening and raising dogs but careless with their married relationship. Denmark critic Jan Nordby Gretlund observes of this couple that "they either do not speak or speak both at once without listening" (258). The woman is deliberately "holding out" the good things intended for their married life: good china and fine quilts she still keeps in her "hope chest." Hood describes in great detail the lengths to which each character will go for his or her respective selfish interests at the expense of their relationship with one another. Another nameless "she" appears to be the central character, but readers do not side with the wife because she suppresses and throws away her own happiness just to get revenge on her husband who doesn't even realize she is holding out everything good to spite him. Carl spends more time with his dogs than with her, but instead of trying to understand his individual

interests and sharing them with him, the wife takes up gardening obsessively. Her hobby then takes up all of her time and all of their physical space so that Carl is left alone with the dogs. Then he blames her for letting the dogs die when he is sick, so he divorces her to her shock. Hood explores how we do not realize or appreciate what we have until it is gone by having the woman obsess over her husband once he has moved out. Hood does not privilege one gender over another because here she clearly puts the burden of care on both the husband and the wife. In “Solomon’s Seal” the woman is just as capable of self-destruction through carelessness as is the man. Here also we see that although gardens are wonderful, we should not maintain our gardens at the expense of someone else’s beloved pets and should certainly not prioritize gardens over humans and human relationships.

One of Hood’s few stories with a happy ending, “A Man Among Men” deals with three generations of males who struggle to communicate their care to other family members. The central character, Thomas, is stuck in the middle of the generations since his father pays him little attention, and now he is struggling to show love for his wayward son. Paula Yow aptly notes, “As though by legacy, Thomas enforces his emotional isolation by refusing to love his own rebellious son, Dean” (137). Hood’s exploration of the common problem of carelessness within family relationships is here again, but this time, her conclusion gives hope. Thomas and Dean can make a fresh start now after the boy’s grandfather is buried. As the rebellious son Dean stays by the grave and brushes dust from his father’s shoulders, his father begins to cry, not only healing the wounds of the past but also symbolizing a future relationship with his son that will finally be close. Even on this positive note, Hood’s subtlety never allows an overwhelming victory; her power to make the reader learn important lessons depends on her ability to make us

long for the best in our treatment of others. Hood said in an interview, “That would be my democracy; that would be my religion: Love one another” (quoted in Gretlund 79).

Hood’s second collection of short stories, *And Venus Is Blue*,<sup>8</sup> begins with “After Moore” in which Rhonda and her children are explaining their life with Moore, her husband, to a family counselor. The first page of the story recalls the first time Rhonda saw Moore, and the description of him prepares the reader for his paradoxical combination of care and carelessness with the words “his calculating, damn-all eyes” (*And Venus is Blue* 3). Immediately, we see that as with so many of Hood’s characters, Moore doesn’t just forget to be careful with his family; he is deliberately careless about everyone but himself. For example, “When Moore slept in on Saturdays, the duplex had to stay holy dark, Sabbath still, and no cartoons” (*And Venus is Blue* 5). This description of Moore’s weekend requirements for the household is clearly satiric, mocking his selfishness with religious language. On the other hand, Moore is one of Hood’s most careful characters when it comes to his image. In fact, when Rhonda takes his car, which later has to be towed, Moore is obviously more concerned about the Volvo than with his wife and children (8).

One of Hood’s most unique characters, the title character of “Something Good for Ginnie” is sexy, has lots of potential, but is spoiled and, most of all, careless with others. Hood portrays Ginnie as quite a disturbing character who rather monstrously lures boys to her and then bullies them, and the reason seems to be her spoiled upbringing. Joy Farmer characterizes this story as “parents held hostage by their offspring” (91), and surely Hood addresses a contemporary parenting issue in this piece. Indeed, “Something Good for Ginnie” begs the question: What kind of children are today’s parents raising? Such stories prompted David Aiken to ask: “Is evil born or made?” in his article “Mary Hood: The Dark Side of the Moon” (25).

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<sup>8</sup> *And Venus Is Blue* is the title of the story collection but also the title of a novella.

Successful parenting takes great care, care that is much more difficult than letting children do whatever they wish. It takes courageous care to risk saying “no” to a young person. Hood’s “Something Good for Ginnie” contrasts such human care and carelessness in relationships in an ironic way that inspires readers to learn from someone else’s mistakes and from their own. Taking the time and care and patience to deny children what they think they want is difficult for parents, but if parents do not make the effort, children will grow up to be careless with the world and with their own lives. The leniency parents believe is care will look like carelessness in the future, but it will be too late to change anything by then. Hood clearly struggled with the creation of Ginnie. In 1985 after finishing this rather shocking story, Hood worries,

I have named my story ... ‘Something Good for Ginnie.’ But I still don’t know about the thing. I figured it last night—what my nausea was. Not at the silliness or the sex; there is a challenge in making it interesting. It is in her destruction of the ones she ruins. Last night I woke and considered it, and it came to me why—now I know—Steinbeck sickened when he had to write about Cathy in *East of Eden*. It is like deliberately introducing parvo virus into the kennel, for the sake of making some news. Then I thought: aha! But parvo virus *is*. I didn’t invent it (rumors to the contrary are false.) Ginnie *is* (more or less) (“I Seem” 93-94)

Such statements reveal Hood’s painstaking care in her character portrayals as well as her great sense of humor. In Ginnie, Hood represented extreme carelessness that unfortunately does exist as an antagonist in the world, but Hood uses it as a cautionary tale.

In both *Familiar Heat* and the story “Hindsight” Hood explores the damaging contradiction of care versus carelessness within certain codes of faith. “Hindsight” addresses Catholicism but in a more obviously satiric way than in the novel. The story “Hindsight” from

the *How Far She Went* examines what can happen when people blindly follow a system (religious or otherwise) without thinking or deciding matters for themselves only. The nameless “she” in this story is married to a man who is incredibly careless with her heart, but she is told over and over by the church that she cannot divorce and that it is her fault, so she must fix her marriage. Finally, after fulfilling her sisters’ elaborate plan to get a divorce out of the country, she is able to legally do what she believes is a reasonable human right under the circumstances. Hood’s narrator is blatantly bitter toward the church’s strict adherence to religious law, here. Although it is true that “beneath the surface of her stories lurks a powerful spiritual dimension” (Farmer 91), sometimes Hood’s tone is clearly critical of aspects of faith which may prevent us from realizing what is also important. Hood’s theme in both *Familiar Heat* and “Hindsight” seems to be that it is ludicrous to forget a person’s humanity because we are so busy remembering every “jot and tiddle” of religious law that is supposed to be intended for the good of the person. This bitter tone toward particular challenges of faith speaks thematically to certain issues in Hood’s novel, but the religious criticism is more palpable in “Hindsight.” Indeed, Hood points out the daily hypocrisy of everyone who wants to be a fool for love (like Vivian Lockridge of the novel) but who foolishly throws love away so as not to look foolish.

In “Nobody’s Fool,” a story about the old man Floyd and his daughter, the dogs are treated with more respect than is Floyd, and Hood’s narration enables the reader to feel his hurt and resentment as if it were our own. Floyd’s adult daughter, Ida, is one of Hood’s most careful characters, perhaps to the point of obsessive compulsion. She constantly uses wet wipes for cleanliness, mostly to avoid germs, but Hood juxtaposes such careful actions with her exaggerated disregard for her elderly father. In fact, Ida’s careful attention to daily detail is performed at the expense of attentiveness to her father. For example, she blames him for letting

the dogs escape in the first place instead of forgiving what was clearly an accident. When the dogs finally come home, Floyd looks out to see their joyous reunion: “Ida was out at the fence welcoming them, pouring red-eye gravy on their chow, talking to them like children past nine o’clock that night” (50). One person’s misplaced values can damage another; referring to Floyd, the narrator says, “He couldn’t have gravy. Ida read where it was bad for his heart” (50). That Ida’s nagging could cause Floyd to run off is clear. When he returns at the end, it is not clear whether things will get better between them, but there is a sense of hope in the air.

In Hood’s story, “Virga,” from the collection *A Clear View of the Southern Sky*, Hood explores new literary territory with Native American subjects, and these characters also struggle with careless behavior. Adolescent Ada finds it difficult to be obedient to her demanding father and to have her own feminine identity. With the help of an older woman, Maxine, she is careful to prepare and carry out personal hygiene routines that conflict with her father’s ideal to maintain his Native American cultural mores. As with the couple in “Solomon’s Seal,” the individual *carefulness* of the characters in “Virga” to fulfill his or her own philosophy of personal survival results in a *carelessness* toward each other. Ada’s father risks destroying his daughter’s will and self esteem with his obsessive quest to keep her from the excesses of American society: shampoo, feminine products, and perfume. Such compelling stories keep readers wanting to know more about these characters, and such a reader response reveals Hood’s care in managing her plots without tidy or sugary endings. Since readers may wonder what will happen to characters whose carelessness hurts themselves most, readers are more likely to attempt to be more careful in their own lives.

Hood’s novella “And Venus Is Blue” reveals the carelessness motivating suicide by radically altering the reader’s perception of plot and time. Suicide is often carefully planned but

is an act that demonstrates a careless disregard for the effect it will have on others. Indeed, a father's suicide haunts the memory of all the past, so this tragic event is not simply fixed in the moment it occurred. By her portrayal of characters who the reader respects for their meticulous attention to detail in some areas, Hood emphasizes the damage caused by carelessness even further. James, Delia's father has committed suicide before the story begins. However, the narration flashes back to a time prior to the suicide from the perspective of Webb, who works for James and who later marries Delia, trying to figure out if there had been any clues—if James had planned to end his life the day before. This section gives the reader much insight into James' character. He is presented as down-to-earth, plain, and simple but remarkably talented at roofing. His workers stand back to watch him work with speed and perfection, traits which no one else in the story seems to possess. James encourages Webb in the painstaking completion of this project later, and he fulfills all of his own responsibilities until late before going home.

The subsequent sections of the novella gradually reveal another side of James, the side that makes him capable of killing himself, but these sections are told as if they happened earlier in real time. Hood structures this story as a reenactment of the suicide told as if it happened in all the major stages of his daughter Delia's childhood even though the first section is told when Delia is grown. Although Hood "challenges the notion of linear time" in a "praiseworthy" way (Aiken 31), it is what she does thematically with such experimental techniques that is noteworthy. The structure not only stands alone as innovative, but the structure also symbolizes the negative impact of suicide on the lives and memories of those left behind. "And Venus is Blue" suggests the innovative idea that one human choice can not only impact loved ones so wholly but also that even the positive memories of those left behind can turn bitter as a result.

Hood's style and often innovative structure or unique presentation of time serve to parallel and therefore promote her theme of care vs. carelessness. "And Venus Is Blue" was published in 1986 along with a collection of Mary Hood's stories. The postscript of this final longer story reads, "Imagine a photograph album, with a bullet fired pointblank through it, every page with its scar. Murder attacks the future; suicide aims at the past." The chapters are divided as Daybreak, Dawn (Delia, Age Two), Morning (Delia, Age Four), Forenoon (Delia, Age Nine), Noon (Delia, Age Fifteen), Afternoon (Delia, Age Fifteen), Evening (Delia, Age Sixteen), Night (Delia, Age Seventeen), and Midnight. To structurally and thematically reflect the devastation of suicide, Hood has Delia experience the loss of her father in multiple stages of her young life growing up, instead of just having Delia remember the tragedy at various moments through her youth and beyond. The presentation of time (past, present, and future) being so unalterably affected by suicide (individual's choice/decision/selfishness) connects to the theme of carelessness. The structure of this novella verges on science fiction, and the effect of the experience of alterity it produces is interesting in itself. However, its impact for theme/message is even more unique and important by making readers say "Oh my God" as Hood's editor Stan Lindberg is said to have exclaimed when he first read this powerful novella (*Georgia Review*).

Hood infuses the beginning of the novella with foreshadowing: "Webb said, 'If you was to fall dead, I know where the plats are and how to break it to the bankers too.' Laughing. James laughed too. They laughed!" (215). James was a caring father who respected his daughter as a person even when she was small; "he didn't believe in whipping...kneeling to converse eye to eye" (228). When James had to leave his daughter in the care of others, he would always encourage her by saying "In only 8 hours from now" they would be together (229). In contrast to Delia's father, others in her life "had already taught her fear, peril, superstition" (231). Delia's

mother Toni is careless of relationships even with her husband and daughter, but both James and Delia are careful until James gives in to hopelessness and kills himself, not realizing how his suicide would devastate his daughter throughout her life and even impact her view of the past (243).

In “Place in Fiction” Eudora Welty notes, “Fiction does not hesitate to accelerate time, slow it down, project it forward or run it backward, cause it to skip over itself or repeat itself.” Time can also “set a fragment of the past within a frame of the present and cause them to exist simultaneously”(97). “Time in a novel is the course through which, and by which, all things in their turn are brought forth in their significance –events, emotions, relationships in their changes, in their synchronized move toward resolutions” (Welty 99). Hood’s novella fulfills Welty’s view of the dramatic possibilities of the novelist’s use of time. Hood’s presentation of time reveals the all-pervasive negative impact of one action on another person so that even that person’s past is marred.

There are several parallels between Janisse Ray and Mary Hood : the structure of *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (alternating human stories with information about pine trees and animal species) and of “And Venus Is Blue” (portraying suicide as if occurring in each part of the survivor’s life) mimics the theme of care vs. carelessness almost in an allegorical way. Ray’s *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* promotes a similar concept of personal stories being intertwined with environment. So may our personal human stories be structured as Hood’s novella, making our every action conscious of the impact it has on others and on the environment.

When Mary Hood published her novel *Familiar Heat* in 1995, she was already an established short story writer with two award-winning collections, *How Far She Went* and *And*

*Venus Is Blue*. Unlike the early short stories, which were set primarily in Hood's Georgia surroundings, *Familiar Heat* takes place on the Florida coast where most of the main characters have immigrated to the small community of Sanavere. In an interview following the novel's publication, Hood admits, "When I go back to the coast now, I have a strong sense of being where I really belong" (Gretlund 69). Hood majored in Spanish as an undergraduate, and she seamlessly weaves elements of Hispanic cultures into her novel.<sup>9</sup>

*Familiar Heat* centers on Faye, a young woman with a good head on her shoulders who falls in love with deep-sea fishing Captain Vic Rios despite her mother's warnings about his "devil in a white shirt reputation" (7). Readers are spellbound as Faye survives one life challenge after another – kidnapping, rape, marital problems, and her mother's cancer. After a paralyzing car accident, Faye must re-learn the basics of life like how to walk, but her memory loss is even more dramatic. The Catholic faith plays significantly in this novel; sometimes the church provides comfort for Faye and the other characters, and sometimes the priests do not seem understanding enough since they have problems of their own. All of the characters' tragedies and successes are intertwined in the small Florida community. Although they experience many happy moments, Hood's characters often learn their lessons best through the difficulties they overcome.

A closer analysis of the relationship between Vic and Faye before everything changed for their marriage reveals underlying problems from the start despite a great passion. An important concept of care vs. carelessness is represented by "Cupboard Love" which comes from the novel's dedication quote. This concept of cupboard love relates to the care vs. carelessness theme and ultimately symbolizes the conflict that reveal Hood's theme of love and redemption.

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<sup>9</sup> Hood has also lived in many inland Georgia communities for short stints working as writer-in-residence for universities such as Reinhardt and Mercer.

Nature has been careless at the beginning of Mary Hood's novel. Although *Familiar Heat* soon gives an overview of Faye's first two decades of life with her overprotective but realistic mother and then her whirlwind romance and wedding with Vic Rios, the true conflict of Hood's novel begins with the beached whales. The book's second sentence reads, "The Captain was away, far out at Stream, a day beyond the horizon" (1). Hood's narrator carefully continues in the first paragraph to explain how the heroine of this novel fits into these circumstances. The Captain has left her a list of things to get done while he is gone: "to ask, to pay, to tell, to look for, to clean, to find, to write, to cancel, to call---that sort of list, a wife's list"(1). Hood craftily makes the reader resent the captain because even though there is something romantic about the one woman in a man's life to get such a list, the manner in which it is given and what is expected seem chauvinistic. Right away, the fact that "he has underlined" (1) getting to the bank makes readers feel that there is a power struggle in this relationship and that Faye is not an equal partner. As if in subconscious rebellion of her subordinate place in the marriage, Faye saves the banking for last after completing all the other required tasks forgetting that it is Saturday when "the bank closed precisely at noon" (1).

The third paragraph offers further hints of power issues since Faye and Vic's Florida home is described as "the big house the Captain had built Faye" (1). Here again, the reader's initial reaction is to feel a bit envious of someone whose big house is built for her as if she is really special just as she should count herself lucky to do her husband's bidding. On second thought, readers intuit that this statement reveals that Faye was not involved in the choosing or development of the house during construction and was not considered a financial partner in their home. Hood's careful wording not only concentrates a great deal of meaningful background into this brief introduction, but such precise implications also foreshadow a time when Faye will not

even remember that this is her house, heightening the irony that her marriage is something distant from her even at the start.

Significantly, Hood moves to describe the whales stranded on the beach, an event which draws a crowd and distracts Faye from getting to the bank. Even though readers don't hear the rest of the story until after the narrator flashes back to give of an overview of Faye's early life with her mother and the day she falls in love with Vic, this initial section builds up to the novel's central conflict but is an important expositional conflict in its own right because of Hood's classic ability to juxtapose human care with human carelessness. Faye is conscientiously trying to make her way to the bank to fulfill her obligations while people disrespectfully stare and poke at the dying whales. Indeed, even children finally start cutting chunks out of the still living whales as Faye protests futilely that these are protected animals. Faye courageously says "Let them be" to the careless children, but she observes that "most of the people were just standing around, staring down, so they would be able to say they had seen them, in person" (14). Hood insightfully shows how we are often more careful of our image than we are of real life. The reader gradually learns that Vic is guilty of this kind of misplaced carefulness as well.

Faye looks on with horror at what humanity is capable of until she realizes that the bank is about to close, and then nothing else but fulfilling that wifely role matters to her. Environmental issues are quite important to Faye and to Hood's fiction, but Faye prioritizes her human relationships when one cause must be given up. The reader feels a kinship with Faye from the start. We want her to stop the mutilation of the whales as much as she does, but we also want her to make it to the bank in time despite the fact that we bitterly sense that getting to the bank symbolizes all that is unjust in her marriage. In the short space of ten pages, Hood creates a protagonist with whom the reader has a vested interest, so we are prepared to be outraged early

when Faye is kidnapped by bank robbers who are already at the bank when Faye begins filling out the deposit slip.

Hood's narration also prepares readers for Faye's strong sense of self-preservation evidenced in her physical actions in dealing with the bank robbers. Her mother's paranoia as a single parent has instilled in Faye a steely attitude toward anything that threatens, so readers are ready for her attempted escape from the kidnappers on several occasions as they drive her to the shore to board the escape boat. Readers have a more difficult time sympathizing with her husband Vic's reaction to the assault, and we understand why Faye would later be tempted by the advances of Cristo, the town's sports hero.

In this novel, perhaps Hood is exploring why people are attracted to those who don't care for them in the way they should, particularly because the narrator shows in detail how careful Faye's mother was in raising her. After Faye's father's death, Faye's mother always reminded Faye how to protect herself whenever she left home even on just a quick errand. Hinting at Faye's beauty and at everyday dangers in the first chapter, the narrator explains seriously: "Because she was small and plain, and because Faye was not, Mrs. Parry signed them both up for self-defense lessons – evenings – and together they learned precaution" (*Familiar Heat* 6). These brief sections of family warnings are humorous, but more importantly, they speak to the vigilant care upon which real love insists, no matter how annoying the reminders of caution may be to the beloved person. Transitioning to Faye's first meeting with Vic Rios who later emerges in sharp contrast to Mrs. Parry's careful love, the novel's narrator offers a long list of examples of Faye's mother's "practical paranoia" (6), reminding Faye what to do when driving their laundry van,

As for the van, Faye had to promise seatbelt always, hitchhikers never, doors locked all around, no entering homes of strangers, and this: "Assume it's you or

them. If they're going to kill you, make them do it first, don't let them drag you off somewhere and strew your bones in sawgrass so deep we won't find you till marsh hen season." Faye always laughed and promised. And kept the gas tank full, good rubber on the wheels. (*Familiar Heat* 6)

Despite Faye's caution, she meets Vic, the Rios brother her mother had described as having "the devil-in-a-white-shirt reputation" (*Familiar Heat* 7). Hood contrasts Faye's immediate attraction to Vic not only with Faye's nurturing upbringing but also with Faye herself – a character made more obvious to the reader when Faye meets Vic's brother Tom Rios shortly after his wife's death. Tom has let his house go in every way because of his grief, but Faye comes in to this stranger's home and takes care of the dishes and the neglected pet bird while she waits for the "wrecker" to pick up her broken-down van (*Familiar Heat* 9). Is it the carelessness Faye already senses in Vic that attracts her in that first instant when his desirability causes her to lose her balance and fall off the front step? When he helps her up without much concern, Faye "[d]id but most certainly did not want his hands on her" (*Familiar Heat* 11). Hood has so carefully built up Faye's character and background that the reader sees anything less than complete care and forethought as the opposite of Faye. Psychologically and unconsciously, Faye probably longed for something haphazard and spontaneous in her life even if it might leave her feeling completely uncared for in years to come, a future she carelessly does not consider.

After Faye meets Captain Vic, her mother starts to worry as mother and daughter fold other people's laundry in their shop: "Some sudden niceness, a deference to Faye's maidenhood, prompted Mrs. Parry to reach out, and sort the men's underwear from the heap and fold it herself, as though Faye might Get Ideas" (*FH* 4).

Several early details reveal not only the passion between Faye and Vic but also the fact that this passion was Faye's first experience of love and intimacy. The circumstances surrounding Faye's wedding to Vic Rios also involve contrasts between care and carelessness. Their whirlwind romance leads up to a beautiful wedding with Faye decked out in a gorgeous dress made by Mrs. Parry: "Years of alterations, custom tailoring for others, had practiced her for this perfection" (*Familiar Heat* 11).

When Faye and her mother are making the wedding dress, Faye describes cutting the silk of her wedding dress "like swimming naked by starlight" (*FH* 12). Her mother asks, "Alone?" and Faye confirms her mother's clarification embarrassed, prompting her mother to think: "Sure as God, it's time" (*FH* 12). Vic's impatience for Faye also implies her virginity: "No posing. Toss the bouquet, duck and flee, his hand urgent and claiming. They were in such a hurry" (*FH* 12). After the wedding when the photographer displays one of Faye's wedding photos, Vic runs in to the shop and snatches the picture away, throwing money behind him and saying, "My wife's not bait" (*FH* 12). Vic and Faye's rush to the honeymoon emphasizes Hood's portrayal of Faye as an unpicked flower or at least how Vic views her, and her virginity heightens Vic's possessiveness, which only gets worse as the novel progresses.

When asked about Faye in my interview with Hood, she discussed some of these passages about Faye and her mother and what Hood hoped readers would take from the novel:

I wrote hoping that if a person read the book twice, there would be more pleasure. The first time, there is story and plot and lots of action and gossip. The second time, there is irony and I hope a kind of aha! for some of the same moments. For instance, first reading, as Faye is lifting bits of silk scraps of her wedding dress and dragging their coolness across her flesh and lips, saying dreamily, "Like swimming at night by starlight," her mom thinks—Sure as God, time to get her married! In fact, within pages

Faye is married and swimming at night by starlight. . . and it isn't sexy at all. Maybe no one will ever read it twice. Maybe these little landmines of "pleasure" are just things to help the struggling writer press on, and not lose heart or momentum, although by the time we get to the final draft the story itself is very very old, its heat very familiar indeed, and we are longing for hail.

The novel implies that Faye was a virgin when she walked down the aisle with Vic by several early hints. In reference to Faye's former love interests or lack thereof, the narrator evaluates Faye's dreams with the following description:

She wanted what one often wants, but yearned no more than natural or seemly. Wanted it to happen, but never, till she met Rios, has she been sure. Cristo had gotten close to making her feel lonely, but none of those cocky, low-riding, beer buzzed, night-prowling others in their crazy cars! – or the clam-baking, beach-dancing, golden-boy yearbook heroes – no, not even Cristo, the National League's numero-uno draft pick bucking home from college in that army-surplus jeep – not a one prevailed. They took her spare time, not her whole heart. So why him, the Captain, at first sight? It was that sudden. (*FH* 11).

The captain's attitude toward his new bride is a different kind of care. (Care exclusively for one's self is selfishness, not the kind of care required to maintain a healthy relationship.) Vic is careful with his wife as people are careful with their possessions, not as if he truly cares for her wellbeing or happiness. His care for her is limited to how she fits into his public image; she is something he insists on possessing.

When Faye is kidnapped by bank robbers, Vic is deep-sea fishing with the Fortners, a wealthy couple, who have learned that the captain is the best at getting his clients a prize catch. Mrs. Fortner is really only interested in catching the captain, so she spends the whole trip flirting. Even when Vic gets the call about Faye's abduction from the FBI, he twice clarifies: "So you say she's missing, you don't say she's dead" (*FH* 34). He does not say a word about this news to the Fortners but makes up a weather excuse for rushing to shore. Is Vic just an independent person, or is Hood portraying him as inappropriately possessive and private? Because Hood's back- and-forth narration has already explained most of Faye's saga, readers are miffed with Vic's silence but even more furious with Marnie Fortner who is portrayed as going after the captain and concerned with her shoes and her image while we know Faye is fighting for her life. In some ways, the reader may even begin to think that Mrs. Fortner is worse than the criminals. Marnie Fortner deliberately intended to seduce a married man, and doing so after their crisis and problems begin only makes her seem that much more opportunistic. It is Vic's brother Tom who puts Mrs. Fortner in her place and who seems the most hurried to get away to the emergency. At this point, Tom's intensity seems only to be concern over Faye as his brother's wife because he himself has lost his wife and because Faye had helped him during his loss. Here Hood foreshadows the key contrasts between the brothers by their very different reactions to Faye's crisis. Because Vic has a gun without a permit on his person, readers sense that his priority is on revenge whereas Tom's concern is for Faye's safety. Vic's "cupboard love" means he kicks into action with respect to Faye when he is jealous, but he does nothing to support Faye and misdirects his passion to plot revenge.

The dedicatory quote for Hood's novel *Familiar Heat* is from a 1981 book that is not well known, *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* by G.B. Edwards: " 'Cupboard love isn't love,' he

said. ‘Is there any other?... Is there? ...Have you ever known it?’ ‘Yes,’ I said.” *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* chronicles the life of one old-fashioned and eccentric man who lives his whole provincial life on one of the English Channel islands called Guernsey. The memoir spans both world wars including the German occupation of the island, but mostly it tells of the daily drama of the Guernsey people. Ebenezer refuses to buy a car or to embrace modern technology of any kind. He prefers to walk and to make a modest living selling tomatoes from his greenhouse. The section that mentions cupboard love concerns Ebenezer’s nephew Raymond who originally trained to be a minister but who has been struggling with his faith. Raymond has many odd things to say about God, and Raymond has lost his mother, been disowned by his father for marrying a girl who wasn’t good enough, and has been left by his wife and children. Perhaps Raymond’s deepest sense of loss is for his cousin Horace who has been his lifelong friend but from whom he is also estranged. While the scene from which Hood derives the quote is important, it is difficult to discover exactly to which love Raymond could be referring because his conversation with Ebenezer is really about all of his failed relationships as well as Ebenezer’s. It is to God’s love that the quotation seems to refer. During the conversation, Raymond assumes Ebenezer is thinking about his great friend Jim who died, and this reference makes the reader think Raymond is mostly worried about his old pal Horace even though Raymond certainly misses his sons as well. The full context of the passage offers suggestions for understanding Hood’s use of this cupboard love concept: “The long dark evenings he would talk to me by the hour of his misery as a child, and of the half-and-half happiness of his marriage...I think his heart was broken because he doubted if God was love. ‘Cupboard love isn’t love,’ he said. ‘Is there any other?’” (Edwards 244). When Raymond asks Ebenezer a moment later if he is thinking about his friend Jim, Ebenezer says he was actually thinking of his

sister and her late husband who had such a great marriage, a relationship that emerges as the strongest bond of the novel. Since there are so many types of relationships in the book, it is difficult to say exactly what cupboard love refers to although God's love is the closest comment to Raymond's words. Despite the complexity, Hood's use of this quote for *Familiar Heat* makes perfect sense because both books deal with romantic relationships especially marriage as well as with religion and the church's helps or hindrances to our relationships. Both books raise important questions about what makes a good marriage and reveal individuals trying his or her best to find fulfillment in marriage but coming up short.

It is at least clear that for romantic relationships, the statement indicates that there exists a better kind of love than "cupboard love." The protagonist himself had one great love, but he would never fully commit himself and lived with regret to his dying day. Hood uses this quotation to argue that all human relationships need maintenance and nurturing to not only survive but thrive, and that call to nurturance is the major theme of the novel.

Cupboard love has been defined as affection that is given purely to seek a reward ( a milder version of conditional love which psychologists say is a form of emotional abuse.) I see cupboard love in the Edwards novel and in Hood as so-called love that one can store on a shelf and then forget or take for granted; it is exactly what Vic Rios is guilty of: a selfish kind of love that does not seek the other's needs before one's own. Cupboard love is also mentioned in John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga*, but Hood's novel explains the significance of this allusive concept and how *cupboard love* is central to the theme of *Familiar Heat*.

Vic's attitude toward Faye as his wife rather than as an individual explains his actions when he learns that Faye was not only kidnapped at the bank but raped on the boat. At the hospital, Faye overhears Vic shout "I suppose the whole goddam world knew it but me" (46)

because someone from the Rape Crisis Center handed him her card. The narrator's description of Vic's behavior at the hospital reveals his carelessness with family duty and with people's feelings in general. He acts "as though marriage and kinship might require him to be there, but that was as far as he'd give, as though sickness were an embarrassment, an indiscretion, an affront. Infuriating" (47). Especially since the rapist is dead, only a character whose ego is as elevated and fragile as Vic's would be most devastated about his wife's rape. Vic comes into Faye's hospital room and never once says how grateful he is that Faye is alive nor praises her for her courage in surviving the ordeal. Instead, he repeatedly tells her to take it easy. Then after implying that he may not even be the one to bring Faye home from the hospital, Vic shows his true colors:

Scowling, he took hold of the sheet and snapped it off the bed. It settled onto the floor in a gust, deflated in a sigh. He stood there looking down on her, from her bloodied toenails to the stitches in her knee, to her black eye. In that cold, estranging glare she tugged the hospital gown down on her thighs, shamed. Shut her eyes against the murderous look on his face.  
(*FH* 48)

Then he walks out, leaving her vulnerable and exposed as if she is to blame for the assault. It is obvious that Vic cannot bear to have had his prized possession enjoyed by anyone else, despite the fact that Faye's rapist is dead. His image of perfection is ruined by an act in which Faye had no control, so he begins to distance himself from Faye physically and emotionally without a care as to how she might feel. Therefore, the reader, having made this dramatic journey with Faye, becomes totally sympathetic to her growing attraction to Cristo's romantic pursuit.

*Familiar Heat* seems peopled with careless individuals – characters who arrange certain aspects of their lives carefully but who simultaneously neglect the people that matter to them most. One character, Cassia, carefully puts her wedding rings in a cup on the sink not only when she washes dishes but also when she feels she must leave her family for a night or two to seek sexual comfort with strangers. One night on a bus, she speaks to a priest, but the priest is only mildly helpful as a good listener and not so much as a spiritual guide. She learns later that the man (Agapito) she married when she was already pregnant with Cristo had known that the son was not his all along. Agapito had come to believe that when Cassia took these bus trips that she was seeing their son’s biological father, yet he cared for her so much that he never complained. Hood demonstrates that sometimes being careful with those you love means sacrificing some of yourself.

Hood explores the ways in which we are often careful to the extreme with the trappings of religion but careless in what really matters (ie love, truth, real faith, and helping others.) For instance, Father Ockham is careful not to use the air conditioner or dryer as a practical application of his religious belief in simplicity and conservancy, but he is careless in his advice to Faye, expecting her to be faithful to a faithless husband and then to assume that their marriage is concrete when it is not. Indeed, he denies the reality that their marriage is now a sham without any practical guidance about how to improve it. He also elevates Cristo above Faye as a sports hero and, like the town, does not give Faye the credit she deserves. Even Father Grattan, the new younger parish minister responds to Faye’s inquiries about marriage with the same platitudes as Father Ockham: “Marriage isn’t a game; it’s a sacrament” (84). Hood subtly points out the double standard often used by the church to place the burden of improving a marriage on the wife with little or no counsel for the husband who is the one not fulfilling his marital

responsibilities. Hood comes back to such marital conflicts time and again because women who have been treated carelessly by their husbands are then given no help or are offered advice that denies that they are victims. Even though Hood's novel shows a sympathetic side to the tenets of the Catholic faith, the simple yet haunting question is heard during Faye's confession to Father Grattan: "Why can't my husband... love me like that" (82)? She wants to ask the simple question, but she breaks off and is unable to finish what she deserves to know for she has noticed Cristo's intense interest in her, and she compares her husband's lack of care to the careful love she glimpses in other marriages. She struggles to reconcile her own narrow beliefs, beliefs that conflict with her instinct. Hood is able to bring out the conflict between heart and mind when Faye has lost her memory and is having to reconstruct her belief system without the benefit of her former experience. Therefore, her innocence and naivete often serve Hood's thematic purposes as representations of the way things ought to be: simple and true.

Hood clearly does not shy away from issues that might be controversial: *Familiar Heat* takes on a number of relevant issues without exaggeration. Cristo has grown up to be a professional baseball player, and his Florida home town adores him. However, Cristo is in love with Faye whose marriage is on the rocks despite her efforts to fix it. The parish priests are little help to Faye since they are more concerned with watching Cristo's games on television or with giving her one-size-fits-all advice for making her marriage work even though her husband has left her. Faye consults the priests specifically about how to help her marriage, but the priests just say she should do whatever it takes to get her husband back. Hood's criticism of the church on certain issues is subtle but important despite the fact that "beneath the surface... lurks a powerful spiritual dimension" (Farmer 91). Hood's purpose for the novel seems to be more thematic than aesthetic. David Aiken aptly notes, "Focused as they are on our common humanity, [Hood's]

stories bypass the issue of blame and carry the reader to a point where forgiveness is not only desirable but possible” (31). Hood portrays Faye as a woman who learns that she must figure out who she is independently and that then only she herself can make her relationships work. She may not choose who readers prefer, but she asserts her right to choose for herself.

After Faye’s car accident leaves her so damaged she has to start again as a child would, learning how to walk as well as re-learning the most basic concepts, her estranged husband’s brother Tom begins to help her and eventually forms a second love triangle with Faye and Vic. Even though Tom is careful with Faye and values her just as she is, her husband Vic cannot deal with all that has happened to Faye and therefore feels justified in neglecting her. Still, Faye longs to understand what her marriage meant and what the concept of love is in general—both of which are mysteries to her due to memory loss. Hood sustains the contrasts of care and carelessness for the length of the novel, and readers may come away convinced of their own carelessness. Hood says, “ ‘Love one another’ is the text I live by” (Gretlund 79). This hopeful but convicting message resonates within the powerful plot of *Familiar Heat*.

Hood’s presentation of time in the novel is unique, and the tidbits readers are given at the beginning affect our view of the characters and their differing views of real love. As a stereotypical Southerner might tell a story with numerous asides and digressions, the third person narrator of *Familiar Heat* teases the reader with a line or two about the wedding photo the FBI would use to look for Faye after her kidnapping when the reader does not yet know the story of Faye’s falling in love with Vic Rios. Readers get a fragment of the whole picture before discovering the entirety, and that piece is a hint of Vic’s “cupboard love,” which is Vic’s objectionable possessiveness. However, Hood keeps readers wanting more; the novel sustains suspense throughout, keeping us hooked on the romantic possibilities in addition to the essential

survival of the main characters. The underlying message to be careful with those we love remains clear. Stylistically, Hood's humorous way with words makes her fiction a pleasure even at mere sentence level. She captures the informal speech of individuals and the comic use of brand names with a power that recalls Welty's and Faulkner's writing. Many critics have noted Hood's remarkable style; "the literary heritage of her characters' language is rooted in the local-color writing of the nineteenth-century South" (Yow 136).

Hood's style makes reading any of her fiction interesting and compelling, but *Familiar Heat* gives readers that much more opportunity to enjoy Hood's way with words and her innovative storytelling ability. Like Kate Chopin, Hood is able to detail her settings vividly without sacrificing character development or plot. What happens to Faye and to the whole community in *Familiar Heat* is riveting, but the style Hood employs to tell it is also remarkable. Hood believes that everyone should be able to read her fiction and that "access is one way that we can overcome prejudice" (Yow 139). In *Familiar Heat*, Mary Hood blends important but realistic themes with beautiful form. Such a marriage of art and meaning comes naturally for a writer whose personal convictions match her life's work.

After a long wait in which readers are privy to Faye's harrowing escape, the FBI finally gets the news that Faye is alive to Vic, Tom, and Father Ockham. When the agent had taken an earlier call, he had accidentally let the phone cord behind him tap Faye's wedding photo, and the captain reacted violently " 'Goddammit' the Captain exploded. 'That's mine'" (*FH* 43). Vic's rage at the mild treatment of his wife's photograph (perhaps reminding him of her virgin state on the day of their wedding) reveals that his concern is more about his image of possessing perfection than it is about his love for Faye herself. The captain's focus is on the photo as his property when the novel has already noted that the silver frame the picture had been in sat

“empty” (*FH* 42) now in Faye’s mother’s house. Really Vic means that the woman the photo represents is his and that no one else has a right to touch her. The agent’s response heightens the reader’s sense of male superficiality when he says, “You’ll get it back. Cherry condition” (*FH* 43) ...another hint at Faye’s purity. Hood continues to reveal Vic’s narcissism as the novel progresses. It is this beginning marital struggle that first makes Vic unfaithful; later it is Faye who will be tempted to stray. After this hospital scene and other scenes revealing what seems to be Vic’s callous attitude (though really hiding his profound hurt), the reader can’t blame Faye for seeking comfort elsewhere.

The damage done by the kidnapping, or more precisely the sexual damage inflicted by the criminals, prevents Vic from really seeing his wife in the same way. She had been his virginal bride, and now she has become damaged goods to him. Therefore, his exaggerated sense of pride makes him live in denial and avoid Faye. In Vic’s defense, Faye herself seems unable to renew their love and intimacy after her kidnapping and rape, but her trauma seems completely realistic to the reader. Readers are somewhat sympathetic with Vic, for “He was puzzled, but far from sympathetic [toward Faye] ; he didn’t know why she was acting like this, and he didn’t care” (*FH* 72). When Vic first tries to kiss Faye after her trauma, she claws him, but when he tries again, he finds her fully clothed in the shower with “a disposable razor in her hand” screaming “Leave me alone!” he does leave her alone completely (*FH* 72). Because of Hood’s order of narration, it is sometimes a little unclear the exact order of events; nevertheless, Vic appears to reject his wife before she rejects him. After her trauma, Faye begins to fidget with napkins, receipts, and twigs, and one day she finds herself handling a packet of condoms:

Then she looked at it. There the Captain stood, reading a chart by the touch-on light, when she held it out to him—no more sense than that! -- and asked, “Oh.

Are these for us?” Rubbers. For a moment he stared at her as though her guileless question were mocking. She didn’t know better, wasn’t sophisticated enough to be defensive, jealous. He told her the thing that would most furiously punish her – the truth. “No,” he said. He put them in his satchel and left. (*FH* 70)

In contrast, Faye “got more out of her romance novels” than from her husband but still “never could sleep till [Vic] was home safe, even if he crashed on the couch and never said a word” (*FH* 72). Faye’s conscience bothers her though because her priest Father Ockham recommends a page from *Happiness Is a Choice* where according to Saint Paul, a husband and wife “should never turn each other down for sex except during prayer” (72). Ironically, Vic resents the time Faye spends on her romance novels and spitefully reads her the end of one she has half finished in order to spoil the ending for her. While this sort of disconnection about romance may be typical for real couples today, Hood emphasizes the particular difficulty in Faye and Vic’s relationship not just because of their extreme circumstances but because Vic’s ego is too huge to handle Faye’s “damage.” However, Hood creates in Vic a dynamic character who is able to surprise readers by his growth.

This conflict over the romance novel further develops *Familiar Heat*’s theme because Faye seeks help for her declining marriage in such novels, and Vic scoffingly asks if something is “missing from her diet” (*FH* 72) referring to their marriage. Even the expression Vic uses reminds us that love is as essential to human beings as food. Like animals and everything else in nature, our diet must include certain elements. When something is missing from our diet, we crave it as Faye craves romance. Vic realizes what Faye is missing but deliberately denies her the romantic love she needs. The reader notes that Vic understands that it is his own failure to make Faye feel love that causes their marital problems. As Blanche Dubois memorably announces in

Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, "Deliberate cruelty is not forgivable." For Faye, the church, or at least the priest she asks for help, does not provide a solution to her marital trouble, so she seeks solace and perhaps answers in romance novels. Therefore, Hood's portrayal of a literary quest for advice on human relationships furthers the idea of literature inspiring healthier relationships through care as opposed to carelessness. The sum total of Hood's novel delves into the many complex facets of relationship mending.

Cristo Montevideo had dated Faye in high school but as noted earlier had been one of those who "took her spare time, not her whole heart" (*FH* 11). In the months following Faye's kidnapping while she and Vic are experiencing "silences and tensions" enough to make Faye look "in the Yellow Pages for some sort of counseling service" (*FH* 71), Cristo returns home to a homecoming parade. The famous athlete is truly loved by the whole community, and girls are throwing themselves at him, but Cristo still has feelings for Faye. Faye agrees to have one cup of coffee with Cristo, and she remembers how she had worn his class ring on a chain around her neck for three years including the year she met and married Vic. Remarkably Faye's whirlwind romance and marriage to Vic occurred the same year she was kidnapped, and now Vic is off not only fishing but apparently being unfaithful as well. Meanwhile, Faye feels guilty about her brief visits with Cristo even while she wonders why her husband does not seem to love her (*FH* 82).

Faye resists Cristo's advances for a long time by refusing to meet again for coffee or to talk to him longer on the phone, but by this point in the novel, the reader is hoping for some personal happiness for Faye. Faye is tempted most by Cristo's attention and appreciation, needs which obviously aren't being met with her husband, especially after the violent attack she has just survived. Still, Faye meets her admirer only in public places; "She feared to be alone with Cristo because of what she might allow, because of the way his gentle slightest touch that first

Saturday, no pressure, had healed the flickering nerve below her eye where she had been pistol-whipped by the bank robber” (80). Since the captain has left her, readers want Faye to reach out and grab what she deserves, but Hood’s layer of religious consciousness complicates our *carpe diem* hopes for her.

Cristo and Faye meet in public, well-lit places only three times, but Hood describes the last date for coffee using a play on words: it “scalded her for days” (*FH* 80). Faye tries to resist temptation, but Cristo ultimately gets the idea that they can fly off together. He asks Faye to drive him to the airport, and then he shows her the two plane tickets he has purchased. When Faye refuses to leave with him, Cristo begins to so fast and desperately that the deer he hits causes the sportscar to crash leaving Faye the only survivor yet terribly injured. Readers know that Faye did not plan to run off with Cristo, but even Faye can’t remember due to the damage to her brain.

After Faye’s accident, Hood portrays a whole new character whose indomitable will no longer reflects her confident personal identity or her earlier personality of constantly catering to her husband. Now her will has to be about survival: learning to walk and to start over as a person.

For Vic Rios, his pure wife, first raped by the robbers and then made child-like by the accident, is like “the fish with the hole in it.” When Tom and Vic argue about Faye, Vic laughingly refers to his lawful wife as “Wife? That accidental virgin?” and then says, “Fashions change” (*Familiar Heat* 301). Readers may be appalled at Vic’s fickle feelings.

After Faye’s multiple trauma and recovery period, Hood juxtaposes a discussion about what is valuable in fishing with the idea of what is valuable in a lover or in a human being:

On one such evening the Captain was in an especially bad mood; a shark had that day taken a thirty-pound bite out of a tournament strike. A big billfish wasted. Trophy fish. Not worth one point with a hole in it. Faye said the wrong thing. “Why can’t they just stuff and mount it going the other way, so the hole doesn’t show?” “In tournament fishing, any hooked fish so much as grazed by a shark is a wipe.” He couldn’t stop thinking about it. One thing for a fish to get away; another to lose a trophy to thieves. Twice this season it had happened. (*FH* 72-73)

Since Vic views his wife as a trophy, he has lost his trophies to thieves or accidents four times this season: twice in fishing and twice with Faye’s rape and car accident. Both physically and emotionally, Faye is damaged and scarred, but instead of helping her and being patient with her, Vic turns away.

The complex love triangle between the protagonist and two very different brothers, Vic and Tom, occurs after the novel’s rich exposition, the frightening kidnapping episode at the novel’s start, and Faye’s tragic car accident. Readers are then compelled to choose sides in the conflict and are not necessarily pleased by which character wins out in the end, but Hood addresses this very issue in her interview with Gretlund. In this interview, Hood implies that she consciously portrayed Vic as a flawed character who had the potential for growth. She makes important connections throughout the novel because it is Faye’s head injury that causes her to survive as a sweeter and more demure character who attracts Tom Rios and who responds to Tom’s kindness. Vic, on the other hand, is portrayed from the beginning as a lady’s man, strong and confident, a man who sends Faye “head over heels” before her accident. Even readers who prefer Tom for Faye can’t help being drawn in by the novel’s unique progress because so much goes on under the surface. Readers hope at first that Faye will escape Vic’s neglect with Cristo

and later wish the same result for her with Tom. Hood masterfully creates in Vic an antagonistic character who is wholly redeemed by the novel's end, but this conclusion remains controversial for readers. Hood touches on important issues of love and identity without appearing to have a particular agenda.

Hood reveals an important thematic contrast between the ideal of care and the damaging effects of carelessness by juxtaposing the Rios brothers in the novel. Tom is careful, but Vic is careless. What is Hood trying to say about this contrast of care between these brothers (who are also rivals for Faye's love) by having her protagonist choose Vic? Does Hood's usual unhappy ending disappoint the reader so much that we realize our own misplaced priorities? Would a more satisfying ending fail to generate positive change? Hood, responding when Gretlund asks about Faye's choice of Vic, says, "But wouldn't it be nicer if the terrible brother learned something" ("Fiction is Like Fire" 77). Hood says that she "had time to be intentional" in this novel, suggesting that issues readers might wonder about were not mistakes but were carefully planned for a particular thematic goal or to produce a certain effect on the reader ("Fiction is Like Fire" 78).

Senora Rios, mother to Vic and Tom, remains careful throughout the novel, cleverly attempting to manipulate Vic and Faye into getting back together so that she can become a grandmother. She goes to exaggerated lengths to make sure the two are at the same place at the same time after Faye's car accident despite the fact that Faye now has to learn the basics of living all over again as if she were a child. Hood's narration reveals how Vic's mother's misplaced desires, which she is so careful to fulfill through manipulation, is canceled out by her carelessness regarding how her actions might affect others. All along the reader feels annoyed

with Senora Rios for butting in, and we even hope that Faye will find love with Tom because we are sensitive to her needs whereas Senora Rios is thinking only of herself.

Senora Rios, persists as a maddeningly eccentric character. She becomes obsessed about having a grandchild, setting her sights on getting Vic and Faye back together, and she even enlists the help of the priest to do so. The older priest, Father Ockham, relies on his assumption that Faye at least remembers her binding obligation to her husband in the eyes of the church, but he overestimates what Faye is capable of understanding after her accident. In fact, Faye barely remembers Vic who never visits her in the rehabilitation center. Tom, on the other hand, visits Faye and helps her, for he has fallen in love with her. In fact, Tom fights his love for Faye because he believes loving his brother's wife is inappropriate even though Vic has so clearly rejected Faye. For her part, Faye wants to be around Tom because he makes her laugh. Senora Rios deviously invites Faye to come and live with her and Tom so that Vic will finally come around and she can ultimately become a grandmother. Faye does not want to impose and resists at first but not because she suspects anything. Instead, Faye wants "to feel cherished; welcome was one thing, but cherished was the best" (224). In contrast to the motives of Tom and Faye, Hood uses Vic and his mother as foils respectively. At the beach flying a kite with Tom, the peasant blouse Faye wears (because she doesn't like dressy clothes) is described as pink, ruffled and "too young for her" (221) by Senora Rios, so the plotting mother "added that to her mental list to correct" (221) because "Vic had a taste for tailoring and detail; if a garment was casual, it had to be somehow outrageous or unique" (221). When Senora Rios takes Faye to the opera where she has deliberately gotten Vic and his date seats behind them,

To Vic, it didn't look like Faye. He didn't like a short haircut on a woman. He wouldn't have known her. When they had married, she had never had

her hair cut, not once. The weight of it—gone now—had let what was left curl. Not tightly, but with great life. She looked like a dozen other women there. Nothing to make him want to know her, if he hadn't already. (218)

This passage reveals important aspects of both Vic and Faye. Faye's short, curled hair is described significantly as having "great life" which represents the protagonist's possibility and hope for growth as an independent person. The contrast of her new hairstyle with her former style indicates the narrow, stifling relationship with Vic whose ideals of femininity prevent him from truly caring for Faye now that she has changed. Hood's contrasts of characterization are heightened in this section to reveal that even in hairstyle and wardrobe preferences, readers see Vic as a shallow, flat character...a man undeserving of Faye whose accident in many ways has brought out the real woman who "liked laughing" (224) instead of worrying about her clothes and being perfect and doing what everyone expects of her. Tom allows her to be herself, and they laugh about silly things in an almost childlike innocence despite the dark plans of Senora Rios and the impossibly perfect but empty expectations of Vic who at this time seems to have forgotten Faye.

After a short time where readers see that Tom is in love with Faye, Faye finally remembers her love for Vic and for the house he built for her when she hears the "For Sale" sign being pounded into the ground outside their briefly happy home. Although her narration is not omniscient revealing Vic's motives, Hood portrays Faye as sympathizing with his struggle and Vic as having grown as a person and perhaps almost becoming worthy of Faye. Vic and Faye no longer share "cupboard love" but a love borne out of tragedy and betrayal into something real where they are both equal partners. Even if all readers are not wholly satisfied with Faye's final

choice to return to Vic, Hood clearly shows the possibility for people to change and grow and ultimately the importance of working to maintain a relationship.

Although Hood's characters are so often deliberately careless, her style reflects the utmost care in the choice of every word. Her description of place and of nature and her character portrayals are all crafted with precision. Her priority as a writer is clearly to privilege character and theme over art for art's sake. In describing her writing, Hood notes its consciousness of the "Southern [style of] interminably savoring *how*, cherishing the chaff of irrelevancy around the essential kernel" ("A Stubborn Sense of Place" 304). Although her style is consistently beautiful in and of itself, Hood's focus is clear: to move the reader, and to move us toward positive action. The complacency she creates in her characters inspires us to reject their inaction, and the bitter conclusions often promote such lessons best. If anything in her writing is sacrificed for the sake of her matchless characterization and strong thematic element, it could only be the visual portraits of the characters themselves. That Hood's readers may have difficulty picturing the physical details of her characters in her fiction is sometimes viewed as a weakness in the writer. However, Hood's deference to theme often contributes to the concepts of equality and the connectedness of humanity, important ideas fostered by Hood's variety of character backgrounds. In *Familiar Heat*, for instance, the novel's narrator illuminates Faye's character in every way conceivable, but Faye's physical appearance is only hinted at. The fact that Faye must be strikingly beautiful is implied by her mother's worries, her husband's possessiveness, and Cristo's desire. The narrator's silence on Faye's appearance actually serves to elevate the reader's sense that Faye is most remarkable in her character and that this unique quality is what truly draws people to her. It is indeed accurate praise when David Aiken notes, "A reader may

have to imagine what a character looks like, but he or she is rarely left to wonder what a character is feeling” (24).

Hood describes her process of becoming a writer as long and arduous because she is self-taught. Her admission of envy of Flannery O’Connor’s ability to improve dramatically from one story to the next reveals her personal and professional care in her own craft. She has periods of doubt during which she must remind herself of the good an artist can do. Hood feels that her goal is to reflect modern life and also to help improve it, particularly in the way we treat one another (Gretlund 80).

Making environmental references to Jon Holden’s “Cutting Beetle-Blighted Pine” published in *Georgia Review* 1978, Hood writes, “Poetry may not help, but it doesn’t hurt either. Or at least if it hurts, it hurts toward healing, which is all a person can ask.” She continues to connect literature and environment when she noted further in 1982, “In Blake’s letters I dead-stopped at this: ‘the tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing that stands in the way.’” Her personal conviction reacts with, “Guilt abounded. Murder has been done to three dozen innocents. Our little depot-shaped ship of a house is lost in a sea of dozer-churned mud. The peach trees, the cherry, the plum—all gone, simply obliterated on the way to bigger game. I have seen evil done, and consented” (*GR* 81). Hood laments environmental destruction as she would a human tragedy, but she places the blame rightly on human greed and selfishness. Therefore, Hood’s central theme is not only care as opposed to carelessness, but it is also ecological. Her ecological theme is not limited to humans or nature, but emphasizes the importance of both everyday ecologies.

*Seam Busters*, Hood’s most recent novella, portrays its protagonist Irene Morgan as a woman full of care for herself, for her family, and for others. Irene takes jobs where she can

work for years and become excellent at her task but also where she can contribute to the family and retirement plan to which she and her husband Deke have always aspired. Irene had worked as a seamstress at Frazier Fabrics years before but then had switched to work at a watch store at the mall for better hours, pay, and benefits for the family. Then when this business closes suddenly, Irene returns to sewing, this time, new camouflage fabric for soldiers in Afghanistan of which Irene's son Davy was one. Irene reveals her care for everything she touches. At work she carefully carries out a plan to befriend an Asian co-worker Sua Nag who never speaks to anyone. Irene also takes great pains to clean, furnish, and decorate the small rental house she and her husband own as an investment. Even when tenants have trashed the place and not paid the rent, she prepares it carefully and even leaves it stocked with paper towels and good light bulbs. Despite a heartbreaking loss late in the novella, Irene remains strong, appreciating the support of old and new friends who return her care and love in kind.

From animal rights, nature conservation, and everyday human relationships, Hood "is typically Southern in suggesting that individuals can do what agencies cannot" (Aiken 30) for social improvement. The reader gets the sense of existing at the crossroads between old-fashioned values (that maybe never were ideal) and notions of postmodernism (the good and the bad) in Hood's fiction. She rarely offers comfort or finality because her stories are in no way stagnant. Instead, their dynamic force gives both nostalgic longing for what was good about the past and a hope for the improvements of the future – hope primarily inspired by the awareness and conviction of our carelessness with life itself.

A recent *Georgia Review* edition included much of Mary Hood's correspondence with editor Stan Lindberg, and it certainly speaks volumes about Hood's own care in writing. Her interviews and letters to Stan Lindberg spell out her intentions clearly and confirm readers'

reactions “to decide...not decode” meaning in her writing and in her life philosophy. Mary Hood writes with great care for purpose and meaning not just for effect like Edgar Allan Poe or for quantity like Joyce Carol Oates.

In a 1978 description of herself, Hood said, “I buy books. I read them. I write them. I am a re-writer. I waste 27 pounds of paper a year. I write by hand with pen and ink. I buy ink by the quart. The ink is black and supposed to be permanent but I know that nothing is, which explains why I write. Naturally I oppose postal rate increases” (GR 88). Hood’s writing habits and life are traditional and careful, but her sense of humor and her thoughtfulness in writing and everything else is unique.

Many of Hood’s ideas parallel this study of ecologies: connections, relationships, blending literature with all other aspects of life in a positive way. In a 1983 letter to Lindberg, Hood explains, “I am a collector, then a connector. From my crib I have been, with knitted brow and fierce concentration, trying to make one picture out of all the pieces. To make sense of fragments” (GR 80). Hood’s emphasizes care in another letter to Lindberg in 1984, “I spent a lot of my years caring about words. I spent at least ten in *intensive* caring. So that I learned, by a single motion, if I was really ‘on,’ to capture the mental image in a right, or nearly right, word or phrase” (GR 90).

In 1984 Hood used ecology as an extended metaphor for good writing (good meaning beautiful words connected to meaning) when she said,

I read the thesaurus like I do a bird guide. The warblers look so *alike*. Then you start noticing the eye ring, the wing bar, the olive to the green rather than the lemon. The relative size. The habits. The known hang-outs. If you know all that, then you can surprise with a word where it oughtn’t be. If you don’t know that,

even a happy accident isn't worth as much as the identical thing done on purpose. But maybe no one will know that but the writer, and then again, who else matters? For that is all it is, really, is honor, is conscience" (*GR* 91).

On a more serious note, speaking of the guilt of the South, Hood took issue with Bertram Wyatt-Brown in a 1987 letter where she argues, "This wasn't a matter of outliving or forgetting, but rather of living up to, or living down" (100). Furthermore, she broadens her argument beyond just the American south when she asserts, "Art cannot properly be called so unless it is transcendent—in intent and results—of time and place and local code" (100). Like Janisse Ray and the other authors of this study, Hood does not defend or deny the racial or environmental atrocities of the South but rather attempts to make reparations through better ideas, improved behavior, and a portrayal of Southern places and people that acknowledges the wrongs of present and past and brings healing and growth to humans and the environment.

### **3 GEORGIA CONNECTIONS AND HUMAN ECOLOGIES IN MELISSA FAY GREENE**

Despite the historical and international variety of Melissa Fay Greene's nonfiction books, her works all share a connection to Georgia and to human ecologies that go beyond the fact that Georgia remains home to their author. Georgia has given literature a great many important writers, but Greene's particular brand of storytelling blended with serious journalism makes her Georgia connections unique. Greene was born in Macon in 1952 but moved to Dayton, Ohio, as

a child. After graduating from Oberlin College, Greene returned to the state in the 1970s to work for the office of Georgia Legal Services in Savannah, and she currently resides in Atlanta.<sup>10</sup>

In response to the question of how she decides on a story she considers exploring, she answered,

I'm interested in a kind of shining moment in time that could be, as they say, "unpacked," a moment—like the looting of the wrecked shoe-truck, with the Sheriff's assistance, in the opening pages of *Praying for Sheetrock*. That mysterious scene turns out to contain a world of information about everything from the trans-Atlantic slave trade to Reconstruction to the racist underpinnings of 20<sup>th</sup> century Georgia. In *Last Man Out*, the key moment—during the dramatic rescue of 18 men from a coal-mine collapse a mile underground—is the emergence of the last man, an Afro-Canadian. "Unpacked," that scene sends racial shock-waves across North America. (Appendix B)

Greene, a longtime journalist, has contributed articles to a number of periodicals, but she now also has a substantial body of book-length nonfiction. The first two books (*Praying for Sheetrock* and *The Temple Bombing*) are set in Georgia, so the connection to place is clear. However, the state of Georgia figures heavily in Greene's later four books as well but in less obvious ways. Georgia becomes a character that Greene portrays as being either the protagonist or antagonist in all of her work. Greene consistently centers even world events around Georgia so that her nonfiction intersects place with method, theme, and purpose. Although Georgia remains at the core of Greene's long works, Greene does not privilege Georgia or idealize the state. In fact, Georgia was symbolically and realistically guilty of civil rights abuses. Perhaps it is

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<sup>10</sup> Greene's husband Don Samuel is a criminal defense attorney, and the couple adopted five children to add to their four biological children.

no coincidence that all of Greene's books reveal an undercurrent of race and class prejudice because Greene has a knack for uncovering unexpected sources of conflict, both small and large scale, that escalate into history-shaping events.

Greene's works share a common effect: they all uncover the truth for the reader's benefit, and Greene's extensive research adds a greater understanding of important moments in history. Greene herself is careful in her life choices, in her choice of subjects, and in her research and honest portrayal of historical and sociological events. Greene's choice of topic or region may seem rather narrowly focused in scope, but her approach always reveals how large the issues she uncovers still are today even if the events occurred in the distant past or far away. Most reviewers acknowledge Greene's talent for sociological studies as much as her historical contribution although her multi-faceted works challenge classification. Therefore, Greene's works are important to read as revisionist history, as cultural understanding, as a wakeup to outrages past and present, and as the human interest stories to which readers can relate.

Greene's first book *Praying for Sheetrock*<sup>11</sup> explains the racial crisis in Darien, Georgia, in Macintosh County where Sheriff Poppell controlled everything from the poor blacks in the town to the tourist traps to the deputies working for him. The author's note for this first book ends with the following two sentences: "This is a chronicle of large and important things happening in a very little place. It is about the end of the good old boy era and the rise of civil rights, and what that famous epoch looked like, sounded like, smelled like, and felt like in a Georgia backwater in the 1970s" (*Praying for Sheetrock 2*). The title chapter of the book centers around Frances Palmer known as Miss Fanny, who could barely clutch a paper cup of juice to her lips because of the damaging shrimping work she had done in her younger days for barely a

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<sup>11</sup> *Praying for Sheetrock* was a finalist for the National Book Award and the winner of the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award in 1991.

dollar a day. Miss Fanny had eleven children, and they grew up working all day at the factory from the time they were ten years old. Greene's book explains the corruption in McIntosh County that kept the black population in poverty while the sheriff owned four houses and lived outside the law. Even though the heroic Thurnell Alston emerged as a needed leader of the black community, the end of the book calls even Alston's actions and motives into question, so the book ends somewhat tragically but honestly. Herbert Mitgang of the *New York Times* in a review of *Praying for Sheetrock*, which he describes as "stylishly written," noted that "the personalities in this remarkable book are like Faulknerian characters" and that it includes "elements of what we seek in serious fiction" (24). Comparing Greene's writing to Faulkner and to other memorable fictions is fitting because Greene's work is nonfiction replete with imagery, character, and plot that is more typically found in novels.

Another enlightening book *The Temple Bombing*<sup>12</sup> recalls Faulkner's often- anthologized story "Barn Burning" in title, subject matter, and character portrayal. The white supremacists suspected of the 1958 bombing of the Atlanta temple on Peachtree Street seem comparable to Faulkner's Abner Snopes who destroys property to get even for the discontent his own poor decisions have brought him as these angry men felt disgruntled at the Jewish wealth they perceived in the city at this time. Atlanta, Georgia is the setting for *The Temple Bombing*, and the focus of this book is the October 12, 1958, bombing of the Temple on Peachtree Street where Reform Rabbi Jacob Rothschild had become a controversial spokesman for civil rights for all. Greene gives the historical context of Atlanta at the time when the mayor, William Berry Hartsfield, "had determined that Atlanta ought to move through the twentieth century without racial violence" and coined the phrase "The City Too Busy to Hate" (*Temple Bombing 2*).

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<sup>12</sup> Greene's second book *The Temple Bombing* was also a finalist for the National Book Award and the winner of the Southern Book Critic's Circle Award in 1996.

However, as Tucker Carrington pointed out in reference to Greene's *Temple Bombing*, "In spite of the shared oppression, which differed only in degree, most of Atlanta's Jews did not consider an alliance with their fellow blacks" (742). Carrington also hints at the idea of Georgia as a character when he says, "What is not fully formed...is the character of the city of Atlanta, and it is the city's transformation which keeps the reader's interest" (741).

From her extensive interviews with Rothschild's widow Janice Rothschild Blumberg and with many others, Greene details the political shift brought by Rothschild as well as the fear growing in his congregation and the resentment growing in the radical community. The frightening facts Greene rediscovers through old police and court records involve the underground associated with the Ku Klux Klan and other extreme groups who were constantly plotting violent and damaging schemes. Even in a time when Atlantans of the Jewish faith felt safe and able to blend in to the larger community, Rothschild pushed his congregation to move out of its comfort zone and to risk their mainstream status for the sake of people of color who were still oppressed. Rothschild, never content to stand by or to take the easy way out when wrongdoing lay around him, spoke out from the temple against racial prejudice and abuse and called on his congregation to protest. *The Temple Bombing* reads like a police blotter of anti-semitic and anti-segregationist trouble makers in Atlanta in this key period of civil rights transition. The trials of the bombing suspects and the memorable Atlanta defense attorneys make up the book's middle section. The book concludes with the events surrounding the death of Martin Luther King Jr. and giving closure to Greene's thorough sociological exploration of these human ecologies in an important era in Atlanta civil rights history.

*Last Man Out* (2003) is set in Springhill, Nova Scotia, in 1958 where on October 23rd<sup>13</sup> a coal mine collapsed and killed seventy-five miners. Much of the book details how a few men survive for eight days without food, water, or even light before finally getting out. With her usual journalistic persistence, Greene interviewed Nova Scotians who remembered the mine disaster in order to get the full story. Greene researched the back story of an earlier 1956 mine explosion that left many miners dead and many more emotionally scarred from the experience. Greene learned that 1958 miners were a very close-knit group, and she studied this human ecology from the perspective of those who survived and from the families others left behind. Everyone in the community had a family member who worked at the mine. Miners knew that “carelessness with flame or dynamite could cause disaster because of the gas pockets” that could accidentally be disturbed by miners allowing the poison gas out before anyone could smell it and escape.

Coal, which comes from “jurassic ferns” was prevalent in Nova Scotia and was the pride of Canada, but mining it was a dangerous job. Greene explains the long history of mining in Springhill where pit ponies had once been used but had all gone blind from the coal dust. In 1958, an elaborate underground rail system was utilized, and men dug and shoveled coal wearing battery-powered head lamps. Greene describes the design of the mining method as in the shape of a giant letter E underground where three sets of workers would work simultaneously in each tine of the E daily. This precarious design, which Greene compares to a child’s plastic ant farm, of the number 2 mine had made the miners nervous early on, but they didn’t feel they had any choice but to work the mine as instructed by the “university educated engineers” (*Last Man Out* 12 ). Even though miners needed the mining jobs, there was a sense that “underground tunnels and rooms were unnatural; they were home to no living thing” (27), but most of them loved the

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<sup>13</sup> Ironically, the catastrophic subject of two of Greene’s books ( *The Temple Bombing* and *Last Man Out*) happened the same year just eleven days apart.

mine because of the work and the fellowship. Miners Greene interviewed described the constant sounds of the mine as “infernally dripping” and other haunting reminders of earlier mine cave-ins and ever-present danger (28).

Greene has relayed in readings how difficult it was to prompt this group of people to elaborate because their regional personalities made them so reticent or at least reluctant to add details. Psychologists had published a study of the survivors, but Greene reconstructed the moment-to-moment events from interview documents that were forty years old. “A World Without Sun” is the name of the first chapter. The miner is described as a strange sort of person who is always “suspicious of hidden danger, ever on the defensive” above as well as below ground. Despite the known dangers, the “skilled craft of mining [was] relayed by fathers to sons for generations”, and these mines themselves had been worked by generations of area residents(8).

Greene exquisitely details the October morning when the whole community heard the “bump” that seemed like an earthquake but was really the mine collapse. Families rushed out to the streets in bathrobes and pajamas “as if their haste could undo” the tragedy “as if they were somehow at fault for not remaining vigilant while their loved ones were underground” (26).

Piecing together the story from a variety of interviews and other research, Greene reconstructs the unfolding tragedy from the perspectives of the trapped miners, the rescuers, and the family members waiting to hear news.

The trapped miners are characterized as personable and funny or as grumpy or scared even before the mine’s bump. Greene’s portrayal of Maurice Ruddick is probably the most thorough and well rounded because he is the eponymous miner. Ruddick sang in the mines on a daily basis. Some miners sang along with him: “Bye Bye, Love” and other songs from the 1950s.

Maurice even tried to organize a bit of harmony depending on who was working with him deep in the mines at the time.

Greene's Maurice of *Last Man Out* tells a new story or at least Greene contextualizes a more accurate story about this hero. Greene finds a psychological study and confirms her earlier findings of how each trapped miner acted. Survivors and family rethink what should have been done; for instance, one boy was sent away to other relatives when his father was killed and not given the opportunity to grieve properly. Mining itself is portrayed as unnatural and risky, but Greene reveals that there was also little monetary compensation for survivors and exposes the greed of politicians in Georgia and the media wanting distraught pictures for papers. Greene boldly names the racist government officials from the past who used the public's interest in the trapped miners they saw on television reports as an opportunity to cash in on the far away tragedy. As with *Praying for Sheetrock* and *The Temple Bombing*, Greene spares no Georgia official complicit in this racial episode, despite the fact that relatives and supporters of those she names still reside in Georgia and prefer to keep such secrets. Greene's exploration of human ecologies continues to focus on Georgia despite her original distant subject.

When the mine collapsed and killed many miners, a couple of men were trapped and seriously injured by the cave-in. One man Percy had an arm completely trapped by the ceiling of coal and was constantly moaning and begging the other men to saw his arm off since they could not budge him. Maurice Ruddick alone was able to stay near Percy and look at him and talk to him while he cried out. Maurice talked to him "in a fatherly way" and gave him sips of water and aspirin while others "turned away humiliated by their inaction" (*Last Man* 148).

During the mine rescue efforts, reporters were asking for phone lines and office space during the crisis while the community was worried sick. New technology allowed the public in

the U.S. and Europe to see the “melodrama” of the mine disaster on television, but this access was at the expense of the respect and privacy of the victims of the tragedy even though some people did donate to the cause by sending money and supplies. Some journalists were considerate and sympathetic, but some photographers wanted to stage the families of victims crying at kitchen table or a small boy at his father’s funeral.

When it had been forty hours since the bump that caused the mine cave-in, a press conference announced that there was “no hope whatsoever” of anyone coming out of the mine alive at that point. Of the rescue situation, one leader not of the Springhill community announced that no one else was going down to get men out because it was too dangerous, to which one rescuer replied defiantly, “If there’s nobody goes down, nobody comes out” (*LMO* 132). The miner’s code meant being careful with fellow workers as when a group of three find water and take only sips so they can take the found can back to the other “ boys” who needed it more even though all three were tempted to drink it all.

Before Greene really knew much about the personalities of the survivors, her intuition told her from just a little information which miners filled each typical crisis role for disaster survivors during this harrowing week underground. Greene analyzes the sociological and psychological aspects of people in crisis and who emerges as a leader. What originally drew Greene to this story and caused her to travel to Canada to get the whole story was actually its Georgia connection. She had heard in the 1990s that in 1958 Georgia Governor Marvin Griffin had invited survivors of the mine collapse to Jekyll Island as a public relations ploy. In 1996 when Atlanta hosted the Olympics, and journalists were clamoring for Olympics stories, Greene decided to seek a very different story elsewhere.

The most striking focus of Greene's *Last Man Out* involves the hero Ruddick who experienced the effects of racism, not at home in Canada, but rather when he traveled to the state of Georgia as a reward for his heroic efforts in the mine and in the aftermath of his life in Nova Scotia post disaster. Ruddick took great care with his stylish clothes because he could only afford one or two new pieces each year since he and his wife had 12 children to support. Greene's research uncovers the inhumane way Georgia leaders and some residents still treated people of color at this time even though much of the country had finally moved away from the bigotry so prevalent nationwide at one time. What was intended to be a hospitable Southern gesture by Governor Griffin's ambitious public relations aide Sam Caldwell turned quickly into a political mess for Georgia. Ruddick had been called the singing miner for his role in motivating the other men during the crisis, but apparently no one in Georgia knew that one of the Canadian miners was black. When the governor realized this fact, he rushed to segregate the vacationers to avoid public scandal. In the late 1950s the south was still highly segregated, so a "mixed" vacation was not considered acceptable to some white Georgians, but it was the racist governor of the state who most wanted to keep the Ruddick family separated at Jekyll. Ruddick had never had any trouble in his own community before, but he did encounter some jealousy and criticism when he returned home, not due to racism but because some newspapers had inaccurately made him out to be the biggest hero of all. The debacle in Georgia is the climax of the book and the story that inspired Greene to find out more, and the state itself almost seems like an antagonist at least from the perspective of Nova Scotia in particular and of civil rights in general.

Greene's *There Is No Me Without You* (2006), is mostly set in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where Haregewoin Teferra takes in orphans who have lost their parents to HIV/AIDS. Although the subject of Ethiopian AIDS may seem even more remote, Greene's angle immediately

convicts readers of Western complicity in the AIDS epidemic. Greene's organizational method is to blend the factual but heartbreaking stories of Haregewoin Teferra and her growing number of orphan charges with sections that explain the statistical data on the AIDS epidemic. For instance, Greene provides information on the earliest cases of HIV or "Slim Disease" as it was first called in Ethiopia. She also gives readers the history of the progression of AIDS, the public's perception of it, and the progress of retrovirals, which have helped victims in wealthy countries tremendously but which have not been available for the world's poor. Scientists are sure that the source of HIV is from monkeys and chimps, but the spark that caused its human and fatal adaptation is still unclear. The serial passage explanation, (that so many injections were probably performed with unsterile needles when penicillin and other medicines were first given in mass quantities) is quite compelling. Greene writes about a disposable needle that is self-disabling so that doctors are prevented from reusing them. Despite all that needs to be done about the AIDS crisis, Greene's particular focus of *There Is No Me Without You* is on the children who have been left behind without parents: over twelve million orphans. The hero of this book, Haregewoin Teferra, has, like Ruddick of *Last Man Out*, suffered and been a victim—of disease, of government, of prejudice.

Georgia again becomes central to international crisis one morning when Greene reads the incomprehensible statistics of AIDS orphans in Ethiopia over coffee in her Atlanta home. Greene introduces her book's theme by relating how she became interested in this problem while reading the *New York Times* piece citing the impossible figure of 12 million children who had been orphaned by AIDS. Like many people who think about world poverty or human rights abuses and think: what can I do about such a big problem so far away, Greene began thinking about her own stress of parenting a few children like most Americans do and realized how much all

children depend on at least one parent to help them get ready for school, to fix them meals, to take them to doctors and dentists and after-school activities, and to tuck them into bed.

Ironically, it was Greene's own exhaustion over all the things parents must provide and keep up with that prompted this Atlanta parent to find a way to help and which led her to the small house of Haregewoin Teferra. Greene first visited Addis Ababa when she traveled to an adoption agency to adopt their daughter Helen. Later, Greene returned to begin interviewing Haregewoin at her two-bedroom shelter with the box car parked outside for extra space for the children. Greene ultimately adopted more children from Ethiopia as well. The bulk of *There Is No Me Without You* is Haregewoin's personal story, which explains how she came to take in all these children. The story is fascinating but heartbreaking because AIDS took Haregewoin's oldest daughter who had worked with the poor in Ethiopia. The Catholic charity began sending first teens and then younger children to Haregewoin's small compound, and this work helped her move out of her grief. Without any formal training on child psychology or nutrition, Haregewoin helped hundreds of children in over a decade of caring for those orphaned by AIDS. Sometimes she struggled to separate those who were sick from the healthy ones, but her only concern was for the children themselves. Most of the individual stories Greene shares are of children whose circumstances are so tragic at first but who through Haregewoin's help become healthy, happy, and loved.

Similar to Janisse Ray's exposure of greed and carelessness with nature, Greene explains pharmaceutical monopoly patent on AZT, which was upheld by the supreme court, a ruling that effectively ensured that few could afford the drug and that no one could make a generic version of the drug for over a decade. The luxury price for this life-saving medicine remained \$16,000 a year even though the labs that created it were largely publicly funded. Greene's explanation of

the pharmaceutical companies exposes the greed and selfishness of the industry as it actively prevented AIDS victims in third world countries from surviving because the drug was created in the rich United States. Greene's research reveals that the actual production cost for the triple cocktail drugs was only \$200. The patents, which Big Pharma fought long and hard to uphold, were expensive, not the drugs themselves. A pharmaceutical company in India and the government of Brazil began making generic AIDS drugs extremely affordable or even free. Yusef K. Hamied the philanthropic director of this small drug company explains, "I don't want to make money on these diseases that cause the whole fabric of society to crumble" (*There Is No Me Without You* 203). Some people have drawn parallels between the AIDS crisis and the Holocaust and wonder if future generations will ask us, "What did you do to help?" (*There Is* 204).

Georgia is a dynamic character in *There Is No Me Without You* because it is the place from which Greene realizes a great need and sets off to help right the wrongs of the world. One major antagonist presented is the Ethiopian government that controlled all public information and that broadcast no current news on television. Greene emphasizes the careful actions of her heroes always, but care does not mean their actions are without risk just as Greene's own adoptions have involved risk taking. This book transitions from Harregoin's story to the dire situation in Ethiopia making what she did (opening her home to orphans of infected parents) "the most dangerous thing a person could do" at that time. When Haregwoin's daughter died, she just wanted to go into seclusion and grieve. She and her friends thought that would be the best thing, but when called on to help a girl on the streets, Harregoin stepped in and found her purpose.

Greene includes the history of Ethiopia in *There Is No Me Without You*. She quotes an old proverb which says, "In a place with no people, try to be a person" (*There Is* 6). Often when

describing a historical moment or in the following examples to reveal a behind-the-scenes look at a culture, Greene will include a few well-placed, stand-alone quotes that illustrate what was really going on at the time or place. In *There Is No Me Without You* she explains people's feelings who were victimized by the AIDS crisis: "Because how could people know and not help?" By way of introducing Harregewoin's story, Greene notes that people, especially Americans, often forget that "there are worse weight problems in the world than obesity."

Greene transitions from the larger Ethiopian AIDS crisis to Harregewoin's concern for her latest foster children's HIV status. She describes this worried time as if waiting on the young girls' blood tests was like auditioning for American Idol and possibly being rejected world's lack or like Survivor voting one on or off the show. This comparison reveals how ludicrous it was and is for the world to be aware of such dire need and not to do more to help regardless of distance. Greene ironically describes some of the poorer nations as "Undeveloping Countries" when it comes to governments who do not distribute healthcare equally among the people or help everyone prosper economically. When describing the personalities of the culture, Greene says, "Centuries of tyrants bring sarcasm to Ethiopians" (*There Is* 12). Ethiopia has a history of literature connected to its life disasters, for there is actually famine poetry from this country's times of famine. Greene quotes one researcher who argues that there "No famine where there is a free press" because in this case, the world has stepped in and sent aid when made aware of mass famine in Ethiopia.

Greene reveals Haregewoin's extreme care for human life in *There Is No Me Without You*. Many people in Ethiopia assumed that the reason Haregewoin agreed to help and house AIDS orphans was because she had been diagnosed as HIV positive herself. After spending several days with Haregewoin, Greene finally receives the tragic story behind this woman's

mission in life. After her daughter died, Haregewoin sat staring out the window into the bushes. A crow—a butterfly – even a cricket possessed the secret recipe for life she couldn't concoct for her daughter. She could barely squash an ant now, knowing that its tiny machinery was something the most brilliant scientists could not build, nor the greatest doctors restore. She was exhausted from having tried to preserve for her daughter what even a worm took for granted: the gift of inching along, alive. It hurt most of all to see how blessed were all other mothers. They kept their daughters in life, while to her eternal shame she had failed hers at the only thing that mattered (*There Is* 89). Even though Haregewoin had a grown daughter Suzie still living, her grief was so unbearable even six months and a year after Atetegeb's death that she preferred to go into seclusion with no material possessions and to live alone with only her grief.

Unlike the exclusively fiction writers who are silent, letting narrators and characters speak for them, Greene participates in the story and becomes a major impetus for positive change. In all of Greene's books, many bystanders demonstrate prejudice and discrimination—often by silence and inaction. The benefit of Greene's, as well as Ray's, non-fiction is the direct connection between the author, the writing, and activism.

One of the most distressing aspects of the AIDS crisis besides the deaths and the parentless children who suffer as a result is at this point not so much the frustrating search for a cure but the fact that retrovirals already existed in wealthy countries like the U.S. These retrovirals can allow HIV-positive patients to live full lives and can prevent HIV parents from passing the virus on to their children. Greene goes into great detail to explain what seems like greedy and cold-hearted practices of U.S. drug companies as they insisted upon patent rights claiming it was the only way to stay competitive in pharmaceutical research and to reimburse companies for their research expenses. Only a few researchers around the world have been

willing to offer antivirals at an affordable cost. In some ways, Americans have forgotten about the AIDS epidemic in recent years because we rarely hear it mentioned anymore, at least not in reference to the United States. We have allowed ourselves to believe that it was a disease that only affected the small fringe minority who lived seedy lifestyles. Perhaps it is true that we don't need to worry as much about HIV here anymore, but unfortunately AIDS remains a huge problem around the world. The danger is that our media's silence on this issue has lulled us into believing everything is fine; Greene informs us of the truth behind such serious issues as well as what still needs to be addressed. Furthermore, she makes the facts personal and compelling from a humanitarian and humanistic point of view.

By 2003, Ethiopia had one million orphans. Haregewoin named her organization the Attettaguv Worku Memorial Orphan Support Association. In 2002, she started a case file on each child. Over a few years, there were a total of five newborns left at Haregewoin's front door. The first time she received a newborn, the baby's mother breathed her last giving the infant to Haregewoin who had become known in the community as the best place to bring children whose families were too sick or poor to keep them. Greene also notes an environmental connection to the AIDS epidemic because of extensive deforestation by Ethiopian cities as well as by the poor who need wood for their heating and to cook their food in *There Is No Me Without You*. One remarkable little boy whose plight Greene describes is AbaBou whose great grandmother gathered and sold sticks daily in order to afford a few kidney beans on which she subsisted.

Despite the embarrassment residents of Georgia or Southerners may experience in seeing the full corruption of predecessors in leadership, Greene's books go a long way in providing context and perspective on the AIDS epidemic, which remains clouded by misunderstanding. She has done the work to expose the truth-- both the ugly and the beautiful. An example of

beautiful truth in *There IS No Me Without You* is when Ryan and Mikki Hollinger are brave enough not only to travel to Ethiopia to adopt a brother and sister, Mekdes and Yabsira, but also to bring those children home to their current suburban family in Snellville and to continue to attend soccer games and dance recitals as if adoptions like these are the norm. There is a very moving scene in the book in which the couple takes the new children to say goodbye to the children's grandfather and aunt who had to give the children up for everyone's survival after the children's parents had died. The older daughter Mekdes had been the one who at age five Greene had witnessed hurling herself against the compound gate to protest being suddenly left there by her relatives. What stands out about Greene's research on Haregewoin's work is not the statistical information although that is included but the importance of the affection Haregewoin gave to each child in addition to food and shelter. Haregewoin had heroic carefulness, agonizing over how to feed, wash, clothe, and give attention to each orphan.

Although her work was on a smaller scale than the large orphanages, it is that very narrow focus of giving up to forty children the attention and love they needed to thrive that makes Haregewoin a true hero. This theme goes back to Greene's initial realization of the crisis back in her comfortable home in Georgia: although one million orphans seemed a problem too big to even think about, Greene made the effort to travel and to bring the information to readers through compelling stories as well as to adopt several Ethiopian orphans herself. Furthermore, Haregewoin is a great example of stepping in and taking great personal risks to be a part of the solution to a problem even if one person can only do so much. To each child she helped, Haregewoin was an angel. Through these and other adoptive parents and through Greene herself, Georgia seems to redeem itself as a character –to now serve a supporting role for doing good and improving the world.

Greene's texts seem distant in time and place, but their truth and their message speak to right here and right now, presenting a cultural point of view of great importance. Of Greene's four long works, the most heartwrenching book is *There Is No Me Without You* because it reveals that it is not too late to do something to help the over twelve million orphans left by AIDS around the world. Greene exposes the greed and carelessness of western nations whose governments and pharmaceutical companies have often taken advantage of patent law and protected themselves at the expense of poor countries and poor people.

The richness in Greene's writing has been largely neglected by critics. The author's personal voice comes in and out periodically, and it always adds to the poignant effect. For instance, there is a wistfulness in a few lines from her latest book where she introduces Stephen Lewis who represents UNICEF in its continual struggle to combat HIV/AIDS. Before providing readers with quotes from Lewis's interview, Greene describes his beautiful Toronto home, where his accomplished family "could sit on soft couches forever" and read all the books that line the walls and "sip iced tea." The reader glimpses here a longing in the author's voice, a longing that all of us academics (who are just readers at heart) probably have --to just retire to a comfortable place and read great books forever. But as Greene says of Lewis, they and we "do not stay home" but we keep working because there is work to be done out in the world. Thankfully, Greene continues to do this work and to inspire readers to do what we can to improve the world by thinking globally and acting locally. Like Ansa, Hood, and Ray, she seeks out projects and subjects that are challenging and controversial because her agenda is to use her writing to improve society. She told me in an interview that she is personally quite interested in science and environmental writing but does not feel qualified to write books on those subjects she often reads herself. Greene has found her own niche of historical and sociological topics that no else has

covered in the same thorough and careful way. She has chronicled the carelessness of many historic figures and leaders but has also shown how some seemingly insignificant individuals have emerged as heroes because of their carefulness with people's lives.

Greene's 2011 book, *No Biking in the House without a Helmet* is her warmest and funniest yet probably because it is wholly autobiographical written since *There Is No Me without You*. With her usual journalistic approach, her tenacity to get to the heart of the story is always impressive, and readers are often pleasantly surprised by the small touches of humor here and there. However, since *No Biking in the House without a Helmet* tells her own journey through 5 international adoption, her humor is hilarious and pervasive. For instance, Greene opens with a long list of tasks she has repeated as a mom of elementary school kids for twenty five years because of the age differences between her biological four children and her adopted five children. Then Greene relates her late joining of Facebook to her teenage daughter's horror who initially said, "MOTHER! ARE YOU KIDDING ME? DON'T EVEN *THINK* ABOUT FRIENDING ME!" But later Lily invites her mother to be her Facebook friend, and Greene starts getting "empty nest" syndrome and obsessing about adopting while browsing online.

Playwright Tom Stoppard said, "If your aim is to change the world, journalism is a more immediate short-term method." Melissa Fay Greene has made great strides at improving the world through her research, which is much more effective because of her truth-telling care and because of her story-telling ability. This book is much more personal and therefore even more rich with poignancy and humor as she works daily to make a family out of very many family members from entirely different cultures now living in the same house.

In the adoption of PI children, there was no category of "no risk."

The international adoption doctors had front-row seats for an unprecedented

social experiment: the gathering of thousands of deprived and traumatized children out of institutions into homes of loving plenty. For each set of parents and child, there were two big questions: What are the odds of this child being able to lead a fairly normal life? And will these parents be equal to the challenges presented by this child? The doctors hated to recommend against a child's chance of rescue by loving parents, but if the child's needs overwhelmed the parents, the adoption—and even the marriage – could fail. (*No Biking* 27)

One of the most heartwarming parts of *No Biking in the House without a Helmet* relates Greene's adoption of Christian a Romani orphan boy whom Greene traveled to Bulgaria to see after she and her family saw him in photos and on a video. In the context of this precarious adoption situation where a child's health and background can cause all sorts of problems for the family that adopts him or her, Greene had begun to feel in her early forties that it might be time to adopt another child. At the same time, she was just beginning to browse the internet on adoption sites when she could not sleep at night. Greene was first interested in Chrissy online because he had not been institutionalized at birth but placed in the orphanage at seventeen months so with a more likely chance of normal speaking and socialization skills. The whole family were intrigued with Chrissy from the video when he sang a little song and got excited about a stuffed bunny given to him by the orphanage directors. Greene's family fell in love with Chrissy when the video showed him reacting to a muffin the directors gave him but did not say if he could eat it. When the director left the room, Chrissy examined and sniffed the muffin that he obviously wanted to eat but put it on the table instead; "He was waiting for permission" (*No Biking* 37). Unlike some of the other adoption productions the author had seen where staging was evident, this video allowed Greene "a glimpse of how he acted when he thought no one was

watching” (37). However, Greene started to second guess herself and to internally question her family’s impatience to make this boy a part of their family. Greene parallels her use of her new computer and the online adoption sites to this new adoption itself because sometimes she wished for her old rattling computer that only allowed for word processing and emails. She had started on this quest, but now she worried that a new child might disturb the peacefully chaotic balance of her large family, and she was not sure about traveling to Bulgaria twice for this adoption. Ultimately, what compelled Greene to adopt Chrissy was seeing from the video that “he was acting with restraint; he was trying hard to behave” so her intuition told her that he was well enough adjusted to join her family (*No Biking* 37).

Greene’s first trip to Bulgaria was the required first step in the adoption of Chrissy who was then four years old. Although still hesitant to commit, Greene met Chrissy and immediately became attached despite realizing how little language of any kind the boy had really learned yet. He was even unsure of his name. When an employee of the Bulgarian orphanage drove Greene and Chrissy out to play ball in a field, Greene realized that there was racism against Romani children in this country explaining why the driver took them farther out so no one would see them. Back at the orphanage, the other preschoolers swarmed around Greene crying “Mama!Mama!” trying to get her attention (*No Biking* 46). Later, Chrissy unzipped compartments in Greene’s suitcase and nibbled on a single cashew savoring its flavor, but when Greene showed him a teddy bear she brought as a gift, he became scared and wanted nothing to do with it. This incident worried Greene and made her wonder if she was rushing into this adoption until she realized that this proposition was not “a no-risk trial with the possibility of a full refund” (*No Biking* 49). Despite the possible risk to her family of already four (at that time) wonderful children, she understood that it was “not permissible to dabble in that way in

anyone's life – especially a child's" (*No Biking* 49). A game of Legos with Chrissy cemented Greene's decision to adopt the adorable but needy little boy.

Although the adoption seemed to be working out from a distance in the six months it took for the legal paperwork to be processed, there were a few more disquieting moments for Greene as she received feedback from doctors about Chrissy's chances at normality based on the videos taken on Greene's visit as well as on his measurements. While his self care and eye contact were promising, there was a misunderstanding about his head circumference, which one doctor said was too small. For a few stressful days Greene worried that the size of Chrissy's head could equal doom for the whole family if it was such a predictor of health and normal growth. After a lot of back and forth and misunderstanding, Greene made the decision to adopt regardless of the potential for delayed development indicated by Chrissy's head circumference.

The fact that I was asking from rich America, for another measurement of an Eastern European Romani child's head felt unconscionable. It smacked of racial theory. No matter what the result, we *would* accept him. Besides, the sudden risk of losing Chrissy awakened my attachment to him. He was already my child. (58)

Finally, a last encouraging email from a doctor about Chrissy's head circumference sealed the deal, and Greene likens the click of her computer mouse to submit online acceptance of the adoption with the plastic tap of "one LEGO brick clicking onto another" extending this metaphor of her growing family (*No Biking* 59).

Despite the likely health and psychological problems that the children Greene adopted would have, she and her husband committed each time to the lifelong challenges as well as the effort, worry, and expense of the travel, the complicated adoption process, and the seemingly insurmountable cultural differences each child brought to the household. Of course, there were

issues with the number of teens in Greene's home at once, but she shares both the fights and the victories. One of the adopted boys had the opportunity to see his older relatives in his native country, and Greene shares the difficult journey there and the challenges to communicate with them. Greene ended up with a house full of athletes because the adopted children (both boys and girls) were quite adept at soccer and other sports.

Tragically one of Greene's adopted sons committed suicide October 9, 2014, apparently because of his own disappointing soccer game despite his obvious athletic ability. Greene attributes this tragedy to a cultural misunderstanding and exaggerated sense of a single failure being devastating. Her speech about her son Sol after his death is quite moving and supports the care/carelessness theme that characterizes all of Greene's work.

But what I most want to say is how precious our children are to us, how precious all you children – all you children the ages of my children, the teens and the 20-somethings and the 30-somethings – are to us; and that we see you in the fullness of yourselves even you do not. How did it happen that Sol, that Fisseha, saw his life measured out in soccer minutes?<sup>14</sup> How did it happen that while *we* saw infinite possibilities for him, infinite chances for happiness, a lifetime of partaking in the joy he endlessly shared with everyone – How did it happen that *he* saw one path to happiness, one very narrow path, through one team, one season, one night? ...But here's what we cannot and will not do: We will not believe with you that your prowess on the soccer field is the most important thing about you. ... It's been our indescribable privilege to be his family for ten years, and we're

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<sup>14</sup> Greene's allusion to T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is quite fitting as she changed "measured out my life in coffee spoons" to soccer minutes. Eliot's theme in "Prufrock" is *Carpe Diem*: Sieze the Day! This theme connects well with Greene's whole body of work.

currently at a loss as to how we will go on without him.

A more recent project of Greene's has been her research and promotion of *4Paws for Ability*, an organization that trains dogs to alert for seizures and to help calm children prone to seizures or emotional episodes. This project began as an article but has become Greene's latest book *The Underdogs: Children, Dogs, and Power of Unconditional Love*, which has been well received. 4Paws was started in 1998 and has been a leader in providing trained dogs (mostly Golden or Lab Retrievers) to calm children with Autism, Down's Syndrome, or Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. This book is also quite moving as Greene chronicles the lives of several families whose children have periodic "meltdowns" that their trained dog can predict and help children through by holding on and staying with a child sometimes for hours until the episode subsides. Some parents of autistic children, such as one family in Cobb County, Georgia, raised the money for a bloodhound mix dog that could actually track their son Ben whose autism made him so curious that he escaped through windows and crept into neighboring houses to examine their appliances. *Underdogs* also chronicles the extreme care required by the trainers at 4 Paws and the care needed for autistic children whose numbers are still increasing. *4Paws* was started by Karen Shirk whose own life was saved and enriched by a German Shepherd rescue that she trained to help her live in a wheelchair and with a trach. Karen's was the first training organization to train a service dog for a child, and *4 Paws* was founded as a resource for people with disabilities who had been turned down by other organizations. *The Underdogs* remarkably compliments Greene's earlier books with its far-reaching historical research on canines in relation to humans but mostly with its emphasis on humans caring for dogs and dogs caring for people in contrast to the neglect that sometimes exists for animals and the misunderstanding or red tape that often prevents people with disabilities from obtaining service dogs. Like Ansa,

Hood, and Ray, Greene focuses on the relationships between living things, and it is the service dog's relationship with humans that offers people with disabilities a rich life beyond the daily service these dogs provide.

Categorizing her body of works -- sociology, journalism, historical nonfiction, Greene stated, "I like 'Literary Nonfiction,' with the notion that one serves two gods—the god of truth, and the god of art and beauty" (Appendix 1.2). Despite the great variety of topics in her work, Greene's books always share a common thread of human ecologies: understanding and improving human relationships with each other and with the world. Similar to the environmental writing of Janisse Ray, Melissa Fay Greene's large body of nonfiction makes readers more conscious of the carelessness of which people can be guilty but also of the possibility for improved humanitarianism and careful living and leading. Like Ray, Greene also practices what she preaches. She by no means expects others to adopt international children as she has, but she has been willing to take great personal risks to help as many people as she can; her revelations of human ecologies inspire readers to act for the betterment of all our relationships.

#### 4 PEACHES AND OTHER SYMBOLS IN JANISSE RAY

Similarly to Melissa Fay Greene's work blending human stories with history, politics, and personal triumphs for an activist theme, Janisse Ray's nonfiction seeks to improve the world primarily through humans conserving or improving the natural environment. Janisse Ray may be creating a new kind of genre where human stories merge with regional examinations of nature. Perhaps Thoreau's multi-genre work *Walden* is the closest precursor to Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* because as Lawrence Buell notes, Thoreau was the earliest to concern himself with the "biota itself" (23) not just the image of nature. Thoreau juxtaposed his poetry with his daily observations of Walden Pond in all seasons and of the other natural elements

particular to his Concord, Massachusetts, region. Although Ray's structure is a pronounced alternation of her family stories with chapters on species of flora and fauna, she shares Thoreau's purpose and method, but rather than New England's mid-nineteenth century ecology, Ray's work voices the distinct environmental concerns of late twentieth and twenty-first century South. Environmental writers such as Neil Evernden remain concerned that "the area of Arts and Humanities seems to play so minor a role in the environmental movement" (92), but if scholars begin to incorporate environmental writing into their research, they could force an important shift. Janisse Ray's nature writing strikes readers as far more accessible than that of Mary Austin and Annie Dillard because of the storytelling that is woven throughout. Both Greene and Ray make history, politics, and government policy meaningful by telling the human stories that are affected by the literal facts. Ray uses a few select species of the natural world to symbolize the need for the human species to address its environmental concerns with greater awareness and care. The examples Ray promotes are interesting in and of themselves, just as her personal stories have poignancy as independent vignettes. However, Ray's purpose is that readers recognize the significance of her work as a whole by seeing the symbols for the larger themes they represent such as the need to cherish and improve both the environment and human relationships.

The species to which Ray has given much of her attention is the longleaf pine tree. She explained the creation of her first book *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* as writing a book people would read for the stories because she felt that "no one would read a book about a damned pine tree" ("Reading"). Perhaps few share Ray's intense appreciation for the value of this particular pine, but Ray reveals how threatened the trees have become in the South, especially in natural stands rather than in planted pine plantations. Ray provides both descriptive and statistical

information about the longleaf pine forests as physically essential to the South's environmental well being. The other nature chapters in her book detail the history and habitat of other plants and animals that inhabit the area around the longleaf pine ecosystem, species that are dying out or endangered because of the loss of the longleaf pine. Ray provides much information to inspire readers to attend to their natural resources. For example, *wiregrass* is a groundcover that naturally thrives below the longleaf pine, and Ray offers details about the complimentary relationship of the two species, primarily in coastal Georgia. Ray explains how longleaf pine forests have adapted, asserting that "longleaf and lightning began to depend on each other" (*Ecology* 37).

The longleaf pine serves Ray's agenda as an important symbol. The book's second chapter "Below the Fall Line" outlines the longleaf and wiregrass community as "critically endangered" because less than 10,000 acres of virgin forests, a mere one percent of what had been, remain in the south today. The loss of ninety-nine percent of natural stands of longleaf Ray calls "apocalyptic" (*Ecology* 15). Ray's outrage and personal burden ring out when she says: "This was not a loss I knew as a child. *Longleaf* was a word I never heard. But it is a loss that as an adult shadows every step I take. I am daily aghast at how much we have taken, since it does not belong to us, and how much as a people we have suffered in consequence" (*Ecology* 15). Like Ansa, Greene, and Hood, Janisse Ray uses literature to help improve people's lives as well as the natural environment. Her awareness of this one endangered species started her official quest to preserve and improve the earth, but she has branched out from there. The longleaf's vital relationship with the wiregrass in flatwoods is also symbolic of ecosystems in general.

Another unique characteristic of longleaf pines is their relationship to the fires caused by lightning that occurs so often in the flatwoods environment. Symbolizing healthy human

relationships which balance each other's strengths and weaknesses, the trees and wiregrass are not co-dependent but complimentary. These trees, and the wiregrass around them, actually thrive as a result of fire, which revitalizes the species in this ecosystem as Ray explains in her chapter called "Built by Fire." Lightning has even become necessary in order for the two coexisting species to reproduce. The trees have adapted to wait until a safe time to grow tall and to produce flammable resin "driving wildfire through the forest, in order to leave older trees unharmed" (*Ecology* 37). The method Ray uses for this chapter reminds the reader of fiction in its reimagining of the pine tree personified as a weary traveler deciding to settle in the coastal flatwoods and to stubbornly remain there despite the threat from lightning. Ray is certainly not the first Southern writer to use fire symbolically. We see fire representative of something larger than literal flames in Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path" or William Faulkner's "Barn Burning". Ray reveals the way that nature adapts to threats like fire, and the longleaf-wiregrass ecosystem thriving in harmony with fire symbolizes how human ecologies should work in harmony as well. Instead, the contemporary world has become the anthropocene era where we see more damage to nature wrought by man than we see the wild, pure natural environment Ray makes readers long to bring back. What sets Ray's work apart from other nonfiction is that it is written beautifully like fiction with all the depth of symbolic layers, with figurative language of metaphor and simile, with story and plot, characters and imagination. She is writing to offer a message that calls readers to environmental action. Symbolically, the pine and wiregrass collectively adapting to the presence of fire stands for humanity's joint efforts to adjust our contemporary lives of wastefulness to the needs of the environment.

A dominant component of the environmental crisis is that the human species sees itself as set apart and above every other species, but ecological studies and ecocriticism show how

everything works together in harmony in nature. When man destroys one element such as a longleaf pine, the other plants and animals that coexisted with that natural forest are negatively impacted. Having articulated the crisis contrapuntally to the human story of her youth in *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, Ray defines her mission to “honor wildness” in her subsequent work. An endangered species of plant or animal can be better appreciated for its rarity and sense of imminent loss once someone, in this case Ray, emphasizes its plight. What people often do not realize is that the endangerment is symptomatic of a larger ecological problem, a systemic loss such as lack of land, water sources, food sources, something man has carelessly taken away or used up without regard for environmental effects. Human relationships parallel ecosystems. Successful relationships balance self with every other aspect of the other in the relationship. Although the challenge remains to manage one’s responsibilities to others, humans must work at it daily to meet individual needs and the needs of the others for the relationship to thrive. Like Mary Hood’s fiction, Ray’s work shows readers examples of how to live carefully with humans and with the environment and how *not* to live carelessly, which would be to the detriment of those same relationships.

Perhaps the most memorable chapter in Ray’s *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* is “Native Genius.” After explaining how her father could fix anything by re-tooling parts of old cars and other items spread across his junkyard in Baxley, Georgia, Ray contrasts her father’s talent with his bout with mental illness. Although there was a good chance that her father’s mental health was compromised by someone slipping him drugs at a gun show, he also had a genetic predisposition to mental illness. The most dramatic part of this chapter relates the day Ray’s mother and the four children finally realized that their father was mentally ill. He locked himself and the whole family in a bedroom where a freezer chest was kept. After hours of sitting while

their father “ranted” in “mania,” Ray’s mother begs her husband for permission to make the family dinner (*Ecology* 93). Ray’s father would only let his wife pick one thing out of the freezer in the room, and she had to close her eyes while he held the lid. Ray describes this scene dramatically as her mother reaches in, feeling for the only thing that would be edible in its frozen state: peaches she had prepared with sugar in summer when Georgia peaches were “plentiful” (94). The reader’s amazement at Ray’s mother’s ability to obtain just the right thing in a crisis mirrors the writer’s own wonder, who says she tried later to re-enact the moment and locate the peaches without looking. In Ray’s re-creation, she always came away with “sliced okra, a chicken or two, bags of turnips” (93), which would be inedible without thawing and cooking. This true story of crisis averted through careful choosing symbolically suggests the natural ecology connected to human choice, which characterizes Ray’s writing. The peaches literally were the only option that could offer both immediate sustenance as well as comfort. Figuratively, the peaches not only represent Georgia, but they also symbolize a mother’s care in preparing them originally, and now a mother’s devotion in caring for all members of her family.

This chapter ends with an explanation of Ray’s father being taken to Milledgeville for evaluation and slipping into a four-day coma. Later he was able to come home and would have only occasional moments of mental breakdown. These negative experiences illustrate Ray’s overall theme because her growing up poor, living in a junkyard, and having a father who was both brilliant and irrational makes us realize the potential for all of us to reverse the dysfunction in our relationships and in our environment. Ray’s childhood playground of old cars spoiling the acreage on which they sat for years is in some ways a symbol of probably the worst abuse of the land she loves, and yet the junkyard setting promotes the idea that even that scarred patch can improve and bounce back to its purest state if we all start to make conscious efforts to improve

the landscape. On the other hand, Ray's father took excellent care of the junkyard and was certainly a pioneer in recycling the cars and their components, hence the junkyard's ecology. In addition, Ray's father is an example of an extremely careful person in many ways but who was also careless at times as we all are. Ironically, Ray's admission of complicity in the waste of natural resources is what best qualifies her to be a spokesperson for environmental conservation efforts, particularly in the South, where the land is often less protected than in other parts of the nation and where residents are sometimes less aware of the negative impact of development. The last page of *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* is reminiscent of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, but it is both wistful and serious not for racial equality but for healing and repairing the natural environment. Ray concludes, "I have a dream for my homeland. I dream we can bring back the longleaf pine forests, along with the sandhills and the savannahs starting now" (*Ecology* 270). Since people have been careless and spoiled the land and its wildlife, Ray's works bring readers awareness and realization that we must reverse the damage we have inflicted and be much more careful going forward. Ray's focus is on nature, but her emphasis is essentially the same as the messages of Ansa, Greene, and Hood. All four promote living consciously and carefully to improve human and natural ecologies.

The Georgia peaches themselves in Ray's story become more than emblems of southern hospitality, comfort, richness, and purity in the region; here peaches stand for literal and figurative nourishment. The finding of those peaches in Ray's family story represents the power of mothers, in particular, but all parents in their obligation and challenge to provide for their children yet also in their awesome responsibility to influence them for good. The "Native Genius" chapter and Ray's other personal stories in the book blend appropriately with her natural history chapters because the structure of the book emphasizes the interconnectedness of human

life with the life of everything else in the environment. The mother-children-peaches connection parallels the human-longleaf-forest ecosystem at the heart of Ray's writing. Meanwhile, it is Ray's father who takes aspirin out to a dog who had been hit on the road outside their house. There was nothing really to be done for the dog but ease its pain, so that is what he did in his thoughtful, careful but forthright way. Human stories do affect ecosystems, and our environment affects us in turn. Just as parents must own the responsibility to feed and encourage their children, people must live up to their responsibility to nourish and protect the environment.

Ray's family stories illustrate how parent-child relationships parallel human-environment ecosystems. Whether people realize it or not, humans are a part of the ecosystem, but the part with the most power to damage the natural wildness that must remain for the harmony of the whole system. Ray notes how humans also benefit when we understand and protect the environment. The peaches further symbolize the importance of natural nourishment, food that is good for the body in its purest and most appropriate form. In contrast to processed foods that are so drastically removed from their origins by distance and form, peaches are nature's gift, and they happen to be a distinct symbol in Ray's home state of Georgia. The joke that every street in Atlanta is Peachtree seems a reality in downtown and Buckhead, but today's travelers and residents might have to look further for the actual peach orchards from which the state emblem originated. Peachtree was originally "pitch tree" (ie. the pine tree of today.) The native Cherokees settled near Pitchtree Creek by Atlanta's Chastain Park. Perhaps the grim irony is this contradiction between Georgia's former trees and peaches and the present state of nature in the south because rapid and unchecked development in this state has made it so that the images of nature sadly remain *largely* symbolic.

After a chapter about her father's strict Christian views, Ray warns those who cut trees for a living, "Better pray continuously" (*Ecology* 123). She describes God as only holding back punishment for clear cutters if their children are hungry but not if they clear cut out of greed. "[God] refuses to go into clearcuts at all. He thought he had given his children everything their hearts would desire; what he sees puts him in a quarrelsome mood, wondering where he went wrong" (*ECC*126).

Ray parallels care vs. carelessness for both human and natural ecologies. Ray's family has lived in Baxley, Georgia 180 years from Scottish clan ancestry, but land was ceded by Creek Indians in Georgia to create the county. Ray parallels clan of long leaf pines to human clans like the one from which her ancestors came, but she laments, "Our legacy is ruination." In a chapter called "Poverty" Ray sums up the often overlooked connection between historical and socio-economic circumstances for humans that affect the natural environment negatively as well:

Passing through my homeland, it was easy to see that 'Crackers,' although fiercely rooted in the land and willing to defend it to death, hadn't had the means, the education, or the ease to care particularly about its natural communities. Our relationship with the land wasn't one of give and return. The land itself has been the victim of social dilemmas, racial injustice, lack of education, and dire poverty. It was overtilled, eroded, cut, littered, polluted, treated as a commodity, sometimes the only one, and not as a living thing. Most people worried about getting by, and when getting by meant using the land, we used it. When getting by meant ignoring the land, we ignored it. (*Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* 164-165)

The chapter called “The Keystone” uses the concept of the keystone or upper central stone in an arch on which all the other stones depend as analogous to the gopher tortoise as crucial in holding the ecosystem of the longleaf pine together. This ancient tortoise (now an endangered species) lives in a burrow it tolerantly shares with over “300 species of vertebrates and arthropods” that live as “commensals meaning organisms that live in close association” (*Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* 170). The burrow of the gopher tortoise benefits the other species that co-exist there especially when threatened by fire. Ironically, “fire is vital in maintaining native ecosystems - most commonly longleaf pine sandhills - where gopher tortoises live” (*ECC* 173). This threatened species was called a Hoover chicken in the Depression because it was used for food by desperate people in desperate times. Ray uses the gopher tortoise as a specific example of how historical circumstances have an impact on nature. It is up to current and future generations to understand what has been lost in nature and to try to correct the destruction of nature from the past. Our own human future depends on conservation of the natural environment. The gopher tortoise has been listed as a threatened species since 1992.

After this chapter on the gopher tortoise, Ray alternates a human story chapter about her grandmother Beulah followed by a chapter on the indigo snake, which utilizes the burrow of the gopher snake. The next chapter called “Mama” recounts the elopement of Ray’s parents. During the quick ceremony in the heat, Ray describes, “Below their feet, the drip line etched a visible line of hollows like those of ant lions in the bare sand. The line divided the world as surely as the desire to control our world divides us from the wild” (*ECC* 195). Of her mother, Ray speaks worshipfully, “What faith she had. She was so strong a ship could have been hewn from her body” and later “If it weren’t for us children and her powerful mothering instincts, she would have broken I think” (*ECC* 197).

Thinking of the junkyard where she grew up as well as her mother's accumulation of knickknacks, Ray confesses, "Once I read Thoreau, I wanted none of it" (*ECC* 202). However Ray chafed against the unfairness of having to stay inside and do women's work, her first book reveals her true appreciation for the dedication of her mother who approached sainthood. Alternating with Mama's chapter is one on Bachman's sparrow, and readers begin to see the pattern is more than just alternating natural history with personal history; Ray's structure focuses on both human and environmental ecologies but two particular ecologies: the relationships in her own family and the relationships between animals and plants in the ecosystem of the longleaf pine. Ray describes a harrowing experience of her and her brothers being spanked with a belt. Her father's reason was because they had not stopped an older boy from killing a turtle. Therefore, Ray vowed never to hit a child. When Ray's father became ill, it affected Ray's whole family just as the plight of the gopher tortoise and the plants it typically eats negatively impact the entire ecosystem of the pine flatwoods. So too contemporary fragmentation threatens our human community. We should take more care to appreciate and preserve our human relationships, even if we do not agree with each other on every subject, just as we should try to conserve the natural ecosystems around us.

Although Ray does not agree with the extreme fundamentalism of her father's religion, she uses the verses of Proverbs describing the virtuous woman to characterize her mother. While Ray as a young woman wanted to assert herself as a feminist, her mother willingly worked to cook and clean for her family from early each morning until late at night. Ray likens her mother's heroic care for her family to "Superwoman disguised as a chaste cracker housewife with four children" (*Ecology* 199) "When my father was sick, my mother stepped into the role of head-of-household without a stumble" (*Ecology* 200). Ray uses wilderness as a metaphor for

insanity. Ray's father was scared of being lost in the woods because his father took him and his siblings out to the woods to try to scare them. Ray surmises the psychological damage passed down a generation: "What my grandfather planted in my father was a crazy fear and mistrust of being lost in a wilderness alone" (*Ecology* 190). Ray contrasts her grandfather's carelessness and even deliberate cruelty to the immense care her mother had for her family.

There are other examples of carelessness in Ray's family. For example, Ray's father's mother "was stingy and couldn't be depended on for even a biscuit," but "she loved birds and flowers and was nicer to birds than people. She had suffered during Hoover days" (*Ecology* 193). Ray's grandfather surveyed the land and forest for logging not for enjoyment. He would say, "Don't take more on your heart than you can shake off on your heels." To Ray, this was the moral of the story: not to be emotional but to just survive. In contrast to this cynical worldview, Ray describes her own heart as a tree picking up more that weighs her down so she can't walk away from it as both grandfathers did.

The same type of locomotive that disturbed Hawthorne with its noise also contributed to the great loss of pine forests even in Georgia. Ray gives historical context for the massive damage inflicted on the pine forests of Georgia: "After the Civil War, timber was in high demand for Reconstruction" (*Ecology* 167). Although Ray's focus is narrow for both human and natural subjects, her thematic purpose and the overall result is much broader.

It was not until Ray started school away from home at North Georgia College in Dahlonega that she first heard of an "environmentalist," when she saw a Morris poem handwritten and tied to a maple tree that was slated to be cut down. This pivotal experience links literature with activism because Ray had heard the poem before but now took it literally. While at North Georgia, Ray earned quite a boon by scheduling James Dickey to do a reading at the

college (now a university), and Dickey agreed to visit for 1/3<sup>rd</sup> his usual fee because Ray begged and because he wanted to visit the beautiful natural area of which he had written in many of his poems.

A later chapter in *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* called “Altamaha River” admits the respect we owe nature because nature is also sometimes dangerous. Ray highlights this perilous power in her stories about her father saving her family from drowning in the rushing Altamaha. More than one critic has focused on Ray’s portrayal of poverty in the south, namely Jay Watson and Sarah Robertson. Watson points to this chapter as evidence of the family’s poverty because of its reference to the homemade boat Ray’s father had made from instructions in *Popular Mechanics*. Ray says: “It was called a PM38 because supposedly you could build it in 38 hours for \$38 and it would go 38 miles per hour with a 38 horsepower engine” (*Ecology* 223). Jay Watson wonders if the fact that the boat was “made on the cheap” (502) is what might have caused the family such danger on the river. Watson argues that poverty connects to a fear of nature felt by Ray’s father. It is true that after the near drowning, among other scary incidents, Ray describes her father as “irrationally afraid” (227). However, Watson may assume too much to say the irrationality stems from poverty. All parents, no matter their socioeconomic conditions, are concerned for their children’s safety. Even an expensive boat can be dangerous because nature can be dangerous. Ray reveals the need for proper respect for the dangers of nature while presenting a dramatic encounter with nature that her family experienced. Poverty has little if anything to do with Ray’s account. In fact, in the same chapter, Ray recounts how her youngest brother accidentally fell off a houseboat into the river, and her father “flew in” to save the son in his church clothes and shoes. They were all grateful that the father jumped in the river the moment he heard the splash since the children could not swim. After that, he

“determined that [they] would learn to swim” (*Ecology* 226). Although Ray did grow up in with little financial means, her work goes far beyond simply a memoir of poverty in a southern landscape. Most readers find in Ray a wealth of beautiful language that promotes activism for the environment and is therefore much more useful than poignant. As Adele Bealer aptly puts it, “Celebrating a childhood spent in a rural junkyard, Ray recasts a life lived in poverty as the performance of an abundant love for the ecology of her homeland” (12).

Like the mother’s miracle with the peaches, Ray remembers several moments of her father’s heroism borne out of his extreme love for his children. Whenever Janisse and her siblings were left alone at the house for a short time, her father “left a litany of instructions: Keep the door locked. Don’t let strangers in the house...” (*Ecology* 227). The family’s poverty and the junkyard environment may have made for a more dangerous place to grow up, but Ray’s parents took excellent care of their children. While the animals were important to the Ray family, people were most important, and that order of priority of care is as it should be. Although there are aspects of Ray’s work that sound distinctively Southern and suggest a low socio-economic background, her message is universal.

Without this combination of disparate elements in her past, Ray would probably not have been called “the Southeast’s Rachel Carson” in a *New York Times* book review. Ray has chosen a life that builds on the good from her parents but a life that takes a far different path in some aspects. For instance, Ray’s mother obeyed her husband even in his mania, but she took her job as protector and caretaker of the children just as seriously as her respect for her husband. Today Ray rejects many of her father’s strict fundamentalist views while still cherishing the good memories and morals they share. In fact, Ray’s relationship with her family was mended and improved with the publication of *Ecology*. When *Ecology* was published, Ray’s father bought

and gave out books to everyone he knew in Baxley, so proud was he that his daughter had become an author.

In another of her books, *Wild Card Quilt* (2003), Ray tells the story of moving back to the old home place with her son and of making a special quilt with her mother. As in other stories, this quilt symbolizes the piecing together of a variety of elements from family members and from both past and present. This particular quilt symbol extends further in Ray's case through the word "wild" in the title, the subtitle "Taking a Chance on Home," and because Ray is writing nonfiction. A wild card quilt is a particular quilting pattern, but the title represents Ray's gamble to try living in the place she grew up. Although taking such a chance seems careless, the paradox is that it began the journey that resulted in her most carefully-lived life and her blending of home, garden, and environmental writing career.

Contrasts between our pristine images of the South and the actual ruined landscape dominate Janisse Ray's other works as well, just as she laments contradictions between what environmentalists say and what most people do every day. In "Altar Call for True Believers" published in *Orion* magazine, Ray explains her frustration with those who say they want change but who seem to make little effort to modify their consumption of natural resources or to reduce pollution. She cites the frivolous use of airplanes in order to make a quick trip to a conference and how such excess seems to go against the environmental agenda. Ray acknowledges her own guilt in this dilemma because she and her family also drive cars and board airplanes, but she wishes that we who know what is best would make more conscious decisions to live with as little negative impact on the environment as possible. Ray and her husband biked to the theater to see *An Inconvenient Truth*, but she was disappointed by the contradictions in the screening such as Al Gore riding a hydraulic lift instead of climbing a ladder. Ray does note examples of people

who “walk the talk” such as Susana Lein who lives near Berea, Kentucky, and “farms six acres without tillage or chemicals of any kind” (“Altar Call” 5). Ray would like to see environmentalists who stay closer to home, who carpool, or who even cancel conferences in order that petroleum might be used “sparingly and wisely” (“Altar Call” 6). Ray advocates no-waste picnics, declining plastic bags at the store, and restrooms that use something other than paper towels. In other words, we need to practice what we preach as environmentalists. Ray asserts that she is not being judgmental because she believes each person should do what is right for his or her own conscience. This negotiation of the conscience justifies Ray’s blending of disparate elements from her parents while also striking her own path, and it allows the rest of us to appreciate some of our heritage but to turn away from the misguided, wasteful, or destructive aspects of our past.

Janisse Ray has published a book of poems called *A House of Branches* (2010) inspired by her travels out west. Her focus is nature as usual, but the poetry collection is a departure from her usual genre. The poetry too has an ecocritical gaze that augments Ray’s other works despite the fact that her setting is not the south this time. Ray’s writing is so rich the reader can only take it in small doses. Her readers find themselves having to step away to savor and to deal with the conviction her insights inspire before returning for more beauty and more action leadership from this muse of nature conservancy. One poem called “What Happened to Georgia” dedicated to activist Steve Wright, significantly says, “Some evil presses a razor into their hands /and kneeling over Georgia – all her beauty -- /they take her down. Oh Georgia” (*A House of Branches* 36).

*Drifting into Darien*, published in 2011, recounts Ray and her husband Raven’s eleven-day trip down the Altamaha with a small group of fellow conservationists. While the focus is on

the river and surrounding land in Georgia, Ray again interweaves human stories with the natural history. Periodically, Ray provides a list of specific birds she sees on her trip or a related time when she was out analyzing mussels or the lack thereof with a scientist. Although employing a similar structure to *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, Ray's personal story is unique in *Drifting into Darien*. The story here is that Raven has been falsely accused of writing a threatening letter to Georgia's governor, and he and Ray are trying to figure out who could have set him up this way and why. The river trip is a distraction from the conflict weighing on their minds, but the worry over self and human relationships connects to the care of the environment. Along the way, Ray also veers off into historical byways explaining how a conservationist organization such as Riverkeeper began and who was involved in its creation. Everything in *Drifting into Darien* relates people and ecology to the particular Georgia area where Ray's trip takes her, but the book's scope and theme are much wider than just a single spot on a map. Reminiscent of Thoreau's *Walden* describing the pond itself and how it changed through the seasons, Ray intones, "I would hope to know my river from the Mississippi if I parachuted down blindfolded onto it. I would want to distill its essence, and distinguish it from the Hudson, or the Amazon, or the Nile. I would hope to be able to recognize it as home" (*Drifting into Darien* 148).

Ray describes the nature she observes in terms of natural metaphors. For example, she describes the "greenish yellow-brown" of the water as "the color of liquid silt, of unbleached paper, of certain large locusts" (148). One chapter is about the Franklin tree, which historical research reveals to be native to the Altamaha (in fact it is named *Franklinia Altamaha*) by early explorers. Ironically, it is extinct in the state of Georgia, but there are Franklin trees thriving in Pennsylvania because seeds from the Altamaha Franklin tree were transported and planted there. On a "Sandhill Walkabout," Ray calls herself and Raven "botanist wannabes" (*Drifting into*

*Darien* 162). Despite Ray's own awe of nature, she makes fun of the time the botanists take with a single weed or flower. The experts call plants by their Latin names, and Ray does not recognize anything until they translate "rabbit tobacco" or another common name, and then she gets excited and can participate. Another chapter is called "River Sticks," an ironic allusion to the River Styx of Dante's *Inferno* because it highlights the destruction of the river as hellish and therefore reveals the horrific effect on all other life surrounding the river. "Folks, we have us a problem. Scientists have spent a long time studying and deduced a fact that any of my neighbors could have told them already—a river is only as healthy as the forests along it. That means the Altamaha is in trouble. Because we're cutting its forests to death. You know by now how attached I am to this watershed. It created me. Its Water flows in my bones" (*Drifting into Darien* 110). People can learn from natural forests. Ray gathered statistics on Southern forestry through the US Forest Service, Ray was devastated by the re-definitions that allow for cataclysmic loss of bio-diversity: "I thought a forest held trees of all kinds and ages, sapling to old growth, and among those trees grew beaucoup underbrush—shrubs and wildflowers—and among all that flora lived drifts of birds and crashes of animals and ambushes of insects and schools of fish" (*Drifting into Darien* 111). In *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, Ray included an interview with a man named Liam who refuses to clearcut even though clearcutting could make him wealthy. Instead, he selects only a few trees in a forest to cut at any one time. This kind of care is possible but takes unselfish people willing to sacrifice money and convenience for the good of nature.

Like effective teams at the workplace or other human relationships, true forests must be diverse and co-dependent. A pine plantation of newly planted trees of the same age doesn't count for wild or even natural, and it is not just industry that is allowed to destroy forests; it is often our government *managing* the land. Ray's response links environmentalism to literature and to

humanity when she says mournfully, “I was thinking about never seeing a poem lovely as a tree. And I’m telling you, 67 percent of my state is not the earth trying to speak to the listening heaven. Most of it is made up of place for the devil to hide” (*Drifting into Darien* 111). *Drifting Into Darien* concludes without including a resolution to Ray and her husband’s personal trouble with the law. The reader never learns who sent the threatening letter to the governor in Raven’s name. There are brief hints at the end that perhaps the issue was still unresolved but that going to the river lessened its burden: “And I must make order of the pine plantations, my neighbors” trailer homes, the smell of chicken shit from industrial broiler houses, the pollution, the hate mail” (*Drifting into Darien* 220). “How many ways can I say this? All we have are moments. All we have are scenes by which to define our entire existence. These moments mark our lives, our passages through life, our paddles down the rivers of life. If we are not paying attention to them—if we’re buried in our devices and our burdens—if we’re not taking notes—we miss them” (*Drifting Into Darien* 212). Referring to rescuing a bird and then letting it go, Ray “overwhelmed with gratitude” says, “My life has been saved in moments. In moments, my life has been made worthwhile” (*Drifting into Darien* 212). In her conclusion, Ray returns to the idea of stories as the most important in history but that stories are so often what we have lost in our carelessness. She says of legacy and loss, “What I grieve are the lost stories—commonplace sights and accounts of oddities, loves made and lost, departed sons, burdens borne, news that caused a person to sing. I am less sad that the stagecoach driver is gone than that his stories are gone” (*Drifting into Darien* 219). Of all of history, she says what matters and what must remain are: moments, places, stories, waters. Whitman-like, Ray self-consciously notes her own place in history and nature: “I am a speck in the life of this river. I am a blink in the long eye of history that stares us down. Before long I too will be gone, into the ground, with only a book left behind

as proof that I loved the place where I existed, the place in which I was born and for most of my life chose to live” ( *Drifting into Darien* 218).

Clearly, Janisse Ray practices what she preaches, making readers more aware of humanitarian and conservation problems that people should try to correct. When I asked Ray how she would describe her own writing style, she responded, “All I know is that I work at a level far below the surface, far below the groundcover, far below the topsoil. Sometimes it’s down in the hot molten rock. There are tons of people who don’t want to go there, for various valid reasons. For me, a story that is spent in the insubstantial is useless to humanity” (Interview). Ray’s literature connects directly with her agenda to help people improve the environment and affect human life positively.

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Ray’s *The Seed Underground* (2012) maintains the author’s mission and theme but is a bit of a departure from her usual topic. This nonfiction book uncovers America’s food crisis due to a lack of biodiversity. The seed has been used as a metaphor for some aspect of human life since ancient times. The sower and the seed parable from the New Testament speaks of the seed falling on different types of soil to represent the variety of spiritual hearers. Janisse Ray’s focus on the seed extends this metaphor of seeds as representatives of human life, but more importantly she reveals the literal seed and therefore food crisis that most people do not even realize exists. In fact, the real problem is that governments (particularly the U.S.) are not only allowing but promoting GM (genetically modified) seeds to be planted almost exclusively and that even organic farms are probably contaminated by GM plants. It is no wonder that gluten and other food and environmental allergies are on the rise when both our food and air are pervaded by seeds/pollen that have been genetically manipulated and then treated with chemical pesticides. Finally, most fruits and grains are now bleached or dyed or had all the healthy nutrients like fruit

pulp removed so that even when we choose what we believe to be a natural, healthy food or drink, it is no longer healthy and probably even dangerous. Ray visits and talks with many seed savers, and as her husband Raven says, her “chatting” always leads to “finding out [their] life story” (*The Seed Underground* 101). When she visits Will Bonsall, a regional curator for the Seed Savers Exchange, she is surprised by his organized chaos of a garden. About seed collecting and classification, “Bonsall says, ‘The virtue in simplicity is that it’s easier. It’s also very dangerous. There is safety in complexity,’” meaning keeping as many varieties of a seed as possible (63). Throughout the book Ray notes and laments the loss of thousands of heirloom varieties. Hence, biodiversity is almost nonexistent; biodiversity is not just about preserving cultural heritage but about our food and therefore our health. On the other hand, Bonsall also says, “People used to say that I’m living a simple life. But the supposed simple life is very complex. Every single hour I have to stop and rethink, ‘What am I doing’” (*The Seed Underground* 63). Ray’s work urges readers to live more consciously even about every bite of food we eat.

This idea of living simply because it best benefits the environment matches Ray’s own life precisely, but the irony is that the care it takes for us to make good daily choices for ourselves and for the environment can be challenging. In fact, one of Ray’s chapters shows her struggle to travel across the country from Georgia to Heritage Farm, headquarters of the Seed Savers Exchange, by bus, train, and car because she has given up flying for the sake of the environment. Like Ray’s other books, *The Seed Underground* connects the environment to literature through its focus on stories. Behind each seed, seed name, and seed saver, there is a human story that is fascinating. An heirloom variety of seed, besides being a genetic resource,

has another quality. It is a cultural resource. It has a story. The story changes as time passes” (71).

My garden, peaceful and calming as gardens are, has become a hotbed of activism, and sometimes a triage unit. To want to rescue anything is in my nature, although my husband doesn't understand why we can't eat everything we grow. We are saving those tomatoes for what? He asks.... I come to realize that I can only play a small part in a tragedy being played out on a world stage. I can only save so few things. My life is short, and time is precious. (*The Seed Underground* 158) <sup>15</sup>

## 5 GHOSTS AND GARDENS IN TINA MCELROY ANSA

W.E. B. Du Bois expressed a “double consciousness,” which was “one aspect of the social environment that made and continues to make central concepts of modernism seem relevant to American experience” (Michelson 198). In his 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois “located his vision within the increasing sense that reality and identity might not be inherited or mysterious but rather, like myth, invented” (Michelson 198). DuBois applied this concept of double consciousness – the sense of outward and internal identities of black folks in a time when showing their true thoughts and feelings was dangerous. Employing a kind of double consciousness, Ansa “snatches back” parts of black culture that have been hidden for so long. Reading fiction by Tina McElroy Ansa extends this vision of invented identity as reality even as we feel our way through supernatural elements such as ghosts in her novels. One critic notes how Ansa’s first novel *Baby of the Family* “echoes... Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*” (Okonkwo

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<sup>15</sup> The last pages (201-202) of *The Seed Underground* has a list of admonitions or opportunities depending on how you look at them.

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145). Okonkwo argues that “resituated historically, *Baby* is a work that deserves the serious critical consideration denied it” because by having the protagonist Lena born with a caul or veil over her face, “Ansa participates in the discourse of black subjectival dualism” (147) begun by Du Bois. It partly the influence of these ghostly aspects that helps makes Ansa’s use of the supernatural worthy to add to the canons of Georgia literature, Southern women’s fiction, and African-American literature.

Ansa’s fiction is characterized by the use of ghosts and by its emphasis on strong black women. *Ugly Ways* (1993) incorporates the spiritual realm in a unique way with “Mudear” (Mother Dear) remaining a powerful influence on her three grown daughters even after her death. In Ansa’s other novels, ghosts play leading roles, starting with the spiritual impact on the young protagonist Lena McPherson who is introduced in *The Baby of the Family* (1989). Ansa’s first novel was based on the author’s own childhood as the youngest child in her family growing up in segregated Middle Georgia during the 1950s and 60s. Ansa has said she was thrilled when she learned through other Southern writers that she too could write about people like herself, meaning African-Americans in the South with a strong sense of community (Interview). Extending the literary inheritance of Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice Walker, Ansa writes about the south with a spiritual aspect with the addition of helpful ghosts and magical powers plus women’s intuition. Ansa’s writing is rich with vivid elements of people, places, and time. *The Baby of the Family* explains that the protagonist Lena is also special, even magical, because she was “born with a caul over her face” (3), a rare event where the amniotic membrane enclosing the fetus remains intact at birth. This rarity was believed to have given the child the ability to communicate with ghosts. Even though Lena’s mother disregarded the spiritual significance and therefore destroyed the caul, Lena does have

these special abilities. The novel ends with an affirmation of the benefits of respecting and learning from the spirit world and from the past while forging one's own identity and looking forward.

Young Lena seems accessible and relatable to readers on the one hand, but almost a mythic hero on the other. At age five, Lena is able to "put the magic" on things to get the car to run or to make some household appliance work. Lena's mother and her brothers appreciate this aspect of Lena's special abilities, but they find it disconcerting to hear her strange understanding of things beyond her years or sometimes even beyond this world. For instance, Lena claims to know about her great-grandmother's torn wedding dress when no one else in the family has ever heard that story or seen a photo of it. Another time, Lena realizes that she is "real" as she sits in the car with her brothers waiting for her mother to return from the grocery store. Lena makes this discovery looking at herself in the car's rearview mirror, but the whole family is a little unnerved by her satisfied announcement.

Ansa is careful to augment her intriguing plots and exquisite character development with this double consciousness with the spiritual realm. Like Lena, Tina McElroy Ansa was born with a caul, and incorporating this old-fashioned idea of its spiritual significance is one of the ways that Ansa has "snatched back" the distinctly African-American heritage that she believes so many have denied and rejected because these treasures of culture are not considered mainstream (Interview). Because Lena was born with a caul, everyone expects her to be a special child who may be able to see ghosts. Lena's first supernatural encounter occurs when the baby in the framed picture over her grandmother's bed reaches her arms out and grabs Lena. Novella Brooks de Vita emphasizes another supernatural moment when in mid- novel Lena meets the ghost "Rachel" that Brooks de Vita asserts means that Ansa portrays Lena as an *abiku* child, a spirit

child who is a “[link] between the spiritual world and the human world” (Brooks de Vita 18). When Lena is seven, the family travels to the beach for a vacation. Here the ghost Rachel “dedicate[s] herself to making her past known to Lena, a living child in constant contact with the spiritual world” (Brooks de Vita 23). Lena learns about the horrors of slavery through Rachel’s story although sitting by the ocean listening to the ghost is difficult. The ghost also teaches Lena that she “belong[s] anywhere on this earth” that she wishes (*Baby* 168). Lena’s grandmother had refused to come to the beach with the family and kept saying that black folks didn’t belong at the beach because of segregation and racism. The grandmother’s silence and avoidance was a means of protecting the next generation, but teaching Lena of history and civil rights, the ghost Rachel says, “Don’t believe black folks don’t belong on the beach. Don’t never believe black folks don’t belong nowhere” (*Baby* 168). This important episode reveals how even a choice of where to live (perhaps like Ansa in St. Simons) or the preference of where to travel can also be a form of protest against past white supremacy, which had the circumscribing effect of black people not feeling welcome at the beach. Raising a similar issue to Melissa Fay Greene’s *Last Man Out*, Ansa asserts any person’s right to choose where to live or vacation no matter the social or racial tensions. Despite Lena’s grandmother’s fear and hopelessness for her people, the ghost inspires Lena and readers with strength and hope. This theme of re-claiming cultural heritage is not just recurrent in Ansa’s works but a message about which she is quite intentional. Ansa calls it her mission to “claim spirits and all the things black people feel they shouldn’t talk about anymore” (Interview). This reclamation of a formerly vibrant heritage makes Ansa careful of documenting and preserving black culture, which she believes has largely been lost in contemporary literature and life.

Walter Gobel argues that Ansa's *Baby of the Family* does something fresh in its approach to the spiritual, which he calls "magic pastoral" because it is a "non-agonistic version" (140). He goes on to say that in Ansa's work, "The figures commanding magical powers are promoted from the traditional status of outsiders to a central position, and magic is presented not as dangerous but as beneficial" (Gobel 140). Although Ansa is not the first to interweave the spiritual realm into her fiction, most earlier uses of ghosts and magic were presented in a threatening way whereas *Baby of the Family* is "a striking example of a positive use of black magic" (Gobel 141).

Not only does Lena's identity as a special, magical, and spiritual child speak to Ansa's themes of identity and of many women's issues, but Lena's place in her family and in the world as an African-American are complicated by the spiritual elements Ansa brings to bear. From the beginning of the novel when Lena is born, there is a tension between Nurse Bloom who wants to preserve the baby's caul and Lena's mother Nellie who wants to get rid of it. Nellie is a modern black woman who does not believe in all these old-fashioned superstitions. By having Lena's hair styled "into many tiny, beautiful braids instead of being relaxed" (Brooks de Vita 21), Nellie "has given her the opportunity to be comfortable with her identity in an environment that disapproves of it" (Brooks de Vita 21). Although this novel shows a clash of cultures, Ansa reveals a different kind of care in each woman caregiver: the nurse preserves the spiritual richness of the past, but Lena's mother wants her daughter to be strong and independent of old-fashioned ideas. Ansa's first novel blends many layers of African-American perspective into a cohesive whole by allowing its newest generation, embodied in Lena, to take both the old ways, such as learning from the past, embracing the world beyond and the new ways like becoming independent with individual responsibility and to merge them together into wholeness. It is

actually Lena's spirit-world connection that most contributes to Ansa's larger themes. This blended identity allows African-American women, and really every human being, the freedom to choose one's own path. Ansa has reclaimed dormant aspects of African-American heritage with her attention to the spiritual, even to the ghostly within a contemporary real world. No matter how unusual the events of Ansa's novels might be, the author has a knack for describing them in such a way that the events seem totally believable and even relatable to readers' own life experiences. Although not all readers may have any experience with ghosts, they can all be intrigued and inspired by the spiritual support Ansa represents.

Shirley Jordan interviewed Tina McElroy Ansa and other women writers on the topic of writing about female characters and about their personal friendships with black and white women. Ansa explains how she accounted for Lena's being "special" and seeing ghosts when she says, "Living here on the island [St. Simons] also had something to do with it making sense because people here still talk about dreams and premonitions" ("Interview" 2). Ansa continues, "In a way, the more assimilated we become, the more integrated we become, the more we become a little ashamed of these things. We think it makes us sound country and ignorant" ("Interview" 2).

Another feature of Ansa's fiction that critics have noted is the role of mothers, particularly in reference to their daughters. Melissa Fay Greene, Mary Hood, and Janisse Ray also focus attention on mothers and daughters or at least parents and children. The common theme all four authors share is the importance of caring for and nurturing young people. Ansa usually creates characters with whom at least two generations of women coexist either at odds or in relative harmony. The one exception to this pattern of mothers, daughters, and sometimes grandmothers is *The Hand I Fan With*, which is the sequel to *Baby of the Family*. In this second

novel about Lena McPherson, the protagonist is grown up but so independent that she lacks someone with whom to share her life. Lena is middle-aged and quite successful as a business owner and as the proud possessor of a luxuriously appointed home. Lena's problem is that she takes care of everyone else in the community before she takes care of her own needs. Her community has come to expect that she will give them money or some kind of help to make ends meet every month. Although Lena has a beautiful car, home, land, and designer clothes, she does not have romantic love or passion in her life. Indeed, the title indicates that Lena has become the savior of the community while Lena herself needs a little saving. The title's origin is an expression about a person being so important in another's life that there is great dependency on him or her. For instance, someone might say, "Oh, that Lena McPherson, she's the hand I fan with," meaning someone people depend on or count on constantly. Lena's mothering of everyone else, then, becomes the parenting relationship that parallels the other novels, but this sequel is quite unique from beginning to end because Lena finds fulfillment of her own. Ansa creates a lover for Lena who is a ghost -- but a ghost capable of doing anything a living man could do and more. Although Lena has always been special and lucky, her new lover finally makes her life complete when he teaches her how to stand up and enjoy life for herself. Through Lena's ghostly lover, Ansa promotes an ecology of fulfilling human relationships as well as self-efficacy. Literal mothering does ultimately become an issue in this novel as well because the very end implies that Lena is pregnant by Herman the ghost. Like Hood's characters, Ansa's Lena has been careful to take care of everyone else, but she has been careless about seeking her own needs. Her call to the spiritual world for a romantic relationship is answered, and Lena is ultimately fulfilled in every way by the novel's conclusion.

Ansa's characters are very confident and self-assured as is the author, and Ansa even describes herself as "the baby of the family" who has always felt special in the world. On the other hand, characters like Betty, Emily, and Annie Ruth in the two "Mudear" novels (*Ugly Ways* and *Taking After Mudear*) do not at first feel comfortable or confident with their own identities. Both Ansa novels about the Lovejoy sisters portray these women as finally coming into their own despite their mother's neglect, Mudear's attempted sabotage of their lives, and her influence on the next generation.

The significance of the title *Ugly Ways* alludes to an expression of Mudear's, but the title also refers to Mudear herself and her ugly ways that negatively affected her three daughters even at her own funeral (and in the sequel even long after her death.) The title *Taking After Mudear* has meaning on two levels because Mudear's three daughters take after their mother despite the fact that they do everything in their power to live their lives in rejection of their mother's ugly ways. Annie Ruth's baby could also be said to take after her grandmother...a child whose very existence goes against what the girls had vowed never to do because of their mother. Finally, Mudear's ghost comes to haunt her grown daughters and attempts to claim her new granddaughter by the end of the novel. This ghost becomes the embodiment of the figurative challenge these women had always risen to: how to be independent and happy by rejecting their mother's negative influence.

In addition to the use of ghosts, this pair of Ansa novels presents a twist on the role of mothers as well as on gardens as symbols of goodness. Many critics have focused attention on Mudear as the antagonist of *Ugly Ways* and its sequel *Taking After Mudear*. Tony Grooms' title almost says it all in the title of his article, "Big Bad Mudear" because this character is so larger than life and literally haunting her daughters. In *Ugly Ways* readers are first introduced to the

incomparable Mudear, Esther Lovejoy who insisted that her daughters call her Mudear short for Mother Dear and certainly reminding some of Joan Crawford of *Mommy Dearest*, Crawford's daughter's book. Ansa portrays Esther (Mudear) as justified in her extended protest against her husband Ernest's domination early in their marriage, but most readers are appalled by her neglect of her three daughters. One winter when the girls are young and sick, Esther pays the electric bill that her husband is unable to pay at the time from the little money she has saved over the years. This act alone stuns her husband and sets Mudear's dramatic "change" in motion. The change involves Mudear sleeping until midday, sitting around watching television and supervising her daughters' housecleaning, and then tending her beautiful garden all night. *Ugly Ways* traces how Mudear "emerges from her subservience a completely self-centered woman, and in becoming self-centered, she resists motherhood" (Warren 195). The three Lovejoy daughters: Betty, Emily, and Annie Ruth, "turn to each other rather than to [Mudear] when they have problems and need nurturing" (Bennett 193), but they also make a pact never to have children for fear of becoming a mother like their Mudear. Nevertheless, Annie Ruth brings a daughter into the world, and the child's arrival dominates the sequel *Taking After Mudear*. Despite the neglect, embarrassment, and criticism heaped on the girls growing up, Tara Green argues that they do "journey towards freedom and self-definition" (47) in both novels and that "Ansa underlines the significance of Black women's struggle to define themselves through the use of voice" (47). Mudear's ghost is not the antagonist because she is a ghost in Ansa's latest book but because she is the ghost of Mudear whose very words in life oozed disdain for her daughters. Even before Mudear's return to haunt her grown daughters and control her new granddaughter, Mudear's words and actions were already haunting-- meaning negative thoughts that consumed them and kept them from being their best. Mudear symbolizes a dwelling-on-the-past bitterness. However, Mudear's

daughters represent a better response of moving on and looking forward despite racial and gender challenges.

*You Know Better*, Ansa's stand-alone novel from 2002 uses the same small town Georgia setting of Mulberry as the other novels, but the characters are three generations of women in the Pine family. Ansa portrays the youngest generation of black women through the character of LaShawndra Pines. She is immature and wild, but the reader can trace the roots of her immaturity to some of her upbringing and therefore see Ansa's comment on society as a whole. Ansa cleverly represents the low but rich phrasing of contemporary youth when her characters talk about "my baby daddy" and being "a little freak" in such a casual way. Lily Paine Pines, Ansa's character of the oldest generation, wisely calls much of this brash, youthful talk destructive, but Ansa shows the need for young people to respect their culture and to use appropriate words to show self-respect. In other words, allegiance to community and preserving dialect are positives, but the younger women in *You Know Better* exhibit behaviors that aren't just independent but careless and risky. Ansa designed a chapter for each woman's perspective on her own life and of the two other generations: mother, daughter, grand-daughter. This structure allows Ansa to comment insightfully on contemporary issues of race, gender, and age. The spiritual realm returns in the same helpful way as if it is the most natural thing in the world: to the youngest girl, a ghost mother figure appears driving a fancy car to pick up the hitchhiking runaway who is significantly headed "north" to Atlanta where "what appears like magic to LaShawndra is no more than the creation of an aura of care and protection" (Gobel 145). This car ride with a ghost becomes the young character's epiphany. Even though Ansa's consistent focus is on women's issues, it is through the spirit realm where Ansa distinguishes herself as a writer.

Critics have responded to a rather negative comment by novelist Thulani Davis about Ansa's work with respect to African-American literature. In "Don't Worry; Be Buppy: Black Novelists Head for the Mainstream," Davis implies that Ansa does not align herself with any black protest movement but instead popularizes her work, making her novels more appealing to readers but not arguing for anything for her culture. Many critics beg to differ with Davis's dismissive comments because Ansa has found her own corner of both protest and celebration, and the niche she has carved for herself remains this spirit-world aspect. Shirley Jordan's interview with Ansa addresses Davis's review that clearly irritates Ansa who responds,

One of the criticisms I have of that "Black Buppie Writing" review, which I think is just such a bunch of mess, is that it looks at [several novels by African Americans] and asks 'Where are the white people?' and says 'These people just whine.' It disturbs me that it was written by a black woman. I find that ridiculous on one level, but also very dangerous. It says something about black people, that we need white people to give us some validity, but we don't allow ourselves to have that inner life. ("Interview" 10)

Ansa later says: "I've always thought that this spirit world of dead people who had been so close in life was something we should honor and cherish. In *The Hand I Fan With*, I just wanted to wallow in it. So I opened myself up to God and the universe, and spirit world came flooding back to me" ("Tina McElroy Ansa" 101).

A first glance at the growing body of fiction by Tina McElroy Ansa does not immediately connect this African-American author with environmental writing; However, nature is very much a part of Ansa's novels, especially in both of the two-volume series novels where ghosts figure so heavily. What connects the prequel and the sequel in each besides the main characters

and the important existence of ghosts is its symbolic representation of gardens. Ironically, there is a major contrast between the series about Mudear and her three daughters: *Ugly Ways* and *Taking After Mudear* and the series about Lena: *The Baby of the Family* and *The Hand I Fan With*. Mudear's beautiful garden is considered a negative to her daughters because Mudear prioritizes this garden to the neglect of her husband and children. Mudear's mothering style is a kind of dysfunctional nurturing because she nurtures her garden instead of her daughters. In the other series, Lena has learned to balance her life with nature as one of life's essential luxuries, so gardens are presented as positive. An examination of Ansa's works shows that ghosts can be viewed as a healthy component to human life, but readers are also shown how to balance the cultivation of nature with the nurturing of our families and other relationships. While it may seem that Ansa offers a contradictory view of environmentalism represented by gardens across her novels, she is actually promoting the same themes of balance between nature and humanity, and the spiritual world.

In Ansa's novels gardens and ghosts are unexpectedly juxtaposed. Ghosts are viewed mostly as positive; the only negative is Mudear's ghost because she was a negative influence in life. Ghosts are seen as natural but as something that can be influential for good or evil depending on their influence; Shakespeare's Hamlet remarks, "There is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so" (Act II Scene II). Ansa's nature writing compliments the character development and adds a unique supernatural element not expected in environmental prose. Ansa could have portrayed Mudear as obsessed with something other than a garden, but the novel's negative portrayal of mothers and gardens is unique and significant.

In *The Hand I Fan With* Lena has money enough to buy an expansive plot of land for her spacious and luxuriously appointed home, and she even employs gardeners and livery people for

her stables. Lena runs her own real estate company where she helps other women improve their careers, and she gives many in her community financial support. However, Lena herself is desperately missing romantic love. In Ansa's *The Hand I Fan With*, Lena's rich and "green" environment and her "community service" are admirable and comfortable but insufficient because Lena lacks personal and romantic love. Ghosts act as both positive and negative spiritual influences on the physical world.

Although there is a father in *Ugly Ways* and *Taking After Mudear*, the four strong women characters dominate both novels because the Lovejoy women are memorably strong, and "Mudear" is so strong that her daughters can't seem to shake her memory even after she dies. One unique element that Ansa creates is this dysfunctional family whose matriarch decides one day that she will stay in her bedroom during the day, let her daughters cook and clean, and then she will emerge at night to tend her garden in the dark. Ansa thereby portrays the garden as an erotic pleasure reserved for selfish mothers, and of course Mudear's daughters resent the beauty of the garden because it seems to be elevated above them in their mother's eyes. Ansa's novel does explain the main reason why Mudear changes this way; it is because one month her husband did not pay the utility bill. Since the girls were freezing and Mudear felt helpless, she scraped enough money together to pay the bill and then vowed never to let a man determine her fate again. While her anger is understandable, Mudear's extreme neglect of her daughters makes her an unsympathetic character throughout both novels.

Tracing the historical portrayal of women, Mickey Pearlman explains, "The mother as currently depicted in American literature by women has moved from sainted marginality (as icon) to vicious caricature (a destroyer), to the puzzling figure" (2). Barbara Bennett asserts that "Ansa's matriarch sees herself as icon, her daughters see her as vicious destroyer, and the reader,

with the best perspective, sees her certainly as puzzling and perhaps therefore more realistic”(192). It is ironic that in these companion novels about the Lovejoy women that gardens and mothers can be negative forces whereas they are usually extremely positive.

The earliest “environmental” writing was pastoralism, idealistic writing about green pastures and animals, but Ansa portrays African-American human ecology and presents her characters as families situated within the larger natural world. Although Ansa is not categorized as an environmental writer, perhaps she is turning the tables on reader expectations of working mothers finding themselves and of gardens. While it is a unique treatment of gardens as well as an unusual portrayal of a mother as not only negative but also as haunting her daughters, Ansa’s symbolism rings true. Ansa portrays Mudear as prioritizing her garden over her daughters, but Mudear’s garden is really a fabrication because she uses nature for herself only. Ansa’s portrays Mudear in sharp contrast to Janisse Ray’s thesis that we must all take mutual responsibility for nature because we are all a part of nature, and Mudear represents a type of person who selfishly uses her talent or art rather than making important choices that benefit other people and the environment as Mary Hood’s fiction suggests.

Ansa’s creation of Mudear provides quite a contrast to the majority of black mothers and mothers of all color who put their children first and who sacrifice much of themselves for the sake of their children in numerous ways. Although something could be said for the fact that Mudear teaches her daughters how to do household chores like laundry, cleaning, and cooking and expects her daughters to do a lot for themselves, the nurturing component is definitely missing. Mudear does not represent a tough love or authoritarian parenting style that enables her daughters to be strong and independent; instead, she uses her daughters to do the dirty work so she can indulge herself in solitude.

The girls never even considered saying what they all had thought at one time or another when Mudear went into one of her tirades about triflingness: that Mudear was probably the most trifling woman they had ever seen. A woman who spent most of her days lying in her throne of a bed or in a reclining chair or lounging on a chaise longue dressed in pretty nightclothes or a pastel housecoat. Doing nothing with her time but looking at television, directing the running of her household, making sure her girls did all the work to her specifications. Then, if she felt like it, some gardening at night (*Ugly Ways* 15).

When Betty goes through a time where she itches all over, it seems to indicate that she is overstressed from work and from the stress of preparing dinner for her parents on a daily basis. Mudear's influence on her daughters was so stifling and oppressive that she would have remained a haunting factor in their lives even without the supernatural element, and many readers can probably relate to the negative impact their own parents may have had on them. However, Ansa makes this negative parental influence palpable by her use of Mudear as a ghost in *Taking After Mudear*.

Mudear is an anomalous mother. She privileges herself and her garden over her children. Her selfishness is not presented as her independence that seems right and just in works such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* where Edna Pontellier asserts that she would give up her life for her children but not her "self." On the third page of *Ugly Ways* comes the very first description of the daughters' childhood home with the "grove of trees and lush vegetation growing in the front and back yards. Next to the manicured lawns and thin rows of shrubbery surrounding the other houses, her parents' home looked as if it had been picked up from a tropical plantation and dropped in place in a different zone" (*Ugly Ways* 3). Certainly, Mudear's garden is beautiful, but

like Mudear, it is not truly nurturing because it isn't shared with the daughters really or with the community. Instead, the garden represents parental neglect to the Lovejoy sisters.

*Ugly Ways* explains the girls' mother's change by calling it "Mudear's seclusion" (10). Neighbors gossip that one cold winter day Mudear stopped leaving the house except "to work in her garden at night" (10). The townspeople of Mulberry say, "Heck, that woman didn't even come out of the house to go to her own mother's funeral" (*Ugly Ways* 11). Betty, the oldest Lovejoy daughter, went to the grandmother's funeral with her two sisters and their father while their mother stayed home in her own room "looking at T.V." (*Ugly Ways* 11). The daughters grow up resenting "that Mudear's actions had left [them] so vulnerable, so defenseless, open and raw to the town's gossip. Always had" (*Ugly Ways* 11). Indeed, Mudear's actions or failure to act on their behalf actually leaves her daughters to fend for themselves physically and emotionally.

Mudear is dead from the beginning of the first novel of the series, but what an impact she has throughout both novels! The girls who grow into women struggle to survive emotionally while their mother berates them and leaves them with all the household chores. She is more neglectful than abusive, so that as adults, they exclaim even after she is physically gone, "We aint even had Mudear's funeral yet, and the Lovejoy family's already falling apart" (*Ugly Ways* 2).

The sisters nurture each other by making their own lives sound crazier because Mudear never helped in times of crisis. For example, the sisters have a "necessary" (*Ugly Ways* 7) ritual of comparing wild things they had done or things that relate to the current crisis. (We all feel better when someone reveals something as embarrassing that they have done.) In this case the

crisis is Annie Ruth's extreme airplane sickness and being wheeled out in a wheelchair by a flight attendant.

Betty remembers when Mulberry knew Mudear had gone crazy, and this memory is how readers are introduced to Mudear's past even though she has just died in the novel's present. Despite the serious family dysfunction, Ansa incorporates much humor throughout. For example, "Some said the whole family had 'walking insanity' like other folks had 'walking pneumonia'" (*Ugly Ways* 11). Mudear's love is not unconditional: "If the three girls expected to live out their lives in Mudear's good graces, then they had to produce" (*Ugly Ways* 14).

One of Mudear's constant rants was the generalization, "Women who don't care nothing about themselves don't even take baths" (*Ugly Ways* 14). What Mudear considered motivating her daughters was actually hypocritical on her part and destructive to their development as well-adjusted women. Although some critics see Mudear's invectives and demands as inspiring them to be strong women who assert their independence by standing up to men, Ansa really portrays Mudear's parenting as detrimental to her daughters' fulfillment and identity. They ultimately find their own way and succeed in spite of their mother not because of or with her help.

Mudear's change had a profound impact on all three daughters. As a result, Betty smokes when stressed, and Emily's low self-esteem continues to lead her into dysfunctional relationships, and all of these problems are easily traced back to Mudear. Each woman has a means of coping with the negative legacy of their mother's failure to nurture. The middle daughter Emily has psychological issues that clearly seem to stem from Mudear's influence, particularly with respect to her love life. Apparently Emily has a habit of getting involved with married men, and then asks her older sister Betty, "Now, if a woman loves a man and she does all she can for him and she tries to make him happy, then, shouldn't that man love her back?"

and again wonders, “But if you love him, if he’s married or not, it doesn’t matter, does it?” Emily was considered the crazy one of the three sisters, but it was Annie Ruth who “went first” (*Ugly Ways* 13) to crazy town or off the deep end (again a development easily traced back to Mudear.) “Everyone called it a nervous breakdown. Mudear called it a heart attack.” “[Mudear] went with the strength” (13) and called it overwork to be seen as a positive. Perhaps such a naïve judgment reveals one of Mudear’s major character flaws: she lives in denial of reality and maintains a fantasy world. However, only Mudear herself can enjoy the fantasy at the expense of her husband and daughters who must work their butts off to keep up the household and to keep up appearances to the outside world. She has also re-cast her life for only her own benefit and now recasts her daughter’s problems as strengths.

The girls reach for each other when they recognize that their mother’s scent is still present in the house. They reach for each other out of fear that their oppressive mother is back. Mudear smelled like “red spicy cinnamon balls”, and the house still smells like the “fiery” candy after her death. Perhaps like William Faulkner’s telling description of Abner Snopes in “Barn Burning” as a man made of tin as in the opposite of iron character, Ansa’s use of cinnamon candy symbolizes Mudear as a fiery person whose fire serves no larger purpose than her own pleasure. Instead of smelling like her garden or like homemade bread as olfactory symbols of nurturing, Mudear’s smell and favorite candy evokes cheapness, shallowness, and immaturity. Therefore, her clean house, her garden, and her strong and beautiful daughters stand apart from her life’s work. Of the three accomplishments, only her garden is Mudear’s own success, but it too is vacuous because no one else benefits from its beauty. In fact, Mudear’s garden was not solely of her own making because she made her husband perform all the heavy labor in the garden from which she was really the only beneficiary (*Ugly Ways* 19).

All three women struggle to re-define themselves after living with Mudear's negative image of them for so long. Betty can't "shake Mudear's image of her as big-boned" (*Ugly Ways* 27) even after her mother's death. When Betty gathers a blanket and two afghans for herself and her sisters, she chooses the blanket because the afghans smell like Mudear. Even as the matriarch of the family now with maternal instincts to help her sisters, Betty's instinct for self-preservation kicks in as she immediately rejects Mudear's very scent. Therefore, it is no surprise that the overall effect on all three daughters results in their feeling "like survivors of a war" (*Ugly Ways* 17), but their mental and emotional survival has required all their strength growing up under Mudear's domination. Ironically, Mudear's favorite dictums usually referred to actions she no longer performed herself; for example, "A person can tell what kind of woman you are by checking to see how clean you keep the burners on your stove" (*Ugly Ways* 19). Ansa has turned the tables on reader expectations because mothers and gardens are often connected as positive symbols in literature but not here. Another irony or anomaly is that Ansa's ghosts are usually positive and nurturing but not Mudear's ghost because in life Mudear was a negative force, so it is fitting that her spirit haunt rather than help her daughters and granddaughter. Despite the magical realism aspect, with or without ghosts human lives do influence others and continue to do so even after death. The question is: do people want to leave a positive or negative legacy?

Ansa humorously describes the characters' fear of turning into their mother in *Taking After Mudear*. Emily says, "After Mudear's funeral, Betty started checking out gardening sites on the computer. I came into her office downstairs one day in November and caught her. She tried to log off real quick, but I saw the flowers and the plants" (*Taking After Mudear* 10). To Emily, looking at gardening websites is akin to a disturbing vice such as a pornography or drug addiction, but readers relate to something not only quirky but dangerous in one's family. Even

though it is a humorous depiction of gardens and plants haunting the girls despite the undeniable beauty of flowers, the garden is represented as a negative symbol. The sisters ask Betty, “You just gonna’ act like that garden’s not out there growing around us like Mudear come back from the grave?” (*Taking After Mudear* 11) The more beautiful and lush the garden, the more they feel the neglect of their childhood and adolescence. Ironically, a bare landscape would have represented more appropriate mothering where children would be nurtured more than plants and flowers.

Many people choose not to have children or to rear them in the opposite way their own parents raised them. It is a shame that people often do not realize the negative impact parents can have on children when they live selfishly and carelessly. Because of Mudear, all three daughters vow two things: not to ever keep a garden and never to have children, not because they dislike plants and babies but because their mother’s obsession with plants caused her to neglect parenting them. Something unusual has happened since the sisters made those vows: the ghost of Mudear has returned to influence her daughters’ lives again. Therefore, “Betty, who had sworn all her life, along with her sisters, that she would never suffer a plant to grow in any yard of hers, now had a garden that, at the end of a forgiving Georgia spring was as fertile and fruitful as her pregnant baby sister and was actually beginning to rival her mother’s legendary sumptuous garden out in Sherwood Forest” (*Taking After Mudear* 8). Equating the nurture of gardens to the nurturing of a child remains a familiar trope, but Ansa’s juxtaposition of children and gardens twists to a totally new theme revealing the possible negative outcome of nurturing the environment at the expense of humanity. Some people prioritize the environment over nurturing their children or above nurturing other human relationships. The result of Mudear’s choice to take better care of her garden than of her daughters remains disastrous even after her death.

The gardens in Ansa's novels are described as lush and beautiful. Critic Tara Green and others have noted connections to Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens"; however, there is some disagreement about whether Mudear (whose character is closely tied to her garden) is a positive or negative mother figure. Barbara Bennett argues that

Regardless of the moral issue in what Mudear does, the fact remains that her daughters perceive that their mother has rejected them by refusing to participate in their upbringing, and so they, in turn, reject her. They accomplish this in several interesting ways... Finally, around their mother they construct a mythical image that separates her, objectifies her, and dehumanizes her; at various times in the novel, her daughters compare Mudear to the goddess Yemaya, Giya, Pandora, and Medea (193).

Mudear does grow collards as well as mint and other herbs in addition to flowers. However, her main reason in growing them is so that she can enjoy them at night and enjoy their scent, but ultimately the garden is for her own space and to enjoy her own accomplishments separate from her husband and daughters. Perhaps Mudear created for herself Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own," but in this case, she carved out this space at the expense of her daughters just when they needed her most. While readers may applaud Mudear's strength and confidence in insisting on her individual rights, the tone and theme of Ansa's two novels implies rather her selfishness and motherly neglect as most dominant. However, it is probably because of (not just in spite of) Mudear's negative influence that her three daughters finally fight back and stand up for their own way of living. Through their rite of passage dealing half their lives with their mother and then their mother's ghost, they ultimately learn to be themselves and to be good mothers to a daughter even though there is only one child between them.

Tara T. Green notes: “Clearly, Mudear put significant amount of time and careful consideration into the maintenance of her garden. This garden is representative of the space that she told her daughters to possess” so that no one can trample it (49). Green further interprets that “This spiritual garden is symbolized by her beautiful flower and vegetable garden—the only place she will leave her house to go and the only place that she will exert energy in caring for. Mudear’s garden is a symbol for the spiritual freedom that she possesses and what her daughters will come to possess by the novel’s end” (49). Ansa portrays Mudear as working and living really exclusively for herself. Even what she does for the environment is selfish. In contrast, Janisse Ray encourages us to work for the good of all. Tara Green goes on to say,

Mudear has both embraced motherhood by teaching her daughters what she feels they need to know to be independent women and denied it by withholding emotional nurturing from them. However, since she feels that showing her love for them may be detrimental to their success as independent women, she must displace her nurturing instincts by cultivating her flowers and vegetables. The garden, a serene place enjoyed by all spectators, represents true freedom for Mudear and allows her daughters to see her as a mother (50).

While there is something to be said for the strength and self-sufficiency Mudear instilled in her daughters, her longterm acts of putting her garden and self before them had more negative consequences than positives in their lives. Therefore, the garden in both *Ugly Ways* and in *Taking After Mudear* is ultimately a negative symbol. The extreme environmental precedence the garden is given represents the neglect of the mother-daughter relationship contradicting the way parent-child relationships ought to be.

Ansa wrote in “Our First and Fiercest Love” in *Essence* magazine in May 2012:

Once, while reading a story in the papers about a woman who had lifted an automobile that had trapped her child, my mother said casually, ‘Of course, she did.’” “When we all laughed, my mother looked about the breakfast table incredulously and said, ‘You don’t think I could pick up a car by myself if my child’s life was in danger. Shoooooot!’” “From that day on, I thought, Shoooooot, my mama would lift a car for me! And I carried that fact inside of me like a talisman.

Ansa speaks further of how black mothers in particular love and nurture their children despite huge challenges of safety, negative influences and images, and of education and economic issues. In *Mudear*, Ansa portrays a strong woman who boldly takes personal fulfillment in life but who is not nurturing and who therefore remains a negative influence on her daughters in life and as a spirit. Ansa’s use of *Mudear* and of gardens is anathema to what readers expect. She turns the tables on our view of all mothers as nurturers and all gardens as pastoral and idealistic. For this family of women, mothers and gardens have always been negative symbols. However, the three daughters learn as women that they can reject their mother’s worldview and be gardeners and good mothers. The next generation of Lovejoy women turn their bad heritage into good for themselves and for their children.

Similarly, Janisse Ray writes about her father’s love for his children as a “fierce, hard love” (*ECC* 228). Both Ray and Ansa draw out the importance of care in human ecologies by showing examples of when we are careless with each other and with the environment. Good parents should nurture their children just as we should all nurture the natural world. Ansa’s interview answers reveal her personal interest in environmental issues even though she does not write about them regularly in an activist way as Ray does. Ansa boldly “snatches back” aspects

of black culture that have been swept under the rug or hidden in order to assimilate in the white culture. Those elements are largely those spiritual elements of ghosts and spirits.

In my interview with Ansa, she made clear that she does have an agenda in her writing even though it is fiction. Her constant theme is to re-claim cultural elements of black culture that have been hidden for many years. Those elements are the spirits or ghosts, dialect, and an overall richness of speech and community that has not been explored fully in contemporary literature.

When I first went to college at Morehouse, I assumed that literature was all about white people only until one of my teachers introduced me to Zora Neale Hurston and other African-American writers. I was shocked that there was literature about my people and eventually realized that I could write literature like that too. I didn't want to write books; I wanted to write literature. (Interview)

When asked about what features of the southern environment appealed to her and inspire her writing, Ansa responded, "The beauty of the south still takes your breath away, and this southern environment is very much a part of my writing." (Interview) Ansa is very clear what her literary agenda is:

I claim spirits and ghost stories." "Chitlins and watermelons" and other things that haven't been considered "proper" to talk about, I want to snatch back. I claim spirits, I claim all the things black people feel they shouldn't talk about anymore. I'm not ashamed to talk about the spirit world and to claim it as a unique part of my culture. Ghost stories black people avoided because of the image of black people and ghosts from the screen in the 20s and 40s. My mission is to snatch back a few things for black people.

It's more the Sea Island and the other islands where especially older people talk unselfconsciously black. Most black people have language and subjects that we don't always use in order to assimilate. Culture here seems to preserve more the songs and the basketweaving; there is also a preservation of history. Small towns or country towns ...the further you are from the city the further you are from mainstream where nappy hair and watermelons would be made fun of in the larger world. (Interview)

Speaking of her home in St. Simons, Ansa exclaimed, "Oh my God" Daufuskie Island used to be a beautiful, untouched, historic place into 2/3rds golf course. The black people who used to live and own there have to ask permission to visit their own cemetery. It's a gated community."

Ameliated wetlands...loss of respect for land and just raze 100 year old trees. Callousness of the value of the land and to say nothing about the fact that black people in particular are being displaced. Exclusive... fertilizer for golf course into ocean and into water supply...I love St. Simons, but it is a place (or at least Sea Island is) where developers have supposedly "made" wetlands and razed 100 year old trees...just desecrated the land. I know about commerce and needing houses, but there has been a terrible disrespect for the land. I feel like Janisse Ray because it just makes you so angry when the environment is destroyed and the runoff from fertilizer from the golf course. It's just insane. We know this and hate this, but it continues. We (Ansa and her husband Jonee) have been part of this fight for the land and for water quality and for saving African-American neighborhoods for thirty years now.

"Development always hurts the poor and black people the most. It made me feel like such a hardened old woman even in my thirties when a large diverse group tried to help conservation efforts, and we lost. It's all about the fight because money and power so often wins. I don't see

these issues so much in my writing, but the natural environment and the carelessness of people in contrast to it.” A woman wisely told her, “If they want your land, they will eventually take it, but you have to fight.” I don’t see this so much in my writing but in my life...the devaluing of the land, the environment, and the culture.” “It starts with the person who leaves trash on the beach... the intentional carelessness of developers who want their golf course and don’t care about the runoff and on and on.” These ideas of appreciation and care for women, children, and each other in families (with ghosts as helpers rather than hindrances) furthers Ansa’s presentation of a positive, careful worldview where we all nurture ourselves spiritually and nurture each other rather than fighting amongst ourselves and living in a fragmented way.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This study analyzes four authors who bridge the gap between literature and improving the world as Matthew Arnold said of the Humanities: “Instruct and entertain.” A recent anthology of environmental thought in contemporary society reveals environmentalism or ecocriticism to be often a state of mind that does not necessarily translate into improvement of the land or of nature (Cronon 71). William Cronon agrees that humans should protect the environment, but his research concludes that even mankind’s preservation efforts have manipulated nature.<sup>16</sup> For instance, people have destroyed village huts and displaced people in order to create a more “natural” environment as a tourist attraction. He asserts that our ideas of untouched nature or wilderness as entirely “other” are “entirely a cultural invention” (Cronan 70). Although many people may have become environmentally conscious in name only, there are just as many who do want to do what is right for the earth, plants, and animals as well as for humanity. In

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<sup>16</sup> In 1996, William Cronon edited and contributed to the anthology *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, which questions motives and results of man’s so-called environmentalism.

literature, it often seems that creative genres (fiction, nonfiction, historical research) and literary criticism have become so specialized that even those writing literature or studying it fail to see the connections across these scholarly efforts and rarely consider blending the social and natural sciences into these studies. Therefore, writing and research are often self serving rather than serving the greater good.

An important connection across Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray is that the destruction of the landscape for “progress” parallels the breakdown in human relationships. Therefore, the work of all four authors points out the backward values of postmodern society: ironically, technology provides everything at our fingertips, but our obsession with technology can destroy what we should hold most dear.

All four authors have found a way to essentially do what Virginia Woolf lectured about and attempted to do but failed; that is to create a “novel-essay” ... “a form which would combine chapters of fiction with historical commentary” (Whitworth 26). Woolf’s lecture “argued that women, if they were to enter ‘the professions’, must not only obtain legal equality, but also eliminate the ideological barriers to success; foremost among them, the ‘Angel in the house’, the Victorian stereotype of subservient womanhood” (Whitworth 26). Woolf eventually gave up on this writing experiment herself after working on “The Pargiters” and then separating genres into *The Years* for the fiction side and *Three Guineas* for the essays. Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray have all fulfilled Woolf’s ideal mission not only as career writers but also as women finding a structure and a theme to assert truth in an effective way.

These four Georgia authors focus on different but equally important components of modern life: family and culture in Tina McElroy Ansa; sociological history in Melissa Fay Greene; human relationships in Mary Hood, and the natural environment in Janisse Ray. The

writings of all four overlap in focus, but examined together, the authors' various approaches reveal essential areas where contemporary society has lost its way. Although technology and environmental awareness are continually increasing, these advancements may have come at the expense of human relationships. All four writers often argue how *not* to live by pointing out consequences of human carelessness. Through compelling stories, both fiction and nonfiction, these four authors show us how to preserve and improve the environment, our relationships, our culture, and our history. All write about carefully maintaining family, culture, human relationships, and the environment.

Many of today's ads, products, policies, and articles are all about helping the environment, but few are about maintaining, enriching, or preserving human relationships. Many texts and ads promote fostering a child's self-esteem or helping his/her diet, but few are about teaching respect because this seems an old-fashioned idea. Churches sometimes neglect the care of families because they are more concerned with saving individuals. Why do we not apply the environmentalist sensitivity and responsiveness and preservation strategy to human relationships? With the environment, we know how every move /change affects another life form. We even talk about reducing our "carbon footprint." This environmental awareness is certainly a good thing and a vast improvement over the carelessness of the past. However, we should be just as concerned with the preservation of our human relationships by being more mindful of how our actions affect other people. Human relationships remain as important as the environment. We are all guilty of carelessness in our relationships, but literature (both fiction and nonfiction) can help us be more careful in all of our ecologies. From Hood's portrayal of careless people who ruin their relationships to Ray's statistics on the destruction of longleaf ecosystems,

and from Ansa's snatching back black culture to Greene's re-telling of social history, literature shows readers how to improve everyday ecologies.

In this anthropocene time when we see the devastation of human action on the natural environment all around us and when we see human relationships struggling, writers like Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray enlighten and inspire readers to improve human ecologies by their more useful literature. We should apply the same respect, serious study, and activism to helping people's relationships thrive as we have been for environmental issues. We have learned, in part due to the discipline of ecocriticism, to question and evaluate the effect of *any* action on the environment. We might now be able to turn our attention to how our human actions affect ourselves first and then focus on human relationships and the environment in priority. Maybe our quest may evolve in the order of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. For example, our early priority of survival eventually developed into more advanced priorities of protecting human rights and finally led to a relatively recent resurgence of environmentalism, which now in some ways may threaten our human relationships that some people neglect for self and environment. Ultimately, Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray reveal through different genres how we should all attempt daily to balance our human relationships with care for the environment.

A few key books have had lasting historical significance for improving society as well as for their literary merit. Thoreau's *Walden*, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* remain powerful and important not just for entertainment value but for contributing something new and powerful to society or even improving society. Literature today can change lives and improve society by raising awareness and inspiring positive change. Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray can motivate readers through their writing to live more deliberately and mindfully and to heal and maintain our human relationships as well as our relationships with

nature. Their art is literary activism. Ray convicts readers with what is happening to our environment while Hood and Ansa show their concern for humanity in more subtle ways through their fiction. Ray points out what readers should do, but Hood and Ansa illustrate for readers through their dynamic characters what is beneficial and what is detrimental to everyday ecologies. Greene paints the historical pictures but applies past conflicts to ways to improve contemporary society. All four inform, entertain, and inspire positive action.

Greene and Ray take truth and statistics and create and reconstruct the narrative via human stories, but it is the reverse with Ansa and Hood who create fictions to reveal important truths. The unfortunate irony is that in this age of progress and advancement and in society's attempt not to miss anything by multitasking, people have become careless of their relationships because of digital distractions that have become the machine in our garden. A once more vibrant symbol of faith and human relationships was found in churches where people gathered to worship, pray, and celebrate weddings and births. Many old and lovely churches in the south have been abandoned and left to the destruction of the elements even though other church communities are as active as ever. Ray and her husband Raven Waters have joined an organization called Historic Rural Churches of Georgia that finds, documents, and restores old churches such as the Cedar Grove Methodist Church in Tatnall County as one of their actions toward actively seeking a better ecology.

In many ways, contemporary society longs for pastoralism (the precursor to environmentalism) because pastoral ideals can encompass human activity and relationships as well as places whereas environmentalism puts all the emphasis on the land, plants, and animals, and people are sometimes displaced. Even with such an oversimplification of environmentalism, people's priorities may be somewhat misplaced when we make human needs secondary to the

environment. This tension between pastoral longings for the unspoiled nature of the past and dreams of a technological future might be even more of a conflict in today's internet-filled world, "[f]or it is industrialization, represented by images of machine technology, that provides the counterforce in the American archetype of the pastoral design" (Marx 26). Ironically, children and adults today play video games on smartphones and tablets that mimic farm life: feeding a pony daily and cleaning out its stall or planting a garden all in a virtual world of chores. They are doing the work, exercise, and caretaking of plants and animals in the virtual reality of cyberspace that heretofore was an active life. Such activities for children and adults (and the environment) are now stripped of all benefits in addition to lacking the personal engagement such games cause in human relationships.

Leo Marx reiterated the singularity of the moment from Hawthorne's 1844 notes when Hawthorne's quiet reflection was disturbed by the train. That moment in Concord, Massachusetts, was not the first time that a pastoral image was contrasted with the harsh reality of technology, but the event "create[d] an unprecedented situation" (Marx 31). The city and the country had certainly been contrasted before for all sorts of literary purposes, but here technology has broken through "the traditional boundaries of the city" and begun to encroach on country (or pastoral) life (Marx 28).

In *Reading Zoos*, Randy Malamud's focus is "to examine links between human culture and nature" in order to "enrich both realms" and to add to the field of ecocriticism. Malamud argues that "[f]orces within and outside academe implore scholars to demonstrate more clearly the relationship of our work to the world around us, and the relevance of studies in the humanities" (6). Admitting his own "unabashed activist advocacy," Malamud asserts that "the time seems propitious for a full-front ecocritical assault on *idees reçues* regarding people's

relations to the other elements of our world” (7). Not only does Malamud defend the rights of animals in his study, but he also examines how humans are harmed by visiting zoos in that its convenience or “ease encourage[s] imperialistic cultural habits and a lazy, undeserved sense of appreciation/control over these animals. Our ecological desecration of innumerable habitats reveals this supposed mastery to be delusory”(8). Furthermore, “the concerns of art and of real life at times will coalesce with a common interest, and at other times will diverge. But they will always remain close, interrelated, and part of the same overall enterprise” (Malamud 18). This study explores how Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray answer Malamud’s call for writers and scholars to connect literary studies to improving society and the natural environment, revealing the ecologies among humans as well as between humans and nature about which Ray and Greene and fiction authors Ansa and Hood write, persuading readers to be more careful in day-to-day behavior.

Although Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray are personally interested in environmental activism, their work is not purely pastoral because they do not write of idealistic longings for the past or for open, green spaces. Their work has a varied focus of human, animal, plant, and land relationships (ecologies) while being practical and looking forward, inspiring readers to improve relationships and the world around them. The machine in our garden is the internet: smart phones with texting, emailing, gaming, and accessing social media. Ironically, our current society is so connected that we are actually less connected to physical, in-person people than ever. Although smart phones are certainly convenient and make life easier in many ways, studies show that we are actually more stressed today than ever because we are bombarded with emails or texts or ads we feel compelled to read, which takes more time away from the things we want or need to do such as maintain and nourish our relationships. Being online often replaces much

of our active lives including more meaningful interaction in relationships. Our relationships are fracturing despite all the communication and connections spurred by social media.

Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray create a variety of stories to address the caretaking of life in its many forms. Ray often uses the term “stories” to describe her work even though they are nonfiction narratives or personal stories, but that all four authors utilize stories in some way is an important link between them. The power of a story as opposed to an essay, a letter, or a speech to impact readers and make a positive difference in their lives is amazing. These authors’ works affirm that contemporary literature is reaching beyond mere entertainment into the realm of activism.

As caretakers of life, each of these four authors has a particular ecological area to which her writing speaks most. Those ecological foci are the organizational center of my chapters on each author as this study connects the writing to the broad theme of caring for life. Ansa emphasizes caring for one’s self and connecting with the spiritual world as well as finding love and sexual fulfillment. Mary Hood’s fiction focuses on caring for other people and preserving, not destroying relationships. Janisse Ray writes about caring for the environment, and her use of the concept of ecology as including the human story as well as the physical environment inspired much of this study. Finally, Melissa Fay Greene writes a variety of nonfiction on historical events that share the problem of human relationships threatened by racial prejudice and other types of carelessness. Greene’s subjects are real figures or groups who have been victimized by personal vendetta and political or social ostracism that her research reveals to be at the root of large historical conflicts. All the writers take great care to publish only what she believes is true from her extensive research and interviews with witnesses. Greene’s particular interests seem to be in law, government, and historical connections.

All four writers highlight the humor and uniqueness in each protagonist making their works entertaining as well as didactic. Dialect also plays a role in each of their respective works. While their writing styles differ greatly, the lyricism in their writing reinforces their positive messages. All four often rely on material that is emotionally powerful and sometimes even tragic in order to tell their stories. Their heartbreaking accounts serve as reminders of the atrocities (or at least careless mistakes) of which humans are capable so that readers may learn from such real or imagined errors and attempt to make things right in their relationships, homes, and communities. In the studies of each author, I have addressed how the individual works promote care of human life. Janisse Ray's works are usually classified in the Nature category rather than as fiction, but since Ray herself says, "It's the stories that we're missing ("Reading"). It is appropriately stories that she tells along with the detailed descriptions of swamps, trees, plants, and animals. ("Reading"). Ansa and Hood weave the distinctively southern natural world into their fiction, while Ray and Greene use Georgia as the springboard for their fiction-like nonfiction and activist writing. Speeches by and interviews with the authors reveal their similar philosophical and professional commitment to do extensive research for their books and to use their works to improve society. Each writer's style, structure, and characterization promote the overarching theme of care in contrast to the neglect against which each author clearly wishes to warn us. Ansa and Ray, in particular, talk about "wholeness" as the missing element of contemporary life.

Through a variety of genres and methods, Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray all reveal how we hurt ourselves when we are careless of others or with nature. Their stories inspire the reader to work toward positive change personally and locally. They admonish readers to make more conscientious choices for balanced lives. Ray's work establishes the framework for this analysis

of the other three Georgia writers, for Ray's original linking of ecologies in the environment with her personal ecologies inspires the additional literary connections. While earlier and current environmentalists focus on observation, on the science, on activism, or on recycling for the average person, Ray connects all of these areas with human stories to produce her blended genre with the common theme of relationships. This study reads *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* as elucidating human ecology in parallel with the natural environment.

Unlike other nature writers, past and present, Ray always has the same goal: to help humanity preserve wildness for nature itself as well as for mankind's good. Besides telling her own stories to serve this activist purpose, Ray offers practical examples of how she and her family try to live as simply as possible (minimizing trips requiring fuel, keeping an old truck as long as possible, growing a garden, and buying locally.) Ray ends her essay "Beyond Capitalism" with the following advice: "In hundreds of ways every day, we have the option to make decisions that either add to global warming, biological extinction and pollution, or prolong and strengthen life on earth, including our own" (120). This study is organized around Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* because Ray's title and structure inspire my conceptual analysis of didactic stories wherein human relationships intersect with ecological relationships.

The ultimate lesson on which contemporary life should revolve is the idea that respect, cohabitation, and intimacy must be preserved and nurtured in both nature and in relationships between people. By writing in fiction and nonfiction about manageable ways to improve daily life, Ray, Hood, Ansa, and Greene have made a difference, and more importantly can enable readers to effect improvements in ways that contemporary civilization has yet to accomplish. In addition to time period, gender, and region, Ray, Hood, Ansa, and Greene share literary similarities as well. Although there is much variety among their work, they are thematically

connected because they all call our attention to areas of contemporary life that we often neglect to our own detriment. All four authors draw out marginal people and other species (the isolated and forgotten) and reveal them to be just as valuable as the hegemonic or dominant species. All four authors have clear messages about conscious care which apply to all of humanity. In addition, these writers promote interconnectedness by exploring other important life issues such as caring for the environment (animals, plants, water, air) as well as caring for the whole person (physically, mentally, spiritually, and sexually).

Another idea common to these writers is the concept of nurturing. While nurture and intuition are perhaps overly conventional concepts to discuss with women authors, my research shows how all four of these women break free from convention to bring prophetic nurture to empower all genders. Indeed, these authors collectively stand against many stereotypes and specifically expose racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, and the often destructive forces of industrial capitalism in the home and in governments. Sometimes the social conflicts addressed are less obvious than others, so this study points out specifically what the author or narrator exposes while maintaining how these revelations connect the four authors by overall theme.

Today it has become popular to at least nod to environmentalism even in children's movies like *Yogi Bear*, *Hoot*, or *Furry Vengeance*. Even some top 40 songs employ environmental messages. These cultural elements do send a positive environmental message about conserving and preserving natural resources on a daily basis on both small and large scales. However, most fiction and nonfiction today does not connect human relationships with ecology directly; there is little which patterns marriage or parent-child relationships after the interdependency of natural relationships. Therefore, while children learn about recycling and

reusing through Disney and Nickelodeon, environmentalism is still a separate thought and activity than communicating with and loving humanity.

The disconnect in relationships is what my study addresses to show how some contemporary literature can be a catalyst for merging the two types of conscious and proactive relationship building. Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray keenly demonstrate how we should be as conscious of how our individual actions maintain our human relationships as we are aware of ecological relationships. Human relationships need guidance and support and intervention through every means possible, psychology and science, but also art. Just as different types of scientists might join together to research and thereby help a region or body of water, so researchers even in the arts should participate in improving and strengthening human relationships for the benefit of humanity as well as for the land and animals.

Two works in particular are direct metaphors or analogies for my thesis: Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* and Mary Hood's novella "And Venus Is Blue". Hood shows the impact that one's actions have on others (even their pasts, their memories, their current and future identities.) Hood's theme is Don't take your own life; don't self-destruct your relationships because it's selfish. Regardless of personal pain, be present for those you love. Cherish and communicate with your loved ones. Hood remains clear about the morality of her characters; her theme is always clear. She reveals either the ironic atrocities we do to one another as in "The Good Wife Hawkins" or shows us the courageous characters such as the grandmother in "How Far She Went" who sacrifices the dog she loves to save her granddaughter's life. Hood's message is about being careful of human relationships even if that means making people a priority over animals. Hood tells of observing the carelessness of workers in her yard dumping old pink fiberglass insulation down the well, thus poisoning the water and rendering it useless.

Most likely they did not consider the consequences of their actions, which is the definition of carelessness that in this example hurts both nature and humans.

Ray's work is the study of human relationships and their interconnectedness with the natural environment. Ray's whole body of work promotes being intentional about living and acknowledges the negative past of the south as well as family and economic challenges. This idea of care and intentional living vs. the opposite way of living carelessly most closely connects to Mudear's garden in *Ansa* and one Hood story about the careless married couple and the wife's garden and hope chest. It also connects to Ray's father (animals vs. land etc.) and Greene's adoption (trying to save the world vs. maintaining her own family first.)

In *Familiar Heat*, Hood describes children laughing and cutting up the beached whales while their parents seem unable to control them. Perhaps worse than the control over their actions, Hood hints that there is a moral failing with many children because their parents are perhaps making sure they are safe and happy but not always teaching them right from wrong. A similar implication of childrearing can be said of *Ansa* who portrays a grandmotherly ghost giving a rebellious young girl an attitude adjustment in *You Know Better*, but then *Ansa*'s cautionary tales seem meant for adults as well as children, with a special emphasis for women and girls. Greene certainly advocates for children and for better parenting techniques, particularly in *No Biking in the House without a Helmet*. Greene humbles herself and reveals her self-doubt over each child she and her family adopt. Finally, Janisse Ray also weighs in on childrearing issues when she writes of her profound respect for her father even though he worked in a junkyard where so much damage was done to the land and despite her personal and faith differences with him to this day.

Today, it seems extreme that now some groups and politicians are more than willing to sacrifice human excellence and comfort for the sake of a mollusk or some other species. The land or any species should not be sacrificed simply for the sake of human greed or for urban development, but at the same time drinking water should not be rationed to humans because of a possible minor threat to animals such as mollusks.<sup>17</sup> People should do their research and be as balanced as possible, but animals, insects, and plant life are not equal to humans. We should, however, go back and re-evaluate our human relationships and give them our best efforts first and foremost and then protect the environment.

In recent years, it has become more mainstream to “go green.” Many people now buy energy-efficient appliances and natural makeup, recycle, and conserve resources on an everyday basis. The state of Georgia’s recent water crisis has proven that individuals can make a big impact by making conservation a habit. Janisse Ray in *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* concludes with, “Culture springs from the actions of people in a landscape, and our southern culture tied to the longleaf pine forests is eroding” just as we often allow our human relationships to erode. It is important to study how literary works reflect contemporary culture and promote lasting improvements for the future because bettering our world is more important than just being entertained by art. In *Writing for an Endangered World*, Lawrence Buell advises that “the success of all environmentalist efforts finally hinges on ... attitudes, feelings, images, narratives” (1). Ansa, Greene, Hood, and Ray employ beautiful language and lyrical descriptions of the good and bad of their southern settings, but their contribution to American literature has more potential than just lasting aesthetics. Their shared thematic focus is to move readers toward

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<sup>17</sup> The health of mollusks in rivers such as the Chattahoochee is one of the debated issues at the heart of the “water war” between Georgia, Florida, and Alabama that has gone on for over 25 years.

positive action in a manner that is careful of both humans and nature in order to improve our everyday ecologies.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Interview With Tina Mcelroy Ansa

(This interview was conducted over the telephone on January 6, 2015.)

I began the interview by asking with which writer Ansa most identified in style or method, and she said that Zora Neale Hurston was the writer whose work first inspired her to become a writer of literature. She elaborated, “When I first went to college at Morehouse, I assumed that literature was all about white people only until one of my teachers introduced me to Zora Neale Hurston and other African-American writers. I was shocked that there was literature about my people and eventually realized that I could write literature like that too.”

Ansa continued, “I didn’t want to write books; I wanted to write literature. My mother was an avid reader. She was not a sophisticated woman, but she was a sophisticated reader. She read *Vogue* because she was a seamstress, and she traveled, and was a book club member. The only time she told us not to interrupt her was when she was reading. I snuck a peak at the books by her bedside, and she would talk to me about these books. She would say these are adult books (not dirty etc) but adult books. Just because you hear certain words in these books, these are not trash. *True Confessions* were teen books that were trash (cautionary tales where the girl always got pregnant.) She said if you want to read real literature, you have to wait til you’re older. My mother would say, ‘Pretty women are a dime a dozen.’” Ansa’s mother inspired her to write quality literature since sophisticated reading was such an intelligent pleasure to her mother.

When I asked about some of Ansa’s favorite books, she responded that recently she has become interested in the writings of Edwidge Danticat, who is African/British and getting a lot of attention now, because she reminds Ansa of Hurston. Ansa has also recently enjoyed *We Need*

*New Names* by NoViolet Bulawayo, but she laments that many writers are not getting published these days due to budget cuts and online competition.

When asked about current projects, Ansa replied, “I have been working on a ‘Good Little School Girl’ project and a book of advice/helps for young women.” Ansa is still developing her own Down South Press publishing company (*Taking After Mudear* was first published by press.) Later I asked more specific questions about her novels, such as “ In *The Hand I Fan With*, Lena has stables and seems interested in horses, and she has a lush garden. In the books about Mudear, gardens are also important but are more negative symbols. Can you explain how you use gardens or the natural environment in your writing?” Ansa corrected, “She makes me pronounce it Muh-dear.” Although she acknowledged Mudear’s negatives, Ansa somewhat defended the character of Mudear as doing what she believed was the best to make her daughters independent of men.

Ansa remains interested in writing about women and their work and the beauty of the south, the environment of Atlanta where she vividly remembers a West End garden in the back of a woman’s house when she was young. “The environment is very integral to my writing sometimes on purpose, and sometimes I look up, and there it is.” On a personal level, Ansa remarks, “I love gardens, and I had to leave a garden I just loved because we have been living in a condo the last couple of years, but I may be getting one soon.” Ansa also says, “The town of Mulberry is a character.”

I then asked what her character Mudear, who prioritizes her garden above her daughters, represents most, and Ansa responds, “She didn’t mean to desert them but needs a place for herself. Mudear wanted to instill strength in her daughters.”

Moving on to address Ansa's use of the spiritual in her novels, I commented about infusing her novels with ghosts and spirits and speaking about how society has changed with respect to the spiritual elements. Ansa responded, "I've always been an eavesdropper." "It's beautiful down here." "I claim spirits and ghost stories." "Chitlins and watermelons" and other things that haven't been considered "proper" to talk about, I want to snatch back. Sitting on the front porch, friends and family would talk about when we got into Kentucky and other Southern states how beautiful the south was and is. The beauty of the south still takes your breath away, and this southern environment is very much a part of my writing. "I claim spirits, I claim all the things black people feel they shouldn't talk about anymore. I'm not ashamed to talk about the spirit world and to claim it as a unique part of my culture. Ghost stories black people avoided because of the image of black people and ghosts from the screen in the 20s and 40s. My mission is to snatch back a few things for black people.

Speaking of coastal Georgia where Ansa has lived for many years, she continues, "It's more the Sea Island and the other islands where especially older people talk unselfconsciously black. Most black people have language and subjects that we don't always use in order to assimilate. Culture here seems to preserve more the songs and the basketweaving there is also a preservation of history. Small towns or country towns ...the further you are from the city the further you are from mainstream where nappy hair and watermelons would be made fun of in the larger world."

Since moving to St. Simons, she has observed a difference in people in small towns and islands. She has been listening to people's conversations since the 1980s, and black people in these smaller towns and islands speak very unselfconsciously. Ansa discusses examples of the spiritual references in certain places in the south. For instance, a woman talked about a dream

where Grandmama came to visit her. Or people will say, “I had a restless night... a dream where a witch rode me all around so I had a bad night’s sleep. We’d always stop at the corner store. Even though it was modern with Slurpee machines, people were talking very unselfconsciously but really only in the country that this slice of the past exists in public it seems.”

Speaking of her personal background with spirits, Ansa remembers that at home she heard ghost stories from her grandfather but knew she wasn’t supposed to talk about them at school. “Spirit stories were often Cautionary Tales.” Some of the pieces of conversation Ansa would overhear on St. Simons reminded her of what her own mother used to say or other older women she remembers.

Connecting her use of spirits to her mission as a writer, Ansa strongly states that what black people have done is to “stop valuing, stop sharing” the elements of their heritage and culture that should be preserved for its richness. She gets frustrated and feels she must snatch them back in a literary way so that it is honored and not a joke. She says it was common for families to say, “Grandmama old, don’t worry if somebody’s sitting by your bed at night, so don’t be scared.” Honoring my people, my ancestors that I would never know from Africa even has become a real mission for me.

When I asked Ansa what advice she gives to new writers, she offers encouragement: “The first time novel, you think you have to put everything in or you lose your vision. A first-time writer needs to keep his or her vision or mission in focus and make that a part of even a first novel but not try to include every idea in a single work.” (Ansa has created and worked on several projects that focus on helping new writers such as her “Mid wife” service and the Sea Island Writer’s Retreat.)

I asked Ansa if there were particular environmental issues she was interested in her own area of St. Simon's or beyond, and she exclaimed, "St. Simons "Oh my God" Daufuskie Island used to be a beautiful, untouched, historic place into 2/3rds golf course. The black people who used to live and own there have to ask permission to visit their own cemetery. It's a gated community." She said she was concerned about "ameliorated wetlands and the loss of respect for land and just razing 100 year old trees and the callousness of the value of the land and to say nothing about the fact that black people in particular are being displaced. Exclusive communities use fertilizer for golf courses which seeps into the ocean and into the water supply...I love St. Simons, but it is a place (or at least Sea Island is) where developers have supposedly "made" wetlands and have just desecrated the land. I know about commerce and needing houses, but there has been a terrible disrespect for the land. I feel like Janisse Ray because it just makes you so angry when the environment is destroyed and the runoff from fertilizer from the golf course. It's just insane. We know this and hate this, but it continues." Ansa and her husband Jonee have been part of this fight for the land and for water quality and for saving African-American neighborhoods for thirty years now. Ansa notes that Eugenia Price and others have written about Savannah and other Southern coastal environments.

Ansa continues, "Saving African-American neighborhoods or historical neighborhoods" is important to me, but fighting development is very difficult. Development always hurts the poor and black people the most. It made me feel like such a hardened old woman even in my thirties when a large diverse group tried to help conservation efforts, and we lost. It's all about the fight because money and power so often wins. I don't see these issues so much in my writing, but the natural environment and the carelessness of people in contrast to it." Concluding her comments about environmental concerns, Ansa mentioned that a woman wisely told her, "If they

want your land, they will eventually take it, but you have to fight.” I don’t see this so much in my writing but in my life...the devaluing of what is important. “It starts with the person who leaves trash on the beach... the intentional carelessness of developers who want their golf course and don’t care about the runoff and on and on.”

## Appendix B: Interview With Melissa Fay Greene

(Email Interview on April 26, 2014)

Rachel G. Wall: *No Biking in the House Without a Helmet* clearly comes from your personal adventure in international adoption. What type of story are you usually drawn to research?

Melissa Fay Greene: I'm interested in a kind of shining moment in time that could be, as they say, "unpacked," a moment—like the looting of the wrecked shoe-truck, with the Sheriff's assistance, in the opening pages of *Praying for Sheetrock*. That mysterious scene turns out to contain a world of information about everything from the trans-Atlantic slave trade to Reconstruction to the racist underpinnings of 20<sup>th</sup> century Georgia. In *Last Man Out*, the key moment—during the dramatic rescue of 18 men from a coal-mine collapse a mile underground—is the emergence of the last man, an Afro-Canadian. "Unpacked," that scene sends racial shock-waves across North America.

RGW: You often uncover and reveal historical circumstances and human motivations for actions that have a lasting effect. Why do you feel that these discoveries are important revelations from your work?

MFG: It has long interested me to try to get to the bottom of things. It's why, in every book, I end up at some point in the Paleolithic Era; I want to begin at the beginning. I'd have made (if I'd had a scientific bent) an earnest geologist or anthropologist; my bedtime reading, every night, is books on evolution. So—looking around at modern society—one wonders what are the underpinnings, and were there certain moments, certain individuals, that gave human history a bit of a steer in this direction rather than in another?

RGW: Do you consider yourself an environmentalist? Does your view of the environment influence your research or writing or any other important aspect of your life?

MFG: Absolutely, but I haven't felt scientifically qualified to write long-form pieces about climate change and loss of species diversity. I'd LOVE to have written—to have been equipped to write—Elizabeth Kolbert's new book, *THE SIXTH EXTINCTION*, which I'm reading now. I recently wrote a story for *Readers Digest* about the Archangel Ancient Tree Project, whose founder, David Milarch, is cloning ancient trees—three to five thousand year old trees—and ancient *stumps* from the once-magnificent pre-Columbian forest of North America—as a step toward reversing the horrific deforestation of the planet.

RGW: How would you most accurately categorize your body of work: sociology, journalism, historical nonfiction, or some other category?

MFG: I like “Literary Nonfiction,” with the notion that one serves two gods—the god of truth, and the god of art and beauty.

RGW: Which of your projects so far has been the most challenging? In what way?

MFG: There has come a point, in every book, when I'd gone too far to turn back yet could not see the way forward. With *The Temple Bombing*, I dreamt one night that I alone was responsible for bringing an enormous ocean steamer, like The Queen Elizabeth, into port—I was the only person on deck and I was also the only person in the harbor. That became my private metaphor for what it felt like trying to steer the ship of that book, to turn it, to bring it safely to shore.

Maybe there's no way around simply hitting a wall and thinking, ‘Well, damn, this is impossible,’ though it will be for different reasons with each book.

RGW: Have you received much negative criticism on any of your works particularly by people who object to your portrayal of Georgia state leaders or their family members etc.? If so, please give some examples of the types of criticism you have received without mentioning from whom.

MFG: The white citizens of McIntosh County were—in the 1990s—displeased with *Sheetrock*. I got lots of letters expressing: “I’m not saying it didn’t happen, but why did you have go kick a dead horse?” and people sometimes SHOWED UP at my readings around the country; a man would be the last person in line for book-signing but he would not have a book. He’d say, “Sheriff Poppell? He’s my cousin.” It felt threatening. In recent years, I’ve started hearing again from white people in McIntosh County—now it’s by email, and now they (a younger generation) are expressing: “Why don’t you come back down and write Part II?”

With *The Temple Bombing*, I got some honest-to-goodness old school anti-Semitic hate-mail. That was 1996. These days, with the internet, it would be far worse. Back then, people actually had to pay to put a stamp on a hateful message.

RGW: How do you think writing, journalism, and audiences have changed today? Do you see these changes as mostly good or bad?

MFG: While there are as many vital, life-changing, earth-shaking stories as ever to be told—to tell—*how* to tell them, *where* to publish, has gotten very confusing. The business plan of journalism today is perilous. There are more ways than ever to get published—no longer is an aspiring journalist limited to a few dozen national magazines or newspapers; he or she can blog, or write for online magazines, or self-publish. BUT to make a living that way is nearly impossible, and to have the work vetted, fact-checked, and improved by experienced editors is unlikely. The problem began, in large part, with the internet model of free content and the corresponding expectation of audiences that content should be free or very cheap. These expectations, enabled by clever computer users and hackers, destroyed the music industry as we knew it. Now rock bands have to survive by selling concert tickets and t-shirts—isn’t that true?—because their audiences download their new songs for free, they pirate the songs, almost

the moment they're available. The audiences do this as if they're entitled to it, as if new songs are kind of a public utility. Similar dynamics are at work in journalism. Still, journalism is one of the pillars of democracy; it's crucially important that true stories be investigated and told. It's honorable work, intelligent work, and I wouldn't trade it for anything. It's just that new ways have to be found to make it paying work.

RGW: . What are some of your favorite books? What do your favorites have in common?

MFG: I relish—I savor—science books written for lay readers, for non-scientists. I'm captivated by the deep history of life on earth and of the evolution of humankind, and by the books that contribute to our understanding of the current “Anthropocene,” the stage of life on Earth dominated and damaged by our species. The absolute gold standard is *The Song of the Dodo*, by David Quammen. Other fantastic works include *Remarkable Creatures* by Sean B. Carroll, *Before the Dawn* by Nicholas Wade, and *Evolution: The Triumph of an Idea* by Carl Zimmer. I read a lot of poetry, too, especially interested lately in Kay Ryan, Carol Ann Duffy, and (translated from the Polish) Adam Zagajewski. Like all writers, I read for the glittering match-up of language and thought.

RGW: What do you think is the primary role of the writer or journalist? What problems do you see with the career or with schools training writers/reporters today?

MFG: I pretty much answered this question earlier, but, as for graduate school for aspiring journalists, I'd recommend a field of expertise rather than (although my friends who teach in 'J' schools would disagree) pursuing a degree in journalism. I'd think a degree in an aspect of modern history, in modern languages, in economics or in science, would enhance your ability to report in this dazzlingly splintered world. Of course, good basic storytelling skills are the *sine qua non*, and if you don't have those, it would make sense to try to develop them.

RGW: What challenges do you think cause the most strain on relationships (marriages, families, friendships) today?

MFG: Economics. Folks being underpaid, underemployed, swamped by the rapidly-rising inequality in American life and finding themselves on the wrong side of their expectations. It's a cruel fact and getting worse, as many of the nation's richest people, with Congress and the Supreme Court on their side, make sure this un-level playing field lasts into the distant future. Voting rights: gutted. Affirmative action: wounded. Political contributions: it's the Wild West. Everything is getting skewed toward the billionaires and the multi-millionaires shaping American life and thought to unprecedented degrees. Every recent study reports that the children of the elite become the new elite, while the children of the poor, the working class, and the middle class, drift ever-downward with every generation. You ask is journalism still important? Journalism is one of the only tools left making it anything like a fair fight. The middle-class is going down (see last week's *New York Times* report), African-American and Hispanic attendance in institutions of higher education is collapsing (see this week's *New York Times*), guns are everywhere, Western crackpots are reminiscing about African slavery, but let there be clarity about what's happening, let there be people telling balanced and truthful stories about what's happening to American democracy.

RGW: Finally, can you tell me about what sort of project you are currently working?

MFG: I published this feature story in the *New York Times Magazine* about a service dog academy training dogs specifically for children with invisible disabilities. The *Times* story concerned a family whose son, adopted from Russia, has been brain-damaged by fetal alcohol syndrome. The book expands that story with chapters about a wide range of families and the dogs who are rescuing them.

### Appendix C: Interview with Mary Hood

(Email Interview on July 11, 2011)

Rachel G. Wall: What kind of research did you do for your novel *Familiar Heat*? Did you travel to one particular place and get a feel for that community, or was most of it imagined from a distance?

Mary Hood: I did research in several places in Florida, including the panhandle as well as in the Keys. Of course having been born on the Georgia coast, and having lived on Saint Simons Island gave me a real and deep, almost instinctive, feel for the light and shade, the moods of sky and nature, the shift of sand. When I traveled—when I travel now—I seem to seek what is already within me. I learned how the world looked, sounded, felt, smelled, even the taste of the air and sea before I knew scientific names for the flora and fauna. Now I find there is mystery shrouding every familiar thing—the mystery of naming, of discovering a language for first and lasting impressions. I loved the Dakotas because—I now see—they reminded me of the marshes of Glynn.

RGW: How did you develop the character of Faye? What in her did you relate to most as her creator? Faye and her mother have quite a loving relationship. Did that grow out of your life?

MH: Faye's story is the guess—the personal caption and continuity I made for snapshots of several lives, vivid and unexplained flashes of truth in other's lives at moments of searing distress. Their own and my own. Who can explain all this? I learned stories, everywhere I lived, and the mysteries were not always solved, or solvable. From a neighbor's story, after a car crash, I began to ask questions about what happens when we forget but God does not. Essential brain and mind and soul issues. I used to wonder things about the born blind—do they “see” in their dreams? Faye and her mother—after Faye's wreck, only her mother remembers, only her

mother can restore or refill Faye's brain, tell her her favorite color, her first date, her best Christmas, etc. What is that worth? What is it worth, to wake a blank and be told you are a child of God, claimed, inerrantly and irrevocably owned—and in Faye's case also wed—to a stranger—because of something you do not remember and never will and cannot be released from? What if Faye's mother—on those tapes in French and Vietnamese, were lying? Or just mistaken? Whose life, whose story, is our life?

My mother, when she realized I had no intention of ever reading *Middlemarch*--the novelist's novel, as it is called-- took it upon herself to read it for me—recording it onto dozens...and dozens...and dozens...of cassettes. Finally, unbeknownst to me that she was doing that, I decided to read it and get it over with, and when I told her, she ceased reading it. So I have an almost complete recording of the novel, in my mother's voice. (She would have been 100 this year.) She is gone now. I have not listened. I want to, but I am not sure how to withstand all the mixed emotions, including the fact that I found Casaubon, despite everyone else's revulsion to him—sympathetic. At least, I could identify with him, since it was taking me so long to write my novel! I treasure the tapes, however. So, I would say that is in the novel. And that is where I got the idea.

RGW: On page eleven of the novel, Faye is described as “the sort that's a tart at heart.” What were you thinking of when you wrote that unique statement?

MH: I think I did not say Faye was the sort that's a tart at heart. I think I was saying she was not the sort that's a tart at heart. If the book implies she is, there is a typo no one has ever pointed to me before. Horrors! I think she was a girl who had been taught how to behave chastely, but whose chastity was not dependent on external rigors. This is very important later, when she wants to know if she was leaving with Cristo. It is an agony to her, not to know her own nature.

No one—except we readers—knows the answer. We can't help her. We can only share her agony. No one in the novel will ever know. It is built in, that snag and mystery and irritation.

RGW: How would you describe the way you organize a story or the novel since you often do not tell a story chronologically, or not entirely. How do you keep the details of plot straight without getting confused or confusing the reader? Do you think that this innovative method of storytelling is particularly Southern?

MH: I chose to tell the story, the stories, as a braid or interwoven, yet apparently, from each character's point of view, straightforwardly. We take it in as a helical thing, interwoven like DNA. I was trying to find a way to show that there are no minor characters in life; each of us is the "hero" of our own story. I was working to have no main characters, no secondary characters or minor characters or "ficelles," and certainly no villains. However—none of this was entirely possible with what I knew and learned to do as I wrote... I needed the bank robbery and the innocent but significant whales to get it rolling. But wouldn't it be grand if we could grasp the idea? That we are strolling through the dreams and histories of others?

When I was in grade school, the *Weekly Reader* had an article on Albert Schweitzer and his reverence for life. I had already discovered that reverence on my own, but he put a name to it. I am not sure if the "tangling" of time is Southern. Faulkner did it. Or—let us say—tried to "get it down on paper." It is how it is. Bach does it, in his counterpoint. Someone has written about Cormac McCarthy and time—in the apple orchard the men gathering, the cut limbs, clearing the tree away—the rings of time are in each old limb, and also in the trunk. . .and in the smoke, rising, from the fire. And in the ash. In our lungs, as we breathe, warmed by the now reduced tree.

It has been pointed out by chemists that the inert element/gas xenon of which there is only so much in the world has the same amount from the beginning of Let there be... and we have been—from the first, through the tree ferns and dinosaurs and cave dwellers and pharaohs and Caesar and the rats with plague and Napoleon and all the rest of us—in and out in and out—fishes and snails and diatoms and you and I—we are just borrowing it, cycling it through for a few breaths and laying it gone, for whatever comes next. What is time? I think, in some ways, we are like xenon in the lungs of time...

RGW: Titles and subtitles seem important in how you organize your fiction. How did you determine what quotes and titles to use for the novel?

MH: Snappy quotes always catch my mind. I find them, or they find me. I collect them, and after a time, they seem to have a place and a purpose. I organized my novel into five books – using the Third Symphony of Beethoven as a kind of pattern. I found quotes which would “work” for each movement. The tone and mood and pace and focus of each book were set from Beethoven’s own choices, however. The second book—Cristo’s parents-- was the “funeral” movement. I did want so much to have in the folkloric dance moment—4<sup>th</sup> of July—a kind of endless passalong of dance and celebrating from dawn until dark—and fireworks—and came closer to doing that than to achieving the next hope, which was to write one whole book—the fourth book-- in the sleeping minds—in the dreams—of the characters. I dreamed their dreams. The only problem was—they didn’t dream those all on the same night! Maybe another writer can make that happen some day. My characters seemed to have been too revved up by the picnic and fun...

The title of my novel came from Latin. From Virgil’s Aeneid... I loved the quote, was reading in Latin puzzled by how much I didn’t remember but glad I could still read... and came

to Vulcan and Venus, and jotted down the phrase just after she puts her snow scool limbs around his roasting hot chest--“notusque calor...” but did not recognize it as significant--as a title—until I was reading some old, old old magazines, and came across –I think in the *Saturday Review* a review of A. Mandelbaum’s translation of Virgil, and mirabile dictu, more than marvelous to say, the very section I had loved and added to my file of snappy quotes—and I admit it is pathetic to have any snappy quotes in Latin! I also have some dandies from the Algonquin crown, in good American English... -- the reviewer of Mandelbaum, singling out his translation of that very phrase I liked—*notusque calor*-- as “familiar heat.” It struck me like lightning. So. From that moment, YEARS before I wrote the novel, I knew it was the title.

RGW: Henry James admitted to his desire to “make the reader” figure out his fiction. Do you like the idea of not giving away too much so the reader has to discover meaning independently?

MH: I do not trust anything Henry James has to say about what he expects of a reader, or a reader of him. I have to translate Henry James into pictures, I have to set each scene of his as on stage, and then, maybe, I’ll get it and laugh just at the right moment, when some inert figure lifts a brow in deep irony and it has a witty effect. But the translation is first. He probably had no idea I would need such help. He would not be pleased. But, as they say in the rhyme, even a cat can look at a king. I wrote hoping that if a person read the book twice, there would be more pleasure. The first time, there is story and plot and lots of action and gossip. The second time, there is irony and I hope a kind of aha! for some of the same moments. For instance, first reading, as Faye is lifting bits of silk scraps of her wedding dress and dragging their coolness across her flesh and lips, saying dreamily, “Like swimming at night by starlight,” her mom thinks—Sure as God, time to get her married! In fact, within pages Faye is married and swimming at night by starlight. . . and it isn’t sexy at all. Maybe no one will ever read it twice.

Maybe these little landmines of “pleasure” are just things to help the struggling writer press on, and not lose heart or momentum, although by the time we get to the final draft the story itself is very very old, its heat very familiar indeed, and we are longing for hail.

RGW: In *Familiar Heat*, why is Cristo introduced so late in the novel? What effect does that have on the reader? Does Cristo act as a figure who reveals how sports dominate our lives and priorities? Did you intend anything specific with the juxtaposition of the priests and the sports enthusiasm of the Florida community?

MH: This is a very interesting question. I have no idea what to say. I did not think Cristo is introduced late. Maybe to us, ok. I see. But he is not a factor in the book until the triumph, his homecoming, and that cup of coffee. Faye has found her way to her life and chosen. She did not choose Cristo. It is Cristo who erupts, who returns, who tries again, who puts out his hand, his finger, to touch the jittery nerve by Faye’s eye. He does that exactly in the book when he does it. That is not late. That is just when. I have no policy statement about priests and sports, or the public love of sports heroes or anything like that. I love baseball. You show me someone who can bring the heat, smoke it past a deluded batter, I will cheer every time, even if it aint my team. But especially if it is. Folks want to consider the tragedy of skill in sport and failure in spiritual matters, let them study Tiger Woods. Not Cristo. He’s just a kid who can throw a strike. There is a wonderful poem, I think it is “Shield of Achilles” about Venus going to Vulcan—same scene in Virgil—and more or less trying to seduce him into making the armor which she hopes will outwit the curse on her favorite, whom she has dipped, holding him by the heel, in the river of death, so he is “almost” immortal. The poet describes the shield. Vulcan has done his best. It is a grand work. Last line of the poem includes the reference to that young hero, who will carry it, “who would not live long.” I also think of “To an Athlete Dying Young” in *Shropshire Lad*.

I had something to say about that. Not about sports. About death. Every writer does.

RGW: There are places in your fiction where the description seems very cinematic (the kidnapping scene on the boat in the novel or in the story “How Far She Went,” for example) What are some of your favorite movies? How would you compare your writing to powerful films you’ve enjoyed?

MH: I am a visual person. And I work as though filming. I expose the film (work out the scenes, stage the angles and poses), make all the pictures, long before I put the caption to them, in text. This may be because I often had to do other work, while “writing.” I worked on the story in my head. Things develop slowly. I often change the caption, the audible part of the “film” but I seldom if ever change the picture. I may edit. But I receive the story both as words—I overhear the scenes—and as “visions.” Is this a good place to say, “Doesn’t everybody?” and then laugh maniacally?

I don’t compare my writing to films. I often wish I had some of the ability of film to do several tremendous things at once, in scene setting. Long shots, changes of focus, background music, filters, and “foley” enrichment—touching up the sound track, and camera angles making the reader look where the poem is, where the fire is, where the truth is. But words are what I have. All overtones must come from the mysteries of subtext and juxtaposition and hints and such. I am no film maker. But I do love films. There’s no point in listing them. I’ve missed a lot of great ones, but I am always catching up.

RGW: When you put a minor character such as the FBI agents or the trucker in *Familiar Heat*, do you rely on types and copy them, or do you create entirely new characters?

MH: OH. The FBI agents. OH. The trucker. I saw them as “real.” As true and real and what I was doing was describing—in their time on the page—everything I could use to make them and

the moment real. I never thought of them as “minor.” Oh my. Oh well. I guess they are. But—not in their own life. That trucker had stories to tell, up and down the road, somewhere to go to, good people he had been raised by, decent women who raised him right, helped him honor Faye, instead of make her feel worse. And the FBI were having to do their jobs, attend and honor hopeless protocols and fill in forms, and work diligently despite very little positive experience to give them hope, so when it turned out well, I wanted their relief and joy to be huge and real. And somehow, if one thought of it, but not necessarily to have to, just if one did, it would make the response of Vic so much colder.

RGW: The priest’s housekeeper Vivien Lockridge is said to have been “more than once a fool for love and twice a widow.” Did you or do you imagine a romantic plot for this eccentric character?

MH: A romantic plot for V. Lockridge? She who played ball with the stonecarver over the fence like Pyramus and Thisbe courting through the Wall? Hell yes. She and Otto are a hot ticket. Didn’t you catch that, in the tossed turnip scene? It is just a matter of time. . .

RGW: Critics have noted how you have quite the range of types of love in your novel. Was this inclusiveness intentional, or do you think the novel simply reflects reality in that respect? Do you think our current culture has erroneously pushed love of family, love of God, and love of friends away in subordination to romantic love?

MH: I read this week in an online news headline that romantic love/or maybe just sex is sort of being left behind in the modern age. I didn’t read the article, for similar reasons that I did not, many years ago, read the article about the “death of the novel.” I still have hope for both—romantic love and novels. Also sex. But there are other things to write about. Maybe not better, maybe not separate from love. Maybe yes. There ought never come a time when human

commitment – to person or cause—doesn’t interest us. Either as a cautionary tale or for inspiration. Love is a pretty good topic. Salvage and remodeling too, if you look at the Home and Garden Channel. There is always going to be something to write about, where the human heart is in conflict with something or other, even if it is just knotty pine paneling, a floral wallpaper border, or a dim landlord. Some of those shows would make great pilots for romantic dramas. I chose fishing, and coffee and baseball and hearts in exile... and threw in a few palm trees, a basket of tangerines, and a hurricane, but the people, the seeking and the fleeing and the hoping and the desolations—could have been anywhere. Ben wanting his own life, tapping on the hull with that wrench... and his sister Palma listening, praying it would never cease. I did want to show all sorts of commitments between humans, vow-driven difficulties. Integrities. Disintegrations.

RGW: Your plays on words seem to reflect a hyperconsciousness about language. You also include many specific phrases like “flinging a fit” and “on the flip flop” or brand names like “Handywipe.” What do unique word uses contribute to literature in your view?

MH: I notice how often I use compound nouns or trouble myself about hyphenation of what I seem to think are compounds but may not be. Language is always getting clearer and richer from borrowing from neighbors and sometimes from low and sometimes from high. A film worth looking at just for “setting” and small details is *After Eli*, (speaking of handywipes or towelettes). How important Chapstick is, after Armageddon! and towelettes. Little jokes and heartaches. Will my trade names last, in text? I don’t know. But somehow, I am not the writer to say, “moist ethyl alcohol and aloe disposable towelette” when what I mean is Handywipe. I do a lot of online cruising of Etsy vintage sites, and the other day I saw a salt shaker—pepper missing—and realized there is no way to describe it. It had no brand name. It matched the one I

used in childhood, and had not thought of in 50 years or more... Mid-century aluminum, it was called. I have been troubled by that. I want it to matter. I want to invest it somehow with the warmth of the hands that passed it. How important those jars of jam were, in Nabokov's story of the parents at breakfast, the son missing, and the phone ringing. Literature can be pretty breezy, or trivial, and sometimes my choices are. But because that is what it was or how it is. Will someone a million years from now try to describe a bouillon cube, the pretty foil paper, like a tiny gift? That's what it was. But what else was it?

RGW: Many of your short stories do not end happily. Do you think the reader can learn more from a sad ending than from a happy one? How do you usually decide how a story will end?

MH: Short stories end on the page, but go on, past the last word, and so do life and death. There is no use pretending. I very often stop the action before serious damage, don't I? Or at a point where there is still that milling around of the hopes, before they—like lemmings—race for the cliff. I must say I am getting happier as I write more stories. Stay tuned.

I don't decide a story. I write what it is; I am given it to write. Often I do see the end, at first. And then I go there. This takes courage, not to waver, not to touch it up or stop too soon. I "heard" truly heard in my mind—no picture with it—Faye's calling, hollering, as Vic raised the mallet to hammer in the for sale sign after the storm. I knew, right then, that was "the end." It wasn't the exact last words, but that was the dock I drove my little craft through the storms toward. Now there's a Henry James moment—that was the "stake" he spoke of, to which the whole thing gets tied.

RGW: In what ways do you think your fiction responds to contemporary problems such as divorce, childrearing, and environmental issues?

MH: I am interested in childrearing, divorce, and environmental issues, but generally not as such—that is, I deal with children I know and parents under stress. Or I witness marriages in stress. Or I wheeze and my cat’s fur falls out when the bug man sprays too much of whatever it is. Or I seek local farms and artisanal goat cheese. Or I devise interesting ways of reducing my carbon footprint. Or I just study birds and toxic waters. I have never been topic driven except in letters to the editor.

RGW: Would you say that the couple in your story “Come and Go Blues” is the most ideal relationship about which you have written? What inspired you to write this story, and what was your research method for it?

MH: I wrote the story in answer to a dare. Bailey White dared me. Then she gave me a cobalt blue inkwell and dared me again, and I thought about it... I had a photograph of two young folks leaning against the grill of a semi-truck. We were discussing how to teach, to use the photograph as a prompt. First thing, I said, is flip the gender expectations. Let her drive. Time, as they say, passed. I went to visit a friend in Macon, and he took me to lunch at the H&H, and played “Little Martha” for me on the jukebox. Then we went to the cemetery and paid calls on the notable dead. As I have said, I have almost eidetic recovery of detail when I am inspired. Summer languished. I had done nothing with that new blue inkwell, and the day came. A critic from overseas wrote to politely ask if I were dead, and that served to wake me, and I got on with things. To say it came from this, I know, would be only partial truth. That little pistol she kept under her pillow was taught to me by a nightwatchman during the graveyard shift when I worked as a barista, earning money for my land taxes (no more mules to sell). What else? Some of it happened to me, some of it, I happened upon. Every story is a kind of casserole, you know. But the singleness of it, the tautness of the string and the hum it made, well, I rejoice that I simply sat

and let it arrive through me. My heart hummed. I hummed along with it. It had been a while since I had hummed, or had written a story, and I had been in a far country, prodigal, and tossing husks to the swine... and now, wow, I got welcomed back into the land of the living, got the ring and robe and lots of rejoicing. So... and some of the most fun was researching the Yellow Pages. I knew the road. I have been all up and down that road. Like the woman driver—Jean—I had no intentions... and no clue...how close to home I was.

RGW: About which story or character do you feel most proud so far? Why?

MH: I finished a novella, and a collection of short fiction last summer—2010—[*A Clear View of the Southern Sky* (which is the final title---I think—of the collection so long “forthcoming” and working titled “Survival, Evasion, Escape”.)] I am really grateful for the stories. And especially grateful for the novella. It is called “Seambusters.” I just like the way I caught—or think I caught—the spirit of the place I live, and the women I worked with for several years before I started writing again.

But of course, I am most grateful always for the next thing... the current thing: the novel I have been working on about the flood of the Flint River in south Georgia. I am still at work, and still chipping away at my list.

RGW: In what ways do you consider yourself an environmentalist, and in what ways have you consciously infused environmental themes in your writing?

MH: I am not an environmentalist like Aldo Leopold or Rachel Carson. They are environmentalists. However, I am writing about what is happening to our planet in the local ways; I have a rammed-earth housing, but I am not sure if I am an environmentalist. I respect Aldo Leopold, and I have a specialist and a water resources field worker in five of my new novels—and there are issues addressed besides romantic ones. Those too. In the novel I am

working on now I have some characters interested in native plants, endangered plants. This topic rolls over into the next few novels in the series, when one character seeks an endangered plant, to transplant, and thereby stop a gated community from being built.

RGW: What reading material has inspired your own writing the most? What about distinctively Southern writing or writers do you most appreciate?

MH: Poets have inspired my ear, and have taught me to choose language, and use it so that attention must be paid, and deserves to be paid. Writers whom I consider essential to me—the ones I keep within touch—include Sir Thomas Browne, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Michel de Montaigne, Chekhov, Frank O'Connor, Elizabeth Bowen, Virginia Woolf, Hemingway, Eudora Welty, Thoreau...I never list favorite living writers or poets, but I am blessed by their fire. I do not especially seek out “southern” writing or writers. It is an opinion I have been developing for some years that many “southern” writers are Irish, French, Chinese, Persian, Indian, and Russian. What I like about Eudora Welty—in particular—I fall down, completely down, in awe before “A Still Moment.” She has caught everything, including the way the south has “always” been here. How it is a place where folks are passing through. A place where human ambition—so deep and strange—can live in blindness or delusion or self service. The labels on her characters can fit any scheme or contemporary dream. ( There is a sign I remember at an egret rookery in New Iberia, Louisiana. Hand printed, a little crooked, a little annoyed, and dead certain: YES WE HAVE MOSQUITOS NO WE DO NOT GIVE REFUNDS. ) The human heart is unknowable, Basho wrote a long time ago, but in my native place, a plant, blooms like heaven. Miss Welty doesn't judge a thing or a man. There are three, and suddenly, they are trivial, in the true and real radical sense of the word—they arrive on three meeting ways--and they come to...pass.

RGW: Do you try to make connections between story and theme and to bring in other elements that are important to you, or do you find it necessary to focus on plot and character primarily?

MH: I did not study writing in school. I did not take but the necessary survey courses in English or world literature. I do not come at reading or writing of stories by “parts” or topics, or in any way academically, like theme and plot and setting. I do not “cook” in that way, by recipe. Or by staple ingredients. I struggle with this, when I teach, because I realize students want to know how to do it. I once tried to answer “The Thirty Questions of Significance” in a college level textbook I bought remaindered at K-Mart some years ago. I could not answer but three, about any story I tried it on. Always the same three, also. So obviously, I just don’t get it! When my story “How Far She Went” was included in Janet Burroway’s textbook on writing, it was in the “setting” section. I could not answer the questions in that book about my OWN story!!!

I ask questions, along the way, as I work. They are not about meaning, plot, setting, conflict, antagonists, or any sort of procedural items. I do not in any way think this proves the case for those idiot French deconstructionists, who claim that writers are also idiots about our own intentions. I think intention in art is rather like the definition of a gentleman: A gentleman is a man at a party with a trombone, but he doesn’t play it. I prefer huge broad categories of possibilities—not to classify or sort, but to honor: so, great gnomonic billboards with single incredible riddles on them, personal and real to me and to no one else. Things such as, “Gone is Gordon,” and “Everywhere we love, monsters move.” Or, “Behold!” That one ought to draw a crowd.

Let me think: plot and character primarily? you ask. Schiller needed a rotting apple in his desk drawer to be able to move on into his poetry. I love being able to tell you that. It seems an answer, somehow. But I cannot tell you my rotting apples, if any. Maybe that salt shaker on

Etsy is one. But I am not nostalgic. When I was in the sixth grade, I knew. I KNEW what I was called to be and do. I had done some reading. I knew what I was to be—the *quipu camayoc*—in Quechua/Inca that was the “keeper of the secrets of the dead.” No, one did not just “keep the secrets.” One knotted them into weavings, and when the time came, one “recalled” them for the others. Weather, scent of cinnamon, feeling of prosperity when there was the scent of fresh coffee in the house, gold rims to clouds, six hexagonal bugs crawling up a wall, taking turns at being first. That leaves out everything, of course, about why. What is very important, in my knottings. It does no good to ask me. Ask them. Other *quipu camayoc* might knot in a different way... I like stories and the matrix around everything which is story. I like process. I like that the story I wrote down isn't the story I know; somehow, the words have got into it, have matter and do matter. And it is that, now, not what I started from. I do think there is always an emotional/spiritual grit upon which irritant my pearling sets in. Not a policy. I do not write policy statements. I am more of a “So much depends” sideways sidelong sort of writer, and I do consider it all a mystery. But imagine the greater mystery of music and painting and sculpture and nature—which need no words at all. For me, again and again, I will call nature my text, my classroom, my master teacher.

RGW: What do you think the writer's role is today? Can it function as more than entertainment?

If so, what can fiction do for the world? How does Southern writing fit?

MH: I think the writer's role in society is not the same thing as the writer's work. Consider Truman Capote on that one! I hope artists have vision. If they do, I hope next they have a drive to honor—as Joseph Conrad put it—the visible world. In reading I seek it, hope for it, for some authentic and vatic connection, something offering us a larger truth or knowing than is possibly human between the visible and the invisible. Not priestly, but prophetic. It can be “minor” or it

can be gigantic but is always tremendous. And dangerous. Truth is dangerous, unnerving, whether it is comic or tragic. And certainly if it is scientific. If readers seek entertainment, they will find it. But they may miss something more. Ants will sip saccharine water, but they will not live long. They cannot help the hill. Every ant starves. ...The good news is there is never a time, never a moment, when the fake is all we have, or all we create. We never lack literary options for deep connection and nourishment “to satisfy the weary and replenish the faint.” And entertaining to boot; what a deal. This is what literature is for. Humans have long childhoods and adolescences and maturings; we do not emerge precocious and able to fend for ourselves or each other... with intrinsic wisdom. Each generation has to be taught. We are not wild turkeys, whose instincts open one on one with each environmental challenge for each new chick, every exigency covered, coded, ready. They are perfect. They are wise birds from the start, just one flipped switch at a time proves it. They are equipped. Humans are not equipped intrinsically; we need shelves, binders, Google, grandmas, the Gutenberg project. National Geographic. Vaccines. Second chances. Blueprints. Hints. Comic chivvyng. Monuments. Maps. We learn from stories, lessons, watching, observing, apprenticings, mistakes, successes, wanderings, hard hard knocks, and if we are lucky, from what we read—from what we watch, from what we hear--we grow strong. Or, we live another day. Or we die as evidence in someone else’s case. No time to give up hope. No time to fret and wring hands and say the end of literature is near, and just flop to the ground, awaiting the four horsemen to come trampling across our touch screens, with Lady Gaga riding side saddle behind. Consider all the good, all that is yet to be. Consider our great grandparents, looking forward into time, clueless, completely disheartened if they could make out the shadows of World War I, of Spanish flu, of Guernica, of Lidice, of Hiroshima, of 9-11. . here we are! and looking ahead some more---our tender sweet children

and their children and their children, out beyond us, groping forward, looking back toward us, harking for our echoes of our confidence and our dread—studying us, knowing our stories and wondering about their own, beyond all that, caught up in all that, more of us, yet to be, on the way—aren't they worth investing in, in hoping for, in hoping toward? In hoping forward? Hand the quipu along, each knot tied to perfection, in hope and love. I hope writers will never give up looking past the local smoke and crashing glass, rejoicing for the heroes, and gathering up the broken, and offering stories, stories, stories forward, so whoever there is, coming, going, or gone, will know our “one and precious life” matters, that human and divine notice has been paid. They'll know that our redeemer lives, but the news won't mean a thing to them, unless we tell them, unless we praise it on. And they won't believe it, if it is “just entertainment”-- just a “story.” They'll know better. And something will make them want to revise, and they will start rewording, and a crowd will gather, and so, on.

Anyone can do this, not just Southerners.

## Appendix D: Interview With Janisse Ray

(Email Interview on May 19, 2015)

Rachel G. Wall: What do you think is the most pressing problem or environmental issue in 2015 and the near future?

Janisse Ray: The climate crisis, which is the manifestation of a catastrophe of vision and ethics

RGW: What made you first think of your own life as ecology in order to name your book *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*? Feel free to elaborate on the human-environmental connection you see.

JR: This occurred to me after the book was written. I saw the parallels between my personal history and the history of my place, the pine flatwoods of south Georgia. An ecology is a theory, yes, and a scholarship, but it is also a set of stories, the same as culture. Ecology and culture both are a set of stories we unearth and tell each other in an attempt to understand life in a place.

Writing *Ecology* it was easy to see these two as identical. Some people think the stories of the landscape and of the wild are boring, are less than, are insignificant. But they are not. The human story is profoundly and inextricably bound with the stories of place.

RGW: In what ways do you see that we all should maybe view our human lives more as we do plant and animal ecologies with the land?

JR: I write about this a lot in the book *Pinhook*. An ecology is a system with a lot of parts that work together, usually in synchronistic ways. Fragmentation of this system creates exponential damage. This is true of biotic communities and is also true of human communities.

Fragmentation lessens and weakens humanity. That means that our work, as ecologists and as humanitarians, should be toward restoring wholeness. To get there, we have to study and try to understand wholeness, which necessarily is going to ask the question about the human potential

for violence – toward each other and toward the earth – trying to figure out if we humans will be able to transcend potential (which is not a mandate) for it.

RGW: What are some of your favorite books, and what are you reading these days?

JR: I cut my teeth on Southern literature, O'Connor & Faulkner & Welty & Crews. Then I fell in love with nature writing, Thoreau & Bartram & Abbey & so many more alive and writing today. These days I'm blurbing a lot of books – I get asked to do this a lot – which means I'm not necessarily choosing what I'm going to read next, except in the fact that I've agreed to write an endorsement. I'm also reading a lot about trauma and how it relates to attachment, plus ways of healing from trauma. I am totally passionate about human healing on many levels and the sages and scientists that are doing such important work, mostly outside industrial medicine, on human healing.

RGW: Are you working on a particular project at the moment? If so, what is it?

JR: I'm always working on something. Right now I'm working on an essay about horses and another on a farm cooperative I visited in Ohio. I have written a treatment about a family of children abandoned in an old cabin about 70 years ago in northern Georgia, which is a fascinating story that was given to me. I'm thinking about my next book-length work and I have a number of ideas. I'm showing up at my desk waiting on a sign.

RGW: Do you think that literature today can serve more than one purpose or fulfill more than one need in readers? How do you think your work serves multiple purposes?

JR: Well, sure, if you mean that it can be entertaining and also educational, self-serving and also benevolent, transformational and also documentary.

RGW: What makes the South and Georgia in particular unique or important for environmentalism?

JR: We've given a lot. Some of our ecosystems, including the longleaf pine flatwoods, are 99 percent gone. Much of the wood for the country comes from the forests of the rural South. The South has been especially hard-hit by environmental destruction.

RGW: What styles of writing appeal to you personally? How would you describe your own writing style or a style you think is appealing to readers in general?

JR: My style is more lyrical. It is definitely not plot-driven, although I'm trying to learn how to employ tension more effectively. I love poetry and I love depth. I'm simply not a reader of murder mysteries, science fiction or romance, meaning pop fiction. I don't really know what pop fiction is or is not. All I know is that I work at a level far below the surface, far below the groundcover, far below the topsoil. Sometimes it's down in the hot molten rock. There are tons of people who don't want to go there, for various valid reasons. For me, a story that is spent in the insubstantial is useless to humanity.

RGW: You have talked about stories that we are missing or that have been lost. In what ways do you think storytelling can be and should be linked with message and meaning or an agenda?

JR: If you want to change someone's mind about a subject or an issue, you have to tap into emotion. Not your own emotion. You have to figure out how to help the reader access his or her emotions. Minds and opinions are not changed by facts and statistics, but by stories that fit into a reader's frame of reference and tap his or her core belief system.

RGW: Do you think our future food supply is as important a crisis as our environmental problems? Do you think people are less aware of the issues you research in *The Seed Underground* than of other issues?

JR: The food crisis is huge, but it is not our most pressing problem. That is the disruption of the climate. That catastrophe is going to affect (is affecting) our ability to grow food, and is a much

vaster problem than those I outline in *The Seed Underground*, namely chemicalized food, decline of nutrients in food, loss of ownership of seeds, overproduction of commodities, globalization and industrialization of agriculture, etc.