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Ecofeminist Sensibilities in
Contemporary Fiction from Women Writers
of the Appalachian South

by

Deedee Abbott

Under the Direction of Pearl McHaney, PhD

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

2022

ABSTRACT

The lives of Appalachian women and other disenfranchised people of the region have been closely entwined with the natural landscape of the mountains for centuries. This dissertation analyzes, from an ecofeminist perspective, the premiere novels of three contemporary Appalachian women writers and explores expressions of these historic connections from past to present. Although written from decidedly different perspectives and set in distinct geographic regions, Amy Greene's *Bloodroot* (2010), Crystal Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence* (2016), and Mesha Maren's *Sugar Run* (2019) each tell of multiple generations of matriarch-led families in Appalachia. In each novel, the contemporary generation of women are drawn to the land and lore of their Appalachian ancestry but ultimately struggle to thrive there in modern times. Ecofeminist analysis reveals that the challenges faced by these contemporary women are often traceable to the entwined oppressions of women and land imposed by those in power throughout Appalachian history and Euro-Western history at large. Although *Bloodroot*, *The Birds of Opulence*, and *Sugar Run* all delve into the reverberations of patriarchal domination in Appalachia, each also imagines unique opportunities for Appalachians to achieve liberation for themselves and for the natural landscapes of the regions that they call home. However, each of these novels also misses the opportunity to investigate women's relationship with the Appalachian land beyond their own ancestry, furthering blind spots to the interwoven importance of Indigeneity in the Appalachian region and worldwide.

INDEX WORDS: Ecofeminism, Feminist Criticism, Eco Criticism, Appalachian Literature, Affrilachian Literature, Granny Witches, Queer Appalachia, Greene, A., Maren, M., Wilkinson, C.

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Contemporary Fiction from Women Writers
of the Appalachian South

by

Deedee Abbott

Committee Chair: Pearl McHaney

Committee: Gina Caison

Randy Malamud

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Services

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

August 2022

DEDICATION

For my Appalachian family and ancestors.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
 Ecofeminist Sensibilities in Contemporary Fiction from Women Writers of the	
Appalachian South.....	1
<u>Ecofeminism</u>	<u>3</u>
<i>Historical Development and Assumptions.....</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Critiques and Responses</i>	<i>5</i>
<u>Appalachia</u>	<u>8</u>
<u>Texts</u> 12	
<u>Conclusion</u>	<u>14</u>
 Chapter One: Amy Greene’s <i>Bloodroot</i> (2010)	16
 Chapter Two: Crystal Wilkinson’s <i>The Birds of Opulence</i> (2016)	46
 Chapter Three: Mesha Maren’s <i>Sugar Run</i> (2019)	78
 Conclusion	106
 Works Cited.....	115

Ecofeminist Sensibilities in Contemporary Fiction from Women Writers of the Appalachian South

*In my Tennessee mountain home
Life is as peaceful as a baby's sigh
In my Tennessee mountain home
Crickets sing in the fields nearby*

Dolly Parton, “My Tennessee Mountain Home” (1973)

This popular song from Dolly Parton’s catalog is probably my favorite one. I love this song because of its lilting melody because the lyrics express the simplicity as well as the lushness of my home state, and because, of course, I love to claim Dolly Parton as one of my own. I know, however, that I have to share Dolly with the world. The Peabody award-winning podcast *Dolly Parton’s America* (2019) argues that “In this intensively divided moment, one of the few things everyone seems to agree on is Dolly Parton” — and the podcast uses hard data to support its claim.¹ Yes, everybody loves Dolly Parton — everyone except perhaps coal mining company executives. In 2009, a group of coal companies pressed for a boycott of Dolly Parton’s Tennessee mountain home, her theme park, Dollywood, and other Tennessee tourist attractions in reaction to a Congressional bill sponsored by the state’s senator at the time, Republican Lamar Alexander. The proposed bill did not call to stop coal mining or even restrict mountaintop removal mining — the controversial process that literally uses explosives to remove the land at

¹Dolly Parton ranks in the top ten of Global Q Scores, the recognized industry standard for measuring consumer appeal of performers, brand ambassadors, influencers, characters, licensed properties, and brands. She ranks number one in lack of negatives, meaning that people have the least negative things to say about Dolly Parton than any other global brand.

the tops of mountains to gain access to coal seams. The bill aimed instead to protect local water quality by stopping coal companies from dumping toxic mining waste into valley streams, which poisons drinking water and kills fish throughout Appalachia.² For the coal companies, being asked to avoid polluting streams, destroying the Appalachian landscape, and disrupting natural habitats was just too much to consider. To avoid the question outright, they countered by threatening the livelihood of Tennesseans who are economically dependent on tourism.³ National coal companies—outsiders to the Tennessee land and people—promoted a boycott of all things connected to the Tennessee mountains (including Dollywood) rather than alter their path of destruction or forfeit any income. Tales like this one are nothing new. In fact, outsiders with power have been manipulating and entwining the fates of disenfranchised Appalachian people and the Appalachian land for centuries in order to prioritize their own desires.

How do Appalachian fiction writers address this complicated history between Appalachian people, their homeland, and intrusive domination from outsiders? More specifically, how do contemporary Appalachian women writers connect the historically entwined patriarchal-driven oppressions of land and women to Appalachian land and life today? How do these writers imagine opportunities for liberation from these oppressions, if at all? In this study, I focus on the first novels published by three contemporary Appalachian women writers: Amy Greene's *Bloodroot* (2010), Crystal Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence* (2016), and Mesha Maren's *Sugar Run* (2019). Although set in different geographic locations across the region, each novel tells of multiple generations of matriarch-led Appalachian families in which the contemporary women are drawn to the land and lore of Appalachia, but ultimately struggle to

² "Stream Protection Rule - Environmental & Energy Law Program." *Harvard Law School*, 25 June 2021, eelp.law.harvard.edu/2017/10/stream-protection-rule/.

³ The "stream protection rule" eventually passed but was later reversed by the Trump Administration in 2016.

thrive there in modern times. An ecofeminist analysis of these novels reveals that the challenges faced by the contemporary Appalachian women in each novel are traceable to the entwined oppressions of women and land imposed by outsiders throughout Appalachian history and Euro-Western history at large. Although the three novels reveal the reverberations of patriarchal domination that continue to follow and threaten the lives and successes of Appalachian women for generations, *Bloodroot*, *The Birds of Opulence*, and *Sugar Run* also imagine unique opportunities for Appalachians to achieve liberation for themselves and for the Appalachian regions that they call home.

Ecofeminism

Historical Development and Assumptions

Ecofeminism has conceptual beginnings in French feminist theory. In 1952, Simone de Beauvoir identified that both women and nature appear as *other*—and therefore, less-than—in patriarchal logic. The term “ecofeminism” was later coined by the French feminist writer Françoise d’Eaubonne, who, in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974), further investigated the connection between the devaluation of women and that of the earth. d’Eaubonne urged “l’eco-féminisme” and the necessity for women to work toward revolution for the environment and for themselves. Ecofeminist theory then grew from overlapping interests in both the women’s movement and the environmental movement of the 1970s. In the United States, Rosemary Radford Ruether’s *New Woman, New Earth* (1975) was one of the earliest attempts to put forth a compelling argument for ecofeminist analysis. Ruether explores connections between the subordination of women and the degradation of the planet by merging analyses of women’s history with critiques of sexism within Christianity, classical philosophy,

psychoanalysis, and industrial society. Ruether identifies that patriarchal western culture's hierarchical binaries such as man/woman, wealthy/poor, white/non-white, heterosexual/homosexual, human/non-human animal, civilized/wild, reason/emotion, culture/nature, etc. These binaries categorize the world into *self* and *other*, valuing all things associated with *self* over those identified as *other*. In such hierarchical binaries as these, both women and nature are always deemed as *other* and therefore under the control of the powerful. Ruether's conclusion that "there can be no liberation for [women] and no solution to ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination" is widely accepted as one of the core beliefs of ecofeminist thought (204). The ecofeminist link between women and nature, however, remains widely contested, and this contention extends to ecofeminist literary theory.

The intersections of ecology and feminism were largely ignored by literature departments during the 1970s and 1980s. By the 1990s, however, literary critics began to examine the intersections of the oppression of women and destruction of nature, defined in *Ecofeminist Philosophy* (2000) by Karen J. Warren, as "historical (typically causal), conceptual, empirical, socioeconomic, linguistic, symbolic and literary, spiritual and religious, epistemological, political, and ethical" (qtd. in Vakoch, "Introduction" 10). Some critics have accused ecofeminism of losing relevance since the 1990s, in part due to its sometimes essentialist and exclusionary beginnings and lack of agreement within the group as to how to move ecofeminist approaches forward. Others, however, seek to use the looseness of ecofeminism as an invitation to generate discussion, analysis, and research while also opening the door for feminists and environmentalists to explore and learn without constraints — criteria that Judith Butler and Joan

Scott describe as “important for good feminist theory” (Kings 69). For example, *Feminist Ecocriticism: Environment, Women, and Literature* (2012) builds upon the works of earlier ecofeminist literary criticism (Gaard and Murphy 1998; Carr 2000; Campbell 2008) that focus on the ways that literary studies may reveal the “oppressiveness of patriarchal, dualistic thinking” through investigating entwining relationships between gender and nature (Vakoch 3). In the introduction to this text, Douglas A. Vakoch asserts that “ecofeminism should not be confined to critique but should also identify and articulate liberatory ideals that can be actualized in the real world . . . strategies of emancipation that have already begun to give rise to more hopeful ecological narratives” (Vakoch 3). Vakoch states, “Though the significance of a specifically *ecofeminist* perspective for *ecocriticism* has been recognized by some, its potential has largely been seen as unfulfilled (emphasis mine, qtd. in Garaad and Gruen 4). Ecofeminist literary analysis continues to evolve to address other critiques of its approaches, and at times, uses these critiques to identify new opportunities for ecofeminist literary criticism.

Critiques and Responses

Lack of Coherence

As feminism and environmentalism each have multiple manifestations and varied approaches, so too are there many variations of ecofeminism. In “New Woman, New Earth — Setting the Agenda,” Mary Mellor explains, “Whereas some ecofeminists stress a physiological or psychic connection between women and the natural world (women as birth givers . . .), others see the relationship as socially constructed reflecting historical patterns of social relations (capitalism, industrialism, scientism, patriarchal religion)” (269). To clarify, in her introduction to the section devoted to ecofeminism in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to*

Radical Ecology, Karen J. Warren explains that ecofeminism is “the name given to a variety of positions that have roots in different feminist practices and philosophies. . . (e.g., liberal, traditional Marxist, radical, socialist, black and Third World) . . . [and] different understandings of the nature of and solution to pressing environmental problems” (264). Predictably, each perspective brings its own conflicts and challenges when in conversation with other perspectives. For example, both liberal and traditional Marxist feminism prioritize human needs above nature for nature’s sake, a view that is unacceptable to some ecofeminists. In another example, radical feminism often claims that women are inherently closer to nature than men, thus recreating the sort of hierarchical ladder and essentialism often critiqued by ecofeminism. Critics of ecofeminism argue that these sometimes competing, sometimes supportive ideas within ecofeminism indicate a lack of coherence within the theory. Many ecofeminists maintain, however, that a lack of strict insistence on a unified approach encourages more possibilities for recognizing and combating the complex interplaying oppressions of women and nature.

Essentialism

Ecofeminism is sometimes critiqued for upholding the same hierarchical dualisms that it claims create the oppressions of women and nature. Although it is true that those within ecofeminism mysticism assert that, as life-givers, women are inherently spiritually closer to nature than are men, this essentialism does not represent all, or even most, ecofeminists. Rather, many ecofeminists seek to reveal the essentialization of women as inherently connected to nature in order to challenge this assumption and the oppressions it causes. Mary Mellor clarifies that it

is the central contention of ecofeminist philosophy that the oppressions of women and nature are linked “conceptually, historically, materially but not essentially” — at least not more or less than all human lives are essentially connected to their natural environment (309). Patrick D. Murphy specifies that in ecofeminism, “hierarchical dualism, self-other is replaced by self-another,” meaning that all humans and nonhumans are in reciprocal relationships with nature, not only women (qtd. in Engelhardt 3). By the end of the 1990s, ecofeminism began to come under fire from critics who dismissed the framework as essentialist in that it could not fully address either feminist or environmentalist concerns. Critics argued that ecofeminism’s exclusive focus on the relationship between gender and nature oversimplified complex forms of domination and left no room for considerations of other crucial factors, such as race or class.

Lack of Intersectionality

Much like western environmentalism and first and second wave feminism, early forms of ecofeminism are criticized for being created by and for a particular set of white people/white women, respectively. In “Women of Color, Environmental Justice, and Ecofeminism” (1997) Dorceta E. Taylor asserts that “Although there are some women of color who consider themselves ecofeminists, the formulation, control, and dissemination of ecofeminist beliefs, practices, and ideas are firmly under the control of white women . . . The best strategy for women of color is to work within a movement that overlays several other important social movements and to build bridges with people from these closely related movements” (70). New approaches within ecofeminism often commit to addressing this deserved critique by embracing

and pursuing intersectional analysis and working to build bridges between these closely related movements, as Taylor recommends.

The term intersectionality (generally attributed to Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989) began as a way to highlight the “failure of both feminist and anti-racist discourse in represent[ing] and captur[ing] the specificity of the discrimination faced by black women” (Kings 61). Today, intersectionality is used as a tool to illuminate the existence and importance of intersections of race, class, gender, disability, sexuality, caste, religion, age, and the array of effects that these can have on women’s treatment in society and on their identities. Intersectional feminism is necessary in understanding the unique experiences of those who face multiple discriminations in connection to nature. This approach requires what Mari J. Matsuda calls “asking the other question” in “Beside My Sister, Facing My Enemy” (1189). Matsuda asserts the importance of recognizing that one type of oppression rarely stands alone: “When I see something that looks racist, I ask, ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’ When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, ‘Where is the hetero-sexism in this’ and When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, ‘Where are the class interests in this’” (1189). Committing to an intersectional ecofeminist approach allows ecofeminists to meet their commitment to understanding the unique experiences of those who experience oppression and the ways that those oppressions are connected to the patriarchal oppressions of the earth.

Appalachia

It is not surprising that Appalachian literature draws the interest of ecofeminist literary critics. Geographically, the Appalachian Mountains stretch from Belle Isle in Canada to the

Cheaha Mountains in Alabama, but the cultural region of Appalachia usually refers to the southern portion of the region, including West Virginia, southwestern Virginia, eastern Kentucky and Tennessee, western North Carolina and South Carolina, northern Georgia, and northeastern Alabama. This region is a source of great environmental beauty and abundant natural resources. Throughout recorded history, however, residents of the region have often been overpowered by federal and corporate entities that manipulated them to gain control of the area. Even before Appalachia was recognized as a distinctive region in the late 19th century, an estimated 12,000 Cherokee people were forcibly removed from their Appalachian homeland along with most U.S. southeastern tribes (excluding the Cherokee Eastern Band and others) through The Indian Removal Act of 1830, which led to the Trail of Tears.⁴ In the early twentieth-century, absentee corporate logging and coal mining companies began to reap resources and profits from Appalachian land while exploiting local people for cheap, dangerous labor. Also, in the early twentieth-century, the federal government displaced other Appalachian residents to create The Great Smoky Mountains State Park and flooded ancient Cherokee burial grounds to create the Tellico Dam.

Today, corporate mountaintop removal mining deforests and removes mountaintops, causing extensive air and water pollution that is believed to lead to increases in cardiovascular disease, lung cancer, pulmonary disease, and birth defects for area residents.⁵ The particularities of place are usually tied to the lives lived there, of course. In Appalachia, however, the bounties

⁴ See Coates, Julia. *Trail of Tears*. Greenwood, 2014.

⁵ See research by Indian University's Michael Hendryx in "A Troubling Look at the Human Toll of Mountaintop Removal Mining" from *YaleEnvironment360*.

of the land have been appropriated and sometimes destroyed to the detriment of the lives of Appalachian people. Similarly, national popular media has also used stories of Appalachian people as a “resource” to earn profits for and entertain outsiders.

In “White for the Harvest: Hicksploitation TV and the Colonial Model of Appalachian Exploitation,” Jimmy Dean Smith summarizes, “Popular media’s ‘invention of Appalachia,’ a process that has arguably been taking place for hundreds of years, has been marked by a persistent outsider-insider agon with outsiders almost always defining what Appalachia is and who Appalachians are” (169).⁶ By the beginning of the Information Age, President Lyndon B. Johnson’s “unconditional war on poverty” brought media coverage to rural Appalachia, and with it, images and interviews that positioned mountain folk as poor, dirty, white, and ignorant. Schadenfreude-slanted philanthropy for the “benefit” of Appalachians persists today, as do stereotypes of Appalachians in fictional film/television and reality television created by outsiders.⁷ “Appalachia . . . might be an amorphously delimited *place* but more importantly it is an *idea* of that place [and its people],” Smith concludes, “and that idea was most often imposed by outsiders, often through popular media” (Smith 171). The Appalachian people have become personae and yet another product of Appalachian land to be commandeered and exploited by outsiders. Reading texts by contemporary women writers is one way to lift the voices of the insiders, that is, to hear from Appalachian women writing about Appalachian people in Appalachian places rather than relying on popular media’s interpretations.

⁶ Smith also describes the ways that media representations of Appalachian people influence the ways that they may see themselves.

⁷ See Smith pages 177-179 regarding *Jaimie Oliver’s Food Revolution*. See the documentary *Hillbilly* (2018) for examples from *Saturday Night Live*, *Family Guy*, and *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*.

As a former literature teacher, current literary studies graduate student, and perennial reader, I am often dubious about “the canon” and, correspondingly, passionately curious about the voices that are silenced, ignored, or undervalued by academic gatekeepers. In American literature, a good number of these lost voices are of Appalachian descent. Author Lee Smith explains: “Appalachia is to the South what the South is to the rest of the country. That is: lesser than, backward, marginal. Other” (qtd. in Ballard 1). As the region is often overlooked, so too is its literature — especially the works of women writers. For example, *The Oxford Companion to Women’s Writing in the United States* (1995) includes only eight women from Appalachia in its more than 1,000 pages. The *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1996) does not include any writers from Appalachia. None.

Significantly, however, when first-time author J. D. Vance published *Hillbilly Elogy: A Memoir of Family and Culture in Crisis* (2016), he attracted widespread national attention as the United States tried to explain the unanticipated results of the 2016 presidential election. Outsiders immediately hailed Vance as the expert of all things Appalachian and claimed his *Hillbilly Elogy* as “The most important book about America” (qtd. from *Economist* in Harkins 2). Many within, from, and/or knowledgeable of the Appalachian region, however, criticized Vance’s book and interpretations of it for “attempting to revitalize widely discredited ‘culture of poverty’ explanations for consistent inequities in the region” and for the tired, white-male-pulls-self-up-from-bootstraps narrative (Harkins 2). In response, writers throughout the region gathered to publish *Appalachian Reckoning: A Region Responds to Hillbilly Elogy* (2019) in an attempt to communicate “deep and varied experiences living in the region” through essays, narratives, and artistic expressions (Harkins 2). The contributors determined to “Break up (the)

too solid image of the place (as asserted by Vance) simply by speaking multiple truths about multiple experiences” (Harkins 2). As there is not one southern voice, neither is there one Appalachian voice. Accordingly, although the novels I have selected for this project all come from women writers of Appalachia, each offers a different perspective through combinations of the authors’ lived experiences and their fictionalized characters.

Texts

The criteria for selecting the novels for this study align with the criteria given for researching and publishing *Listen Here: Women Writing in Appalachia*, a collection of fiction and poetry written by women from, in, and of Appalachia, edited by Sandra L. Ballard and Patricia L. Hudson. I, too, will focus on women writers because “The Appalachian region is still seen as the site of an unmitigated patriarchy, with the result that the region’s women writers and the impressive body of work they have created is not sufficiently visible, recognized, or appreciated” (Ballard 3). Appalachian women writers are still often invisible in U.S. national literature. Additionally, the writers I have selected were born and reared in Appalachia, identify with the region, and publish writings that concern Appalachian experiences. Finally, I have selected these contemporary texts (published within the past twelve years) to sidestep canonical boundaries. These contemporary texts and authors are well received by the Appalachian Studies and Appalachian Literature communities yet remain unnoticed by literary studies at large. I want to read what Appalachian women are writing about today to capture a contemporary perspective unclouded by the viewpoints of others.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I explore the ecofeminist sensibilities in Amy Greene's debut novel *Bloodroot* (2010). *Bloodroot*, published by Penguin-Random House, became a national bestseller while also receiving accolades from respected contemporary Appalachian writers such as Silas House, Jill McCorkle, and Ron Rash. Set in the mountains and foothills of her home region in East Tennessee, Greene's novel follows a matriarchal bloodline through five generations. As time progresses from the turn of the twentieth century toward modernity, the progeny of Byrdie Lamb continues to inherit inexplicable connections to mountain flora and fauna, but also experiences more and more disruptive interferences into their lives from patriarchal culture and government agencies as they move away from the mountain and into the present day. An ecofeminist reading of *Bloodroot* suggests the ways that Appalachian women gain agency for themselves and other rural folks by fostering balanced connections with nature that challenge patriarchal dualisms of domination.

Chapter Two focuses on *The Birds of Opulence* (2016) by Crystal Wilkinson. In the early 1990s, native Kentuckian Crystal Wilkinson joined with other African American writers mentored by poet Nikki Finney to form a group that would later be called The Affrilachian Poets. Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence*, her first novel following two short story collections, received multiple awards, including The Appalachian Writers Association Appalachian Book of the Year for Fiction Award and The Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence. Wilkinson was recently appointed 2021-2022 Poet Laureate of the State of Kentucky. *The Birds of Opulence* tells the stories of four generations of Goode-Brown women, each of whom has personal and historic relationships with the natural landscape of Opulence, Kentucky. This novel

compels readers to acknowledge that intergenerational trauma and strides toward liberation from that trauma are both directly connected to land and nature for many Black women.

Chapter Three analyzes West Virginia writer Mesha Maren's first novel *Sugar Run* (2019). Maren's short stories and essays have appeared in *Tin House*, *Oxford American*, *Southern Review*, and elsewhere. *Sugar Run* was published by Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, a small publishing house born of a commitment to publishing work of undiscovered writers, mostly from the South. Algonquin was the initial publisher of Jill McCorkle and Lee Smith, Appalachian writers who have garnered both critical and popular acclaim. *Sugar Run* uses symbolism of Appalachian land as well as a few places beyond Appalachia to both stabilize and complicate character identities and their connections to nature, past and present. *Sugar Run* also includes an embedded plot thread of impending destruction from fracking on the family land of the protagonist, Jody McCarty—a thread that makes this novel especially well-suited for ecofeminist literary analysis. Jody McCarty is a formerly incarcerated, informally educated, closeted, gay, poor, sometimes drug-addled white woman — a complicated character who offers opportunities to explore intersectional elements of her identity in relationship with West Virginia land that has been owned by her family for five generations.

Conclusion

Dolly Parton's popular lyrical tribute to her Tennessee mountain home describes the peace she experienced growing up surrounded by Appalachian flora and fauna in the 1950s, but her continued support of social and environmental challenges in the region demonstrates that she also recognizes the difficulties associated with living there now. Debut novels from Amy Greene, Crystal Wilkinson, and Mesha Maren reveal similar sentiments: nostalgia for parts of an

Appalachian past juxtaposed against recognition of the struggles that Appalachian land and people face today. This dissertation argues that ecofeminist analysis of *Bloodroot*, *The Birds of Opulence*, and *Sugar Run* reveals the inherent yet unaddressed connection between the past dominations of Appalachian women and land and the current threats to the successes of both. The hardships faced by contemporary Appalachian women in these novels — mental illness, poverty, and addiction, among others—are directly traceable to the entwined oppressions of women and land as experienced throughout Appalachian history. Although patriarchal domination continues to follow and challenge Appalachian women for generations, these novels imagine unique opportunities for Appalachians to achieve liberation for themselves and for Appalachian land.

Chapter One: Amy Greene's *Bloodroot* (2010)

*Once I had a girl on Rocky Top
Half bear, the other half cat
Wild as a mink, but sweet as soda pop
I still dream about that*

Felice and Boudleaux Bryant, "Rocky Top" (1967)

Growing up in the foothills of East Tennessee, I cannot remember a time when I did not know all the words to "Rocky Top." I have fond memories of singing it loudly at ball games and bars and of dancing to it wildly at weddings . . . and bars. As I study ecofeminism, however, I become drawn to the description of the dream girl in this verse: half bear, half cat, and wild as a mink. Even the lyrics to my alma mater's fight song include language that expresses symbolic connections between women and the earth. In the introduction to her chapter in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, Karen Warren explains how many ecofeminists recognize that "women are [regularly] described in animal terms" (e.g., as cows, foxes, chicks, bitches, beavers, bats, and pussies) (268). These word choices and others essentialize women as inherently closer to nature and perpetuate ideas that both women and nature are inferior. Describing a woman as "half bear, half cat, and wild as a mink" directly links her to animals that resist bending to the ways of men and are therefore deemed less-than.

The debut novel from East Tennessee writer Amy Greene also tells of wild women from the Smoky Mountains. *Bloodroot* chronicles the lives of multiple matriarch-led generations within one Appalachian family while following the members' complicated relationships with their histories and the mountain of their home. Through first person character narration, Byrdie

Lamb, her granddaughter, Myra Lamb Odom, and Myra's twins Johnny and Laura, as well as a few others, share memories and stories of their lives on and around Bloodroot Mountain, Tennessee. Byrdie remembers being raised in the wilds of Chickweed Holler by her Mammy, Grandmaw Ruth, and great-aunts Della and Myrtle at the turn of the twentieth century. These women, known regionally as "granny women" and locally as the Chickweed Holler Witches, demonstrate humility and respect for Appalachian nature, and Byrdie lives to pass their stories and ways on to Myra, the granddaughter whom she raises as her own child. Myra also inherits "the touch" from the female line of her ancestry — a connection to nature that "bewitches people and animals alike," as the novel's book jacket proclaims. Myra's connection to the wilderness around her is threatened when she marries a boy from town and moves off the mountain. After months of a traumatic, abusive marriage, Myra returns to Byrdie to ensure that her twins are born and raised in the wilderness of the mountain that she loves. Eventually, the modern world intrudes to tame the 'wild' ways of Myra and her young children. Myra is forced into a mental asylum, and Johnny and Laura bounce from foster care homes to juvenile detention centers and to jail. Eventually, the three family members work to reunite and return together to Bloodroot Mountain.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how ecofeminist analysis reveals how *Bloodroot's* Appalachian granny women, the evolving symbolism of bloodroot, and the zoomorphic relationships between animals and humans challenge historic-causal (cause and effect) and symbolic connections that link women and nature together and sanction the domination of both. I also explore the novel's use of Romantic poetry as an expression of ecofeminism. Finally, I

address the ways that *Bloodroot* runs counter to the goals of contemporary ecofeminism by continuing the myth of the American settler.

I begin with an exploration of *Bloodroot*'s Chickweed Holler Witches and their connection to historic Appalachian granny women. I analyze their relationships with the natural landscape of the region, their mystical connections to nature, and I address concerns of essentialization between women and nature that this mystic connection may be interpreted to communicate. In the next section, I trace bloodroot as an evolving symbol throughout the novel, beginning with symbolism associated with the novel's title, the bloodroot plant and its properties, and finally, the journey of the carved bloodroot box and its contents. In the third section, I consider the ways that the zoomorphic relationships between humans and animals in *Bloodroot* replace the anthropomorphic relationships so often found in popular literature, and thus highlight the agency of animals as well as marginalized people. In section four, I bring focus to the links between ecofeminist epistemologies and English Romantic poetry as used in the novel. The final section of this chapter addresses examples of the ways that *Bloodroot* contradicts ecofeminist objectives. As the novel reclaims connections between Appalachian women and nature, it also highlights the memories and nostalgia of white settlers in Appalachia and their felt connections to land. This perspective ignores the impact of Indigenous people's lived experiences on that same land, thus creating a power hierarchy that places white memory above Indigenous reality.

In *The Chalice and the Blade* (1998), Riane Eisler traces the rise of dual dominations of women and nature through historic data. Eisler draws on archeological research to determine that prehistoric European cultures were matrifocal, matrilineal, peaceful agrarian societies before

they were overrun and destroyed by war-like nomadic tribes who established male dominance through force. According to Eisler, this led to the decline of cultural values, such as nurturance, caring, and compassion for humans and nature alike, and the rise of male dominance. In *Bloodroot*, the granny women of Chickweed Holler harken back to the matrifocal, matrilineal, peaceful agrarian time before patriarchal control. They gain agency for themselves and others in their communities by fostering balanced relationships between humans and the nonhuman nature of the Appalachian landscape that thwart the historical, typically causal connections in patriarchal culture which have created and sustained dual dominations of women and nature.

Bloodroot begins through the narration of family matriarch, Byrdie Lamb, as she remembers being raised by her mother, Grandmaw Ruth, and great aunts, Della and Myrtle, at the turn of the twentieth-century in Chickweed Holler. During this era, most residents of the East Tennessee mountains relied upon the land and its natural resources for their sustenance and shelter, but Byrdie's female family members developed relationships with the environment that went beyond using nature as a resource for humans. They made themselves conduits between Appalachian nature and people for the good of all.

Byrdie's Grandmaw Ruth and her sisters, Della and Myrtle, were known in the community as "granny women," specifically, the Chickweed Holler Witches. Historically, Appalachian granny women/granny witches were wise female healers, spiritual practitioners, and midwives who were paid with respect rather than goods or money. These women incorporated beliefs and practices from Indigenous people, European immigrants, and African Americans to create a hybrid-folk tradition. *Foxfire Book 2* specifies: "Midwives (also known as granny women or neighbor ladies) used to serve each section of the county," healing through herbal

medicines and conjuring through folk magic practices (Wiggington 276).

The Chickweed Holler Witches used their knowledge of nature to help other rural folks. Byrdie recalls that the people of the hollow “relied on them for any kind of help you can think of” (7). Great-aunt Della made effective cures from local plants and roots to treat her neighbors’ ailments. “She could name any root and herb and flower you pointed at,” and she used this knowledge to help and heal others (7). Great-aunt Myrtle was known as a water witch. Folks sent for her from several counties away to find the best water source on their property. Cousin Lou Ann was a granny woman known to use herbs to terminate unwanted pregnancies. Byrdie specifies, “Each [of the granny women in her family] had different gifts,” and although the gifts are noticeably different from one another, each expresses a relationship with the environment that helped humans to thrive before formally trained outsiders arrived from patriarchal sanctioned agencies (7). The Chickweed Holler Witches used their bodies and minds as conduits between rural folks and Appalachian nature, thus creating agency for themselves and their community through respectful relationships with the environment that surrounded them.

Historically, Appalachian granny women were known for their spiritual powers, and the Chickweed Holler witches access spiritual connections with nature, as well. Byrdie’s Grandmaw Ruth could send her spirit beyond her body. She tells Byrdie, “it don’t matter where this old shell is at. My soul will fly off wherever I want it to be” (8). As a child, Ruth fell into a sinkhole while exploring the woods beyond her home, but she was able to send her spirit back to her little cabin in the holler, retaining no memories of the traumatic event. Later, her great, great granddaughter Myra inherits this gift and also calls upon it to send her spirit away from traumatic events that she cannot escape. Great Aunt Myrtle also experiences mystical connections: she conjures

visions. In one scene, Myrtle teaches young Byrdie to toss a spring of myrtle, the plant for which she is named, into a campfire to glimpse her future in plumes of smoke. Cousin Lou Ann calls upon mysticism for evil uses. She places a curse on her cousins' futures when they, instead of her, are willed the best plots of land in the hollow. Soon, terrible things begin to happen to the families of Ruth, Della, and Myrtle: they all lose their husbands, two of Della's grandbabies are stillborn, and Myrtle's house burns down.

The granny women's mystic connections to the earth do not always work as they are intended, however. When Della is young and unmarried, she eats a raw chicken heart to attract the man that she loves. They eventually marry, but he is cruel and abusive. The union Della had desired becomes an unhappy one. Generations later, Della's great niece Myra has heard of Della's spell and its ruinous results, but she too sneaks to eat a raw chicken heart to win the heart of Johnny Odom. Soon after their marriage, Johnny becomes violent and controlling. These two examples show that, although the granny women and their progeny connect with nature in mystical ways, they never truly control nature or the final results of their efforts.

The mystic examples here are inspired by spiritual connections to nature and align with what some early ecofeminists recognized as inherent connections between women and nature. In "What's in a Name? In Defense of Ecofeminism," Chaone Mallory identifies two early ecofeminist anthologies, *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, edited by Judith Plant (1989), and *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, edited by Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein (1999), that promoted an essential connection between women and nature. These texts asserted that "women possess a 'special' connection to nature that men do not, [and] that women have privileged epistemological access to an animate, enchanted,

maternal earth, [and] that women's reproductive bodies possess an ontological continuity with nature that surpasses that of men's" (Mallory 19). Contemporary ecofeminists eschew the promotion of mystic connections between women and earth because this essentialization continues stereotypes that were originally used to dominate both women and earth. In *Rethinking Eco-feminist Politics* (1990), Janet Biehl criticizes ecofeminism that espouses a mystic connection between women and nature because it overlooks the actual *experiences* of women and the environment as dominated entities, and therefore does not reveal or challenge patriarchal domination.

The Chickweed Holler Witches seem to have mystical powers in addition to their learned skills as herbal healers and water witches, however *Bloodroot* does not essentialize the connection between women and earth. First, the novel never suggests that all women have mystical connections to nature. In fact, many women in Byrdie's own family line have neither mystic connections nor learned relationships with nature. Additionally, *Bloodroot* also features male characters with seeming mystical connections to nature. For example, Byrdie meets her future step-father, Pap, when he is able to breathe her thresh⁸ away because he possesses a gift as "a man who has never laid eyes on his father" (25). Pap cures Byrdie and eventually many others in the community of thresh during his lifetime. Later in the novel, Ford Hendrix — a writer and wanderer — experiences visions of the future as gifts from nature, and Byrdie's great grandson Johnny develops a bond with a copperhead snake. Therefore, although *Bloodroot* explores the

⁸ Assumed to be a colloquial term for oral thrush

mystic connections between the granny women and their Appalachian environment, the novel avoids the essentialization that contemporary ecofeminists deem counterproductive.

In “Ecofeminism, Toward Global Justice and Planetary Health,” Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen survey the most prominent explanations of how humans came to see themselves as separated from the natural world, thus beginning male domination of both women and nature. Gaard and Gruen explain that some ecofeminists pinpoint the rise of patriarchal religion as the origin of these dual dominations. “In the goddess religions, both earth and women’s fertility were seen as sacred. There was no gender hierarchy, and divinity was seen as immanent . . . In the Judeo-Christian tradition, a great chain of being was established with god at the top, appointing Adam to be in charge of his entire creation” (Gaard and Gruen 237). Thus, in Christianity, a divine god, always male, perpetuated the domination of women and nature. Although Byrdie and her family worship and respect the Christian God, rumors that surround “The Chickweed Holler witches . . . [who have been] practicing witchcraft up in them hills since time out of mind” make them outsiders in the Christian community (Greene 38). When Byrdie and her mother move with Pap to Piney Grove and attend local church services, one congregation member raises the alarm about “witches” attending her Christian church. She demands that Byrdie and her mother be ousted from the sanctuary. The Piney Grove parishioner assumes that the granny women’s connection with nature makes them evil “witches” who must be against her Christian God. Here, the parishioner has assumed dualistic thinking as fostered in all patriarchal cultures. She does not consider that the Chickweed Holler Witches and their progeny could celebrate both nature and a Christian God. However, Byrdie recalls, “Grandmaw always said [the touch] can draw ugly things from you if you’re not right with the Lord,” revealing that she and her family foster spiritual balance rather than hierarchical thinking (10). Byrdie has been taught by the women in

her family to combine their respect for nature with respect for God, and this combination challenges the patriarchal control of much Christian doctrine.

Bloodroot unsettles value dualisms that position women and nature below men and humans. In Karen Warren's introduction to "Part Three: Ecofeminism" of *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Ecology* (1993) explains that many ecofeminists recognize that "conceptual structures of domination construct women and nature in male-biased ways" which devalue both (265). Therefore, male-created, hierarchically-organized value dualisms, that is, "disjunctive pairs in which the disjuncts are seen as oppositional (rather than as complementary) and exclusive (rather than as inclusive) . . . and organized by a spatial Up-Down metaphor" attribute greater value to that which is higher within their hierarchy (266). For example, in the frequently cited disjuncts human/nature and man/woman, whatever is associated with nature and woman is regarded as inferior to that which is associated with human (i.e., male) and man. Chickweed Holler, the name of Byrdie's childhood home, disrupts the imbalance of these hierarchies as does her family's appreciation for that which is wild there.

As the granny women of *Bloodroot* challenge the patriarchal notion that nature and women are to be controlled and managed by men, so too does the name of their home: Chickweed Holler. The *Dictionary of American Regional English* identifies "holler" as the "chiefly South, South Midland, especially Southern Appalachian, Ozark" pronunciation of hollow; a small, sheltered valley. Byrdie remembers her childhood home in Chickweed Holler as a "wild place with mountains rising steep on both sides [and] wildflower fields waving when the . . . winds blowed" (6-7). Byrdie lovingly notes the wildness of the holler here, and in so doing, demonstrates that wildness is a thing to be cherished rather than tamed. Additionally, the very name Chickweed Holler pays respect to that which is wild. Chickweed is an invasive weed

pervasive in the southern Appalachian region. It is known as an invasive groundcover and a reservoir for insect pests and plant viruses; thus, gardeners regularly battle to remove this weed with vigilant hand-pulling, mulching, and herbicides. To many, chickweed is a wild infestation that must be controlled, but *Bloodroot* centers chickweed and its wildness as the name for a loving home for young Byrdie and her family full of females. In this subtle way, the name Chickweed Holler challenges patriarchal structures that categorize nature as an element to be dominated, and the place Chickweed Holler allows women and nature to be wild and free from patriarchal control.

Amy Greene's title *Bloodroot* also muddies falsely-created conceptual hierarchies, as does the name "Chickweed Holler." The compound word 'bloodroot' combines 'blood' (possibly human) and 'root' (nature), leading readers to anticipate connections between humans and nature rather than two separate categories. Without knowing anything about the East Tennessee landscape or the Appalachian characters featured in *Bloodroot*, simply reading the novel's title leads readers to begin to embrace ecofeminist epistemologies that challenge the mainstream philosophical views of reason and rationality which separate humans from nature and set up conceptual connections that ultimately link the domination of women and nature.

As the plot unfolds, readers learn that bloodroot is a wild, perennial, flowering ground cover native to the southern Appalachian Mountains. Bloodroot features tiny white flowers and delicate roots that Byrdie Lamb describes as "fleshy and about as thick as a finger, look[ing] like part of a human being" (42). Byrdie's use of "finger" and "human being" in her description of the root specifically connects the bloodroot plant to human beings and continues to blur the distinction between humans and the environment, as set forth in the title, while also foreshadowing the significance of the severed human finger in the forthcoming actions.

Ecofeminism encourages exploration of the ways that male-biased connections between women and nature often devalue and disempower both, but Greene's centering of the bloodroot flower connects poor women and other poor, rural people to a flower with power rather than to possibilities for exploitation. Throughout recorded history, bloodroot has provided a means for mountain people to treat and heal themselves from common ailments. In *Bloodroot*, four generations of mountain folks use wild bloodroot as cures for croup, poison ivy, warts, and as a treatment for some kinds of cancer. Bloodroot has the power to heal, but it can also kill. In one instance, mountain boy Doug Cotter uses bloodroot to try to poison his unrequited love's favorite horse when he learns that she has married a city boy. Although his plan doesn't work, readers recognize the scope of the power of bloodroot and its value to the lives of Appalachian people. The bloodroot plant is understandably a significant ecofeminist symbol, as it provides access to medical agency for mountain folks through their connection with the environment.

As the novel progresses, the symbolism connected with bloodroot evolves to challenge patriarchal control in a number of ways. First, is the ecofeminist significance of the bloodroot plant in sanctioning the marital bond of Byrdie and Macon Lamb. In "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism," Greta Gaard specifies that "The rhetoric and institution of Christianity, coupled with the imperialist drives of militarist nation-states, have been used for nearly two thousand years to portray heterosexuality, sexism, racism, classism, and the oppression of the natural world as divinely ordained" (112). Christianity conceives God as a male deity separate from nature and conceives humans and nature as separate from each other. Gaard explains that these separations and resulting hierarchies within Christianity have been used "as both an authorization and a mandate for the subordination of women, nature, persons of color, animals, and queers"

(123). Greene subverts Christianity's patriarchal control through the symbolism of the bloodroot plant within the marital bond between Macon and Byrdie Lamb.

Macon takes Byrdie to visit his home on the mountain early along in their courtship. He pulls her down to kneel with him in the floral white groundcover and explains, "This here's why they call it Bloodroot Mountain" (41). Byrdie remembers:

Then he started to dig around the flower with his hands . . . It was so quiet, except for the sounds of mountain woods. It felt like a ceremony, like we was in church down there on our knees. Macon pulled the flower out of the ground and held it in his hands where I could see the root . . . then he fished out his knife and cut the root in two pieces . . . everything slowed down. . . [from then on] Macon was my home and far as I was concerned any wedding we had was just for show . . . I'd done cleaved myself to him right yonder under the trees, kneeling over that bloodroot flower . . . I was overcome with something that felt like the Holy Ghost (41-42).

In this scene, Byrdie recognizes the serenity of the mountain woods as akin to the sanctity of her Christian church. She feels the presence of her Christian God in nature and in her relationship with Macon, but she does not require the formalities of Christianity to sanction her commitment to her partner. However, Greene does not impose a hierarchy that would place nature above Christianity within the union of Macon and Byrdie. Instead, this scene respects both Christianity and the environment of Bloodroot Mountain as important elements in the bond between the two. Byrdie and Macon make their home together on Bloodroot Mountain. In their elder years, they raise their granddaughter Myra there as their own child. In the generations of

Myra and her children, the symbolism of bloodroot continues to shift as it represents the connection between humans and nature while also resisting patriarchal control.

In another example, before his death, Macon carves a gift for his granddaughter: a small wooden box intricately decorated with bloodroot flowers on its lid. The bloodroot box — undoubtedly made from the wood of a tree from Bloodroot Mountain — is the last object Macon creates and the last thing to receive his living touch. The box carries the properties of Macon's flesh and of the mountain forest. The bloodroot carving symbolizes the romantic love between Byrdie and Macon, their parental love for Myra, and their shared love for Bloodroot Mountain. The bloodroot box is initially empty. The object, a box, which is usually created to contain *something*, allows vacant space and room for possibilities. In this way, the bloodroot box also represents the potential that lies within the interrelationship between humans and nature.

The bloodroot box does not remain empty for long. It comes to hold three unique items throughout the generations of Byrdie's family and the plot of the novel: a wedding ring, the same wedding ring on a severed finger, and a lock of baby's hair. Each item interacts with the ecofeminist significance of the bloodroot box and alters its symbolic meaning. First, the box holds Macon's wedding ring and, in doing so, entraps a symbol of patriarchal control within a symbol of ecofeminism. Byrdie places the ring inside the box soon after Macon's death, intending to give both to Myra when she grows up and falls in love. Byrdie recognizes that Myra is "too young to understand the preciousness of that bloodroot flower [box], no matter how pretty it was, and [she] didn't know how to tell her," but Byrdie does not mention the value of Macon's wedding ring (85-86). In fact, the historic significance of Macon's wedding ring runs directly counter to the ecofeminist symbolism established through the bloodroot flower. Although the circular shape of wedding rings is said to represent eternal love, the custom of exchanging

wedding rings originally comes from the practice of using marital dowries as payments to the groom from the bride's family. In this custom, both bride and ring, like land or livestock, became possessions of the groom. Regardless of the romance associated with wedding rings today, they began as symbols of women's oppression within patriarchal marital traditions. Although Macon's wedding ring is not a part of a traditional Christian ceremony or the patriarchal domination associated with Christianity, the ring's provenance related in the novel directs readers toward another structure of domination: the hierarchy of domination within the class system.

Ecofeminism began as the recognition that the dominations of women and nature are entwined, but grew to demonstrate that "sexism, racism, classism, speciesism, and naturism (the oppression of nature) are naturally reinforcing systems of oppression" (Gaard *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* 5). In *Bloodroot*, Macon's wedding ring also represents the American class system. Before Byrdie married Macon, she stole the ring from the wealthy homeowners for whom she cooked and cleaned. She was drawn to the red gem within the ring, which reminded her of the "blood-colored drops of root sap Macon showed me on the mountain," so she impulsively took the ring, gave it to Macon, and never returned to her employer's home (46). The stone and the root share color, but their meanings are in conflict. In this novel, the bloodroot plant represents connection between humans and nature, and, therefore, challenges patriarchal structures of domination, but the stolen ring clearly represents monetary wealth, differences between class statuses, and hierarchically organized disjuncts of "haves" and "have-nots." In these ways, Macon's wedding ring represents the dominant structures of male-created, hierarchically organized value dualisms (patriarchal control of traditional marriage, class structure). As the ring rests inside the bloodroot box, an ecofeminist symbol of the connection

between humans and the earth holds a symbol of patriarchal control, perhaps protecting Byrdie and Myra from systems of domination that thrive beyond Bloodroot Mountain.

The next item to be placed within the box is the finger from the hand of patriarchal domination—literally. As the ring passes from Byrdie to Myra, who gives it to John Odom upon their marriage, its provenance as a symbol of patriarchal control gains real-time experience. John Odom exemplifies many negative aspects of patriarchal control, as learned from his own patriarch. Frankie Odom coaxed young John to participate in drugging his mother into a zombie-like state; this eventually led to John’s mother’s death. Although John experiences guilt about his role in his mother’s death, he also reenacts his father’s desire for maniacal control in his marriage to Myra. John’s language and actions equate Myra to an animal that he believes requires male domination. Ecofeminist theorists often “focus on language, particularly the symbolic connections between sexist and naturist language, i.e., language that inferiorizes women and nonhuman nature by naturalizing women and feminizing nature” (Warren268). When John scolds Myra, “you’re as wild as a buck,” he equates Myra’s desire for mutual respect and autonomy to an animal’s wild nature, thus suggesting that both women and nature require taming by man (300).

John’s actions also equate Myra to an animal that must be controlled. Each day, John strands Myra, alone, at their house. Each time she tries to escape, his response is violent: he whips her with a belt, he locks her overnight in the dark, earthen crawl space under the house, and he rapes her in their front yard. Each of these acts is designed to break Myra’s need for freedom, similar to the way that humans try to break animals of their wild spirits. John’s belt becomes a whip—a tool designed to strike animals and exert control through pain compliance. The crawl space of the home becomes a pen to keep Maya from roaming. Marital intercourse

becomes a pathological assertion of domination. During each act of tyrannical control over Myra, the blood red wedding ring remains on John's finger and directly connects the ring to John's hand of patriarchal power.

Myra eventually flees her abusive marriage. She waits until John passes out, chops off his finger with Macon's ring still on it, and knocks him out cold with the blunt end of the hatchet. She then returns home to Byrdie on Bloodroot Mountain, taking the finger and wedding ring with her. In reclaiming her grandfather's ring, Myra also reclaims her freedom from John's control. In chopping off John's ring finger, Myra disables the hand of patriarchal control in her marriage. By returning the ring to the bloodroot box and to Bloodroot Mountain, Myra reunites all of the symbols of her family, their love for the mountain, and their love for each other. Now, however, the carved bloodroot flower box encases an actual flesh and blood human finger rather than hiding flesh-like roots and blood-like sap as the bloodroot flower does. Essentially, Myra traps a piece of John inside the bloodroot box rather than remaining trapped by his control. The bloodroot box, which once symbolized freedom and potential through its emptiness, now symbolizes freedom by what it holds: a finger from the hand that attempted to tame Myra.

The finger and ring remain in the bloodroot box and hidden beneath a mattress for six years, during which Myra gives birth to and raises her twins, Johnny and Laura, on Bloodroot Mountain. Myra seeks refuge on the mountain but remains forever traumatized by her violent marriage and the freedom it took from her. Before Myra is taken to a mental asylum and her children are placed into foster care, she frantically passes the bloodroot box and its contents down to her daughter Laura. Laura takes the bloodroot box and ring with her as she travels between foster homes but tosses the finger somewhere along the way. Years later, when Laura directs Johnny to retrieve the ring from the box to pay for her bail from jail, she explains: "I

threw that finger bone away . . . Wasn't no use hanging on to it" (241). In discarding the withered appendage, Laura frees herself from the hand of patriarchal control. Importantly, she eventually also uses the blood red ring—a symbol of that control—to purchase her own freedom from jail, thus leaving the carved bloodroot box empty once again.

While she waits in jail, Laura passes Johnny a lock of her baby boy's hair through the cell bars and asks that he place it in the bloodroot box "for safekeeping" (241). As readers imagine a lock of hair from the beloved child nestled where the withered finger bone and the blood red ring had once been, the meaning of the bloodroot box shifts to its final form in the novel. The box, hand-carved with an intricate bloodroot flower, made from the bounty of Bloodroot Mountain, and inspired by familial love, has been stripped of the dangers of patriarchy domination and violence to hold a representation of the future and potential that lies within Byrdie's family line.

Byrdie remembers Grandmaw Ruth telling her that "animals are attracted to our kind of people," and generations later, Myra and her children remain as proof of this inexplicable attraction. In her YouTube lecture, "Defining Ecofeminism with Greta Gaard," Gaard explains, "Ecofeminism's roots are really in this felt sense of identity as interconnected with other beings and this . . . is very different from what . . . Euro-Western culture has taught us about the separation and elevation of humans over the rest of nature. We get that idea from René Descartes as well as other Renaissance philosophers . . . that view humans as separate from and above the rest of the natural world." *Bloodroot* adheres to the roots of ecofeminism Gaard recounts, as the novel expresses humans' interconnectedness with animals through relationships—the relationship between Myra and the horse Wild Rose, between Johnny and the copperhead, between Laura and the cat called Percy, between Laura's husband Clint and the fish of the lake, and even through

Laura's relationship with Clint. In these relationships, humans connect to animals without forcing anthropomorphism upon them. Instead, *Bloodroot* crafts relationships between humans and animals in which the animals' natures leads. In this way, *Bloodroot* challenges the Euro-Western teaching that humans are hierarchically above animals, and thus exemplifies ecofeminist sensibilities.

As a child, Myra is found with butterflies "all over her arms and legs and in her hair . . . all sizes and colors with their wings opening and closing" while sleeping soundly beneath a tree (39). She is known to track animals and insects for hours to learn their ways. She coaxes a chickadee to eat out of her hand while wondering if the bird could be her mother. In these ways, Myra bends her humanness toward the disposition of the animal world rather than enforcing a human-over-animal hierarchy. The first sections of this novel alternate chapters between the perspectives of Byrdie Lamb (Myra's grandmother) and Doug Cotter (a mountain boy who loves Myra). Each perspective provides insight about Myra and her intimate relationship with nature on Bloodroot Mountain. Byrdie's chapters describe her difficulties understanding Myra's wild tendencies. Byrdie remembers how Myra would "chew her fingernails to the bloody quick, looking off in the woods like she didn't even know she was doing it" and once even burst through the glass in their cabin window when she felt hemmed in by a snowstorm (79). Doug's chapters extend this recognition of Myra's wild side by narrating her kinship with the paint mare Wild Rose — kinship that goes deeper than their ghost-like blue eyes. Presenting the similarities between Myra and Wild Rose through Doug Cotter's point of view allows readers a glimpse of the difficulties most people have accepting humans as a part of nature and its wildness, especially the patriarchal tendency to try to manipulate wildness for personal benefit (he dreams of riding Wild Rose to capture Myra so that they may ride away together). Doug is drawn to

Myra's wild nature as his father is drawn to Wild Rose's wildness. Doug eventually recognizes that the "only way to love Myra is from a distance the way daddy loves Wild Rose" (73). Doug learns to stifle his male need to control Myra and respect the zoomorphic bond between Myra and Wild Rose.

Doug Cotter's father purchases Wild Rose, but the horse's spirit is beyond human ownership. She breaks through fences to roam the mountain freely and to escape beyond human control. Wild Rose bucks Mr. Cotter when he tries to ride her, and she bolts away when anyone else comes even close to her — anyone except Myra Lamb. When the two first meet, Wild Rose walks slowly until she stands directly in front of Myra "close but out of reach" (43). Myra does not try to pen or saddle Wild Rose; instead, she allows Wild Rose to come to her, an apt introduction to the balanced relationship between the two.

Greta Gaard's "Defining Ecofeminism" YouTube lecture contends, "The ability to feel with another is something that is either cultivated and supported by a culture or turned off by a culture. We empathize with different groups based on our culture's sense of hierarchies . . . [we have learned to] define humanity in a way that excludes our inner species connections . . . so, ecofeminists have done a lot to work on those connections." Myra and Wild Rose are different species but are also connected. Both Myra and Wild Rose violently balk at being penned in, Wild Rose from her corral and Myra from being kept indoors, and both find remote natural places on the mountain to revel in their freedom away from others. Wild Rose climbs to a field on the mountain top that humans can rarely reach, and Myra often disappears to perch on a rock above a cliff away from the world at large. Myra's last name is ironic- lambs are tame and helpless creatures. Lambs are often associated with sacrifice for remission of sins, but Myra is untamable. Myra and Wild Rose seek each other out over the years, but Myra never tries to harness, ride, or

corral Wild Rose. Myra respects Wild Rose's wild nature rather than trying to tame her for human use; she avoids the human tendency to anthropomorphize and, instead, celebrates the wild in Wild Rose and the wild in her human self.

Myra also intentionally teaches her young twins to live in a balanced, respectful relationship with the wilderness of Bloodroot Mountain. With Myra's guidance, Johnny becomes adept at hunting rabbits and squirrels, Laura learns to can the vegetables from their garden, and both children learn to locate and harvest ginseng and other beneficial roots and herbs. Myra lets her children bring any animal they can catch into their home, but she also cautions them that "wild things belonged outside and not to forget their true nature" (107). As Myra moves toward a cognitive collapse prompted by the trauma of her brief marriage, she seeks to protect Laura and Johnny from the outside world by immersing them in nature. She shares her thoughts about raising her children in the wilderness:

I can't stand to hold them. I have to let them go. I don't want to leave too many marks behind. There were fingerprints all over me when I came back here, and it's taken a long time to wash them off . . . I think of them now by their real names. Silver like how her eyes glint in the dark. Cinder like how his eyes look in the white of his face. Woodsmoke, the way he smells passing by me in the fall. Lacy the way leaves appear on her shoulders as she moves under the trees. Their old names mean nothing now. (245)

Myra effectively rechristens her children with names that are "real" to her, names connected to the natural elements that they resemble and encounter in their mountain life. She allows nature to represent her children's identities rather than forcing traditional (human) names upon them. Although Myra's eventual complete mental breakdown interrupts her ability to pass

along more of her learned experiences of living in balance with the wilderness or to protect them during this process, her cognitive collapse does not block Johnny and Laura's connection to the other animals of Appalachia or their ability to foster zoomorphic relationships with them.

Johnny remembers that his "mama always said we had inherited a way with animals" and the children's lived experiences support their mother's assertion (106). When Johnny and Laura were mere toddlers, a bear lumbered through the patch of pine needles where they were playing but stopped only to sniff the air before moving peacefully along. "We must have smelled familiar," young Johnny rationalizes (106). The children may have smelled familiar to the bear because they had not been raised to believe themselves more important than animals. When he is five, Johnny focuses his presence to silently scatter a pack of wild dogs "like a gunshot" so that he may rescue their neighbor's dog from attack (106). Rather than rely on human behavior, Johnny instinctively communicates to the dogs in a way that they interpret and respect. When Laura is six and feeling lonely, she lies on a cliff and prays for her mother's comfort. Instead, Wild Rose comes to her side, and Laura feels her prayer was answered. Each of these instances exemplifies Johnny and Laura's ability to connect to the animals of Bloodroot Mountain without forcing human control upon them.

As a child, Johnny experiences a unique connection with a copperhead snake. While roaming the wilderness of Bloodroot Mountain, young Johnny spies a snake on the ground. He lies down on his belly in the dirt to stare into the eyes of a copperhead. Tellingly, Johnny assumes the snake's position—becoming like the snake: "Staring into his eyes, it seemed he knew everything about me. I thought if he could speak, he would call me by my name (108). Here, Johnny recognizes that the copperhead has separate but equal epistemologies. Johnny reaches to grab the snake and is bitten. He is shocked and in pain, but he also realizes that it was he who

overstepped the boundaries of respect between two. In fact, Johnny welcomes the pain from the bite. He imagines the throbbing from the poisonous bite allows him to become more like a copperhead. Soon after the bite, Myra playfully uses bloodroot sap to mark Johnny's face depicting birds in flight and a coiled snake, but Johnny believes, "She must know that I'm a copperhead now" (114). Johnny relies upon the copperhead's qualities to face difficulties in his future, calling forth this inner power when he is forced to navigate the strange world beyond the mountain. At foster homes and the teen detention center, Johnny becomes like the copperhead to teach the "other children not to stare" (133). He becomes a camouflaged predator that adapts to his new surroundings and can protect himself with his venomous bite. Later, Johnny calls upon copperhead-like instincts to gather the bravery needed to revisit his childhood home on Bloodroot Mountain. Rather than viewing the copperhead in human terms, Johnny respects the copperhead's natural instincts and recognizes the ways that he can incorporate the copperhead into his identity in order to gain agency for himself.

When Laura is forced into a foster home, she connects to her foster mother's cat Percy rather than to her new foster family or the other children there. Once, Percy escapes the house, and Laura successfully tracks him for two hours in the neighborhood by centering herself until "I started hearing a little ticking in my ears, like what a cat's heart might sound like" (142). Laura accesses her symbiosis with animals to feel Percy's presence. Later, however, she disregards her mother's lesson "not to forget [an animal's] true nature" and forcibly pulls Percy out of his hiding spot. He hisses, scratches, and bites Laura on the hand, just as Johnny was bitten by the copperhead. Laura forces Percy back into domesticity, rather than respecting the cat's nature as Johnny respected the copperhead. Still, Percy "kept trying to get away. It was like he got a taste for freedom and wanted more . . . then one day . . . Percy [was] dead in the street" (171). Laura's

attempt to force Percy to fit human needs and expectations results in his violent death and suggests the ecofeminist lesson that humans must not place their needs above those of animals. Later, Laura relies on this lesson in her relationship with Clint Blevins—a young man who wonders if he “ort to been borned a fish” (173).

Back in the days on Bloodroot Mountain, Myra once held young Laura’s face with her slimy, fish-scale-covered hands. Laura remembers “I walked around the rest of the day wearing that slime on my cheeks. I felt touched by some magic creature, like a mermaid out of one of Johnny’s storybooks” (103). Later, when Laura meets Clint Blevinson on the high school bus, she imagines that she and Clint “must have seen each other’s secret scales glinting under our skins. There was something the same inside of us” (153). Laura is drawn to Clint’s fish-like ways, but it is Clint who claims personal agency by taking on the ways of fish. As a child, Clint escaped from his alcoholic father and abusive mother by swimming in the lake every day until the bitter cold forced him onto land. Clint would “sink as far as he could and stay down for as long as he could hold his breath . . . it was like time stopped when he was under the water and he wanted to stretch it out (152). Clint becomes like a fish to protect himself from encroaching family trauma. Clint and Laura eventually quit school, marry, and move to the lake shack where Clint once lived. *Bloodroot* describes the spiritual bond between Laura and Clint by incorporating the lake, much as Byrdie and Macon’s bond was formed in the bloodroot patch. Laura remembers:

Once me and Clint went out to the lake and took off our clothes. We got in the water and sunk like rocks. I wasn’t scared, even though I can’t swim. My hair floated up like a sea plant . . . [Clint’s] long legs and arms were like tentacles. I wanted to live down yonder with him forever . . . I was sad when

we broke the surface . . . missed him when he went out swimming, but I never made any fuss about it. I knowed he needed his time in the lake, like Mama needed her time in the woods. (183)

Although she cannot swim, Laura is willing to be fish-like in order to be with Clint. Clint expresses a zoomorphic relationship with the fish of the lake as he adapts to their habitat to gain agency in his own life. He tries to extend this affinity to include Laura. When Clint drowns in the lake, Laura is heartbroken, but also accepts that “he was just trying to stay down where it was peaceful a little while longer” (205). Here, Laura embodies her mother’s admonishment that “wild things belonged outside and not to forget their true nature” (107). Laura can empathize with Clint’s zoomorphic connection to fish and his need for freedom from the reverberations of the trauma from his childhood.

Myra’s acquired affinity for the themes of William Wordsworth’s “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” highlights the similarities between Romanticism at large and the ecofeminist sensibilities within *Bloodroot*. When she reaches high school, Myra extends her ancestors’ respectful relationships with the landscape of Appalachia when she discovers a love for Romantic poetry, which can be thought of as the written expression of this relationship. Doug, recollecting Myra’s initial reaction to “Tintern Abbey,” says “‘It’s like he’s talking about here,’ she said. ‘He wrote this one a few miles above a place in England called Tintern Abbey, but I can tell he feels the same way as I do about Bloodroot Mountain’” (59). In his poem, Wordsworth describes the beauty of the natural surroundings along the banks of the River Wye. Eventually, the poem builds to express the poet’s overall philosophy that humans are losing touch with their appreciation for nature, and in so doing, also losing touch with the value of their own souls.

English Romantics used the language of the people, rather than the formal rhetoric of the ruling class, and encouraged the spontaneous overflow of emotion and appreciation for the beauty of nature. This movement arose, in part, as a reaction to the Industrial Revolution, during the same era which prioritized scientific progress and the elite, educated man's right to use science to control nature for his benefit. Similarly, ecofeminism arose centuries later in response to the dual oppressions of nature and women and other marginalized groups by patriarchal forces which some trace back to the Industrial Revolution and the Age of Enlightenment. English Romantics wrote in response to the dual oppressions of people and nature; ecofeminism reveals these dual oppressions to resist them.

When Myra embraces the sentiments of "Tintern Abbey," she recognizes the poem's ability to communicate her and her ancestors' appreciation for the bounties of nature as more than a functional resource for human use and misuse. In doing so, Myra extends her ancestors' lived appreciation for and balance with nature toward appreciating the ways that the written word can express this special relationship. Years later, Myra's son Johnny will further extend his mother's appreciation of the English Romantic poets when he comes across an old copy of Wordsworth. He recognizes the words his mother mumbled about the house during her mental decline. Johnny is inspired to write poetry in an attempt to express his frustrations with his mother's abandonment in seeming to have chosen the wilderness over her children (although readers never know the content of his poems).

Contemporary ecofeminism seeks to reveal and disrupt all false hierarchies of power (men over women, humans over nature, upper class over lower class, white people over people of color), but *Bloodroot* falls short in this area. Although an ecofeminist analysis of *Bloodroot* reveals the ways that this novel uses the relationships between Appalachian women and

Appalachian nature to create agency and disrupt systems of patriarchy that dominate both women and nature, the novel also relies heavily upon the ways that white Appalachians imagine their past and their connections to Appalachian land. In so doing, *Bloodroot* bolsters a false hierarchy of white memory over Indigenous history and runs counter to the egalitarian goals of contemporary ecofeminism.

In her interview with *Appalachian Heritage* on writing *Bloodroot*, Greene says, “Historically, the English arrived in Tennessee first and took the rich bottomland, and when my people, the Scotch-Irish arrived, they got what was left, the rocky land. It is beautiful but the terrain makes a hard life inevitable, partly because of its isolating effect, so you form an attachment to it and have deep roots in it but at the same time you are at war with it” (qtd. In Schuster 31). Here, Greene’s understanding of history and the land prioritizes the experiences of white settlers and ignores those of the Indigenous people who were in the region before them. In her introduction to *Red States: Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, and Southern Studies*, Gina Caison challenges, “I think one of the main responsibilities of non-Native scholars is to undo continued structures of white supremacy and settler colonialism by educating their fields and fellow non-Native scholars about continued blind spots to Indigenous studies” (19). Notably, *Bloodroot* adds to these blind spots by ignoring the influence of Indigenous people on Appalachian white Appalachians’ relationship to the land.

For example, *Bloodroot*’s Chickweed Holler Witches’ balanced relationships with nature could not exist without the epistemologies of Indigenous people. In another interview in *Appalachian Heritage*, Greene shares that she drew inspiration for her novel’s Appalachian granny women from her childhood in the Smoky Mountains. In this interview, Greene discusses her family members who had “the touch,” but by relying heavily on her lived experiences and

family stories, she overlooks the ways that Appalachian folkways are deeply rooted in Indigeneity (qtd. In Brosi 14). In “A History of Southern and Appalachian Folk Medicine,” Phyllis Light explains that white settlers in Appalachia “quickly adopted native herb uses and healing stories” to adjust to their new environment (29).⁹ Furthermore, Light asserts that “Native knowledge of medicinal and food plant use was of such great value and importance to early settlers that survival . . . would have been impossible without access to it” (29).¹⁰ Although Greene lifts the Chickweed Holler Witches as conduits of agency for themselves and others, this perspective adds to the blind spot of the influence of Indigenous people on white settlers’ relationship with the Appalachian land.

A closer look at the titular weed of the granny women’s home in Chickweed Holler also reveals complications of white Appalachians’ claimed connections to Appalachian land. Although chickweed is naturalized throughout the world, it is actually native to Eurasia. As the Chickweed Holler Witches and their progeny celebrate the wild weed of their home terrain, they fail to recognize that neither they nor chickweed have the claim to Appalachian land that Indigenous people have. In fact, one might even say that white settlers and chickweed are both invasive species to the area.

Bloodroot’s characters also further the blind spots to the influence of Indigeneity in Appalachia as they forge much of their identities through deep attachments to the mountain. For example, Byrdie remembers that Chickweed Holler “land was in our family for generations and Grandmaw and my great aunts loved it as good as they did any of their kin” (7). Of herself and

⁹ Here, healing stories are myths that taught that survival depended upon keeping within a carefully balanced relationship with nature.

¹⁰ Eventually, white Appalachian settlers were also influenced by African cultures as enslaved people fled to the mountains.

Bloodroot Mountain, Byrdie says, “I love [the mountain] like another person” (3). Two generations later, Myra entirely merges her identity directly into the Appalachian environment, claiming “[I am] Rainy when I come in dripping after a storm. Bird when I climb to the ledge and sing down the mountain . . . I am a part of this place like never before” (246). Although statements like these demonstrate deep and respectful connections between women and nature, they also ground the identities of these women in “settler-colonial narratives of land connection” that displace the impact of Indigenous people and histories (Caison 19). Caison further explains, “Because so much of southern identity, particularly white southern identity, is founded on settler-colonial narratives of land connection, the historic and continued presence of Native people in the region represents a hurdle for this associative bond” (19). *Bloodroot* ostensibly overcomes this hurdle by ignoring it, thus perpetuating blind spots of the Appalachian Indigeneity for uninformed readers.

While *Bloodroot*’s zoomorphic relationships between Appalachian people and wildlife provides agency to humans without imposing human expectations on animals, this balanced relationship between species relies upon ancient Indigenous epistemologies without acknowledging them. Indigenous peoples’ relationships with other animals are the result of tens of thousands of years of connection to their environments. The Smithsonian Institute’s National Museum of The American Indian explains, “In Native American traditions, animals are sometimes used to communicate the values and spiritual beliefs of Native communities. Animals’ importance is also evident in the creation stories of many tribes [and are also used] to share family, clan, and personal stories.”¹¹ The zoomorphic relationships between people and

¹¹ “Native Knowledge 360°-Native American Relationships to Animals: Not Your Spirit Animal.” *National Museum of the American Indian*, Smithsonian, <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/informational/native-american-spirit-animal>.

animals in *Bloodroot* may be read as appropriating these ancient relationships between Indigenous people and animals without showing deference to Native culture. In this way, the novel prioritizes the agency of white Appalachian settlers, and, albeit unintentionally, bolsters blind spots to Indigeneity. Extending a false hierarchy between white perception and Indigenous experience in Appalachia runs counter to the goals of contemporary ecofeminism, which calls for an egalitarian, collaborative society in which there is no dominant group.

In *Bloodroot*, Amy Greene adds her voice to the contemporary Appalachian writers who reclaim Appalachian identity from stereotypes perpetuated by outsiders. In so doing, she also lifts the connections between Appalachian women and the natural environment that surrounds them. Ecofeminist analysis of this novel reveals how the Chickweed Holler witches and their progeny (as well as Appalachian granny women who inspired the development of these characters) craft a balanced relationship with the Appalachian landscape that allows them to connect rural people to nature without infringing upon natural ecosystems or habitats. These reciprocal relationships harken back to a time before patriarchal domination when western culture was matrifocal, peaceful, and agrarian. Greene uses bloodroot as an evolving symbol that shifts in meaning from that which represents the connections between humans and nature (the compound word “bloodroot,” the setting for Byrdie and Macon’s commitment, and the empty carved bloodroot box) to a symbol of that which controls patriarchal domination (the bloodroot box entraps the wedding ring and its patriarchal elements of marriage, the severed finger, and, consequently, the connection to violent domination within marriage), then returning to a symbol of hope in future connections between humans and nature (the lock of Laura’s baby’s hair). Furthermore, *Bloodroot* thwarts patriarchal domination by presenting zoomorphic relationships between humans and animals. In *Bloodroot*, Myra, Johnny, Clint, and Laura learn

from wild animals, whom they respect as kindred beings, rather than forcing anthropomorphic expectations and relationships upon them. Romantic poetry also works as an expression of ecofeminism in this novel to communicate Myra's, and later, Johnny's, relationship with nature. Myra loves William Wordsworth's "Lines Written A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" as it aptly expresses her awe of nature, and Johnny is inspired to write poetry to communicate his complicated relationship to Bloodroot Mountain after he perceives that his mother has chosen the mountain over her children. Although ecofeminist analysis of *Bloodroot* reveals the ways that these connections between women and nature often provide agency to poor, rural women and other people, Amy Greene's dependence upon white settler memory and their felt connections to Appalachian land uses language that claims the land as theirs and ignores the relationships between Indigenous people and that same land centuries before white settlers arrived. This blind spot inadvertently feeds into white supremacy, a system of domination also created by patriarchal control, and runs counter to contemporary ecofeminism and its goals.

Chapter Two: Crystal Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence* (2016)

*Oh, the sun shines bright
On my old Kentucky home
'Tis summer,
The people are gay,¹²
Well, the corn top's ripe
And the meadow's in the bloom
While the birds make music
All the day*

-Stephen Foster, "My Old Kentucky Home, Goodnight!"

Even Americans who are not from Kentucky may recognize its state song. Spectators have enthusiastically sung the first verse and chorus at the Kentucky Derby since 1921. Unknown to most, however, this sentimental ballad about the loss of one's family home has a complicated history. Stephen Foster composed "My Old Kentucky Home, Goodnight!" around 1853. Evidence suggests Harriet Beecher Stowe's abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which became available in Foster's hometown of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1852, inspired the song. The song was originally titled "Poor Uncle Tom, Goodnight!" and the verses follow the plot of Stowe's novel, in which an enslaved person who has been forcibly removed from his family and home longs to return back to Kentucky, his cabin, and his family.

"My Old Kentucky Home" and its anti-slavery sentiments were exceedingly popular and embraced by the abolitionist movement. In *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Frederick Douglass states "'My Old Kentucky Home, Goodnight!' (and other songs with abolitionist themes) . . . awaken[s] sympathies for the slave in which antislavery sentiments take root and

¹² Updated in 1986 to "people are gay" from original lyric "darkies are gay."

flourish” (Lubet). Conversely, in the 1920s, the song became a standard in minstrel shows of the era in which white performers donned blackface to entertain white patrons by presenting the plight of enslaved people as cartoonish and child-like. These minstrel acts focused on the song’s first verse and chorus so that white audiences heard what they wanted to hear: an enslaved person’s nostalgia for a happy country home rather than the heartbreaking tale of being stolen away from one’s family and sold down the river, as voiced in the latter verses. Consequently, the song’s original intent as a lamentation on American slavery disappeared to the background as it gained white approval and became a source of white financial success which has lasted for decades.¹³

The history of “My Old Kentucky Home” mirrors much of American history in that the song was used to cater to white audiences by presenting Black lived experiences through white gazes, which either objectified or entirely ignored Black lives. It is not surprising that much of recorded Appalachian history follows suit. Until recently, white historians (and popular culture) have almost completely ignored the existence of Black Appalachians and Black communities in Appalachia. In 1991, when Black Kentucky poet and playwright Frank X Walker looked up “Appalachian” in Webster’s Dictionary, the definition read “white residents of the mountainous region known as Appalachia.” Struck by the blatant erasure of people like himself, Walker soon coined the term “Affrilachian” to “open up a new space” recognizing and celebrating Black people in the Appalachian region (Roberts). Walker and his writing group then formed the Affrilachian Poets who, more than thirty years later, still work to defy the stereotype that all

Appalachians are white. Founding members of the writing group include Nikki Finney, then a new English faculty hire at University of Kentucky, who was welcomed to the fold. Other founding members included Kelly Norman Ellis, Crystal Wilkinson, Gerald Coleman, Ricardo Nazario-Colon, Mitchell L. H. Douglas, Daundra Scisney-Givens, and Thomas Aaron. They were soon joined by others. Together, the Affrilachian poets use their craft to reveal “relationships that link to family roots . . . and an inherent connection to the land” for Black Appalachians.

Founding Affrilachian Poet Crystal Wilkinson embraces these themes of familial roots and connections to the land for Black Appalachian women in her short story compilations *Blackberries*, *Blackberries* (2001) and *Water Street* (2003), and her collection of poetry and prose, *Perfect Black* (2021). Wilkinson’s first novel, *The Birds of Opulence* (2016) tells of four generations of Goode-Brown women of Opulence, Kentucky, and their material and symbolic relationships to the land that has “been up under [their] people’s feet since slave times” (112). Mama Minnie Mae is owner and caretaker of the homeplace, a former tobacco farm that she and her husband once owned and operated. Although the family no longer lives there, Minnie Mae continues to garden at the homeplace and returns multiple times each season to plant, weed, harvest, rake leaves from the yard, and sweep the dust from the porch. She reminds her middle-aged sons that “This is y’all’s what-for . . . all this . . . My mama and daddy worked this land, and their mama and daddy before them” (112). Her sons do not share her reverence for their family’s land. They have moved away to Lexington. They rarely bring their wives or children to visit the homeplace, and they sell the land immediately upon their mother’s death.

Minnie Mae's relationship with the land and nature passes on to her female progeny alone: her daughter Tookie, granddaughter Lucy, and great-granddaughter Yolanda. Ecofeminist analysis of *The Birds of Opulence* reveals how the Goode-Brown family reclaim relationships between Black women and nature from the racist and patriarchal associations used to oppress them. The novel also complicates the agency that they achieve by integrating the family's Kentucky homeplace into the stories of their girlhoods, sexual experiences, reproduction, and motherhood. As a result, readers may trace traumas as inherited from the family's enslaved ancestors' connection to land and realize the reverberations of unfronted negative associations between Black women and nature.

I begin with an ecofeminist analysis of the first chapter, "The Known Bird," as it introduces key characters in the novel and provides a conduit to understand their stories and personal connections to land and nature from the first-person point of view of the youngest daughter, Yolanda. In this chapter, Yolanda describes her birth in the family vegetable garden and, while doing so, reclaims many historic negative associations between Black women and nature from a primarily white perspective. As my analysis progresses, I focus on how the family matriarch, Mama Minnie Mae Goode, lifts success stories of Black people in the Kentucky landscape and passes them down to younger generations. Mama Minnie Mae's memories and oral histories of her family, their homeplace, and the township of Opulence, Kentucky, proclaim positive relationships between Black people and Appalachia that white history and culture often ignore.

Although *The Birds of Opulence* reclaims many connections between Black women and the Appalachian landscape, the novel also reveals how the Goode-Brown family continues to

inherit trauma when they fail to address the long reach of their ancestral enslavement and its aftermath. Therefore, the next sections of this chapter follow the linear progression of inherited traumas from Minnie Mae Goode, through her daughter Tookie Goode, and to Tookie's daughter Lucy Goode-Brown. This sequence traces the ways that familial memories and traumas pass between Black women and nature from generation to generation. Next, I return to analyze other instances of reclamation of the relationship between Black women and nature beyond Lucy's delivery of Yolanda in the squash patch. I particularly focus upon the ways that *The Birds of Opulence* provides opportunities for Black pride and joy in nature for Black people in the Appalachian landscape. Finally, I close with analysis of Lucy's husband Joe Brown's role in respecting Black Appalachian women and in sharing their ancestral legacies and relationships with the land of Opulence, Kentucky.

Patricia Hill Collins' descriptions of the ways white people have constructed images of Black women in "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images" in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000) is helpful in guiding an ecofeminist analysis of *The Birds of Opulence*. Similar to ecofeminist theory, Hill Collins recognizes that western "binary thinking . . . categorizes people, things, and ideas in terms of their differences from one another . . . each term in the binaries white/black, male/female, reason/emotion, culture/nature . . . gains meaning only in its relation to its counterpart" (77). She specifies, "African-American women occupy a position whereby the inferior half of a series of these binaries converge, and this placement has been central to our subjugation" (79). Hill Collins refers to Black and female identifiers, and she also recognizes that the images white people have used to subjugate Black women often align them with animals and

nature, thus bridging to ecofeminist theory. For example, as Hill Collins describes the white construct of the controlling image of the breeder woman, she explains, “claiming that Black women were able to produce children as easily as animals . . . provided justification for their interference in enslaved Africans’ reproductive lives. Slave owners wanted enslaved Africans to ‘breed’ because every slave child born represented a valuable unit of property, another unit of labor, and, if female, the prospects for more slaves” (86). The white construct of the enslaved breeder woman as akin to an *animal* meant to *breed* to create more *property* aligns Black women to nature to justify exploitation of their reproductive lives.

The Birds of Opulence immediately wrests the reproductive lives of Black women away from the controlling image of an animal-like breeder and returns their personal agency during childbirth. In the first chapter, “The Known Bird,” Yolanda Goode-Brown provides a first-person recounting of her own birth in the family squash patch in 1962. She narrates how her mother Lucy’s legs “grew wobbly, like two thin branches” and describes as Lucy stops short “in the squash patch, her back humped over, [as] the wet spot grew wider in the dirt beneath her” (11). Lucy then balances on her knees and elbows, her head down low to the ground. Yolanda tells how her great-grandmother “Mama Minnie and Granny Tookie bare Mama’s private place, and as the day wore on [brother Kee Kee] eventually saw me being born . . . a squalling thing caught slippery and wiggling in Tookie’s hands” there, amid the summer squash (11). The imagery Wilkinson constructs for this birth scene radically reclaims Black women’s connection to the earth from racist constructs. Labor pains force Lucy to drop to her knees and place her elbows in the garden — grounding her in the earth in an undeniably animalistic, albeit natural posture. However, Lucy’s labor during childbirth delivers a free individual, rather than immediate property and future labor for white enslavers. A consensual, loving relationship led to

this child's conception, not a controlled attempt at "breeding." Furthermore, Lucy delivers baby Yolanda directly onto the family garden that has "been up under [their] people's feet since slave times" (112). Land on which Lucy's ancestors were once enslaved now legally belongs to their family just as their progeny do. When Lucy's amniotic fluid seeps into the soil of the garden and the afterbirth is buried there with a few turns of Mama Minnie's hoe, their family DNA is poised to enrich the soil, not through the blood and sweat of forced labor as their ancestors must have done, but through the natural labor of bringing new life into the world. Whereas Black women's reproductive lives had sustained white enslavers and the system of slavery, the Goode-Brown family now sustains the land that, in turn sustains the Goode-Brown family with ample nutrition. The controlling image of the breeder woman in which white constructs align Black women with animals to exploit and "breed" them is vanquished, and the Goode-Brown women reclaim their agency and connection to nature.

Yolanda's birth also reclaims childbirth from professionalized American medical practices and restores another connection between women and nature, especially in respect to the practices of Black midwives. In "The Racist History of Abortion and Midwifery Bans," Michele Goodwin explains that prior to the Civil War, women's reproductive health care was generally managed by midwives who used time-honored, non-invasive techniques to assist the laboring mother. Goodwin specifies that during this time, "midwifery was interracial; half of the women who provided reproductive healthcare were Black. Other midwives were Indigenous and white" (Goodwin). Midwives comforted and encouraged women during contractions and provided herbal teas to ease labor and knew how to manipulate the fetus in-utero in case of a challenging fetal complications. Childbirth was accepted as a natural process that usually did not require intervention. As Yolanda recounts her birth, she accesses her family history with midwifery and

shares her great-grandmother Minnie Mae's memories of her mother's work as a rural midwife. Minnie Mae remembers how her mother relied on nature — the signs of the moon or the shape of a woman's belly or eyes — to guide the care that women needed. Minnie Mae also helped deliver babies in her youth. She reminisces, "Knowing, reading signs, was as familiar to her as her own two hands" but she also recognizes "women don't catch babies for one another much anymore. They go to the [segregated] hospital" (5). The hospital births to which she refers recognize a significant rift between women and nature and, in the process, specifically demonized, for profit, the connections between Black midwifery and nature.

American childbirth underwent notable changes when patriarchal medicine began to interfere in the early twentieth century. Rather than engaging in an interconnected relationship with the mother and the natural birth process, physicians perceived both nature and the mother as passive and viewed themselves, the professional doctors, as active, necessary agents. Childbirth soon became a medicalized assortment of catheterizations, episiotomies, and anesthesia that removed women from their agency during delivery. In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), Val Plumwood cites Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of this dualistic approach to women's reproductive capacity in *The Second Sex*:

Because reproduction is construed not as a creative act, indeed not the act of an agent at all, it becomes something which is undergone not undertaken, at worst tortured and passive, at best a field for acceptance and resignation. When women's agency and choice are denied, the female body itself comes to be seen as oppressive, the instrument of an invading nature hostile to human subjecthood and alien to true humanity, a nature

which can only be subdued or transcended. (qtd. in Plumwood, 38)

This ecofeminist perspective acknowledges that medicalized childbirth relies on the dualisms that identify women and nature as agentless in order to objectify and control pregnancy and childbirth. Medicalized childbirth also has a capitalistic, and therefore an anti-ecofeminist, agenda.

In the early 1900s, the American Medical Association (AMA) recognized that physicians were neglecting to capitalize on childbirth as a reliable source of revenue. In order to monetize childbirth, the AMA coordinated racist and misogynist smear campaigns against midwifery. Dr. Joseph De Lee, a preeminent twentieth-century obstetrician, stated in an oft-quoted 1915 speech:

The midwife is a relic of barbarism. In civilized countries the midwife is wrong, has always been wrong . . . The midwife has been a drag on the progress of the science and art of obstetrics. Her existence stunts the one and degrades the other. For many centuries she perverted obstetrics from obtaining any standing at all among the science of medicine (“Progress Toward Ideal Obstetrics” qtd. in Goodwin).

Whereas midwives approached childbirth as a natural process needing little intervention, physicians positioned childbirth and midwives’ connection to nature as dangerous. Their argument that midwives, the majority of whom were Black women, were dirty, uncivilized, and barbaric used Black midwives’ connection to nature against them for profit. Yolanda’s birth breaks through these negative associations between Black women and nature as it engages a history of Black midwifery.

In *The Birds of Opulence*, Yolanda's birth eschews medicalization and patriarchal control and returns the birth process to women, nature, and Black midwifery. Her mother Lucy's spontaneous drop to all fours in the garden creates a birth position that helps to open her pelvis naturally, rather than the prone position used for doctors' convenience in hospital deliveries. Lucy's mother and grandmother bare her "private place" with their hands — using intimate familial, feminine touch rather than of cold, metal forceps (11). Granny Tookie holds Baby Yolanda first rather than a male stranger, as would have been probable in the 1960s. Mama Minnie Mae cuts the umbilical cord with her pocketknife, and Tookie comforts her daughter by stroking her head, caressing her arms, and massaging her neck and shoulders, until they "finally entwine their fingers" as they sit in the squash patch (13). Grounded in the family garden and facilitated by the touch of a female family member, Lucy's delivery of Yolanda reclaims childbirth from male-domination and returns it to women, restoring an important relationship between nature and Black women through midwifery.

The Birds of Opulence reclaims yet another connection between Black women and nature as Yolanda's first-person account of birth in the family garden is infused with the stories from her great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother who have lived on that same Kentucky land. In this way, Wilkinson gives voice to the generations of Black Appalachian women and their connection to Appalachian land that white history and culture have ignored. Yolanda begins the novel by prompting, "Imagine yourself a woman who gathers stories in her apron" (3). Yolanda's ability to tell the story of her birth claims her personal agency and her connection to Kentucky land. Additionally, she shares the "stories in her apron" gathered from Mama Minnie, Tookie, and Lucy as they have been folded into her own memory. Generations of Black

Kentucky women are a part of her story and a part of Yolanda. Many of the experiences and memories from Minnie Mae, Tookie, and Lucy that Yolanda embeds into her birth story also include their experiences in the landscape of their Kentucky home.

Yolanda recounts the moments before her birth when “A feeling seeped into Mama Minnie’s bones, a feeling like the return of everything lost. Old time people from across the waters gathered all around her . . . Every yesterday converged” (9). Here, Yolanda perceives as her great-grandmother Minnie Mae embodies the people and experiences of the land in her bones and places them in the present. Minnie Mae even feels the “old time people from across the waters” reaching past the family’s known history in Kentucky to their ancestry before being displaced from the African diaspora. This trail of memories connects Yolanda, Minnie Mae, and generations of their ancestors to that particular plot of Kentucky land and provides one of the only reminders that, although they are connected to that land, that connection is a product of their past enslavement there. Moments after her birth, as Yolanda describes it, Minnie Mae points toward the spot in the field where she had been born decades earlier, directly linking their two births to the land and connecting past to present once again. Yolanda knows about her great-grandmother’s connection to nature and the past, and she implants these elements of her great-grandmother within her birth story.

Yolanda also includes her grandmother Tookie’s joyous girlhood memories of playing in the Appalachian landscape of their home place before the headaches and worried thoughts crowded her mind. Tookie remembers “playing tag with Tess and Lou Lou [other children] around the holly bush; Pa Green whittling her a play-pretty from a piece of firewood; the grand

whisper of daffodils in spring” before her reverie is halted by encroaching traumatic memories (9). Further reading reveals how Tookie’s trauma also stems from associations with the land.

As for her mother, Yolanda includes awareness of Lucy’s emotional distance. Yolanda knows that her “Mama couldn’t stop bad thoughts from clotting in her brain” after childbirth and that she can “feel a coldness brewing even then” (13). Unlike the stories of Mama Minnie Mae and Tookie, Yolanda perceives no real association between the homeplace land and her mother; instead, Yolanda is aware of Lucy’s dissociation. Lucy’s dissociation from her daughter Yolanda and the homeplace are also rooted in traumatic history with the land and will be analyzed in a latter section of this chapter. Yolanda embeds oral histories and memories associated with the homeplace and nature— or, in Lucy’s case, the notable lack thereof—from three generations of Goode-Brown women into the story of her birth, exemplifying the importance of Black women and Appalachian land in her creation and within herself. In this way, *The Birds of Opulence* proclaims Black Appalachian lives and histories that white culture and history have often ignored.

The Affrilachian Poets, including Crystal Wilkinson, do not claim a connection to ecofeminism, yet their goals are interrelated. Ecofeminism seeks to reveal the ways that associations between women and other marginalized people and nature are used to oppress them, and it works to reclaim these connections towards liberation for all. Similarly, Affrilachian poets write to express “relationships that link to family roots. . . and an inherent connection to the land” for Black Appalachians (Roberts). In so doing, they confront the dual oppressions of Black Appalachians and Appalachian land and reclaim histories that have been overlooked by white people for decades. In the preface to *Black Bone: 25 Years of the Affrilachian Poets* (2018),

Shauna M. Morgan explains, “The founding members of the Affrilachian Poets were all engaged in mapping Blackness both as a race and culture, but even more importantly as an idea or consciousness emerging in and shaped by the region and its connection to a global awareness of liberation” (2). In *The Birds of Opulence*, Yolanda’s first-person recounting of her birth in her family’s squash patch literally proclaims her connection to the land of her Kentucky home and lifts the histories of her ancestors, thwarting the pervading notion that Appalachia is homogeneous and all white.

After the first chapter, *The Birds of Opulence* moves from first-person narration to omniscient accounts that center on one character or particular relationship at a time; while the Appalachian landscape remains essential in the stories of the Goode-Brown women. As matriarch, Mama Minnie Mae is intentional in sharing the memories and oral histories surrounding her family’s successes at the homeplace and in the township of Opulence, Kentucky. In so doing, she often achieves the goals of the Affrilachian Poets and of ecofeminism. Minnie Mae’s oral histories align with the founding poet Frank X. Walker’s intention to challenge the notion that Appalachia is all white. They lift “an undeniable Affrilachia in which lives the soil, the river, the trees—even the very air [Black Appalachians] breathe” (qtd. in Morgan 15). Furthermore, Minnie Mae’s stories of Black Appalachian success in the Kentucky landscape illustrate what Douglas A. Vakoch describes in *Feminist Ecocriticism* (2014) as “liberatory ideals that can be actualized in the real world . . . strategies of emancipation that have already begun to give rise to more hopeful ecological [and personal] narratives” (3). Minnie Mae’s oral histories about her ancestors’ connection to the Kentucky landscape liberate them from the

weight of their enslaved past and its turbulent aftermath and celebrate the lives of Black Appalachians overlooked by white history.

Minnie Mae claims and names her family's relationship with a particular plot of land in Kentucky, the homeplace. Feminist writer and cultural critic bell hooks — a Kentuckian herself — dedicates a chapter to the importance of homeplace to many Black lives in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (2015). In "Homeplace: a Site of Resistance," hooks explains that, "An effective means of white subjugation of black people globally has been the perpetual construction of economic and social structures that deprive many folks of the means to make homeplace . . . For when a people no longer have the space to construct homeplace, we cannot build a meaningful community of resistance" (*Yearning* 46-47). Black homeplaces provide a space to resist white supremacist domination and to learn integrity and dignity. hooks identifies that Black women have historically worked to create homeplaces to support their families and communities: "They understood intellectually and intuitively the meaning of homeplace in the midst of an oppressive and dominating social reality of homeplace as a site of resistance and liberation struggle" (45). Minnie Mae Goode is a Black woman who knows the importance of her homeplace in resisting white domination, and she is dedicated to passing this lesson on to her children.

Minnie Mae's homeplace is the family's former tobacco farm. Although she now lives in town with her daughter Tookie, Tookie's daughter Lucy, Lucy's husband Joe Brown, and Lucy and Joe's children Kee Kee and Yolanda, the homeplace is never far from her thoughts. As she ages, she takes solace in its very existence, reflecting that "so much has changed, but this land has always been here steady and consistent, ready for whatever problems she sends up to the

hill” (83-84). However, the homeplace is more than a memory for Minnie Mae. She continues to maintain ownership and guardianship of the land that she inherited; she returns multiple times each season to plant the vegetable garden, weed, and harvest its bounties. On one such visit, Minnie Mae spreads her arms far and wide in a gesture of embracing the entire property, reminding her adult sons, “This is ya’ll’s what-for. . . All this. . . been up under your people’s feet since slave times. My mama and daddy worked this land, and their mama and daddy before them” (112). For many Black people, hooks notes, homeplace goes beyond house purchase, but Minnie Mae’s ownership of this homeplace takes on particular significance when one realizes that her ancestors were once considered to be property on the property she now owns.

Minnie Mae also connects her sons to this environment through their nicknames, June and Butter. June is, of course, the first month in summer, but the nickname comes from Juniper: tall, hearty trees with practical purposes (fence posts, windbreaks, and aromatic wood for keeping moths at bay) that are common throughout Appalachia. Butter suggests the sweet and salty condiment-spread made easily by rural folks with cow’s milk and some firm churning. Minnie Mae tells them both, “All ya’ll was raised up on money the tobacco brought in and the garden food we put on the table. Over that ridge there is a graveyard, a whole village of our folks . . .” (113). This reminds June and Butter that the homeplace land is a part of their experiences and a part of their bodies, and that their ancestors are now a part of the homeplace landscape. Conveying the historic connections between her family and the homeplace is a fundamental part of Minnie Mae’s mothering. Her stories position her family as survivors and thrivers on the very land on which they once were owned, suggesting liberation from their enslaved ancestral past and the turbulent aftermath that followed.

Minnie Mae's oral histories also share how the township Opulence began. In 1878, Old Man Hezekiah, a freed man from Virginia, paid one hundred and fifty-six dollars for eight acres of Kentucky land. He then carved a large, intricate sign declaring the township *Opulence* rather than let white people continue to call it "n---- town" (113). This oral history proudly reclaims the land and its name from assumed white ownership. The lives of Black Appalachians have long been overlooked by white histories, but artifacts from Old Hezekiah's life displayed in the Opulence library and protected by Minnie's kinfolk document his success as a Black founder of a Black Appalachian township and effectively liberate Opulence from requiring white acknowledgement at all. Minnie Mae mentions that Old Hezekiah bought the land "one hundred years after Daniel Boone blazed a bloody trail through here, killing every Indian he saw," a detail that distinctly separates the story of Black liberation in Opulence from the white theft of Native land (112).¹⁴ Minnie Mae Goode will tell "anyone that will listen" about Opulence, its history, and her family's history there, thus perpetuating stories of Black success and liberation on the land which was once dominated by Black enslavement.

In tracing her lineage at the homeplace, Minnie Mae begins the story of her ancestral history at approximately 1880, but noticeably leaves much unsaid. She claims her family has worked the land of the homeplace "since slave times," but she begins their story there almost twenty years after the ratification of the 13th amendment that officially freed enslaved people of Kentucky. What happened during this unspoken period? How did her ancestors manage to purchase and stay on a valuable tobacco farm during the turbulent years of Reconstruction, Jim

¹⁴ In *Red States: Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, and Southern Studies* (2018), Gina Caison clarifies that "it is necessary to be clear about the fact that the vast majority of African American people in the U.S. South should not be understood as settlers . . . African American history as it relates to settler colonialism and Native American history [is still] a complicated terrain of diverging and converging interests and alliances" (20). Minnie Mae's understood history of Opulence adds to the myth of Native disappearance and ignores Native survival.

Crow lynchings, and white race riots? Why did she move away from the homeplace that is so important to her? In *Appalachian Elegy: Poetry and Place* (2012), bell hooks recognizes the reluctance of many Black Appalachians to “look back” (5). She writes, “no one wanted to talk about the black farmers who lost land to white supremacist violence. No one wanted to talk about the extent to which that racialized terrorism created a turning point in the lives of black folks wherein nature, once seen as a freeing place, became a fearful place. That silence kept us from knowing the ecohistories of black folks. It has kept folks from claiming an identity and a heritage that is so often forgotten or erased” (5). Minnie Mae is intentional about sharing ecohistories of Black success at both the homeplace and in the township of Opulence; however, by failing to address racialized terrorism in association with the land, she adds to the silence that keeps Black people from knowing the full extent of their ecohistories.

While Minnie Mae intentionally lifts stories of Black success in Kentucky, she also unintentionally passes down trauma that originates in the negative associations between Black women and nature. She is particularly influenced by the controlling image of jezebel—white slave era ideology that cast Black women as sexually aggressive in nature to sanction their rape and sexual exploitation. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Hill Collins paraphrases scholars Cheryl Clark, Angela Davis, and Deborah Gray White explaining:

The image of jezebel originated under slavery when Black women were portrayed as being, to use Jewelle Gomez’s words, ‘sexually aggressive wet nurses.’ Jezebel’s function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by white men typically reported by Black slave women. (89).

The image of jezebel presents yet another example of binary thinking in which white constructs align Black women with nature in order to oppress them. Minnie Mae has internalized fear of being cast as a jezebel, and to combat this fear assumes “the politics of respectability,” a term first coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (1993). Higginbotham uses this term to describe twentieth-century Black women’s strict adherence to manners, temperance, and sexual purity to distance themselves from stereotypes and prove that they could be as “respectable” as white women. Although respectability politics offers an avenue to avoid racist stereotypes, it also upholds racist ideals as it fails to challenge the systems of power that deem white expectations of behavior the correct expectations of behavior. Minnie Mae assumes this racist ideology when she accepts the white construct of jezebel as truth. She is desperate to separate herself from the image by demanding purity—one of the “cardinal virtues. . . of ‘true’ [white] womanhood” — from her family and other Black women in her community (Brooks Higginbotham 72). For example, when her great-granddaughter Yolanda begins to “fill out,” Minnie Mae predicts that she will soon be “*Hot-tailed*” because she “knows what comes after” a Black girl’s body begins to develop (83).

In another instance, Minnie Mae labels a young woman a “hussy on the Lord’s ground” when she deems her tight dress to be inappropriate for a church social (106). Most strikingly, Minnie Mae takes violent action to ward off the jezebel when she “*took a strap to [her daughter] to try and keep her legs closed and her skirt tail down*” when Tookie was a very young girl (83). Although Minnie Mae’s stories of Black successes in Kentucky celebrate the lives of Black people over the limits of white constructs, she cannot escape a lifetime of messages that Black women’s nature makes them responsible for their own sexual exploitation. She passes this

negative association between Black women and their wild sexual natures on to future generations.

Minnie Mae's internalization of the jezebel image is most evident in her vicious reaction to Tookie's pregnancy. In her elder years, Minnie Mae reflects on the moment that she realized her thirteen-year-old daughter was pregnant. She

can't remember if it was Tookie's face that started it
all or if it was that belly poking out like a swollen something. But
even before she was fully aware of what she was doing, she started
beating Tookie. She couldn't stop. Her grip around Henry's belt
couldn't be broken, not by her boys, Butter and June, not by Tookie's
screams, not even by Henry himself. She kept beating and beating,
trying to beat Tookie back into good, looked down at the ridges rising
up on her pregnant child's legs and back and kept beating. . . even when
she remembered what old-time people said about slave-time beatings,
she kept on. (84)

Minnie Mae is so committed to "trying to beat Tookie back into good" and away from the jezebel image that her body takes over without thought. She never questions how a thirteen-year-old girl became pregnant or considers finding the boy or man who impregnated her. She never asks if, and therefore never learns that Tookie was raped by an older Black boy in their community. Instead, Minnie Mae is overwhelmingly triggered by fear of her daughter's jezebel nature that "even when she remembered what old-time people said about slave-time beatings, she kept on" trying to beat her daughter back into good.

Prompted by fear of the jezebel image, Minnie Mae turns to plantation-style discipline, which sanctioned the brutal whipping of enslaved people by white enslavers, much as they whipped plantation beasts into submission. In “Corporal Punishment in Black Communities: Not an Intrinsic Cultural Tradition but Racial Trauma,” Stacey Patton explains that Black Americans adopted the practice of beating their children from white slave masters and colonizers. No evidence that such forms of physical discipline existed in precolonial West Africa prior to the Atlantic slave trade has been discovered. Patton argues that the use of corporal punishment in Black American families is a result of white enslavers and white racism. Minnie Mae’s violent whipping of Tookie suggests that, in addition to her acceptance of the controlling image of jezebel, she has also inherited racist ideologies that sanction treating Black children as mere beasts of plantation labor. Minnie Mae equivocates when trying to understand her brutal reaction to Tookie’s pregnancy: “Was it fear or hate? *Ain’t it a mama’s job to protect?* Protect from who? That’s the question that rears its head now” (84). In fact, Minnie Mae’s vicious beating of Tookie is instigated by both fear and hate stemming from her lived experiences and those of her ancestors, in which white constructs aligned Black people with nature as sexually aggressive animals and beasts of burden.

Tookie’s rape and the traumatic treatment she receives afterward are linked to legacies of the sexual exploitation of Black women and girls sanctioned by their association with nature. In *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, Dorothy Roberts explains, “the rape of slave women by their masters [and overseers] was primarily a weapon of terror that reinforced whites’ domination over their human property,” and the law “failed to recognize the rape of a slave woman to be a crime” (29). Neither were enslaved men charged for the rape of enslaved women or girls, since the laws decreed that “the crime of rape does not

exist. . . between African slaves. . . Their intercourse is promiscuous” (and) “left to be regulated by their owners” (31). Neither white nor Black men were held accountable for raping enslaved Black women/girls during American slavery setting the stage for their continued sexual exploitation post-slavery. Tookie never speaks of her rape through most of her life until, moments before her death, she revisits the scene in realistic detail:

It’s 1943. She is scared. . . Bruce Harrison took her to the center of a cornfield and kissed her so hard she thought she would die. He took her clothes off, promised it wouldn’t hurt. . . But when he climbed on top of her it had hurt like nothing she had ever known, and then he had mounted her and put all his weight into her chest and pushed inside her and began to move faster and faster, like he was trying to kill something and wouldn’t stop. (139)

The natural landscape is materially complicit and symbolically significant in Tookie’s rape. Her assault is protected by phallic corn stalks; the assault hidden from view. Both Tookie and the earth are fertile and will produce. Furthermore, although a boy himself, Bruce Harrison assumes control of young Tookie’s inert body. He has accepted society’s messages that Black women and girls are dehumanized objects available to meet the needs of his brutal and brutish male desires.

Historically, most men have not been held accountable for sexual assaults against Black women and girls; instead, their victims have been held accountable for their own rapes. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Hill Collins explains how Black [female] rape victims are often “twice victimized. . . first by the actual rape, [and] again by family members, community residents, and social institutions such as the criminal justice systems which *somehow* believe that rape victims

are responsible for their own victimization” (159, emphasis mine). This *somehow* is not really a mystery; the cause is directly linked to the pervasive controlling images of Black women as having inherently wild sexuality — an image that began in racist and sexist white culture but has bled into the Black community. When Tookie begins to show signs of her pregnancy, mothers in the township no longer let their daughters play with their former friend. Tookie is cast out of the church choir, as well. Minnie Mae withholds all affection from her daughter, and when Tookie’s labor begins, Minnie Mae refuses to take her to the hospital or to support her through midwifery as she has done with women in their community. Instead, Minnie Mae forces Tookie to deliver her baby in a cold, empty bathroom all alone, admitting that she “wanted Tookie to go through every single bit of suffering, her punishment for what she’d done” (85).

Hill Collins explains, “Motherhood as an institution occupies a special place in transmitting values to children about their proper place . . . a mother can foster her children’s oppression if she teaches them to believe in their own inferiority” (57). In beating and neglecting Tookie, rather than comforting and supporting her, Minnie Mae teaches her daughter to believe in her inferiority. Minnie Mae and the women of Opulence react to generations of fear of the jezebel image. They hold Tookie’s assumed wild sexual nature solely responsible for her pregnancy. They accept the jezebel image as truth, and they punish her accordingly.

Tookie’s rape in the Appalachian landscape and the traumas she experiences from the effects of stereotypes that associate Black women as hypersexual animals arrest her development. She never fully recovers. Tookie becomes an adult and a loving mother, but she never develops a romantic partnership or friendship beyond her family unit. She suffers painful, recurring headaches when memories of her abuse arise. In public, Tookie holds her head down and positions herself behind her mother. Her traumas freeze her in place; she never leaves home

until the day she dies. A month before her death, Tookie gathers the strength to stand up for herself and fight against the yoke of trauma that has weighed her down since her girlhood.

Before she dies at the age of forty-eight, a “coiled and rusted thing in Tookie’s chest finally frees itself” (132). In the novel’s longest, uninterrupted dialogue, she speaks out against the animalistic stereotype with which she has been branded. Tookie confronts Minnie Mae about her cruelty. She blurts, “Mama, why’d you beat me like that?” and continues to counter each of Minnie Mae’s deflections, asking “Why? Why? Why? Why?” (132, 133). Minnie Mae cannot answer. She does not realize that she was also victimized into accepting the pervasive negative stereotypes against Black women. Tookie’s ability to question, however, is perhaps more important than Minnie Mae’s inability to answer. In questioning her mother and defending herself, Tookie Goode challenges decades of animalistic, controlling images that have dehumanized her and countless other Black women and girls to silence and control them.

The violence, neglect, and experience of being ostracized that Tookie encounters in addition to her rape forge fissures of trauma that she cannot avoid passing on to her daughter, Lucy. The birth of Lucy’s daughter Yolanda in the squash patch at the beginning of *The Birds of Opulence* triumphantly redresses many of the ways that Black women have been negatively associated with nature throughout American history — materially and symbolically. Lucy also reclaims experiences around sex and reproduction away from the traumatic experiences had by her mother, Tookie. Unlike her mother, Lucy finds a loving partner in Joe Brown. She enjoys her sex life, and her children are conceived consensually. Tookie delivers baby Lucy in a room alone after weeks of abuse and neglect; Lucy delivers baby Yolanda surrounded by nature (delivered among the “vaginal” squash blossoms rather than conceived amongst “phallic” corn) and supported by her knowledgeable grandmother Minnie Mae and caring mother Tookie. Tookie’s

conception and delivery of Lucy shames Minnie Mae within the community, but Lucy's delivery of Yolanda is celebrated with a baby shower. Tookie's negative experiences around sex, conception, and reproduction may seem to be quelled by her daughter Lucy's positive experiences. Moments after Yolanda's birth, however, Lucy succumbs to an unidentified mental illness from which she never fully recovers.

Lucy does not experience trauma directly; yet she exhibits traumatic responses as if she has inherited them from her mother, Tookie. Transgenerational trauma (sometimes termed second-generation PTSD) is a psychological term that asserts that trauma can be transferred between generations. Researchers trace transgenerational trauma through generations of enslaved and formerly enslaved Black Americans, survivors of the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and other genocides and wars. Critics of this area of trauma studies believe it to have flawed methodology.¹⁵ Regardless, the concept of transgenerational trauma helps to situate Lucy's mental illness as a connection to her mother and enslaved ancestors who have come before her at the homeplace, all of whom have suffered from negative associations with nature.

Lucy initially refuses to breastfeed her baby. Her family gathers to facilitate the feeding, regardless of her protests: "'Hold her feet,' [Minnie Mae] says to Tookie, and pushes her full weight atop Lucy, holding her hands down, even with Lucy kicking and screaming" (26). In this scene, Lucy rejects the continuation of the symbolic triumphs of Yolanda's birth. Perhaps subconsciously, Lucy will not allow her body to nourish the next generation of Goode-Brown women without addressing their inherited traumas beyond symbolic gestures. Lucy pushes her daughter away saying, "She'll learn quickly, won't she?" (25). Here, Lucy implies that Yolanda must learn that mothers (and others) do not always nurture their daughters. Lucy has never

¹⁵ For more, see Davis, Collins, and Meretoja "Introduction," *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma* (2020).

experienced abuse or neglect. She is referencing the brutal treatment of her mother by her grandmother and the community, as well as generations of oppression of Black women throughout history.

Lucy's refusal to breastfeed her daughter is especially significant when understood through Black feminist and ecofeminist perspectives. During slavery, Black women's ability to breastfeed was commandeered by white families who used enslaved women to wet nurse white children, using Black woman as they would use milk cows. If Lucy were to have breastfed her infant in a nurturing way, she would have provided yet another symbolic triumph over racist animalistic stereotypes of Black women. Today, breastfeeding is manipulated by the patriarchy, which reduces women's breasts to sexual objects, and by capitalism, which convinces mothers to stopper their breastmilk and purchase formula, thus handing their nurturing power (and money) over to corporations. Were Lucy to have nurtured Yolanda with breast milk without coercion, she would have reclaimed a fundamental tie between women and nature from the grasp of patriarchy and capitalism. Instead, Lucy balks. She kicks and screams — accessing the animal within her to fight against continuing the story of triumph over the historically negative associations between Black women and nature.

The family is eventually successful in attaching Yolanda to Lucy's breast. Later, however, Lucy toys with ideas of infanticide. Lucy holds Yolanda's tiny nose closed time after time and watches as her baby struggles to breathe

She could starve the child of air and even Joe, who is snoring in her ear, would never know. She watches her daughter struggle for breath, watches her bright eyes widen until the legs kick and she lets go of the nipple. Lucy does it again and again until she can feel the baby trying

to fling her head free. (35)

Lucy's motivation in considering taking Yolanda's life is motivated by the need to confront the traumas that enslavement and its aftermath have visited on Black Americans — especially women, specifically the trauma that conceived Lucy through rape and its aftermath. Lucy's mother's life was stunted by the abuse and neglect that she received in response to her pregnancy. Although Lucy's life, pregnancy, and delivery seems to have addressed these traumas, Lucy cannot allow her body to support progress until the traumas of the past have been openly addressed beyond symbolism.

Lucy is unable to move beyond the day when her body conquered so many ancestral oppressions without addressing those oppressions outright. Although she does not ultimately remove her daughter from the cycle of unfronted trauma, she does remove herself. Lucy rarely speaks throughout the remainder of the novel, and instead “stares out of the kitchen window. . . wishing something out there would come and take her away” (96). Lucy is the only family member to remain silent in the passionate debate around selling the family homeplace, and although she is present in the events narrated in the chapter entitled, “The Kitchen Ghosts: The Goode Women (Yolanda, Tookie, Minnie Mae),” Lucy's name is noticeably omitted from the list of Goode women. Joe reflects “Seemed she had divorced herself from this land. . . back when Yolanda was born out in the squash patch” (192). By the age of fifty-two, Lucy has spent time at Eastern State (presumably a mental hospital) and been medicated for depression. Yet, “where her veins should be, she [still] feels the squash vines growing up from her toes clean up to her head and up through the place where her heart should be” (183). In one of her final conversations with Joe, Lucy asks, “Did I ever tell you about the time Mama beat me?” Although

it was Minnie who beat Tookie and not Tookie who beat Lucy, this is evidence that Lucy is forever connected to oppressions that she did not experience directly.

The editors of *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma* explain “There is now a wide recognition of how past violence leaves marks on the present and future, how the past haunts us . . . and how past injustice needs to be remembered and worked through so that we can avoid repeating it” (Davis and Meretoja). For Lucy Goode-Brown, these past injustices reach back to negative connections between Black women and nature that began before she was even born. When Lucy slices her vine-veins with her “mother’s mother’s butcher knife” —perhaps her first act of agency since her delivery of Yolanda — she uses a tool meant for slicing animal meat to actively remove herself from the chain of ancestral trauma that remains unfronted within her family (168).

Connections between the Goode-Brown women and nature are important in tracing trauma throughout their generations, but Appalachian land and nature are also key in providing opportunities for liberation from those traumas by fostering Black community, joy, and respect for Black Appalachian ancestors. Consider the township of Opulence, Kentucky. Minnie Mae’s retelling of the oral history surrounding the founding of Opulence by a formerly enslaved man demonstrates her dedication to lifting stories of Black success on the land. Additionally, the particular moniker *Opulence* specifically resists Black and Appalachian stereotypes. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines *opulence* as “wealth, riches, affluence; ostentatious luxury or grandeur,” but it is unlikely that Old Man Hezekiah was aware of this formal definition. In fact, in retelling the tale, Minnie Mae recalls that “a lot of people here then didn’t know what that meant” (112). Outsiders who may have been more familiar with the definition of *opulence* would probably not immediately associate luxury or affluence with any part of Appalachia, nor with

Black communities within it. Effectively, Old Man Hezekiah's definition of *opulence* becomes the definition for Opulence. He carves the name out of the finest wood of the area and then surrounds his cursive script with ornate figures of elk, bison, foxes, and birds native to the area. Whether he knew a dictionary definition or not, Old Man Hezekiha clearly claims that the lush, natural habitat of Opulence is enough to make the township worthy of the name — a name that fosters independence from white identity and communicates the interrelatedness between the Appalachian landscape and the residents of the township. In *Appalachian Elegy*, bell hooks explains her Kentucky heritage: "When slavery ended in Kentucky, life was hard for the vast majority of black people as white supremacy and racist domination did not end. But the folks who managed to own land, especially in isolated country sites or hills . . . were content to be self-defining and self-determining, even if it meant living with less . . . they farmed and fished and made their way in the world" (3, 4). Much like the residents of hooks' home in Hopkinsville, members of the township of Opulence carved their own identity connected to nature and separate from white definition.

Dinner on the Grounds is a symbolic link among the people of Opulence, natural location, homegrown food, stories, and histories that reaches beyond the Goode-Brown family. In 1976, Minnie Mae proudly proclaims, "Dinner on the Grounds has been going on since slave times" (81). Although Opulence annually celebrates the Fourth of July to note the birth of the country (in this case, the Bicentennial), it is later in the month that the Black community really comes *together* for Dinner on the Grounds: "Every house is swarming with anticipation . . . a thrill wriggles at the center of the hottest summer" (81-82). This homecoming ritual welcomes members of the Opulence community — past and present — to gather for a potluck picnic at the churchyard cemetery. Children roll through the yards and stain their church clothes with sweat,

mud, and grass — connecting their bodies to the earth that has hosted Dinner on The Grounds “since slave times” (81, 82-83). Many women have “suitors” for their homegrown dishes. Young, single women dress up “like blossoms in a flowerbed” since “many a match is made during Dinner on the Grounds and It has always been this way,” notably locating this natural setting as important in the past, present, and future of Opulence (105, 104). Successful matches create future residents of Opulence who will one day come to the Dinner on the Grounds, and, perhaps, make his or her own match. The ritual of Dinner on the Grounds clarifies that the Goode-Brown family’s embedded connection to the land of Opulence is not singular. Opulence is a Black Appalachian community, and the ancestral lifeblood of all those who have lived it.

Throughout the novel, the friendship between Yolanda and Mona exemplifies the role that the Appalachian landscape has in fostering joy and not only passing along only suffering. At the Dinner on the Grounds in 1976, fourteen-year-old Yolanda and her best friend Mona “watch it all and learn their lessons well” (109). The girls explore and revel in their natural surroundings. Although they trespass privately-owned areas, “the girls are convinced, [the land] is not Simpson land at all, just land, free for the coming and going of rabbits and birds and girls” (68). They hunt duck eggs (but do not disturb them), pick wild gooseberries, and watch terrapin plunk into the pond. The Appalachian landscape allows young Yolanda and Mona to be curious and free. When they were ten years old, a white boy from their school, Obie Simpson (one of only three white characters to intrude into *The Birds of Opulence*) accuses them of trespassing. He pushes Mona to the ground and attempts to sexually assault her by the pond, creating a clear correlation between Tookie’s rape in the cornfield. However, unlike Tookie, Mona is not frozen by fear. Instead, perhaps emboldened by the power she feels being wild in nature, Mona recognizes Obie’s tiny penis as weakness. She laughs at him and runs away. In this scene, the landscape

strengthens Mona rather than protecting her attacker as it did during Tookie's rape. For young Yolanda and Mona, the Appalachian landscape fosters curiosity, independence, friendship, joy, and, in this particular case, bold fearlessness.

As the girls mature, so do their experiences on the land. Later, on a return trip to the Simpson land, they make a discovery. "To most, it is just an empty field . . . But Yolanda and Mona . . . see happiness in the swoosh of long, dried blades of grass, arched and swirled like a giant bird's resting place" (76). Birds serve as symbols throughout the novel: Minnie sees "not a Kentucky" bird, indicating that Lucy's baby will be a girl; a crow flies into the house before Tookie dies; and Joe Brown notes three birds together in a tree after the deaths of Minnie, Tookie, and Lucy (5). At this moment in 1974, however, Yolanda and Mona *become* the birds of Opulence. They lie in the swirled grass and "cocoon themselves away in their nest" together (76). They observe the nature around them — birds and butterflies — and whisper about the nature of their maturing bodies. Mona has started her period. A classmate is having a baby. Yolanda and Mona hope to be pretty when they grow up. In this scene, the girls tuck into nature away from the world at large. The nest creates a positive association between Black girls and nature because it is created by Black girls rather than foisted upon them by racist-sexist-controlling images. The nest also becomes an important memory that bonds them with nature and together even when maturity and circumstances set them onto different paths.

Lucy's husband, Joe Brown, can usually be found tinkering with cars or doing repairs around the neighborhood, but the story of the Goode-Brown women and their relationships with their Kentucky homeplace would be incomplete without his presence. Joe was raised in the city, but eventually he recognizes that "He now belongs here. He is more a Goode than a Brown. He is sure of that now" (192). He pays attention to stories about the land and its past and has

“learned how to blend into this river of crazy women” (4). In the novel’s final chapter, Joe Brown visits the Goode homeplace after Minnie, Tookie, and Lucy have died and Minnie Mae’s sons June and Butter have sold the family’s land “to city white folks” (193). Rather than say a final “goodbye” to the women and the homeplace, however, Joe facilitates the continuation of the bond between the Goode-Brown women and their land. He digs into the earth and plants a rose bush for each woman, speaking words of acknowledgement and ritualistically pouring out libations. With this act, Joe connects the spirits of Minnie Mae, Tookie, and Lucy to the natural world of the present and future, continuing the connection that has lasted for generations. Joe Brown’s actions illustrate that one need not be an Appalachian woman with personal ties to the land in order to create a relationship with and respect for that land. In this way, he complicates what may have been read as an essentialization between women and nature in *The Birds of Opulence*.

Intergenerational trauma continues even after Minnie Mae, Tookie, and Lucy have died—Yolanda suffers from panic attacks as an adult, and the family land now belongs to city white folks. But Wilkinson provides one final act of liberation for the Appalachian landscape and the Goode-Brown family. Builders hired by the new owners of the homeplace, who refer to Joe as a trespasser, leave a bulldozer on the property overnight during a rainstorm. The muddy land consumes the machine over the very seat from which the white men would sit to destroy the homeplace. Here, the earth of the homeplace takes action, demanding attention to Carolyn Merchant’s call in *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* to recognize nature as “an active subject, not a passive object” in (qtd. in Vakoch 10). The old folks of Opulence knew of an underground spring in that location, but they were never consulted. An old man says to Joe, “Minnie Mae’s people done come back and gave [the white folks] a piece of their minds.

I wouldn't be a bit surprised if it wuddn't Miss Minnie Mae herself leading them all to flood that dozer out" (198). With that speculation, Minnie Mae, her people, and her land join the oral histories that proclaim the strength and survival of the Goode-Browne family and Black people of Appalachia on that land.

Sankofa is an African word from the Akan tribe in Ghana that translates to "it is not wrong to fetch what is at risk of being left behind." Accessing wisdom from the past helps to ensure a strong future. A mythical bird often symbolizes the spirit of Sankofa; its feet facing forward, its head turned backward with a precious egg in its beak as seen on the cover art for *The Birds of Opulence*. Throughout the novel, Goode-Brown family's homeplace and the Appalachian landscape impact each member's ability to access the wisdom of the past to build a strong future. Minnie Mae passes along wisdom of past successes in Opulence, but her efforts are counteracted at times by the ways that she also passes along past oppressions in association with land and nature. Tookie's traumatic past directly and indirectly connects to land and nature. These traumas are much more influential in her life than any inherited wisdom might be. Lucy's life becomes a cautionary tale of the dissociation that may occur when one is unable to confront trauma openly to recognize the wisdom and opportunity for learning that may lie within it. The Goode-Brown family's ancestral land and associations with nature are significantly present within all inherited wisdom, not merely within the positive anecdotes and symbolic victories. This must be the true spirit of Sankofa: retrieve wisdom in the good, the bad, and all things in between to build a better future. In this way, Sankofa is necessary for disenfranchised Appalachians, for Black Appalachians, and for all who are connected to an old Kentucky home.

Chapter Three: Mesha Maren's *Sugar Run* (2019)

*Almost heaven . . . West Virginia
Blue Ridge Mountains, Shenandoah River*

-John Denver, "Country Roads"

The epigraph above may tempt a reader, as it has tempted many others, to sing out loud to the country crossover song that has remained popular since 1971. "Country Roads" wistfully expresses a yearning to return home by country roads and through memories . . . to painted skies, to ancient trees, to mountain mama and, most touchingly, to the "place I belong." In 2014, the West Virginia State Legislature made "Country Roads" the official song of the state, even though a close reading of the geographical places mentioned in the song (Blue Ridge Mountains, Shenandoah River) reveal that they are more aptly placed in western Virginia, not West Virginia. "Almost heaven," as described in "Country Roads" is not, it seems, in West Virginia.¹⁶ Rather, the West Virginia legislature and the lyricist of "Country Roads" are like many of us: we tend to conflate nostalgic memories with reality. In *Sugar Run*, the premiere novel from West Virginian writer Mesha Maren, the central character Jodi McCarty relies on oral histories and nostalgia of her childhood home on Bethlehem Mountain to guide her toward building a "perfect future" after eighteen years in prison (287). Like John Denver, Jodi longs for a place that does not exist — at least not where she thinks it does. *Sugar Run* follows Jodi as she is released from prison and winds her way toward a new beginning on land that has been owned by her family for five

¹⁶ For more, see Yaffe, Alva. "John Denver Had Never Even Been to West Virginia - Song Meanings." *Musicoholics*.

generations. Along her journey, Jodi collects other distraught and desperate people in search of refuge, including Ricky Dulette, her dead girlfriend's thirty-year-old brother who is both troubled and troubling; Miranda Matheson, a captivating, impulsive, pill-popping young woman; and Miranda's three, dependent young sons. *Sugar Run* moves back and forth between Jodi's life pre-and post-prison (the late 1980s and 2007) as she faces both anticipated and unexpected hurdles in her attempt to resettle in West Virginia—the place where she believes she belongs.

In this chapter, ecofeminist analysis of *Sugar Run* reveals that, although Jodi McCarty was raised in the mountains for sixteen years before her incarceration, her relationship with that land is primarily based on romanticized nostalgia, including a vague association with indigeneity. In fact, it is when Jodi's dreams of simple mountain living are thwarted by opportunistic outsiders and her vulnerability as a poor, closeted-queer, formerly incarcerated woman that she most closely experiences the reality of many past and present West Virginians' relationships with the land of that region: a relationship of disenfranchisement and oppression. In this chapter, I also investigate how *Sugar Run* signals to the entwined oppressions of people and land beyond Appalachia through the historic implications associated with the title and through the character of the Mexican immigrant, Rosalba. Finally, I address opportunities for the emancipation of Appalachian people and land from patriarchal and capitalist control within *Sugar Run*, while recognizing the inherent complications thereof.

In “The Political Ecology of Nostalgia,” David Hardiman and Parita Mukta submit that “Visions of a better, more sustainable future are [often] tied to a variety of interpretations of the past” as they explore the way that these “Edenic” visions are usually motifs rather than clear historical statements (113). Hardiman and Mukta argue that, although many ecological theorists call for a return to an “earlier and purer form of life in nature, historical research [shows us how]

romanticized and anachronistic such notions are” (133). In *Sugar Run*, Jodi falls victim to such uninformed Edenic interpretations of the past as she plans her perfect future on her childhood home of Bethlehem Mountain. After eighteen years in prison—more of her life spent behind bars than not—Jodi relies upon oral histories and nostalgia to create her own romanticized version of the relationships between her ancestors and their lives in the West Virginia mountains. Similar to the ecological theorists interrogated by Hardiman and Mukta, Jodi idealizes a relationship between humans and nature that was never truly a part of her ancestry. In doing so, she overlooks the complicated history that entwines the oppressions of many Appalachian people with the land of that region as she pursues a refuge that does not exist for her.

Incarcerated at age seventeen and released at thirty-five, Jodi’s relationship with her childhood mountain home is primarily built upon dreams and memories (and sometimes dreams within memories). She muses, “Mountains were a dream that had ended when the judge said life in prison . . . far off, West Virginia, home” (5). Notably, Jodi does not seem to mourn family, friends, or even her freedom – only the mountains. When she is unexpectedly released from a life sentence, Jodi is immediately compelled to return to her mountain dream. She remembers Bethlehem Mountain as a vague “me-shaped space” in the universe, where “the smell of wheat in the field . . . (the) sunlight scissoring through the trees . . . the rhythms of the days and even the air around her had always felt right” (81). As she travels toward home, Jodi further reflects upon her childhood on the mountain:

Everything else — the school and town had seemed difficult and confusing. . .

She never quite understood the connections among other kids. . . a hurdle

between her and the hours of long after-school walks, the soft hills of orchard

grass, neon toadstools spiking up through rotting stumps, the perfect

palm-sized smoothness of horse chestnuts, and the celestial patterns of oak leaves in the pond slice that split with a bright cracking sound under the pressure of her boots. (125)

Jodi remembers Bethlehem Mountain as a refuge from her peers and others in her community. She envisions that she can return to her special “me shaped space” after her incarceration and hopes to plant a garden, raise some yearlings; she sometimes even dreams of raising a family of her own there (81). Jodi fails to recognize, however, that she felt this kinship with the Appalachian landscape during her childhood, a distant time when she remained ignorant of the machinations and reality of the world at large.

Memories passed down from her grandmother Effie, and oral histories from generations before either of them, supplement Jodi’s own childhood memories of the mountain. “The idea of Effie’s land was more than just a need for a place to call home . . . Even when she’d been there, on the farm, with Effie alive, Jodi had been bending her mind toward the memories of before . . . filled up with backward yearning” (15). With these oral histories as a guide, Jodi imagines that she would have been well suited for the mountain life of the past. She feels as if she has “slipped through time somehow better fitted among the dusky eyed ancestral men in Effie’s stories who carried slabs of oak down the mountains to build beds . . . planting their acreage by the light of headlamps after full days spent in the coal mines” (124). Although she is compelled to return home to Bethlehem Mountain much as the biblical Mary and Joseph were compelled to travel home to Joseph’s childhood home in Bethlehem, Jodi’s Bethlehem is based on childhood memories, mythologies, and the emotions brought about by nostalgia rather than an actual geographical location.

In their indictment of ecologists who falsely romanticize the past, Mutka and Hardiman cite Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva's seminal text, *Ecofeminism*:

Let us take the argument put forward by Mies and Shiva: that the "traditional" civilization of India preserved the forest, while western civilization destroyed it. Historians have established a long history of forest destruction, often through arson in military campaigns, dating back well over two thousand years in India. Mies and Shiva ignore historical evidence in favor of a depiction of an "organic" society, in which rich and poor are supposed to have shared a common ecological wisdom, and society operated . . . according to the principle of "democratic pluralism." In reality, pre-colonial India was a highly hierarchical and patriarchal society, with power in the hands of elites who claimed a god-given superiority.

(29)

Similar to Mutka and Hardiman's interpretation of Mies and Shiva's assertion in *Ecofeminism*, Jodi McCarty idealizes a relationship between herself, her ancestors, and Bethlehem Mountain through a history that is not supported by historical research.

Relying on her grandmother Effie's stories and her own memories allows Jodi to overlook the documented, complicated histories of many West Virginians and other Appalachian people who have attempted to live with the mountain land in that region without interference. Effie tells stories of five generations of their family's coal miners and rural farmers who settled on Bethlehem Mountain, but within her stories, she also embeds a vague association with Indigenous people of the region. "Got the worst of both sides, her grandmother Effie had loved to say. British teeth and Injun eyes" (7). This implied ancestral indigeneity allows Effie and then Jodi to co-opt Native people and their history into their feelings about the land without

recognizing their documented white ancestral responsibility in Native loss and tragedy on that same land.

In *Red States: Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, and Southern Studies* (2018), Gina Caison addresses how the stories people tell about the lands they inhabit and why they inhabit them, whether creation stories or sanctioned histories, matter for the recognition of their sovereignty. Caison explains that

Because so much of southern identity, particularly white southern identity, is founded on settler-colonial narratives of land connection, the historic and continued presence of Native people in the region represents a hurdle for this associative bond. To overcome this reality, Euro-American southerners have often mediated their racial identities through Native ones in order to feel appropriately and justifiably connected to their adopted and bellum-defended homeland. (19)

In *Sugar Run*, Jodi's association to indigenous ancestry is mentioned only once. This singular instance allows Jodi to imagine a connection to Native people, when it is more probable that her family's white ancestry participated in the colonization which displaced and oppressed Native people to gain control of valuable land. In an interview with West Virginia Public Broadcasting, Wayne Appleton, of the Appalachian American Indian Association, says, "The official state position is that there were no Indians here when the white settlers arrived. Nobody knows why but they weren't. And the fact is that's nonsense" (qtd in Knollinger). Archaeological studies suggest that the first people came to the region now known as West Virginia about 14,000 years ago, but most of what is known about Indigenous people of this area, however, revolves around tribes that lived there in the 1600s most of whom were forced to relocate in the

mid 1800s. The state of West Virginia has yet to officially recognize centuries of lived experiences of Shawnee, Saponi, and Delaware people (and others).¹⁷ Although Jodi loosely imagines a connection to Indigenous people of West Virginia, her family was, most likely, among the opportunistic outsiders who entwined the oppression of Native people with the domination of Appalachian land.

In addition to a vague association with indigeneity, Jodi also romanticizes five generations of her ancestors' lives as coal miners and rural farmers on Bethlehem Mountain. This would place her family settling in the region roughly around the turn of the twentieth-century. Ronald D. Eller's *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (1982) documents that the dual domination of white Appalachian people and nature was well underway by that time. Eller explains that, during this period, outsiders, often blinded by what he calls "urban provincialism," surveyed the mountains and its resources and determined that they needed to bring "civilization" to the people of the region (xviii). Not so coincidentally, "civilization" also brought profit and power to the urban interlopers. This power structure — outsiders with money gaining control of the land and its people for their own wealth and power — charts the history of coal mining in Appalachia. As King Coal began its reign, large Northeastern and Midwestern utility companies pitted small coal operators against one another to drive down prices. As mine owners focused on market competition, coal miners suffered some of the highest fatality rates among industrial workers. Correspondingly, coal operators attempted to strictly control their labor force to keep costs down and compete against each other. Coal operators controlled the education available to workers and

¹⁷ In this same article by Knollinger, Bonnie Brown, head of Native American Studies at West Virginia University, clarifies, "the Cherokee did not consider West Virginia homeland, but, instead, hunting land, and hunting land might mean they were there six months out the year or more."

their families, they controlled the local economy through company stores and company script, they controlled medical care, and they controlled the messages of religious ministry, all in an effort to weaken workers' and their families' agency in their own lives. Entire communities were kept poor, vulnerable, and dependent upon dangerous coal mining jobs in order to reap profits for coal corporations such as Boone Company Coal, Rosemont Coal Company, New River Coal Company, and White Oak Coal Company.¹⁸ In *Sugar Run*, Jodi romanticizes her ancestors' relationships with the land, but she fails to recognize the fact that the poverty and vulnerability that limit her opportunities to thrive and threaten Bethlehem Mountain's future also existed five generations earlier.

When Jodi arrives back in Render, West Virginia, she finds that her dreams of living peacefully on the mountain are foiled by a variety of opportunistic outsiders who intertwine the dominations of nature and marginalized people: an absentee landowner, encroaching fracking corporations, and a wealthy, self-centered philanthropist. The year prior to Jodi's incarceration, her grandmother, Effie, suffered two strokes. Effie later slit her wrists rather than be taken into a nursing home and away from her mountain land. Although Effie officially willed the land to Jodi, Jodi's parents lost her right to ownership when they did not (could not) pay the land taxes during Jodi's imprisonment. A man in Florida was able to benefit from her family's negative circumstances and purchased their acres of mountain land for \$3,500 in back taxes. Jodi finds that the land that had belonged to her family for five generations is now the property of an absentee owner who does not seem to have shown interest in it since its purchase. Additionally, in the eighteen years of Jodi's absence, much of the mountain property surrounding her family's

¹⁸ Although West Virginia miners attempted to unionize to improve their conditions, mine owners and coal operators fought back fiercely resulting in a series of violent episodes now known as the West Virginia Mine Wars between 1912-1921.

land was sold to corporate fracking operations. The idyllic landscape of Jodi's memory now features gigantic fracking machinery, over-priced dives that also serve as hubs for illegal drug distribution, polluted water, and blasting sounds of the "woods being scalped" that overpower the ambient sounds of the mountain (190). The fracking companies are quickly encroaching on the area of Jodi's childhood home. Her only opportunity to protect the land from destruction requires that she sacrifice her self-respect and any hope of regaining ownership to a fetishizing outsider cloaked as a philanthropist. Unexpectedly, Jodi comes closest to experiencing the relationship between many of her West Virginian ancestors and land when her disenfranchisement is coordinated and manipulated by opportunistic outsiders.

The poverty Jodi and her family experience in *Sugar Run* and the contemporary poverty in Appalachia is historically connected to the intentional manipulation of local people and plundering of land in that land. In *Worlds Apart: Why Poverty Persists in Rural America* (1999), Cynthia M. Duncan and Robert Coles explore generational poverty in areas of Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, and Northern New England, documenting that chronic poverty in these rural areas often began as deliberate, long-term control of the lives of local people by those in power — local elites and their outside employers — to secure labor forces. On the surface, these powerful men seemed to offer economic opportunities to impoverished residents, but these jobs came with a hefty price. In areas of Appalachia, people were kept poor and dependent upon dangerous coal mining jobs (and an economy dependent upon these jobs) in order for powerful coal corporations to reap enormous profits. In the 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty brought media attention to the Appalachian poor but did little to create structural changes such as investing in bettering educational resources or fairly distributing opportunities and benefits—policy actions that would improve their plight. Today, as King Coal declines in

power, the environment, people, and sense of community in rural West Virginia continue to suffer under economies built upon extraction through the growth of mountaintop removal and hydraulic fracking efforts. For the purposes of this paper, research will focus on the effects of fracking as this is the form of extraction particular to this novel.

In West Virginia, fracking currently entwines the domination of people and land for the benefit of those in power reminiscent of how coal mining once did. Fracking is a means of gas extraction that requires blasting large volumes of water, sand, and chemicals into subterranean rock to drive out and capture natural gas. Natural gas is significantly more productive than other fossil fuels, but opponents of fracking cite numerous environmental and health threats, from poisoned groundwater and the destruction of habitats to heightened ground-level ozone that can increase the risk of asthma and other respiratory issues for local residents. In “A Community Divided: Hydraulic Fracturing in Rural Appalachia,” Michele Morrone, Amy Chadwick, and Natalie Kruse review the environmental and public health effects of fracking and contribute to understanding the sociological impacts on people in surrounding Appalachian communities. They find that fracking can also divide impoverished community members between those willing to face environmental and health risks for well-paying jobs and those who are not. Their results suggest that “unconventional gas extraction has the potential to fracture more than just shale [and environments and residential health]; it may fracture communities as well” (Morrone 207). In *Sugar Run*, Jodi bears witness to these multiple fractures upon her return to Bethlehem Mountain.

In Jodi’s idealization of Effie’s oral histories, she perceives that “for so many years the mountain had protected this place, the landscape, keeping it safe for those willing to scrape out a life” (122). This romanticized history overlooks the fact that the landscape and its resources

attracted outsiders to the area, rather than protecting it from them. Jodi witnesses the negative impact that fracking is having on Bethlehem Mountain and the town of Render when she returns home. She is immediately distracted by the sight of a monstrous blue flame flaring on the mountain. Her nearest neighbor, Farren, is a part of Effie's generation. He has lived on the mountain most of his life and is troubled by the destruction he sees. He tells Jodi, "My well's contaminated . . . Got to drink rainwater now . . . Them gas companies have piped [methane] up from the middle of the earth" (196). Farren strikes a match that sets his well water on fire to demonstrate. Although it is only a matter of time before Jodi's family's former land is destroyed by fracking as well, her brothers ridicule Farren's public protests of the fracking companies. Instead, they prefer to capitalize on the presence of the frackers by selling drugs to the workers rather than to protect the mountain and its environment. The discord between Farren and Jodi's brothers represents the rifts within many Appalachian communities faced with fracking. Jodi's lover, Miranda, finds employment at the town's new dive bar that sells overpriced drinks to capitalize on the influx of money that fracking brings to the local economy. However, the bar also serves as a drug hub for those in search of relief from pain or poverty—an addicting, unsustainable bandage for the hardships that surround them. The entwined dominations of Appalachian people and land continues.

Another obstruction to Jodi's creation of her perfect future on Bethlehem Mountain comes disguised as altruism. Lynn Bower — the earth-goddess-styled leader of a conservation group, Don't Frack with Us, holds the power to save Jodi's land from the frackers. Jodi learns that if there is enough Marcellus shale under her family's acreage, she may convince Lynn to purchase the land before the fracking companies do. In this case, Jodi's family's area of the mountain would be kept from fracking destruction. When Jodi meets Lynn for the first time,

Lynn is draped in silk scarves, identifies herself as a “big tree hugger,” mesmerized by the mountains’ “womb-like” essence (202, 204). This outward femininity aside, Lynn represents patriarchal control. Like the fracking companies (the mountaintop removal companies and the mining companies before them), Lynn is singularly focused on “all the riches here, the coal — the shale!” rather than the needs of impoverished Appalachian people (203). Although Lynn is intent on conserving nature while miners and frackers are intent on extracting from it, ultimately all parties intend to use their money and accompanying power to pursue self-centered agendas that limit the agency of others. In Lynn’s case, this means purchasing a connection to both land on which she is an outsider and to mountain people such as Jodi, whom she fetishizes. Lynn Bower’s brand of patriarchy is especially pernicious because it is disguised as compassion. Like other “helpers” Jodi has encountered (the lawyer who seems overly proud at helping poor people, the court appointed therapist whom Jodi imagines sharing anecdotes about “her brilliant hillbilly client” at cocktail parties, and the ACLU representatives who want Jodi to be the poster child for their claims of homophobia in the Georgia court system), Lynn assumes she knows best for Jodi (14). Lynn prioritizes her own agenda rather than consider the experiences, insights, or desires of those people she is claiming to help. In this way, Lynn Bower is reminiscent of many white women in the first waves of American feminism who fought for their own best interests before recognizing the inherent intersectional oppressions within their fight for equality. Lynn’s character evokes ways that outsiders have historically railroaded their own agendas in Appalachia under the auspices of altruism. In *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism and Appalachian Literature* (2003), Elizabeth Engelhardt discusses how wealthy women ventured into the Appalachian region as Voyeurs, Tourists, and Social Crusaders at the turn of the twentieth century. These outsiders to Appalachian culture assumed the inferiority of

Appalachian people to highlight their own importance. Similar to Englehardt's description of the Voyeur, Lynn is titillated to peer into Jodi's sordid past and abject poverty. Like Englehardt's Tourist, Lynn is mesmerized with how the Appalachian landscape moves her spirit and makes her feel — without respecting the existing relationship between current residents and the landscape. Lynn condescends, "It's not just fracking and mining that threaten this place. There are people who have land here . . . who just don't even know how to care" (298). Lynn Bower assumes that she knows best. As Englehardt describes Social Crusaders who sought to save Appalachian people from their "backward" culture, Lynn seeks to save Appalachian land by purchasing it from people she perceives as ignorant locals before fracking companies are able to do so. Englehardt's Social Crusaders were determined to save Appalachians from Appalachia. Lynn Bower is determined to save Appalachian land from Appalachian people. Although Lynn's efforts successfully save parts of the mountain from destruction, her refusal to consider Jodi's request to repurchase her family land in the future underlines Lynn's ultimate priority: to use her money and accompanying power for her own gratification. Although Jodi is eventually able to return to her home land after prison as she had dreamed, she finds that returning to her former life, or living as she imagined her ancestors did, is hardly more accessible after her release from prison than it was when she was locked behind bars.

The entwined dominations of Appalachian people and land through coal mining, mountaintop removal, and fracking have made contemporary fiction about the region ripe for ecofeminist analyses.¹⁹ *Sugar Run* adds opportunities to explore the effect of powerful corporations' uses and abuses of land and locals and also offers opportunities for ecofeminist

¹⁹ See for example, ecofeminist work around W. Dykeman's *The Tall Woman*, D. Giardina's *Storming Heaven*, B. Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* and *Prodigal Summer*, A. Pancake's *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, L. Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies*.

analysis that are still open for exploration. Specifically, *Sugar Run* reveals ways that Jodi's identity as a gay woman in rural West Virginia adds layers to the oppressions she experiences from outsiders. In "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism," Geta Gaard contends that, within the ecofeminist assumption that the liberation of women and other marginalized groups depends upon the liberation of nature (and vice versa), the voices of the LGBTQ people are often committed or commandeered by ecofeminists outside of the queer community. Gaard explains that, although perhaps well-intentioned, heterosexuals may not grasp the multiple dualisms within the queer experience. She asserts that the problem of oppression based on sexuality is not limited to the

heterosexual/queer dualism. As queer theorists have shown, the larger problem is the erotophobia of Western culture, a fear of the erotic so strong that only one form of sexuality is overtly allowed; only in one position; and only in the context of certain legal, religious, and social sanctions (Hollibaugh 1983, 1989; Rubin 1989). The oppression of queers may be described more precisely, then, as the product of two mutually reinforcing dualisms: heterosexual/queer, and reason/the erotic. (118)

In other words, sexual attraction is never reasonable, yet patriarchal forces continue to force their ideas of reason upon it to gain power for themselves.²⁰ This double dualism complicates the oppressions experienced by queer people in ways that heterosexuals may not recognize. "It is time for queers to come out of the woods and speak for ourselves," Gaard argues, about the nuances of oppressions based on sexuality as entwined with oppressions of

²⁰Gaard notes that western patriarchal culture aligns most oppressed identity groups with nature to sanction their oppression, but that "queer sexualities are frequently devalued for being 'against nature'" (119). She concludes that, although ironic, "contradictions such as this are of no interest" to the ruling patriarchy (119).

nature (115). In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* about the creation of *Sugar Run*, Mesha Maren shares how she drew upon her experiences as a queer woman growing up, settling in, and feeling connected to rural West Virginia, where many people could make it “a pretty hard place to live as a queer woman” (Canfield). Although closeted, Jodi’s queer identity adds to the challenges she faces regaining her footing in her rural hometown among her own neighbors and kin, thus adding an additional hurdle to her desire to reclaim and thus protect Bethlehem Mountain from imminent destruction.

Love for land and poverty may bond many Appalachians together, but Jodi’s queerness separates her from their bond in *Sugar Run*. Jodi begins to recognize her outsider status in her own community when she is a young teenager. She thinks back to one meaningful childhood memory that does not take place on the mountain or even include her grandmother Effie. She remembers when she and other middle-school students were assigned to clean the library after a destructive flood in Render.²¹ Among the muck, Jodi discovers a collection of Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poems, soaked, swollen, and splayed open to “The Lady of Shalott”:

She’d wiped the sand away and read about the solitary woman who, from
her tower room, captured the lushness of the world around her—*Long fields
of barley and of rye, / That clothe the world and meet the sky; / . . . Little
breezes dusk and shiver / . . . unhailed / The shallop flitteth silken-sailed /
Skimming down to Camelot—.*” (126)

²¹ Consistent floods in mining regions provide yet another example of how outside corporations place profit above the safety of local people and the stability of the environment. In the infamous flood that followed the collapse of the Buffalo Creek dam in West Virginia in 1972, 124 people were killed and hundreds of coal miners and their families were left homeless and traumatized. The New York-owned Buffalo Creek-Pittston Coal Company was eventually forced to pay for its destructive negligence and violations of multiple Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety laws. For more, see Cowan, “The Buffalo Creek Disaster.”

Jodi is mesmerized by Tennyson's romantic imagery of the natural world and the ways that his language expresses how she feels about the beauty of Bethlehem Mountain. She recognizes that for her, however, "it was more than that, though, it was about being hidden right in the middle of things. It summed up everything Jodi felt but could not name, everything in her high-strung teenage heart. Tennyson was writing about *her*, she thought" (126). Tennyson's overflow of appreciation for the beauty in nature in this poem is particularly moving to Jodi because, similar to the Lady of Shalott, who must view the world from a tower window, Jodi is an outsider in a community while surrounded by the natural beauty of the Appalachian Mountains.

The editors of *Storytelling in Queer Appalachia: Imagining and Writing the Unspeakable Other* (2020) unpack ways that LGBTQ people are often both personally and geographically isolated in rural areas of Appalachia and how these dual isolations make life more difficult (Glasby, et.al). Rural Appalachian areas are usually socially conservative, for the Bible Belt lies directly within Central Appalachia, and people are often socially unaccepting of LGBTQ people, effectively isolating them within the land of their rural communities. The geographic isolation of rural regions often means a lack of access to affirmative resources for LGBTQ people, services that are usually available in more metropolitan areas. Executive director of the Campaign for Southern Equality, Jasmine Beach-Ferrara, explains, "One of the first things we think about when it comes to Appalachia is the compounding effects for LGBTQ folks who are living with lower incomes and living in poverty . . . especially for people living in more rural areas, it's hard to access basic services to begin with, but the additional burden of finding LGBTQ-friendly services creates real challenges" (qtd. in Nichols). In *Sugar Run*, Jodi represents the experiences

of many LGBTQ people in rural Appalachia: poverty compounded with isolation on land that is also an inescapable part of their identities.

Storytelling in Queer Appalachia shares author Silas House's keynote speech to the 2014 Annual Appalachian Studies Conference, as he described how queer Appalachians are reminded of –and made to feel their differences in their own home regions. House recognized that “Homophobia lurks in the hollers, and slithers along the ridges of Appalachia” (qtd. in Glasby 4). Jodi experiences that lurking and slithering homophobia when she returns home from prison. Her brother A.J. blurts, “I heard you turned queer,” and Jodi turns away. . . smelling “the stink of her own shame” at the “bitter drawl of that word” (115). Jodi feels his homophobic disgust and internalizes it as self-loathing. Later, in a loosely veiled attempt at blackmail, Jodi's other brother, Dennis, interrogates her life on the mountain: “You and Miranda got some kind of sick shit goin on up here? . . . I can't stand to think of those boys growing up around something sick like that” (143). Here, Dennis all but threatens to out his sister's homosexuality (or worse) if she does not agree to hide his illegal bulk drugs on her property. Dennis also offers to loan Jodi money toward repurchasing their family land if she acquiesces to his scheme. Jodi's love for the land, abject poverty, and lack of opportunities, along with the threats that inherently accompany her queerness, make her susceptible to her brother's blackmail. There is no one in her community to whom she can confide or turn to for support. Therefore, although Jodi has returned to her mountain home as she desired, as a queer woman, she remains an outsider among the people on this land and unable to create the stability she would need to protect the family property from destruction.

Ecofeminist theorists often “focus on language, particularly the symbolic connections between sexist and naturist language, i.e., language that inferiorizes women and nonhuman

nature by naturalizing women and feminizing nature” (Warren 1993). As seen in *Bloodroot* and *The Birds of Opulence*, *Sugar Run* shows the damage caused by such confluence. Maren expresses the impact that imprisonment has had on Jodi through language that relates her to animals. For example, upon her unexpected release from Jaxton Penitentiary, Jodi shuffles toward the prison van and is promptly “shooed” by a guard, much as one might treat a troublesome varmint (5). When she glances back, she perceives the prison yard as a “pen” of wet cement (7). In these instances, Maren subtly aligns Jodi with animals to demonstrate how she has been dominated within the prison system. Jodi’s confinement has also taught her to accept an association between herself and dominated animals. When she is released, she is ostensibly free, but instead of expressing joy or excitement, she predicts that the weight of decisions and consequences to come with her new freedom beyond prison will be “yoked about her neck” (12). Later, as Jodi begins to acclimate to the outside world, she finds that when her stomach begins to rumble “without thinking about it she’d been waiting for the chow bell” similar to Pavlov’s dog. (19). Nineteen years in the prison system has conditioned Jodi to surrender her individual agency, and Maren expresses Jodi’s capitulation through language that associates her with livestock. In “Women in US Prisons: Behind the Bars of the Patriarch,” Rebecca Reverie and Vernetta D. Young explain that the United States’ criminal justice system reflects the patriarchal society in which it was created and continues to be sustained — one that centers elite, white males as superior to all others. As a result, US prisons are overwhelmingly populated by poor people and people of color. While men who are often of color and/or poor are still more likely than women to be incarcerated, the female prison population also often of color and/or poor is increasing at a faster rate than that of men. Jodi’s generational poverty and the resulting circumstances of this status place her firmly within this statistic. As the patriarchal forces of the

criminal justice system and American culture create an inevitable snare for those who are not elite, white males, once incarcerated, the “primary purpose [of prisons] is to [continue to] silence and oppress rather than rehabilitate” (Reverie 93). Jodi earns her GED during her imprisonment, but statistics suggest that a prisoner like Jodi would have also likely experienced physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, medical neglect, and the subjectivation of her body from within the prison’s culture and rules. These and other efforts are “deployed to break the women’s will and render them passive, silent subjects to the arbitrary will of the state” (Reverie 102). In Jodi’s particular case, lack of rehabilitation, combined with intentional efforts to break her spirit, work to arrest her maturity at age seventeen and increase the difficulty she has in reclaiming and protecting her family’s land on Bethlehem Mountain. In this way, the oppressions Jodi experiences due to the patriarchal forces of the prison system contribute to the susceptibility of the Appalachian land to destruction.

Jodi’s former imprisonment negatively disrupts her life in practical as well as psychological ways. When her life sentence is suddenly and surprisingly commuted, Jodi is given bus fare and ordered to check in with her parole officer for further instruction. There, she learns that her parole requires that she “*Shall not* leave the geographic limits [of Render, West Virginia] . . . *shall not* violate any laws. . . *shall not* associate with persons engaged in criminal activity. . . *shall* work regularly. . . in other words, *get a job* and keep it” (106). Jodi is legally bound to stay in and around the land where she wants to be. However, being bound to this land also binds her to circumstances within its boundaries. For example, as Jodi no longer owns Effie’s land, she is illegally trespassing, and therefore “violating laws” as she homesteads in the cabin of her childhood. She immediately, although unknowingly, associates with “persons engaged in criminal activity” when she reconnects with her brother, a drug trafficker, and one of

only four people she seems to still know in the area. Jodi's felony record further limits the already scarce job opportunities in rural Render. She finds that most places of employment require a criminal background check. Although Jodi is free from prison, felony disenfranchisement adds to the challenges she faces reconnecting with the people of her community while exacerbating her poverty and inability to reclaim her home land.

Jodi's experiences as a closeted queer and formerly incarcerated Appalachian woman take on new significance when read with an ecofeminist perspective. By including Rosalba's experiences in the novel, *Sugar Run* also illuminates entwined oppressions of people and land beyond Appalachia, thus recognizing a broader ecofeminist awareness. Jodi's brother manipulates her into hiding Rosalba, a Mexican immigrant woman, on the mountain homestead as a part of his drug-dealing machinations. Jodi learns that Rosalba was raised in a farming family and grew up to teach at a university in Mexico. Eventually, however, Rosalba chose to flee her home. She explains, "Everything was gone . . . The land I grew up on, the way we used to live . . . Now it is, if you do not grow for the cartel, do not farm at all" (195). Rosalba's escape, however, does not ultimately free her. She eventually works at a brothel under the control of a powerful drug dealer and remains dominated by patriarchal control. She explains, however, "Here, I am not teaching, but at least I am sending money home" (194). The embedded story of Rosalba's plight within *Sugar Run* recognizes that the confluent oppressions of women and land are not essentialized in the Appalachian region of the United States. Life in Mexico is not sustainable for Rosalba, as life in Render is not sustainable for Jodi. The fates of both women are tied directly to how the lands of their childhoods are used to earn profit for people in power: Jodi's through corporate fracking in West Virginia, Rosalba's through the cartel's control of her

farm in Mexico. By the end of the novel, each woman sacrifices part of herself for what she perceives to be a greater good.

The title *Sugar Run* suggests the global history of the entwined dominations of land and people by those in power. At first, the word sugar, the sweet-tasting substance once primarily obtained from sugar cane, may evoke images of candy aisles, pastry racks, and maybe even memories of southern kisses, “gimme some sugar, honey!” Historically, however, the realities concerning the farming and commodification of sugar are quite grim. Marc Aronson and Marina Budhos’ *Sugar Changed the World: A Story of Magic, Spice, Slavery, Freedom, and Science* (2010) documents how slavery within the sugar industry did more to reshape the world than any ruler, empire, or war had ever done. Over the four centuries that followed Columbus’ arrival on the mainland of Central and South America and the islands of the West Indies, countless indigenous lives were destroyed. Additionally, an estimated eleven million Africans were enslaved in the pursuit of sweet sugar, not including the lives lost during the Middle Passage. The dual dominations of land and people by men in power are clearly evident in the brutal beginnings of the sugar industry. Before the turn of the nineteenth century, the advent of sugar processing in the Louisiana Territory prompted an explosion of sugar plantations up and down the banks of the Mississippi River, although importing sugar and enslaved people in the American colonies were prevalent much earlier. The success of the sugar industry relied upon rich soil, expertise of planters from the sugar cane-growing regions of the Gulf and Caribbean, and the labor of thousands of enslaved people used to plant, maintain, harvest, process, package, and transport sugar.

The corresponding dominations of land and people by (mostly white) men with power within the American sugar industry can be traced through the decades to our current times. As

recently as 2018, the *1619 Project* brought attention to Wenceslaus Provost, Jr., a fourth-generation Black sugar cane farmer who lost his home to foreclosure after defaulting on federal Farm Service Agency loans. A whistleblower eventually revealed that Provost had been systematically and racially discriminated against by his bank so white sugar cane farmers would be more successful. Provost's story, and the stories of Black farmers like him, continue to connect sugar cane farming prosperity to the use and abuse of Black people and the greed of people in power.

Sugar is also dietetically linked to the manipulation of people of color and the poor. Now, however, corn, heavily subsidized by the American government, has replaced sugar cane at the top of the sweetener list. Sweeteners made from corn such as high fructose corn syrup (HFCS) are cheap to process and purchase. As a result, food manufacturers add exorbitant amounts of HFCS to foods ranging from sodas to soups. According to Derek Beres' "There Was No Relationship between Obesity and Poverty - until High-Fructose Corn Syrup," almost all health experts agree that the corresponding increased HFCS consumption is directly linked to the American obesity epidemic, as well as the escalating diabetes, heart disease, and rates of certain cancers. HFCS is particularly linked to obesity among poor people. People who are poor must eat food that is accessible and affordable, and food deserts drastically limit food accessibility in low-income communities. Food manufacturers continue to reap the economic benefits of HFCS even as waistlines expand, and diabetes rates soar. Once again, people with power manipulate the lives of others for their own financial gain, and once again, sugar is at the center of this manipulation. The history and success of the sugar industry inherently relies upon the entwined oppressions of people and land. The title *Sugar Run* connects to these historic oppressions as well.

The term “sugar run” also centers the metaphoric connections between Appalachian people and land as Jodi and Paula, her first female lover, both associate “sugar run” with owning rural land, and the refuge that they imagine land ownership will bring. Paula uses the phrase to justify their gambling-focused road trip: “All it takes is just one great hand . . . Just one night, with one sweet sugar run, and you’re hooked” (50). For Paula, a sugar run refers to a gambler’s good fortune. Paula hopes that a sugar run will help her “buy a piece of land. Gonna build a house and move my little brother . . . He needs a good place to live” (51). Paula’s quest for a sugar run is initially connected to owning land as a means of escaping poverty and forging protected futures for herself and her ten-year-old brother. Notably, however, Paula’s goals for land ownership are vague and fleeting; she does not seem to have a specific place in mind, and she never mentions land as motivation for her gambling again after this comment. Instead, Paula’s search for a sugar run quickly devolves into drug-fueled armed robberies, dealing cocaine in strip clubs, and kidnapping a young woman for ransom money. She commits crimes for quick cash, rather than saving up to buy land that may secure her future. Jodi’s concept of sugar run, on the other hand, is firmly grounded in the memories of her home on Bethlehem Mountain.

Jodi “listens to [Paula] speak of sugar runs and thinks of the runs she knows — flashing mountain creeks that appear out of nowhere after a good rain — and she smiles at the appropriateness of this phrasing: like a creek that glistens and then disappears, leaving only swirled leaves” (50). Paula has vague ideas about land ownership through a sugar run. Jodi imagines returning to romanticized memories of Bethlehem Mountain through a sugar run. When Paula mentions that a sugar run can be used to purchase “a good place to live,” Jodi’s mind leads her back in time to her childhood home: Effie’s house, “the row of three small rooms, long

porch, and the garden with bean poles pointed sky high” notably complete with garden and sky in her vision (51). Although Jodi is younger and less experienced than Paula, she seems to recognize the illusive nature of *both* of their concepts of sugar run as both eventually “glisten and then disappear” (50). Jodi’s recognition proves prescient. As the plot of *Sugar Run* progresses, both young women victimize others and then become victims in their runs toward pursuits of sugar runs, similar to the ways that people in the pursuit of sugar have victimized countless people throughout history.

In 2012, *Feminist Ecocriticism: Environment, Women, and Literature* challenged and built upon the works of earlier ecofeminist literary criticism (Gaard and Murphy 1998; Carr 2000; Campbell 2008) that illuminate ways in which literature may reveal the “oppressiveness of patriarchal, dualistic thinking” through relationships between gender and nature (Vakoch 3). *Feminist Ecocriticism* asserts that “ecofeminism should not be confined to critique but should also identify and articulate liberatory ideals that can be actualized in the real world. . . strategies of emancipation that have already begun to give rise to more hopeful ecological narratives” (3). In *Sugar Run*, Jodi and Farren, her reclusive neighbor on Bethlehem Mountain, each explore different “strategies of emancipation” as they work toward emancipation for the land and for themselves.

Jodi’s neighbor Farren and his family have lived on the land neighboring Effie’s for generations—he must be close to Effie’s age, as she once dated his brother when they were young. Unlike Jodi’s family members—and assumedly many other long-time residents, Farren remains committed to the mountain’s welfare when it is threatened by fracking. Farren works toward emancipating his land from destruction by participating in protests against the fracking companies. Farren’s simple act of remaining on his property rather than selling out to fracking

companies is also a rebellious act toward emancipation for himself and the land. The longer he stays, the longer the land stays protected. When he supports Jodi and her homestead, he also considers the land. Farren tells Jodi that he believes “It is important to leave [the mountain] and to return. The future depends upon the young. . . it will take you young folks to save it” (233). When he supplies Jodi, Miranda, and her children with food and shelter (deer meat and wood to patch the roof), he is laying groundwork for their future success, and, in turn, the welfare of the mountain. Through each of these seeming acts of rebellion; protests, perseverance, and paving the way for future generations, Farren works toward emancipation for his land as well as that of others as he sustains his own relationship with it.

Jodi lives in intimate connection to her family land while flouting the laws of patriarchy and capitalism to create a semblance of liberation from the oppressions that bind her . . . if only briefly. She relies on Bethlehem Mountain to provide a refuge from her past, the chaos of her time with Paula and her time in prison, and a comfortable place to plan her future. She plants carrot and turnip seeds, proving that she is committed to a future tied to this land. Jodi creates a simple home with a woman she loves. They share some of the natural joys of mountain life with Miranda’s young boys: picking blackberries, nurturing a stray dog, watching baby birds in their nest, climbing trees, and playing outdoors. There are also natural dangers inevitable in mountain life (poisonous snakes, scrapes, and falls), but unlike facing the challenges of the wider world, Jodi is well-equipped to tackle the challenges posed by nature: “Up here it did not matter that she had no real life skills . . . walking through the fields nothing outside the present could interrupt, not even hunger . . . up on the mountain nothing to spend money on” (132). Jodi is homesteading, but she is also illegally trespassing and therefore breaking laws that could send her back to prison. Jodi rebels against these laws and the patriarchal logic under which they

were created. Similarly, living rustically, with no electricity or running water, also provides liberation from the very power companies who are connected to fracking the land. Thus, Jodi challenges her oppression from patriarchal laws and capitalism as she determines to make her home back on Bethlehem Mountain.

Jodi's respite from the chaos of her past and the demands of her future are significant, but short-lived. She has no legal rights to her family land, no realistic opportunity to repurchase it, and no recourse as mountaintop removal encroaches to destroy it. Jodi's only chance at protecting the land from destruction requires that she relinquish all hope of future ownership to Lynn Bower and her conservation group. In her past, Jodi bristled at receiving help from outsiders. When she is around Lynn, Jodi imagines herself as "an organ grinder's monkey with this little cup of money," but she also knows that "with the land in Lynn's name it would be safe," (283, 297). Eventually, Jodi relinquishes all hopes of returning to her family's land, and she gives in to Lynn Bower. Jodi sacrifices her pride and her personal desires in order to prioritize the protection of the land. With this selfless act, Jodi emancipates her family's former acreage and saves it from imminent destruction by the fracking companies

Disconnecting herself from her childhood homeland creates opportunities for Jodi's own liberation — opportunities that do not exist on Bethlehem Mountain or in Render, West Virginia. As the novel comes to a close, Jodi has lost her land and her lover, and with them, relinquished the dream of her "perfect future" on Bethlehem Mountain. With a "strange, gutted silence," she begins to acknowledge "the possibility of other possibilities and the hugeness of the universe" beyond her mountain home (303). Jodi lets go of her relationship with her family's land as she had previously conceived of it, and she gives up on her hopes of building a "perfect future" there.

She spends the evening alone in the woods, absorbing it with her senses: the smell of the ground, the secret sound of things decaying and the satisfaction of the “bruising weight of her body against the hard earth” (303). By the morning hours, she has traversed the land and traveled back through the heart of Lady Cake Caves—three linked chambers below the land that used to belong to Effie. As a child, Jodi had loved to hear Effie’s stories about the caves. As a young teen, she had reveled in exploring them. At seventeen, she had brought Paula to the depths of the third chamber and wondered “if the heart of this place [was] visible to [Paula], if anyone else [could] ever love it” like she did (33). On the final page of the novel, Jodi emerges through a slim channel in the caves, evoking birth, onto a rock platform overlooking Effie’s land. Jodi sees “beyond the bit of land that once belonged to her, beyond the cabin and all that was familiar, there was more” (306). To survive, Jodi knows she must see beyond the land that both nurtured and isolated her in order to create new possibilities. Ultimately, Jodi McCarty liberates herself by letting go of her relationship with Bethlehem Mountain.

Reading Mesha Maren’s *Sugar Run* through ecofeminism reveals how the dual dominations of marginalized Appalachian people and their environment are often exacerbated by an inability or unwillingness to confront the historic and contemporary realities there. Jodi is entwined with Bethlehem Mountain through childhood memories and romanticized oral histories. However, similar to the nostalgia espoused in the lyrics of “Country Roads,” she is longing for a place that does not exist and probably never did. She is impeded from creating a place where she belongs on the mountain because she is born into generational poverty and because she is bound to experience the lingering legal and psychological effects from her former incarceration. Jodi is also ostracized from the support of her family and community because they correctly suspect that she is a gay woman. These realities keep her from creating the financial

stability which would allow her to return to and protect the mountain from frackers. The domination inflicted upon Jodi is entwined with the mountain's destruction. Jodi may never recognize that nostalgia has misled her— that her relationship with the mountain is most akin to her Appalachian ancestors when she experiences the entwined oppressions of people and nature as they must have. She does, however, recognize that she must relinquish her dreams of life on the mountain in order to save it from ruin. In surrendering all of her rights to Lynn Bower's organization, Don't Frack With Us and leaving Bethlehem Mountain, Jodi emancipates her acreage from encroaching destruction and claims agency for herself. Thus, Jodi McCarty weakens one small link in the historic chain of the dual dominations of Appalachian people and their Appalachian home.

Conclusion

*I dodged a mullet when you broke my heart
It could've been me
sittin six dogs deep
in the Shady Oaks Trailer Park
It might've been my name
tattooed in flames
on your ass-grabbin farmer-tanned arms
But I dodged a mullet when you broke my heart*

–The Chattahoochies “I Dodged a Mullet” (2022)

I would have *cringed* had I heard this song full of twangy tropes as a teenager. I grew up in the rural foothills of East Tennessee before the world wide web brought information to our doorsteps and before anyone, I knew ever traveled beyond a summer vacation to Myrtle Beach. I was nicknamed “uppitry” — a clever combination of uppity and country— because I eschewed most things my kin and classmates accepted as culture: hunting, monster truck rallies, and crowded Camaro road trips to buy moonshine – decidedly uppitry. I preferred to rely on good books to help me make sense of the world. I wanted to know about the Dickensian slums. I wanted to glimpse life in the Jewish communities of Europe and New York. I wanted to connect with African American lives in Harlem and Chicago as well as the lives of Africans across the sea. These worlds were fiction and foreign, and certainly more fascinating than my own ancestral history. Even as I began the process of this dissertation, I focused my reading and research worlds beyond my own, specifically on the Mississippi Delta and the ways that our government and patriarchal culture sanctions the oppression of Black people as they manipulate the natural resources there. Eventually, however, I turned to look at my own home and history in southern Appalachia.

Ecofeminist literary theory provides a guide for exploring the connections between the patriarchal appropriation of nature and the oppressions of women and other marginalized people throughout history to the present day. Ecofeminist readings draw attention to systems of power that entwine women and nature together to subjugate them both—systems such as gendered language, capitalism, and patriarchal religion. I was unintentionally following this thread of understanding in my early reading choices, and I realized the thread also looped through the history of Appalachian land and people. I determined to explore the ways that contemporary Appalachian women writers connect the historically entwined patriarchal-driven oppressions of land and women to Appalachian land and life today. Furthermore, I wondered how these writers may imagine opportunities for liberation from these oppressions, if at all. Ecofeminist readings of Amy Greene's *Bloodroot*, Crystal Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence*, and Mesha Maren's *Sugar Run* provide breadcrumb trails that lead curious readers to trace from the past to the present the historically entwined dominations of women and other marginalized people in each of their Appalachian home regions.

Although written from decidedly different authors' perspectives, each from distinct areas within Appalachia, all of these texts express appreciation for wilderness in nature and wildness in children. In *Bloodroot*, Myra prioritizes raising her twin children as she was raised: roaming relatively free on Bloodroot Mountain, encouraged to explore the wilderness and respect the flora and fauna within it. In *The Birds of Opulence*, Yolanda and Mona bond their friendship in girlhood adventures beyond the township. They climb across fences and ignore property claims to claim their own space entwined with nature. Together, the girls watch over delicate duck eggs and build a nest in the grasses to become the Birds of Opulence. Mona gathers the strength in the wilderness to fight off their own natural predator: a white boy. In *Sugar Run*, Jodi McCarty

briefly finds the freedom to be herself when she is alone with her grandmother on Bethlehem Mountain. Jodi's nascent awareness that she is gay probably prompts her recognition that she is an outsider among other members of her family and other rural children. She can be her natural self when she is alone with the natural landscape that she believes protects her. In these texts, Greene, Wilkinson, and Maren explore the importance of young women's positive relationships with nature before their characters must reckon with their entwined dominations that patriarchal culture creates and enforces.

Each of these texts reclaim control of other patriarchal-manipulated associations between women and nature, as well. In *Bloodroot*, Myra Lamb and her children develop zoomorphic relationships with the animals around their home. These relationships respect the instinct of the animals without forcing human expectations or traits upon them, challenging the patriarchal power structure that regularly places animals beneath humans. Myra also flees her abusive marriage in which she was beaten, caged, and referred to as a wild animal. She literally chops the finger from her husband's patriarchal hand to reclaim her family heritage as symbolized by the blood red ring, and intentionally returns to Bloodroot Mountain and her maternal grandmother. Myra commits to raising her twin children in the wilderness of the mountain to try to protect them from their father and from patriarchal control at large. Myra Lamb disrupts the patriarchal control over women in marriage and lifts a balanced, nurturing relationship between women and nature in its place.

In *Sugar Run*, Jodi McCarty challenges many of the assumptions that outsiders bring to their ideas about Appalachian people and their relationships with Appalachian land. Through Jodi's family history and personal experiences, readers recognize that often, Appalachian people's inability to thrive there is not due to willful ignorance, backwardness, or laziness, as

stereotypes often assert. Instead, the patriarchal forces of capitalism and classism created systems intended to keep rural people ignorant, poor, and dependent to bolster the power and line the pockets of influential outsiders and local elites. The King Coal's control over the region and its people has given way to fracking and mountaintop removal corporations, but the effects of all continue to dominate the natural landscape and oppress the local people today. Jodi's identity as a closeted queer woman and her experiences as an incarcerated and then formerly-incarcerated woman — perspectives infrequently considered by outsiders and infrequently explored in Appalachian literature — add layers to the patriarchal hurdles she faces in her attempts to reconnect with the home and landscape that once protected her. Jodi McCarty debunks stereotypes about Appalachian people, thus disrupting the dualities of wealthy people over poor, heterosexual over homosexual, and even law-abiding citizens over those who have been found guilty of felonies.

As an Affrilachian writer, Crystal Wilkinson adds her voice to those that foil the perception that Appalachian people are all white people. Furthermore, she wrests the domination of Black women from an American history controlled by white men through the enslavement of Black people for profit and power. The first pages of *The Birds of Opulence* immediately return the birth process to Black women and nature. Yolanda Goode-Brown's first-person narration of her birth in the family squash patch restores agency to Black women by commanding the stories of herself and the women in her family. Yolanda's insight about her conception between two free, committed, loving adults juxtaposes against the conceptions of generations of her enslaved ancestors on that same soil, and undoubtedly in other places. Her telling also dispels the controlling image of a Black animal-like breeder woman as has been imposed by a history under white racist control. Furthermore, the process of Yolanda's birth, surrounded by female family

members on the Kentucky land they own (and on which her ancestors had once been “owned”) avoids contemporary sexist, racist, and capitalistic medicalized childbirth to return power to Black women and Black midwives. The stories within this novel, as inspired by Wilkinson’s family history and upbringing in rural Kentucky, counteract dualities imposed by white enslavement of Black people to profit from nature (among other reasons) and disrupt dominating white voices in recording American history.

These texts each share awareness of nostalgia for the relationships between Appalachian people, nature of the past, and ways that romanticized oral histories and memories that shape contemporary Appalachian lives. *The Birds of Opulence* recognizes the imperative for Black people to reclaim their stories. Mama Minnie Mae intentionally lifts positive relationships between the Black Appalachians of the past and nature rather than a focus on their enslaved toil in the tobacco fields. However, in doing so, she neglects the need to confront traumas inherent in their relationships with nature as enslaved people. These unaddressed traumas—specifically the trauma inflicted by the controlling image of Black women and girls as naturally promiscuous—taint Mama Minnie Mae’s relationship with her daughter Tookie and become traumas eventually inherited by Tookie’s daughter Lucy and her daughter Yolanda. In *The Birds of Opulence*, romanticized histories of Black Appalachians, although well-intentioned, do not benefit contemporary generations of Black women. The Sankofa bird featured on this novel’s cover reminds readers of the importance of looking back to retrieve what may be lost. Jodi McCarty is also influenced by romanticized oral histories about her Appalachian ancestors in *Sugar Run*. Jodi believes she would have been better off had she been born into the mountain life of the past when folks lived in balance with the natural landscape without interference from manipulative outsiders. Documented history suggests that an idyllic past such as this did not exist in Jodi’s

ancestry. Instead, it is more likely that corporate domination (from the coal industry) and manipulation from outsiders who viewed mountain people as ignorant disrupted Jodi's ancestors' ability to succeed on Bethlehem Mountain, much as these forces impede her own success. Whereas Minnie Mae, Tookie, and Lucy of *The Birds of Opulence* die before confronting the trauma inherited from unfronted history, *Sugar Run* suggests that Jodi may have a chance to survive. Jodi eventually abandons the mountain land that she loves and the nostalgia she associates with it to pursue other opportunities for her future beyond Bethlehem Mountain.

Bloodroot seems comfortable nestled in nostalgia without exploring the complications inherent therein. This novel explores the balanced relationships between the Chickweed Holler Witches—a fictional example of historical Appalachian granny women—and nature. Readers learn how these granny women used their knowledge of nature and spiritual gifts as conduits to help themselves and others in their community survive in the tough, isolated, mountain terrain of the East Tennessee mountains at the turn of the twentieth-century. Women and nature worked together rather than fall victim to domination by those with power. Historic facts remain unfronted by the characters in *Bloodroot* similar to those in *The Birds of Opulence* and *Sugar Run*. However, *The Birds of Opulence* and *Sugar Run* both suggest the negative impact that accepting a history based on nostalgia can have on contemporary generations while *Bloodroot* does not. Historically, herbal remedies and other knowledge about living in balance with nature as used by the Chickweed Holler Witches and Appalachian granny women were learned from Indigenous people who were knowledgeable about their natural surroundings for generations before white people arrived. In interviews about writing *Bloodroot*, Greene acknowledges that the novel is based on her own Appalachian upbringing and mentions her Scots-Irish ancestors as some of the first humans to build their lives in the East Tennessee mountains, but she does not

suggest awareness of the lives of Indigenous people in the region before them. Although it is understandable that rural characters would rely on oral histories from their families, Greene has access to a wealth of information in the twenty-first-century. *Bloodroot* misses an opportunity to connect white Appalachian characters' relationships with nature to the relationships between Indigenous people in that region for centuries before them. An indication of this important connection—however small or subtle—would have served as a step in addressing blind spots about Indigeneity in white memory and white recorded history rather than supporting the myth of the white American settler. In fact, neither *The Birds of Opulence* nor *Sugar Run* mention histories with the Appalachian land beyond those of their own ancestry (although Jodi McCarty's family vaguely claims Indigenous ancestry). This omission marks an opportunity to address ecofeminist perspectives of Appalachian literature that include Indigenous histories. I searched for a novel written from an Indigenous Appalachian female author as I began this dissertation, but I was unable to identify such a text.

After researching the evolution of ecofeminist literary theory, I looked for opportunities for the emancipation of Appalachian land, women, and other marginalized people from patriarchal control within the texts I chose to analyze. I was not disappointed. As *The Birds of Opulence* comes to a close, Wilkinson symbolizes the continuation of the spirits of Mama Minnie Mae, Tookie, and Lucy with the Kentucky landscape as Joe Brown plants and waters a rose bush for each woman. Wilkinson also crafts literal liberation for the women's homeplace as their land consumes a bulldozer belonging to white gentrifiers. In *Sugar Run*, Jodi McCarty commands personal agency for the first time in her adult life as she releases her family's former land to those who can afford to protect it from further destruction. Jodi also facilitates personal liberation from the patriarchal forces particular to her region of West Virginia as she leaves to

search for autonomy beyond Bethlehem Mountain. Opportunities for the emancipation of land and people remain vague in *Bloodroot*. Readers are led to believe that Johnny and Laura will successfully release their mother from the mental institution—an act of liberation from a patriarchal agency. Perhaps, the three will return to Bloodroot Mountain. Notably, however, none of these novels suggest opportunities for the emancipation of Appalachian land and people beyond symbolic gestures or vague endings. Tidy, happy endings would be unrealistic and also disrespect the complicated challenges that confront these characters and nature. Dramatic structural, cultural, and political changes are necessary to disrupt the entwined dominations of land and people in Appalachia and around the world.

This dissertation is not exhaustive in its scope of Appalachian literature. It is, however, focused on the ways that these three contemporary novels explore the entwined dominations of Appalachian women and nature, as well as the way that these dual dominations reach from the past to impact the present. In “White for the Harvest: Hicksploitation TV and the Colonial Model of Appalachian Exploitation,” Jimmy Dean Smith connects outsiders’ construction of Appalachia in order to commodify the land [through extraction] and its people [through cultural stereotypes]. Smith asserts, “Appalachia . . . might be an amorphously delimited *place*, but more importantly, it is an *idea* of that place, and that idea [is] most often imposed by outsiders . . .” (133). Since publishing their premiere novels, Amy Greene, Crystal Wilkinson, and Mesha Maren have continued to add their voices to the other Appalachians who reclaim ideas about Appalachian places and people. In 2016, Amy Greene published *Long Man: A Novel* about The Tennessee Valley Authority’s flooding of areas of East Tennessee in 1936. Crystal Wilkinson’s *Perfect Black* (2022) shares her insights about girlhood, racism, and political awakening in Southern Appalachia through poetry and prose. Mesha Maren published *Perpetual West* (2022),

a novel in which a young married couple leave their home in rural Virginia to search for meaning beyond their Pentecostal upbringings. When Appalachian people share their stories and insights about their lives and culture, even through tongue in cheek lyrics such as those of The Chattahoochies' song "I Dodged a Mullet," they can explore complicated histories with the land and the contemporary cultures these histories have created. The challenge lies in avoiding reliance upon a nostalgia that lifts personal ancestral successes without exploring the complexity of the entwined dominations of all people and land in the region. In *New Woman, New Earth*, Rosemary Ruether concluded that "there can be no liberation for [women] and no solution to ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination" (204). Appalachians and others must challenge the Western culture of domination to protect all marginalized people and the lands that they call home—especially in popular fiction which will be read beyond the academia.

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