

For the Love of the Land:  
Placing Appalachian Women Writers in a Conversation with Ecofeminist Principles

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### Introduction

In this project, my goal is to understand the ways in which texts published by Appalachian women writers in the 1990s were engaging with ecofeminist principles. As I will discuss later in this introduction, ecofeminist principles were struggling to gain credibility at the end of the twentieth century; I argue that the Appalachian texts that I work with not only engaged in a dialogue with ecofeminist ideals, but ultimately advocated for them. The major contribution that I hope to make through this project is the linking of ecofeminist thought and Appalachian literature. There is a significant lack of scholarship regarding Appalachian literature, which I believe makes its connection with ecofeminist principles a unique one. Through understanding the relationship between these two concepts, I hope to open up a broader conversation on how literature can help us to understand ecofeminist and ecocritical thought.

I came to this project from the intersection of many different pathways of analytical thought. My core interest in beginning this project was the representation of religion and spirituality in Southern literature; the original text I worked with was Lee Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies*. As I began engaging with spirituality and religion in Smith's work and Appalachian women's writing in general, I realized that it was nearly impossible to engage in a thoughtful analysis without recognizing the ways in which feminist theory and environmentalism also influenced the texts. I became aware of ecofeminist ideology through my research on intersections of spirituality, feminism, and environmentalism; ecofeminism provided a perfect frame for understanding these concepts as they interacted with one another. I found the linking of ecofeminist thought

and Appalachian literature in the 1990s to be both a fascinating topic and one that still speaks to pertinent issues of our time.

In studying any work from Appalachia, it is imperative to understand what the term “Appalachia” implies. However, one immediately encounters a problem with this: Appalachia has many meanings, but few solid definitions. The Appalachian Regional Commission, a federal government agency, defines Appalachia as “all of West Virginia and parts of 12 other states: Alabama, Kentucky, Georgia, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia” (ARC). Forty-two percent of the population of the region is rural and boasts an economy that is dependent on “mining, forestry, agriculture, chemical industries, and heavy industry...and now includes manufacturing and public service industries” (ARC). These facts provide a glimpse at this region, but, as many scholars argue, defining Appalachia proves to be much more complicated.

In her work *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature*, Elizabeth Engelhardt argues that geography cannot be the only factor that defines Appalachia. Engelhardt states:

The Appalachian Trail begins in North Georgia and extends through Maine; yet not all states on the trail are in the region. Besides sharing a mountain range, Pennsylvania and Alabama share precious little else. Most New Yorkers, even rural ones, do not consider themselves Appalachian. Although many residents of southeastern Ohio do, most South Carolinians do not. Quickly, the question of Appalachia becomes more difficult [because] physical geography is not enough. (2003, 12)

In order to discern what constitutes Appalachia, other factors such as culture must be considered. Yet even including these factors further complicates the definition, as one must then decide which cultures to include. Engelhardt furthermore recognizes that many people, particularly those who live outside of the area, refer to the southern half of the region when they use the term “Appalachia,” though she argues that this definition is misleading and implies that Appalachia is merely a “subset of the South” (2003, 12-3). Ultimately it appears that any definition of Appalachia must be insubstantial in capturing the rich diversity of this region.

For the purposes of this project, I will focus on literature set in and produced by women writers from the central region of Appalachia. The Appalachian Regional Commission designates five subregions of Appalachia as a means for engaging in more detailed analysis; the ARC claims that these subregions are “continuous regions of relatively homogenous characteristics” (ARC). The literature analyzed in this paper is set in and produced by women writers from the North Central, Central, and South Central regions of Appalachia. The North Central region of Appalachia is composed of parts of Ohio and West Virginia, while the Central region of Appalachia is composed of parts of West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Finally, the South Central region of Appalachia is composed of North Carolina, as well as parts of Virginia and Tennessee. Though my project does include certain geographic boundaries, I strive to represent a diverse array of literature from this area in order to reflect the idea that Appalachia cannot be defined by one single definition or set of principles.

The purpose of this project is to examine how texts published by Appalachian women writers publishing in the 1990s engaged in a dialogue with ecofeminist principles

and advocated for those principles at a time when ecofeminism was struggling to retain its credibility as a mode of feminist thought; the remaining part of this introduction is intended to set up the texts I am analyzing and the state of ecofeminist thought in the late twentieth century. For my literary analysis, I focus on six texts of both poetry and prose written by women of Anglo-Saxon and Cherokee descent. These authors come from the states of Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia; two of these writers, MariJo Moore and Marilou Awiakta, are of Cherokee descent. All of the texts were published during or near the decade of the 1990s. The two notable exceptions are Lee Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies*, which was originally published in 1988, and Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*, which was published in 2001. As previously mentioned, the 1990s are relevant because I argue that these Appalachian women writers were actively engaging with contemporary ecofeminist concepts.

In order to place these texts in a conversation with ecofeminist principles, it is important to have a general understanding of the ecofeminist movement. In her article "Destabilizing the Criticism of Essentialism in Ecofeminist Discourse," Elizabeth Cassalare places the origins of ecofeminism in the women's liberation movement of the 1970s, yet she notes that ecofeminism "does not lend itself to easy generalization," as it is built from a variety of diverse opinions (2009, 51). Indian scholar Chhaya Datar echoes this sentiment in her book *Ecofeminism Revisited: Introduction to the Discourse*, though she provides a more detailed look at the various paths through which ecofeminism began to develop. In particular, Datar cites the exposure in the mid-1970s of many radical and cultural feminists to nature-based religions that honored the female, as well as the powerful environmental movement that many feminists participated in during the 1970s,

which was inspired by works such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (2011, 8-9). Though these scholars provide a brief introduction to the multi-faceted emergence of ecofeminism in the 1970s, it quickly becomes apparent that finding a simple history of ecofeminism is quite difficult.

In her article "Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environment," scholar and environmental activist Greta Gaard provides perhaps the most concise summary of the emergence of ecofeminism in the 1970s. Gaard states:

Ecofeminism emerged from the intersections of feminist research and the various movements for social justice and environmental health, explorations that uncovered the linked oppressions of gender, ecology, race, species, and nation...An early text of radical feminism, Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), exposed the historical and cross-cultural persecution of women as legitimized by the various male-dominated institutions of religion, culture, and medical science,...linking the physical health of women and the environment with the recuperation of a woman-centered language and thought. (2011, 28)

As Gaard notes in her article, ecofeminism emerged in large part due to an understanding of the link between the oppression of the humans and the environment. What is most important to note is that, with the rise of ecofeminism, special attention was placed on nature as a pertinent category of analysis in linking feminist theories of gendered oppression and environmental degradation.

By the beginning of the 1980s, ecofeminism had finally established a solid foundation. In their article "Ecofeminism: Toward Global Justice and Planetary Health,"

Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen address many of the original issues that led to propagation of ecofeminism in the 1970s. Gaard and Gruen note that the movements for social justice and environmental health of the 1960s and 1970s led citizens in the United States particularly to become aware of problems such as overconsumption of energy, pollution of drinking water, the loss of forests, and more; ecofeminism sought to understand these issues from a feminist theoretical perspective (1993, 235-6). Gaard and Gruen assert:

Standing at the crossroads of environmentalism and feminism, ecofeminist theory is uniquely positioned to undertake a holistic analysis of these problems in their human and natural contexts. Ecofeminism's central claim is that these problems stem from the mutually reinforcing oppression of humans and the natural world. (1993, 236)

Particularly important to my project is the concept of holistic analysis. To put it simply, I understand a holistic analysis as one that recognizes the need to examine multiple intersections and viewpoints in considering any issue. In the case of ecofeminist thought, as Gaard and Gruen argue, the issues of women's oppression and the oppression of the environment cannot be viewed as mutually exclusive, but rather must be viewed in relation to one another. I understand this larger project as my attempt to provide a holistic analysis of the intersections of literature, women's spirituality, and environmental action.

The core idea of ecofeminist thought is that the human and natural worlds are inextricably connected; the problem that many ecofeminists seek to address is the existence of male-dominated institutions that deny this connection and choose to see the human and natural worlds as separate. Cassalare explains that it is important for ecofeminists to focus on identifying and critiquing ideological frameworks such as

hierarchical and/or dualistic thinking that could lead to the establishment of these institutions (2009, 51). In her book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Australian scholar Val Plumwood explores the male-dominated institutions that lead to the formation of a human/nature contrast. Plumwood asserts:

The framework of assumptions in which the human/nature contrast has been formed in the west is one not only of *feminine* connectedness with and passivity towards nature, but also and complementarily one of exclusion and domination of the sphere of nature by a white, largely male elite, which I shall call the master model. (1993, 22-3).

Plumwood further argues that in order to dismantle this model, we must come to recognize human identity as continuous with nature, rather than “alien” from it (1993, 36). Ultimately, though ecofeminism is built from a diverse array of thoughts and voices, the core problem all ecofeminists address is the institutions and ideologies that seek to maintain a separation between the human and natural worlds.

Ecofeminists cite many root causes for this separation; most pertinent to my argument is understanding the separation of humans from nature as a result of the rise of patriarchal religion. Several ecofeminists cite the shift from goddess worship to the worship of male deities as the origin of this separation. In her article “From Heroic to Holistic Ethics: The Ecofeminist Challenge,” Marti Kheel notes that in “prepatriarchal cultures,” there was a special emphasis on “female-bodied goddesses” (1993, 245). Furthermore, Kheel designates the formation of Judeo-Christian traditions as the cause of this separation between human and nature: “By the time of the biblical story of the Garden of Eden, a totally new world had emerged. Both a woman and an animal were by



this time depicted as the source of all evil in the world. And “Man,” above all other forms of life, was claimed to have a special relation to the divine” (1993, 245-6).

Other ecofeminists raise similar observations; Gaard and Gruen are critical of the Judeo-Christian tradition in which God appoints Adam to be in charge of his creation, while women and animals are placed below him (1993, 237). Ultimately, many ecofeminists argue that through patriarchal religion the “domination of both nature and women was divinely commanded” (Gaard and Gruen 1993, 237). This approach is particularly important to my analysis because, as I will explore later in this paper, religion forms a fundamental part of life in Appalachia; however, the literature I analyze portrays many female characters rejecting traditional religious institutions. I believe that these texts respond to these ecofeminist theories through employing critiques of patriarchal religion.

Though the ecofeminist movement had just established its roots in the 1980s, it was already experiencing strong resistance and heated backlash by the beginning of the 1990s. The ecofeminist community received a cold reaction not only from groups including “deep ecologists, social ecologists, Greens, animal liberationists, and other environmentalists,” but from other members of the feminist community (Gaard 2011, 39). Overall, ecofeminists were criticized as “essentialist, ethnocentric, anti-intellectual goddess-worshippers who mistakenly portray the Earth as female or issue totalizing and ahistorical mandates for worldwide veganism...” (Gaard 2011, 32). In particular, many critics of ecofeminism pointed to the image of ‘Mother Earth’ as problematic.

Several ecofeminist scholars recognize the problematic nature of the ‘Mother Earth’ figure. Datar notes that significant criticism is leveled against ecofeminists who uphold the concept of ‘Mother Earth’ because many believe that it equates women solely

with their reproductive ability (2011, 193). Plumwood cites similar critiques, claiming that many feminists criticize the connection of women and nature as “regressive and insulting, summing up images of women as earth mothers, as passive, reproductive animals, contented cows immersed in the body and in the unreflective experiencing of life” (1993, 20). However, Plumwood argues that recognizing some sort of a connection between women and nature is necessary for a holistic analysis of women’s position in humanity; we must recognize the ways in which women consciously choose to position themselves with nature (1993, 21). In a similar vein to the issues of the ‘Mother Earth’ figure, many critics of ecofeminism argue against a nature-based spirituality.

One particular complaint lodged against ecofeminism relates to the spirituality often cultivated by ecofeminists as a response to patriarchal religions. For the purposes of this project, I understand spirituality as an individual feeling of connection to the divine, while religion connotes participation in established traditions and rituals. Gaard states:

In conjunction with the charges of essentialism were the criticisms of ecofeminism’s allegedly essentialist spirituality that both gendered the earth as female and led to elite, apolitical retreat and individual salvation rather than inspiring engaged struggles for local, community-wide, and global eco-justice. (2011, 38)

Many ecofeminists reject the critique that an ecofeminist spirituality is incompatible with political action. Cassalare points out that many feminists critique a spiritual exploration of the oppression of women as apolitical; she argues that these critiques rely on a very narrow definition of politics (2009, 62). In her article “Power, Authority, and Mystery: Ecofeminism and Earth-Based Spirituality,” Starhawk argues that a nature-based

spirituality actually motivates and requires political work: “When we understand that everything is connected, we are called to a politics and set of actions that come from compassion [with] all living beings on the Earth” (1990, 74). Ultimately, ecofeminist scholars reject the multiple critiques of spirituality, rather arguing that a nature-based spirituality must inevitably lead to political and environmental action.

I argue that the texts I engage with in my project were creating a dialogue with and ultimately advocating for ecofeminist principles at a time when ecofeminism was receiving heated backlash. In particular, I believe that these texts are particularly concerned with three major aspects of ecofeminist thought: the emphasis on a nature-based spirituality, which is built from and related to the inextricable connection between the human and natural worlds and the recognition of the need for a balance between the human and natural worlds that attempts to dismantle hierarchy. In my first chapter, I focus on the emphasis paid to the importance of a nature-based spirituality in the texts that is built on these ecofeminist concepts of connection and balance. Furthermore, I believe that these texts are fostering a dialogue with ecofeminism about the possibility for multiple forms of a nature-based spirituality, such as a total rejection of the Judeo-Christian tradition, a reworking of Christian principles to frame a nature-based spirituality, and an exploration of ecofeminism through Cherokee traditions.

In my second chapter, I argue that the literature advocates for ecofeminist principles by demonstrating that nature-based spirituality inevitably leads to environmental action. The female characters in these texts that work towards cultivating a spirituality defined by an intense reverence for nature are the very ones who engage in environmental activism both on an individual and community level. What is important to

understand, as I explain in my second chapter, is that little was known specifically about Appalachian women's environmental activism when these texts were engaging with ecofeminist principles in the 1990s. Therefore, I argue that these texts include examples of environmental activism not only to advocate for these abstract ecofeminist principles, but to draw attention to the activism that was occurring in Appalachia as a way for the reader to begin to understand the actual work that was part of the broader ecofeminist political project.

## Chapter One

\* Note: Any misspelling of words in a direct quote is intentional, as the authors occasionally misspell words to represent the Appalachian vernacular.

### ***Overview: Religion in Appalachia***

Appalachia boasts an intricate religious history, as the region has fostered multiple denominations of Christianity as well as its unique blend of religious traditions. Several denominations of Christianity maintain a strong presence in Appalachia; Deborah McCauley notes in the introduction to her book *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* the lengthy presence of United Methodists and Southern Baptists in the region (1995, 2). Evidence of multiple Christian denominations in Appalachia also permeates nonfiction accounts of life in the mountains. In her work *The Spirit of the Mountains*, Emma Bell Miles notes: “In a settlement in our mountains one may find Missionary Baptists, Hardshell Baptists, Cumberlands, Calvinists, and what not” (1905, 138). However, the strongest religious tradition to take hold in the region is Appalachian mountain religion, which was established in the nineteenth century.

Appalachian mountain religion is a unique regional, religious tradition. In writing about its history, McCauley states:

The history of Appalachian mountain religion involves more than just what is special and unique to religious life in Appalachia. It also concerns nearly two hundred years of interaction with the dominant religious culture of American Protestantism...mountain religion’s values have clashed with – and challenged – the values of its more powerful Protestant counterparts in American Christianity. (1995, 2).

Though mountain religion grew out of the Protestant tradition, it adopted characteristics from several different Christian denominations, allowing it to remain distinctive from mainstream American Protestantism. In fact, McCauley notes that mountain religion is traditionally non-denominational, instead mixing together aspects of various Christian sects (1995, 156). In particular, mountain religion draws on aspects of “pietism, Scots-Irish sacramental revivalism, Baptist revival culture in the mid-South during the great awakening, and the early-nineteenth century plain-folk camp-meeting religion” (McCauley 1995, 52-3). The adherence to a strict religious code and the importance of an individual’s relationship with God in mountain religion is inspired by pietism; mountain religion furthermore draws on ecstatic worship practices and conversion experiences from these different revival cultures. (McCauley 1995, 157).

Emma Bell Miles captures the unique sense of mountain religion in a simple statement: “[The mountain person’s] religion is really the outgrowth of his own nature and environment rather than of the written Word...” (1905, 142). As Miles’s comment suggests, though it grew out of mainstream American culture, Appalachian mountain religion has carved out its own unique space in American religious traditions. While there is still emphasis placed on the church and a sense of organized religion, mountain religion has drawn inspiration from multiple Christian practices in order to create a unique non-denominational Christian tradition.

### ***Representations of Religion in the Texts of Appalachian Women Writers***

Though religion comprises an integral part of life in Appalachia, many texts published by Appalachian women writers in the late twentieth century painted a rather dark picture of women’s experiences with organized religion. In early twentieth century

nonfiction works such as Emma Bell Miles's *The Spirit of the Mountains*, organized religion is portrayed as a comfort particularly for women: "What going to church really means to a woman who during the rest of the month sees hardly a face outside her family is difficult to realize..." (1905, 131). While it is important to note that Miles's work is a memoir written from her point of view, her description of religion is particularly intriguing. Though Miles advocates for traditional religious experiences as a comfort for women, the texts I engage with disagree. Rather than advocate for adherence to traditional religious experiences, these Appalachian texts focus on the cultivation of a nature-based spirituality by their female characters.

By the last decade of the twentieth century, many works by Appalachian women writers portrayed religion and particularly the church as something to escape from rather than find comfort in. In her collection of poems titled *Wildwood Flower*, Kathryn Stripling Byer speaks through the voice of the fictional Alma, who lived in the Blue Ridge Mountains at the beginning of the twentieth century. Though Byer's poetry is set at the same time that Emma Bell Miles was writing, Byer's portrayal of religion is very different. Alma often voices her desire to escape from the confines of the church:

...But for Christ  
 we are doomed to the worms waking under  
 these hills I would rather be climbing  
 again with my father's goats bleating  
 so loud I can't hear this man say  
 I must ask the Lord pardon for what  
 I've come back to remember – ("Easter" 1992, 10-16)

In this passage, Alma voices her preference for enjoying the natural world rather than participating in a religious service; in particular, she claims that she would rather hear goats bleating than the preaching of a church official. In contrast to Miles's assertions, there is a clear breaking away from organized religion in favor of an appreciation for the natural world. Just as Alma voices her desire to escape from the strict confines of the church, other female characters in Appalachian literature exhibit a similar desire to shed the burden of traditional religious institutions.

As the time period in which these works are set progresses through the twentieth century, they continue to portray traditional religious institutions as sites of patriarchal oppression for female characters. Lee Smith's epistolary novel *Fair and Tender Ladies* centers on the life of Ivy Rowe, a Virginia mountain woman who rejects the male-dominated religious institutions that she comes in contact with throughout her life. In Conrad Ostwalt's article "Witches and Jesus: Lee Smith's Appalachian Religion," he argues that Smith's work "depicts religion as restrictive and often portrays its adherents, particularly its leaders, as hypocritical or repressed" (1998, 98). According to Ostwalt, many of the male religious leaders in Smith's work represent the deep problems that permeate the organized religion of Smith's fictional world. In fact, Ostwalt's argument echoes several of the key tenets of ecofeminism, in particular the rise of patriarchal religion as a source of female oppression; *Fair and Tender Ladies* explores this concept through the character of Ivy.

Ivy first recognizes the hypocritical nature of male religious leaders as a young girl when she encounters Sam Russell Sage, a tent revival preacher. Ivy recounts going to tent revival meetings where Sam Russell Sage preaches about the wrath of God and



instills fear in those who attend (Smith 1988, 108-9). However, Ivy soon recognizes that Sam Russell Sage does not uphold many of the lessons that he preaches about. Ivy writes to her sister Silvaney:

...if Sam Russell Sage is who God has sent, then I dont know if I even want to be saved ether, in spite of the firey hand. For I think Sam Russell Sage is awful. He is Genevas sweetie these days whenever he comes to town, and stays up in the room with her out of wedlock, and drinks whiskey out of bottles which he brings. (Smith 1988, 112)

Ivy recognizes the hypocrisy demonstrated by the male religious leaders she encounters and pulls away from the idea of organized religion. This trend continues throughout the rest of the novel as Ivy becomes increasingly aware of the oppressive, domineering nature of organized religion.

The ideas brought forth by Ostwalt are clearly demonstrated by many of the male characters in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, in particular, Ivy's younger brother, and preacher, Garnie Rowe. Garnie represents the ultimate oppressive patriarchal power of organized religion through the abuse he heaps on his wife, Ruthie. Ivy bitterly notes that while Garnie "seems to be on great terms with God," his wife appears to suffer from his religious fervor (Smith 1988, 293-4). Ivy later writes to her sister Silvaney, "I have forgot to say that when Garnie left town with his Crusade, Ruthie stayed! For it turned out that Garnie beats her up, and makes her do bad things" (Smith 1998, 302). In this glimpse at Ivy's letter to her sister, it is clear that Ivy in her own way is recognizing a hierarchy of domination similar to ones often critiqued by ecofeminists. In response, Ivy chooses to completely reject organized religion.

Due to her many encounters with oppressive patriarchal religious structures, Ivy completely rejects religious institutions. She renounces both her brother and the religion that he stands for, stating, "...if he is going to heaven then I will rot in hell and be happy about it" (Smith 1998, 292). Through the hypocrisy and desire to dominate women that male religious leaders exhibit in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, and the patriarchal religion that allows them to do so, the text establishes a direct connection with the rejection of hierarchy that many ecofeminists advocate. However, Ivy remains a unique character in Appalachian literature due to her complete renunciation of organized religion; many other female characters share Ivy's contempt for the patriarchal nature of religion, but refrain from complete rejection.

Appalachian texts such as Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* engage with ecofeminist principles in a way that strikes a balance between Christian ideals and ecofeminist thought. *Prodigal Summer* explores women's desire to distance themselves from the patriarchal nature of organized religion through the characters of Nannie Rawley and Garnett Walker. Though both attend church, Garnett adheres to a strict traditional version of Christianity. He exhibits distaste at the thought of Nannie attending a more modern church:

Sundays she went to the Unitarian place; Garnett was not about to call it a church.

That was just her cup of tea, he imagined: a den of coffee-drinking women in slacks making high-toned conversation along godless lines. Evolution,

transcendentalism, things of that nature. (Kingsolver 2000, 131)

This passage demonstrates that Nannie's choice to attend a more modern church is one of the ways in which she stands in opposition to the staunch, traditional Christian values

espoused by Garnett. Though Nannie does attend church, she still revises many traditional Christian ideas to accommodate her own views.

In addition to expressing distaste for Nannie's beliefs in modern concepts of evolution and transcendentalism, Garnett also exhibits his displeasure at Nannie's rejection of certain aspects of his version of Christianity. Kingsolver writes, "She had no respect for property, for her elders in general, or for Garnett in particular. No use for men at all, he suspected darkly – and just as well. No love lost there on either side" (2000, 84). Garnett essentially voices his displeasure over Nannie's lack of respect for the hierarchy instilled by the religion that he adheres to, particularly through his observation that Nannie lacks "respect" for him and other male figures. Garnett and Nannie are juxtaposed throughout *Prodigal Summer* to highlight Nannie's attempts to fight back against the oppressive hierarchies typical of many religious denominations.

While Nannie does not completely reject Christianity, she does reject the oppression and domination present in Garnett's values in favor of a less hierarchal version of Christian principles. While Garnett considers himself a creationist, Nannie strongly expresses her belief in evolution. Nannie writes to Garnett in a letter, "We love to declare that God made us in his image, but even so, he's three billion years old and we're just babies" (Kingsolver 2000, 217). Furthermore, Nannie rejects Garnett's belief that humans hold a position of power over other aspects of nature. She writes in a letter to him:

I do believe humankind holds a special place in the world. It's the same place held by a mockingbird, in his opinion, and a salamander... Everything alive is connected to every other by fine, invisible threads. Things you don't see can help

you plenty, and things you try to control will often rear back and bite you, and that's the moral of the story. (Kingsolver 2000, 215-6)

In this selection from Nannie's letter, she clearly demonstrates a belief in the inherent interconnectedness of all living things, particularly through her metaphor of the "fine, invisible threads." In addition, through her warning that the "things you try to control will often rear back and bite you," she speaks in favor of a balance amongst the many aspects of the human and natural worlds, rather than domination. Ultimately, Nannie does not completely reject religion as Ivy does in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, choosing instead to distance herself from certain oppressive principles of Christianity. *Prodigal Summer* enters into a dialogue with ecofeminist principles just as *Fair and Tender Ladies* does, but it chooses to advocate for a mixing of ecofeminist principles with certain Christian ideas, demonstrating that it is possible to find a balance between the two.

### ***Cherokee Beliefs and Ecofeminist Thought***

There has been a strong tradition of Cherokee culture throughout the southern Appalachian Mountains, and many Appalachian women writers of Cherokee descent produce literature that explores Cherokee stories, legends, and more. In her book *Cultural Intermarriage in Southern Appalachia: Cherokee Elements in Four Selected Novels by Lee Smith*, Katerina Prajznerova provides a brief history of the Cherokee in southern Appalachia. Prajznerova explains that by the time Europeans first began exploring the Appalachian region, the Cherokee country had spread to "Georgia, North Carolina, east Tennessee, upper South Carolina, Alabama, Virginia, West Virginia, and Kentucky" (2003 13-4). By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Cherokee were struggling to fight back against many removal attempts by the federal government; this culminated in

the 1838 mass movement of Cherokee peoples known as the Trail of Tears (Prajznerova 2003, 17). However, Prajznerova notes that some of the Cherokee residing in Appalachia were able to remain in the mountains, and many soon returned (2003, 17). Marilou Awiakta and MariJo Moore are two Cherokee poets who claim Appalachia as their home.

The collections produced by Moore and Awiakta both demonstrate a strong connection to the space in which they live; many of the traditional Cherokee ideas put forth in the poetry, such as the interconnectedness of the human and natural world, are echoed in arguments by ecofeminists, suggesting perhaps that these poets also hope to create a dialogue with ecofeminist thought. Prajznerova examines several of the core aspects of the Cherokee belief system, stating, “In the Cherokee traditional belief system religion is never disconnected from the physical natural world. Rather, the spiritual and physical worlds are connected, forming a “coherent balanced whole” (2003, 30). Though Cherokee beliefs have been established for centuries, these beliefs place both poetry collections in a position to create a dialogue with certain ecofeminist principles.

Marilou Awiakta’s poetry collection, *Abiding Appalachia: Where Mountain and Atom Meet*, is rife with descriptions that explore the idea of the inherent interconnectedness of the spiritual and physical world, as her short poem “Trail Warning,” reveals:

Beauty is no threat to the wary  
 who treat the mountain in its way,  
 the copperhead in its way,  
 and the deer in its way,  
 knowing that nature is the human heart

made tangible. (1990, 37)

In the first line, the speaker warns against viewing the natural world as a threat to be controlled. Furthermore, in stating that “nature is the human heart / made tangible,” the speaker expresses a clear connection between the physical and spiritual worlds, equating nature with the core of humanity. The poem appears to be in dialogue with the ecofeminist principle of the human/nature connection, demonstrating how multiple belief systems can enter into dialogue with ecofeminist thought. Similar themes are revealed in the poetry of MariJo Moore.

Moore’s collection *Spirit Voices of Bones* explores the relationship between the spiritual world and the human world. In her poem “Interim,” this idea of the connection between the spiritual and physical world is clearly visible:

Come visit me

Spirit of Solitude

...

No work today

only time

gentle time

spent alone with all of creation

and time

gentle time

always comes with

an essence of healing. (1997, 58)

In this excerpt from “Interim,” the speaker recognizes the need to reconnect with the “Spirit of Solitude,” by spending time with “all of creation.” Through a focus on spiritual healing and reconnection with the “Spirit of Solitude,” there is a sense that the speaker intends to restore a balance between herself and the natural world.

The Cherokee belief system upholds a connection between the physical and the spiritual world; one of the ways in which this connection is maintained is through legends and stories that are passed down. According to Prajznerova, “The stories that are passed on today continue to be deeply rooted in the land, connecting people to their natural environment and expressing a reverence for nature...” (2003, 30). Storytelling is another theme that runs throughout the poetry of both Awiakta and Moore. In *Abiding Appalachia: Where Mountain and Atom Meet*, the speaker recounts the Cherokee myth of Little Deer. The poem “The Coming of Little Deer” opens with: “From the heart of the mountain he comes, with his head held high in the wind. / Like the spirit of light he comes – the small white chief of the Deer” (1990, 18). The poem then explains the myth of Little Deer, who punishes hunters that do not pray for the animal lives that they take (1990, 18). I have no intention to verge on essentialism of native customs and practices; rather, I find it interesting in this passage to note that the myth of Little Deer focuses on respect for nature and rejects human domination over it, particularly through condemning hunters who do not pray for the animals lives they take. This allows the poem to demonstrate a possible link between Cherokee beliefs and ecofeminist thought.

Storytelling and myths are also prevalent in *Spirit Voices of Bones*. In the poem “Song Morning Song,” the speaker recounts a song that haunts the memories of the Cherokee:

It is the song of the Grandmothers  
 rising from the earth, falling with the rain,  
 floating on the lilies.  
 Pulling us deeper into ourselves  
 beyond thoughts past dreams  
 under memories  
 deep deep deeper. (1997, 11)

Here, the speaker reimagines stories and legends as a type of song that the Cherokee must remember. It is important to note that this “song of the Grandmothers” is deeply rooted in the earth, as the speaker claims that it comes to the people through the earth, rain, and plants (1997, 11). Furthermore, these myths and songs are linked to directly to females, perhaps paralleling traditions of goddess worship explored by many ecofeminists. In linking the “song of the Grandmothers” to the natural world, the poem further reinforces the importance of stories and legends as a way in which the Cherokee people connect to the natural world around them.

### ***Cultivating a Nature-Based Spirituality in the Texts***

Many of the female characters in the texts that I am studying rely on a nature-based spirituality that they cultivate in their daily lives. The emphasis placed on a nature-based spirituality is demonstrated either through the complete rejection of organized religion or the reworking of certain Christian ideas in order to find a balance between organized religion and spirituality. To reiterate, I define spirituality as a personal connection to the divine, while religion connotes participation in organized traditions and rituals. The texts I engage with build a nature-based spirituality through their female



characters' reverence for nature, as well as their recognition of their connection to the natural world. In her book, Prajznerova links the importance of storytelling and myth to the Cherokee with trends of storytelling in the works of Appalachian authors such as Lee Smith in order to exhibit how storytelling can influence the creation of a nature-based spirituality.

The stories that Ivy Rowe hears as a young girl in *Fair and Tender Ladies* stay with her throughout her life and often take on a spiritual nature as they act as a replacement for many Biblical teachings. Prajznerova notes that stories about the white bear are a link between the Smith's fiction and Cherokee culture, as the white bear figures prominently in Cherokee myth (2003, 40). As a young girl, Ivy is fascinated by the story of Whitebear Whittington told by the Cline sisters, who come to visit her family on Christmas Eve; it is the story of a girl who falls in love with a man who takes the form of a white bear by day and a man by night (Smith 1988, 33-5). After the sisters leave that night, Ivy writes in a letter to her friend Hanneke, "The sisters disappeared. But when I was straining to see them I seed something else and I will sware it, you culd see in that moonlight as plain as day, and what I seed was Whitebear Whittington..." (Smith 1988, 36). In this statement, Ivy recounts a vision she has based on the stories she hears; she holds on to childhood stories such as the one of Whitebear Whittington during the remainder of her life.

These stories serve as replacements for many of the Biblical stories that Ivy rejects throughout her life. Ivy writes a final letter to her sister Silvaney right before she passes away; though she does reference Ecclesiastes 3:1, it is overshadowed by the

stories that she heard as a child.<sup>1</sup> At the very end of her last letter, Ivy states, “Whitebear Whittington lives yet up on Hell Mountain[...]He lives there even now I tell you and he is wild, wild. He runs throgh the night with his eyes on fire and no one can take him, yet he will sleep of a day as peaceful as a lullaby...” (Smith 1988, 366-7). The stories that Ivy carries with her throughout her life are deeply rooted in the natural world around her, often referencing the mountains she knows intimately and the animals that inhabit those mountains. Rather than relying on Biblical quotes, Ivy allows stories of the mountains to take on a spiritual quality, demonstrating a deep connection to her home.

The stories found in Byer’s poetry collection *Wildwood Flower* are also rooted in nature. In her poem “Childbirth,” the speaker, Alma, imagines the stories she will recount to her daughter about the day she was born. Alma states:

Someday I will tell her the fire roared  
for what seemed like days and the rooster crowed  
so loud I ordered the midwife to fetch the axe  
under my bed. There was yellow brush  
far up the mountain I watched  
until night came. And blood. (Byer 1992, 28)

It is important to note in this passage that Alma specifically points out the natural world around her as she was in the process of giving birth, recounting how she watching the yellow brush until the blood came. This links pivotal moments in her life with the landscape. Alma further equates storytelling with the natural world in a poem called “Weep-Willow,” as she remembers her grandmother singing songs late into the night. Alma claims, “She sang sad all night long/ and smiled.../ The dark was all/ she had. And

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:1: To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven.

sometimes moonlight/ on the ceaseless water...” (Byer 1992, 37). Once again Alma equates songs and stories with observations of the natural world, claiming her grandmother is only able to find solace in the reflections of the moonlight on the water. This reliance on stories about the natural world is demonstrated multiple times throughout Byer’s poems, showing how these stories can take on a spiritual quality for her female characters.

Throughout *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Ivy Rowe expresses an intense love for the mountains and the natural world that surrounds her in addition to the stories she carries with her. She looks to the mountains to comfort her during trying times in her life; after the death of her husband, Oakley, Ivy writes to her sister Silvaney, “...some days I feel old as the hills themselves which I walk among now almost without ceasing...” (Smith 1988, 317). Ivy’s statement demonstrates the emotional healing and connection that she finds amongst the landscape, walking through the mountains as a way to heal and find comfort in her grief. She writes to her daughter Joli, “I never thought...that I would turn into an old mountain woman like I have, and proud to be so” (Smith 1988, 322). As Ivy repeatedly demonstrates, she feels an intense connection to the mountains where she grew up, to the point that she feels a spiritual connection to her home. *Fair and Tender Ladies* exhibits a clear link between Ivy’s spiritual connection to nature and the nature-based spirituality espoused by many ecofeminists.

This love for nature is demonstrated in several other texts by Appalachian women writers. Throughout Byer’s collection *Wildwood Flower*, the speaker Alma contrasts her desire to be out in nature with her rejection of organized religion. In Byer’s poem

“Easter,” Alma is in church, but imagines herself running free in the mountains. Alma states:

I must ask the Lord pardon for what  
 I’ve come back to remember – the sun  
 on my neck as I shook loose my braids  
 and bent over the washpot. My bare feet  
 were frisky. If wind made the overalls  
 dance on the clothesline, then why  
 shouldn’t I? (Byer 1992, 44)

In this passage, Alma claims that although she is sitting in church, she truly longs to be out in the sun, roaming the land that she has come to hold so dear; she longs to let her hair free and dance in the wind. The poem demonstrates Alma’s need to feel spiritual fulfillment through nature rather than through organized religious practices.

Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer* also contains several female characters whose reverence for nature takes on a spiritual aspect; in particular is the example of Deanna, a woman studying the return of coyotes in the Appalachian Mountains. As Deanna walks through the mountains one day, she takes a moment to survey the scene laid out before her. Kingsolver states:

Here was one more day she almost hadn’t gotten, the feel of this blessed sun on her face and another look at this view of God’s green earth laid out below them like a long green rumpled rug, the stitched-together fields and pastures of Zebulon Valley. (2000, 16)

Deanna deeply appreciates the experience of being in nature and enjoying the world around her. She even feels a deep connection to specific aspects of the natural world. For instance, there is a particular fallen log that Deanna visits when she feels upset.

Kingsolver states, “She touched her fingers to her upper lip, breathing that earthy smell, tasting the wood with her tongue. She had loved this old log fiercely” (2000, 100). In this passage, Deanna shows that she finds peace and calm through objects in the natural world. She shows an intense devotion to the nature throughout *Prodigal Summer*, often finding spiritual moments of healing through her connection with the natural world rather than the strict teachings of organized religion.

I believe that all of the texts I have worked with are directly engaging with many contemporary ecofeminist ideas; in particular, I argue that they foster a conversation regarding ecofeminism’s emphasis on a nature-based spirituality. Many of the female characters in the texts cultivate a nature-based spirituality through their sense of connection with the natural world, which is often supported by stories of nature that they hold dear throughout their lives. However, these texts demonstrate that a nature-based spirituality can take multiple forms. *Fair and Tender Ladies* and *Wildwood Flower* rely on a traditional pathway to a nature-based spirituality through the rejection of patriarchal religion and the confines of the church. Yet *Prodigal Summer* brings a unique perspective to this dialogue with ecofeminist thought, arguing through the character of Nannie Rawley that nature-based spirituality can also blossom from the reworking of certain Christian principles rather than complete rejection of these principles. On the other hand, *Spirit Voices of Bones* and *Abiding Appalachia* not only explore their Cherokee heritage through their texts, but demonstrate how multiple belief systems can interact with and

support ecofeminist principles. In my next chapter, I examine how these Appalachian women writers support the ecofeminist argument that spirituality rooted in an appreciation for nature often leads to environmental action.

## Chapter Two

### ***Overview: The History of Environmental Activism in Appalachia***

In the introduction, I touched upon one of the major critiques lobbed at ecofeminism during the 1990s: the inclusion of what many saw as an “essentialist” spirituality that was apolitical in nature. However, many ecofeminists argued that adhering to a nature-based spirituality inevitably leads to political and environmental activism. I argue that the texts published by Appalachian women writers during the 1990s that I focus on were directly engaging with this critique of ecofeminism and ultimately rejecting it through the environmental activism demonstrated by many of their female characters. It is interesting to note that up until recently, little was known about women’s environmental activism in Appalachia in the twentieth century; while women were certainly engaged, the nature of their activism was largely unknown. Therefore, these texts not only reject the current ecofeminist critiques of the time, but they use that stance to shed light on the activism that real Appalachian women were engaging in during the twentieth century.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Appalachia was experiencing an influx of environmental issues. In her book *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature*, Engelhardt explains that the situation in the region at that time has been described as “a potent mix of logging, mining, poverty, and tourism” (2003, 25). Furthermore, Engelhardt explains that other scholars, such as environmental historian Albert E. Cowdrey, attribute this phenomenon to “an era of “exploitation unlimited” in the South, as business interests shamelessly coveted the region” (2003, 25). To put it simply, Engelhardt recognizes that during the twentieth century “the forces of

industry and resource extraction radically reshaped the Appalachian environment” (Engelhardt 2003, 26). Though Appalachia faces multiple environmental problems, the texts I engage with in this project focus on coal mining, nuclear energy, and the use of pesticides.

In her book, Engelhardt also addresses the lack of information regarding women’s environmental activism in Appalachia during the twentieth century, despite knowledge of such action elsewhere in the United States. Engelhardt asserts that at no time had “women’s self-conscious role as protectors of the environment been better exemplified than during the progressive conservation crusade of the early twentieth century” (2003, 25).<sup>2</sup> However, she also explains that though the twentieth century signaled the rise of women’s environmental clubs, there has been little direct attention paid to the environmental efforts of women in the Appalachian region. Engelhardt states, “The detailed history of Appalachia’s environmental club women’s activities lies buried across the region, waiting to be unearthed” (2003, 26). Ultimately, it was not until several years into the twenty-first century that scholars began paying attention to women’s environmental activism in this region.

Shannon Elizabeth Bell’s book *Our Roots Run Deep as Ironweed: Appalachian Women and the Fight for Environmental Justice*, just published in 2013, is one of the first attempts at a comprehensive study of women’s environmental activism in Appalachia. Through interviews with multiple Appalachian women, Bell uncovers the motivations behind their decision to participate in different protests and movements. Bell states,

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<sup>2</sup> According to Stacy Alaimo in *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space*, the progressive conservation crusade lasted from roughly the 1890s to the 1920s. Women across the United States engaged in conservation activism particularly related to animal and forest preservation; they advocated for environmentally protective legislation. (p.66-7)



...I contend that it is something greater than a “motherhood identity” that motivates and legitimates the activism of many Central Appalachian women; rather, it is more precisely a broader “protector identity”...an obligation to protect their communities, their heritage, their family homeplace, and the physical landscape that surrounds them. (2013, 9)

Bell’s idea of a broader “protector identity” surfaces over a decade after the period my project focuses on, yet her suggestion resonates with many ecofeminists’ responses to the critique that ecofeminist spirituality is not compatible with environmental action.

Scholars such as Starhawk cite ecofeminists’ compassion with all living beings on Earth as a motivation for environmental action, which easily parallels Bell’s idea of a “protector identity.” While it may have taken years for scholars to address women’s environmental activism in Appalachia, I argue that the texts I engage with were actively shedding light on women’s activism in the late twentieth century while simultaneously rejecting critiques of ecofeminism.

### ***Representations of Coal Mining***

The issue of coal mining is perhaps the most well known crisis to affect the Appalachian region; Lee Smith’s *Fair and Tender Ladies* and Denise Giardina’s *The Unquiet Earth* both address this problem. The Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) website defines mountaintop removal coal mining as a process that includes blasting away mountaintops to expose coal seams and then disposing of the waste in adjacent valleys. The process of mountaintop removal mining has disastrous effects on the environment. Plundering Appalachia is a website dedicated to fighting the presence of mountaintop removal mining; according to them, mountaintop removal mining destroys

areas of wildlife habitat and contaminates streams with mining waste. Furthermore, Plundering Appalachia claims that 470 mountains in Appalachia have already been destroyed due to mountaintop removal mining, and there is no end in sight. The residents of Appalachia have been fighting against the practice of coal mining for years.

In their collection of essays titled *Mountains of Injustice: Social and Environmental Justice in Appalachia*, Michele Morrone and Geoffrey Buckley recount the history of the fight against coal mining in Appalachia. In his essay ““We Mean to Stop Them, One Way or Another”: Coal, Power, and the Fight against Strip Mining in Appalachia,” Chad Montrie states, “The militant drive to end stripping [of mountains] in Appalachia began in eastern Kentucky, in the mid-1960s, and quickly spread to other parts of the region” (2011, 83). Furthermore, the coal companies developed tactics to work around these protests. Montrie states:

With a keen sense of the stakes in the battle, however, coal operators did not respond to the opposition solely with belligerent tactics. In fact, they were much more successful in defending their interests by showing calculated support for minimal regulation... This approach ultimately paid off... it provided legal sanction and cover for coal operators’ continued and even more devastating destruction of the land and its people. (2011, 83)

Despite the daunting odds they faced, residents of Appalachia continued to push back against the mining of coal on their lands. This struggle is apparent throughout Smith’s and Giardina’s texts as many of their female characters find themselves compelled to take a stance on this issue due to their love for the landscape.

While Giardina's work is centered on the issue of coal mining, Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies* deals with coal mining later in the text, as Ivy Rowe confronts the coal companies in her old age. Ivy highlights the practice's detrimental effects on the environment through the letters that she writes to her children; while telling her daughter Joli about what has been happening in Majestic, Ivy mentions the floods caused by the strip mining that has been occurring further up the mountain (Smith 1988, 38). Ivy later takes direct action against the Peabody Coal Company, which is attempting to mine the land around her house. She writes to her son Danny Ray:

So this was where I had to do something, and fast! For if [the Peabody Coal Company] had done what they were intending, they would of mined out that whole clift right up beyond Pilgrim Knob, and left us just sitting in a watershed. Come the first spring rain, this whole place would of washed right down the mountain! Now Danny Ray, I *know* this! (Smith 1988, 355)

Because Ivy is aware of the effects of strip mining on the land, she defends her home against the bulldozers that eventually arrive by threatening the men with a gun, ultimately running them off her land for good (Smith 1988, 355-7). Though she may not formally educated, Ivy uses both her position as an Appalachian woman and her intense love for the natural world as a driving force in her fight against strip mining.

Ivy maintains a love for the natural world and particular the mountains that she grew up in throughout her life. In fact, though she attempts to live in the town of Majestic for a while to help out with the settlement school, she eventually must return to her mountain home. Ivy writes to her sister Silvaney, "But I am old and crazy, I have a need to be up here on this mountain again and sit looking out as I look out now at the

mountaintop so heavy with August heat...” (Smith 1988, 349). Ivy’s words are echoed in the sentiments of many of the women interviewed by Bell, as they often cite an intense love for their home and their need to protect it. In fact, Bell interviewed a woman named Joan Linville who had been fighting against coal mining in Appalachia for decades; she decided to become an activist after her house was flooded due to the strip mining on the mountains (2013, 45). In her interview, Joan Linville speaks about many of the ideas present in Smith’s novel: “I love these mountains – this is my home. I don’t need to leave – they need to leave...God made these mountains and we’re tired of men destroying them” (Bell 2013, 54). The sentiments expressed by Joan echo Ivy’s words in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, showing that the text is actively drawing attention to the presence of women’s activism in Appalachia during the late twentieth century.

Of all the works I have analyzed for this project, none deals more closely with the issues of coal mining in Appalachia than Denise Giardina’s *The Unquiet Earth*. This novel follows the story of a community living in a mining shantytown in West Virginia, and is narrated mostly by the characters Dillon, Rachel, and their illegitimate child, Jackie. Throughout her childhood and particularly in her adult life, Jackie demonstrates a deep love for the mountains that she grew up in, as well as a determination to help protect them from the damage of the coal companies. As an adult, Jackie moves away from her hometown for a while, yet she misses the landscape she grew up in despite the damage done by mining: “I travel Blackberry Creek in my mind at night as I fall asleep. Memories melt into dreams of black coal tipples and curving stone walls, of dusty summer weeds and the wail of a train as it swings through the hollow” (Giardina 1992, 248). Even in her fondest memories, Jackie demonstrates how the environmental damage

to the mountains pervades every aspect of her life; she cannot imagine the landscape without the presence of the mining company. She further demonstrates how dear the landscape of her home is to her when she simply states, “On Blackberry Creek I would gain strength and color, like a starving person fed rich broth” (Giardina 1992, 263). Jackie feels a deep connection to the natural environment of her hometown, and it is this connection that causes her to fight against the institutions that are attempting to destroy her community.

Due to her commitment to fighting against the damages imposed by the coal companies, Jackie becomes involved in protest through her job as a journalist. Her father Dillon claims that Jackie writes about the coal company strikes in their community as a way to spread the word about the truly damaging effects that the strip mining is having not only on landscape, but on the people in the town as well (Giardina 1992, 308). Though Jackie attempts to fight alongside her community to stop the coal companies, it is too late to prevent the ultimate disaster: the flooding of their town due to the buildup of the watershed. During the flood Jackie and many of her friends are seriously injured; as an emergency helicopter takes them away, Jackie paints one last vivid pictures of the horrors inflicted by the coal companies. She states, “The mountains are falling away below us. They are ripped and torn like a rumpled gray quilt where the cotton batting shows through. The crown of Trace Mountain is gone, a flat rocky moon pocked by green ponds of acid water” (Giardina 1992, 337). This passage reveals the ultimate horrors that the mining companies can inflict on the Appalachian landscape. Though she is ultimately unable to stop the destruction of her home, Jackie is compelled to fight against the destruction of the landscape due to her connection to her hometown.

Several of the women throughout Giardina's novel stand up against the coal companies that are threatening to destroy the landscape. The first example of such a character is Louelly, a young woman who gets involved with the community group that is fighting to rid her town of the poverty that resulted from the coal companies coming into the region. At a televised event, Louelly stands up against Arthur Lee, a politician who has aligned with the coal companies and is actively trying to prevent the people of the town from speaking out against them (Giardina 1992, 196-7). Louelly tells Arthur Lee, "I been sitting here praying to the good Lord above. I was scairt to speak before, but He has opened my mouth like he done for Moses" (Giardina 1992, 197). In her attempts to stop Arthur Lee and the coal company, Louelly invokes aspects of traditional religious thought, finding a balance between organized religion and a spiritual connection to the land. The text directly demonstrates through this passage that a spiritual connection to the land leads to environmental activism, directly countering the claims of many critics of ecofeminism.

There are several other examples of the female characters in *The Unquiet Earth* engaging in environmental justice activism. For instance, one of the male narrators in the novel, Hassel, mentions an attempt by himself, Louelly, and the characters Toejam and Brenda to stage a protest against the coal company by blocking the road that the coal trucks must use (Giardina 1992, 315). Hassel even mentions that the bumper of Louelly's car, which is helping to block the road, says "GOD IS LOVE" on the bumper, further reinforcing Louelly's use of spirituality to drive her action (Giardina 1992, 316). Other female characters throughout the novel become involved as well; for instance, Ethel Day not only engages in protest, but often puts herself in harm's way to do so. Jackie states,

“One night Ethel Day was on picket duty at the shack outside Number Thirteen tipple when there came the sharp whine of a bullet and her hand resting on the door frame opened up like hot melting wax” (Giardina 1992, 317). Ethel Day demonstrates that these women often put themselves at risk of danger in order to stand up for what they believed in. These female characters demonstrate a need to stop the destruction of the land throughout *The Unquiet Earth*, which ultimately causes them to become involved in community-wide protests. The female characters in Giardina’s work parallel the experiences of women such as Joan Linville; the text demonstrates the link between spirituality, a connection to nature, and environmental activism, while also utilizing the female characters to shed light on the activism performed by real Appalachian women during the 1990s.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Representations of Nuclear Energy Plants***

While nuclear energy is not usually a major topic of debate when discussing environmental issues in Appalachia, it certainly has a history in the region. In fact, Appalachia was host to a number of nuclear energy sites for at least half of the twentieth century. Appalachian Voice is a group of environmentalists and organizers who are dedicated to fighting environmental issues in Appalachia, as well as educating people on these issues through their bi-monthly journal *The Appalachian Voice*. In Paige Campbell’s article “Nuclear Confusion: The Complicated History of the Atom in Appalachia,” she states:

In 1942, a momentous chapter in America’s early nuclear history began to unfold on the western edge of Appalachia, where the instant city of Oak Ridge, Tenn.,

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<sup>3</sup> For more interviews with female environmental activists in Appalachia, consult *Our Roots Run Deep as Ironweed*, particularly chapters two, six, seven, and ten.

was built to house the nearly 75,000 employees of the Manhattan Project. Within three years, the complex had created the nation's first atomic weapons, including the two dropped on Japan to effectively end the Second World War.

Furthermore, residents of Appalachia have been staging opposition to the existence of nuclear power plants in the region for decades. For example, in 2011, a group of 170 residents in Erwin filed suit against the company Nuclear Fuel Services, citing "personal injury, wrongful death, and property damage" (Campbell 2012). This battle to fight against the harm that these nuclear power plants bring to both the people and environment of the region continues today.

In Marilou Awiakta's poetry collection *Abiding Appalachia: Where Mountain and Atom Meet*, multiple speakers recount stories of their experiences in Appalachia, and in particular deal with the building of nuclear power plants in the region. In a selection from "Prophet," the speaker is a person living before the creation of a nuclear plant. The speaker imagines the impact that construction of the plant will have on the land, stating, "Big engines will dig big ditches...Thousands / of people will run to and fro. They will build / things and there will be great noise and confusion / and the earth will shake" (Awiakta 1990, 45). This passage of "Prophet" takes on a spiritual quality in its prediction of environmental damage. Not only is the language descriptive, invoking "the great noise and confusion" of construction, but the title itself associates the poem with a spiritual figure prophesying such an event.

Other poems in *Abiding Appalachia* also focus on the disastrous effects that the building of these power plants had on the land. In the poem "Genesis," the speaker is a



child being relocated with her family from Knoxville, TN to the city of Oak Ridge, TN.

The speaker states:

Oak Ridge had a magic sound –

They said bulldozers could take down a hill before your eyes

and houses sized by alphabet came precut and boxed, like blocks,

...

But the woods sounded best to me.

My mind went to them right away ...

to wade in creeks and rest in cool deep shadows,

watching light sift through the trees ... (1990, 48-9).

The speaker combines the destruction of the mountains with her own imaginings of the woods to bring the environmental damage of the energy plants into sharp focus. The first lines, describing a bulldozer destroying entire hills, are a stark contrast to the speaker's desire to explore the woods. These poems represent the individual environmental activism that one can engage in, even through the simple act of recounting stories as the speakers in this collection do. The poems engage with ecofeminist principles through connecting activism with spirituality and a love for nature.

### ***Representations of Pesticides***

The use of pesticides, especially in farming, is a hotly contested issue. In one of its articles, "Exposed: Pesticides," *The Appalachian Voice* explains that pesticides "include popular products such as insecticides, herbicides, fungicides, and rodenticides" (2014). Pesticides are incredibly dangerous for the environment, often contributing to pollution of air, as well as the pollution of underground aquifers that supply drinking

water for people (“Exposed: Pesticides” 2014). Though there is little information directly related to protests against pesticide use in Appalachia, it is likely there are many environmental organizations focused on reducing the use of pesticides in agriculture. In *Prodigal Summer*, Nannie Rawley actively speaks out against the use of pesticides in farming.

*Prodigal Summer* focuses on the environmental action that is possible on a purely individual level through Nannie’s arguments with Garnett Walker regarding the use of pesticides. It is clear early on that Garnett disagrees with Nannie’s disapproval of pesticides. Kingsolver describes Garnett growing upset about a sign Nannie left in his yard: “His plan for today was to hoist that sign with a mighty heave back over her fence into the ditch, where it would be consumed by the swamp of weeds that had sprung up in the wake of her band on herbicide spraying; then justice would prevail in his small corner of God’s green earth” (2000, 84). In this passage, Garnett is portrayed as favoring a worldview critiqued by many ecofeminists in which there is a separation between humans and nature; he feels it is his God-given right to control the land through spraying harmful pesticides and other damaging substances. The text ultimately provides a confrontation between Nannie and Garnett as a means of exploring Nannie’s ecofeminist leanings.

In her response to a letter received from Garnett, Nannie invokes her connection to the natural world in explaining her extreme dislike for using pesticides, citing the harm they take on the land. Nannie writes:

If God gave Man all the creatures of this earth to use for his own ends, he also counseled that gluttony is a sin – and he did say, flat out, “Thou shalt not kill.” He didn’t tell us to go ahead and murder every beetle or caterpillar that wants to eat

what we eat (and, by the way, other insects that *pollinate* what we eat)... You're a religious man, Mr. Walker. Seems to me you'd think twice about spraying Roundup all over God's hard work. (Kingsolver 2000, 217).

As explored in the first chapter, Nannie is an example of a female character who cultivates a nature-based spirituality that re-appropriates tenets of Christianity in order to reject the ideas of hierarchy and domination characteristic of patriarchal religion. Nannie uses her nature-based spirituality in her response to Garnett, often turning his religious views against him. For instance, Nannie argues that Garnett should "God's hard work" against the use of harmful pesticides, rather than using his religion as a justification for destroying various plants and insects. In this passage, *Prodigal Summer* directly responds to the critics who argue that an ecofeminist spirituality is not compatible with environmental action.

Though scholars have only recently started paying attention to women's environmental activism in Appalachia, the texts that I focus on utilize their female characters to shed light on the activism that women were actually engaging in throughout the 1990s. Recent studies such as Bell's prove that much of the activism that these women writers focus on parallels the real-life experiences of many Appalachian women during that time. Whether the focus is on coal mining, nuclear energy, or pesticides, each text points to a nature-based spirituality and connection to nature as the driving forces for their female characters' environmental activism. I argue that through their female characters, these texts are directly responding to critiques of ecofeminism that had come to the surface in the 1990s. Though many critics of ecofeminism argue that nature-based spirituality is apolitical, these texts reject that claim by demonstrating how women in fact

utilize spirituality as a driving force in their fierce desire to protect the land that they love.

### Conclusion

The goal of this project was to gain a broad sense of how various texts published by Appalachian women writers in the 1990s were actively engaging with ecofeminist ideals. The history of ecofeminism is one of a struggle to gain credibility within both the feminist community and various other environmental activists. Though ecofeminism as a movement had established a solid base by the 1980s, heated backlash was not far behind; by the beginning of the 1990s, ecofeminists were struggling to hold their ground against the multiple critiques lobbed at them. In particular, many scholars and feminists criticized the ecofeminist idea of nature-based spirituality as an effective driving force for environmental activism. Though ecofeminists rejected these critiques and sought to prove the effectiveness of nature-based spirituality and its link to environmental activism, there was little change in general opinion. Surprisingly enough, it would be texts by Appalachian women writers published during this time that would foster a conversation with ecofeminist principles and ultimately advocate for their acceptance.

Throughout this paper, I have examined six works of fiction by Appalachian women writers publishing in or near the 1990s. The themes of spirituality, environmental activism, and their inevitable connection forms a core theme all of these texts. First, I argue that these texts engaged in a conversation with ecofeminist principles regarding the cultivation of a nature-based spirituality. Many ecofeminist scholars cite the inextricable connection of the human and natural worlds as the core tenet of their ideology; they view the rise of patriarchal religion as the driving force behind the separation of these worlds. Lee Smith's *Prodigal Summer* and Kathryn Stripling Byer's *Wildwood Flower* both exhibit the cultivation of a nature-based spirituality, as their female characters completely

reject organized religion in favor of spiritual fulfillment through the natural world. However, Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* complicates this idea; instead of a complete rejection of Christian principles, *Prodigal Summer*'s female characters demonstrate how one can draw a balance between spirituality and religion through the re-appropriation of certain Christian principles to remove hierarchy and place importance on the natural world. Finally, Marilou Awiakta's *Abiding Appalachia: Where Mountain and Atom Meet* and MariJo Moore's *Spirit Voices of Bones* directly engage with ecofeminist principles through the exploration of Cherokee beliefs in various poems, thus demonstrating how multiple belief systems can interact with ecofeminist values.

Furthermore, I assert that these Appalachian texts support the link between spirituality and environmental action that many ecofeminists argue for. Through explorations of coal mining, nuclear energy, and the use of pesticides, these texts demonstrate their female characters utilizing spirituality and a connection to the natural world as a driving force that pushes them towards environmental activism. Denise Giardina's *The Unquiet Earth* places female characters in community-wide protests against coal mining, while the texts by Smith, Awiakta, and Kingsolver use female characters to explore activism at a more individual level. Through this exploration, these texts directly reject the criticism that spirituality is apolitical and only leads to internal salvation. What I note as particularly compelling about these texts is that they are dealing with issues of women's environmental activism not only in relation to critiques of ecofeminism, but during a time when little is known about women's environmental activism in Appalachia. Ultimately, these texts parallel real-life instances of women's environmental activism in order to introduce readers to the broader ecofeminist political

project occurring at this pivotal time and provide a beginning point from which to explore these issues throughout a much larger range of Appalachian literature.

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