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Almost Heaven: Religious Arguments in Appalachian Extractive Fiction

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ALMOST HEAVEN: RELIGIOUS ARGUMENTS IN
APPALACHIAN EXTRACTIVE FICTION

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in the College of Arts and
Sciences at the University of Kentucky

By

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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Appalachia is a national sacrifice zone that hosts extractive industries directly responsible for many social problems in the region, however, many attribute these issues to the moral failings of Appalachians themselves. Activism in the area is heavily focused on opposing both extraction and the negative perceptions which contribute to its domination. One way this activism is conducted is through extractive fiction—novels which expose the destruction caused by extractive industries. Appalachian extractive fiction utilizes religion and spirituality to argue against extraction. This research examines how fiction can be an effective mode of activism and how the use of Christian arguments in particular is enhanced through fiction. The arguments present include those supporting place attachment, stewardship, and nature-venerating spiritualities, all of which work to sacralize the fictional Appalachian mountains in the hopes that the reader will apply these ideas of sacredness and spirituality to the real-life Appalachia. Using faith to build this empathy works to show the readers that the issues in Appalachia are not the fault of those who are victimized by extraction. These arguments are enhanced through the perspectives of protagonists who feel these connections in a way that is not only cultural, but spiritual.

KEYWORDS: Extractive fiction, Appalachian literature, Religion, Political novels, Environmentalism

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Introduction: Extractive Fiction and the Effect of Political Literature

Appalachia has historically been host to a number of extractive industries including timber, oil, tourism, and the most recognizable, coal. Appalachia is a resource-rich geographical area that due to several factors at the turn of the 20th century was left vulnerable to exploitation from outside industries who saw an opportunity to take advantage of an economically depressed community for cheap labor and high resource output. Exploitation by these industries, all of which used questionable legal practices to take property from local Appalachians only to exploit them as employees, has had long-lasting effects on the region. Many exploitative practices are still in place. For over one hundred years, extraction has been the defining characteristic of the region and can account for the majority of its social, economic, health, and environmental issues. The poverty rate, the severely high rates of terminal health problems, the opioid epidemic, and devastating flooding can all be tied back to exploitation by the extraction industries.

Appalachia is a national sacrifice zone—a resource-rich area in which the land and the people are deemed an adequate sacrifice in exchange for the resources (Scott). It is not simply the government and the companies who make this distinction, but society as a whole. Negative stereotypes work outside the region to convince people that Appalachians are pre-modern and backward and therefore deserving of this treatment, while the pre-modern stereotype is viewed within the region as a point of pride, reinforcing the belief that Appalachians are built stronger and more able to handle the work demanded by extraction. As a result, the land and environment of an entire geographic area and the bodies and lives of its people are sacrificed, without much opposition from the majority that perceives no injustice. Jessica Wilkerson in her book *To Live Here, You Have to Fight* (2018) details the history of exploitation and injustice in

the area, saying “In the first half of the 20th century, extractive industries overwhelmed the region; communities experienced tolls in the form of workplace death and disability; workers organized into unions and faced corporate backlash; and by the 1950s, mechanization again transformed industry and unemployment rates soon rose” (Wilkerson 9). Appalachians are sacrificed through multiple means, such as direct exploitation as the labor of coal miners is traded for pennies on the dollar. This has resulted in the fact that “[i]n the 1920s, Appalachian coal miners earned less than their unionized counterparts in the Midwest and Northeast” (Wilkerson 27). The industries also showed a blatant disregard for the health and safety of the people, which has resulted in severe health problems caused by pollution from mountaintop removal, including black lung and heart disease (Bell). People and the environment have been used and abused as merely tools for industrial capitalism at best, and at worst they have been treated as obstacles to capitalistic progress who need to be removed, to the point where Appalachians are suggested to be some of the most exploited people on Earth (Scott).

As a result of this exploitation, Appalachia is also one of the most active regions in terms of activist movements and social and environmental justice. Appalachian literature written by Appalachian authors about and in service to the region has played a role in exposing and opposing the destruction brought by extractive industries. Mountaintop removal (MTR)—a surface mining technique in which explosives are used to loosen the earth above the coal seam and large machinery is used to remove the dirt and rock exposing the coal for extraction without the need for an underground mine—has devastating effects on the land and the environment. This process often leaves the once rugged mountaintops flat, hence the term “mountaintop removal,” and can be linked as

the cause of a number of environmental and health problems (Scott). Authors also work to expose the violence caused by extraction, for example, the Battle of Blair Mountain. Blair Mountain is the largest battle on U.S. soil since the Civil War, fought at the end of the West Virginia Coal Wars, a years-long struggle to unionize coal miners which culminated in the deaths of almost 100 people and only ended after the National Guard was activated. The novels discussed here all reveal the harm done by mountaintop removal and the unethical labor practices of the industries, both issues either directly caused by or closely tied to extraction. The purpose of these novels, which are themselves works of activism, is to reveal the extent of the damage being done in the area, both on an environmental level, but also on a human level, and to counter the idea that Appalachia is a sacrifice worth making. They also counter the myth that environmental activism is in a sphere separate from social justice and show how entirely tied the social, economic, and even spiritual wellbeing of Appalachians are to the environment in which they live. All the novels discussed in this thesis accomplish this by relying heavily on themes of spirituality and religion. They make clear how these different forms of spirituality and religion are intrinsically entwined with the environment to build empathy for these characters and Appalachia.

Protest literature of this nature can be identified with the term “extractive fiction,” defined by Matthew Henry in “Extractive Fiction and Postextraction Futurisms” (2019) as “literature and other cultural forms that render visible the socioecological impacts of extractive capitalism and problematic extraction as a cultural practice” (Henry 403). Henry derived the term from the literary criticism of Sharea Deckard, Michael Niblitt and Stephanie LeMenager, who focus on the devastation of extraction as a result of

colonialism and how literature challenges the commonly held myth that extraction can be a means to economic and social progress. According to Henry, “Extractive fictions can be viewed as conceptually adjacent to the extractive frame used by literary critics in recent years to examine how world literature registers the cultural and ecological violence wrought by raw material extraction on the peripheries” (403). While Henry’s definition of extractive fiction can be applied globally, in his discussion, as in mine, the focus is placed on literature from the Appalachian region, as Appalachia is the most prominent sacrifice zone in the United States. Contemporary extractive fiction written by Appalachian authors contributes significantly to the social justice causes surrounding MTR, labor organizing, and the health and wellbeing of Appalachians, especially when it comes from authors like Silas House and Denise Giardina who are prominent activist figures in addition to being authors. The extractive fiction discussed in this thesis includes *Strange as This Weather Has Been* (2007) by Ann Pancake, *The Evening Hour* (2012) by Carter Sickels, and *The Coal Tattoo* (2005) by Silas House, all of which center on narratives of mountaintop removal. *Flight Behavior* (2012) by Barbara Kingsolver, includes discussion of timber extraction. *Storming Heaven* (1988) and *The Unquiet Earth* (1992) by Denise Giardina trace the transition from traditional underground coal mining to MTR. All these novels showcase the conflict between the characters and an extractive industry.

By its very nature of laying bare the negative effects of industrial extraction, extractive fiction is inherently political. Ann Pancake even goes as far as to explicitly use the term “political novel” to describe *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, which is an account of a fictional family living below a mountaintop removal site with the constant

fear that a slurry dam will fail and drown them and their neighbors. This fear is substantiated by the cultural memory of the Buffalo Creek Disaster, in which a coal slurry dam (built of loose debris left over from the mining operation) broke at the head of Buffalo Creek in Logan County, West Virginia, sending a massive flood through sixteen communities, killing 125 people, and injuring over one thousand more in February of 1972. Prior to publishing her novel, Pancake had been adamant about keeping her politics and her fiction separate, believing the common conception that politics ruin literary art. She also claims that she “didn’t believe fiction could put a scratch in contemporary social and political problems” (“Creative Responses” 404). She changed her mind. The Turrell family is directly based on a family she met while helping her sister with a documentary, raising the question, why choose fiction as the medium for a story that seemed to be primed to be a journalistic or nonfiction piece? In fact, why do any of these narratives need to be fiction when many are either fictionalized accounts of real events, as is the case of *Storming Heaven* and *The Unquiet Earth*, or contain scenes reminiscent of historical events, as in *The Coal Tattoo* and *The Evening Hour*?

The benefit of fiction over other nonfiction media like documentary is the way in which fiction encourages the reader to form an empathetic bond with the characters and places portrayed. Where nonfiction would keep the subjects of the work at an arm’s length, fiction invites us directly into their lives and minds. Pancake supports this idea, saying:

The reader of a novel or a book-length work of creative nonfiction, for instance, spends hours upon hours vicariously living the lives of other human beings, and such an experience can generate great compassion in the reader...That effort

means the reader engages more actively with the art, ultimately arriving at a more intimate and manifold appreciation of the issue the art addresses. (“Creative Responses” 408)

The effect of this imaginative effort required by fiction is that readers are more likely to form an empathetic bond with the character whose life and world in which they are immersed. This is supported by research in cognitive ecocritical theory. The primary argument is that exposing readers to social justice issues within fiction will help them to recognize and confront the social injustices revealed within the literature (Bracher). What Pancake and authors like her are doing in these cases is “authorial strategic empathizing” which is defined by Suzanne Keen as when an author purposefully utilizes empathy to advance a particular political or social justice purpose (Keen). Creating empathy and inciting an emotional response from the reader is often much more effective in encouraging a cognitive and behavioral shift since, according to research by George Westen, “people’s positions with regard to social issues and political parties, platforms, and candidates, are determined more by the emotions that they feel toward these things than by evidence and logical thought” (Bracher 11). In the case of authors of extractive fiction, the goal is not only to create an empathetic connection between the reader and the character, but between the reader and the place itself. The goal is to convince the reader to not only see the violence enacted by extractive industries but to feel the devastation in the way that it is felt by the characters and by those who live in the region in reality. We need to understand that the environment of the novel is more than the background for action and realize place’s narrative importance to the plot and characters of the novel.

Beyond just empathy, recent research also suggests that reading literature can develop cognitive and affective capabilities essential for responsible citizenship in terms of how we view the behavior of others. Fiction and the empathy it fosters can change a reader's entire perspective on a group of people and can even go as far as to encourage action on the part of those whose behavior is the result of external factors. As Lucy Pollard-Gott explains:

Novels have a unique power and tendency to focus our attention on elements and complexities of situations that have a powerful impact on people and determine their behaviors but that are often invisible to observers outside of fiction. By focusing our attention on situational factors that we tend to overlook in real life and by making us privy to characters' feelings and thoughts evoked by these situational factors... novels lead us to make more situational attributions than we tend to make when observing similar behaviors in similar situations outside the novel. (Pollard-Gott, 505-506)

Situation attribution means that the observer will attribute the characteristics of what Pollard-Gott refers to as the "actor," the person doing the action, to the person's environment and situation which they are perceived not to control. They attribute this to their situation rather than attributing their actions and shortcomings to personal character flaws of the actor. Bracher and Pollard-Gott both support the idea that by presenting the reader with a sympathetic actor in a poor situation, authors can reconceptualize the reader's way of thinking about both the actors within the novel, and the real-world people who these actors represent.

Therefore, contrary to Pancake's former perception that political fiction would have no effect on society's perception of those political issues, other writers have established that protest novels such as these can indeed have a profound cognitive influence on the reader. After publishing *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, Pancake also came to this conclusion, even going as far as to suggest that artists through their work can act as the "intermediaries between the profane and the sacred," and that "[o]nly by desacralizing the world, over centuries, have we given ourselves permission to destroy it. Conversely, to protect and preserve life we must re-recognize its sacredness, and art helps us do that" ("Creative Responses" 413). Sacralizing the world through fiction is exactly what these Appalachian political novels do, even more explicitly than what Pancake is suggesting here, through characterization of the protagonists as devoutly and faithfully Christian and by tying that faith directly to their surrounding environment. The characters embody and promote common religious arguments used in anti-extraction activism in order to sacralize the earth. By showcasing characters who experience an intense attachment to their place which is grounded in many forms of religion and spirituality, these authors attempt to play on the empathy that the readers will have for their protagonists. Experiencing a fictionalized Appalachia as sacralized through the focal point of characters who are harmed emotionally and spiritually by extraction can translate to concern for the real Appalachia and its residents.

It is important to acknowledge that the novels analyzed here which engage in religious arguments in this way all present their arguments through the lens of Christianity and from the perspective of a majority of white protagonists. Sacralization of the land through fiction is just one way in which this rhetorical argument can be made,

but it is not definitively the best, nor are the experiences within these books at all representative of the overall religious experience in Appalachia. There is not one definitive religious or spiritual experience even among activist circles who engage with these arguments for rhetorical purposes. Appalachia is a diverse region with a variety of different religious and faith-based practices, contrary to common misconceptions that it is an entirely Evangelical Christian area. Appalachians participate in many religions other than Christianity, and even a variety of unique religious denominations and practices within the realm of Christianity, and it is important to remain aware as we discuss this specific set of social justice narratives that the arguments and perspectives in these novels are only a few of many. While sacralization as a rhetorical technique can be highly effective for all the reasons given hereafter, this technique should not be lauded as the best method or only method to empathetically engage a reader in a political argument. Doing so will leave other religious and nonreligious voices out of the argument and can even be misconstrued to suggest that anyone who does not engage with the environment in a way that is inherently spiritual or religious must fall on the side of extraction, which is entirely untrue. Many people who support environmental justice activism engage with the environment in ways that are entirely non-religious or spiritual, and their experience engaging with and protecting the environment is still valid. Further, some activists also experience nature-venerating spiritualities in a way that is entirely untethered from Christianity. Nature-venerating spiritualities as an ideal is largely based on both paganistic spiritual practices and Indigenous culture and spirituality and is sometimes appropriated to appeal to a Christian audience.

Nevertheless, the combination of the cognitive influence and empathetic affect which fiction can have with the sense of morality and rightness which arguments based in religion evoke enhances the effectiveness of the rhetorical argument for environmental and social justice. Adam Sanders in his thesis “Mimetic Transformations of Sacred Symbols: Christianity in Appalachian Literature” (2005) argues that religion plays a role in the sense of moral rightness people feel, regardless of whether those people ascribe to a religion or what religion they ascribe to. This argument is based on Clifford Geertz’s understanding of religion which states that religion is “(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz, qtd. in Sanders 7). Sanders also cites Berger’s notion that “religion not only instructs one on the proper ways to act and think, but it transposes these actions onto a cosmic order, thereby lending them a sacred significance” (Berger, qtd. in Sanders 8). It is both true that fiction can fundamentally change the readers cognitive perceptions and biases regarding certain topics, and it is also true that religious arguments are particularly effective rhetorical strategies in regard to activism because they realign the subject of activism in the hierarchy which dictates the moral value we place on certain items and concepts. People tend to view things which they perceive as sacred or tied to faith (even faith which is not their own) as higher in that hierarchy, and therefore view destruction of that thing as worse than something they consider lower in the hierarchy. It would stand to reason, then, that these religious arguments being presented in the medium of fiction and embodied by characters with whom the audience

is encouraged to build an empathetic connection would be a highly effective means of activism.

Religious arguments such as the Creation Care argument, which advocates for care of the Earth as a gift from God which humans have been given stewardship over, and the inherent argument made by nature-venerating spirituality, experienced by people who associate nature with spirituality, as well as the effect of presenting the reader with a protagonist who experiences a profound and spiritual place attachment are effective because, as Joseph Witt explains in *Religion and Resistance in Appalachia* (2016), “In the case of mountaintop removal, religious narratives of opposition counter the utilitarian arguments used in support of the practice by applying a spiritual or affective value to place and it’s communities” (52). These arguments are rhetorically effective in real life, but the empathetic connection between the reader and the character built through fiction increases the effectiveness of these arguments as the character’s environment is now elevated in what Berger refers to as the cosmic hierarchy because it has been sacralized as a result of the established connection with characters whose faith is heavily enmeshed with the land.

The authors utilize a variety of religious arguments in their extractive fiction for the unified purpose of presenting an anti-extraction argument that will garner sympathy and empathy not only for the characters and their real-life counterparts, but for the mountains themselves. In this thesis, I will analyze the ways in which each author employs spirituality and religion in a way that has the potential to sacralize the environment and affect the reader’s perceptions of extraction in the Appalachian region, serving the ultimate goal of these political novels to support the social and environmental

justice movements. Each section explores a different way in which these authors use religion and spirituality to enhance the empathetic connection between the reader and the protagonists and their environment and situation. The first chapter discusses how Giardina in her novels as well as Pancake in *Strange as This Weather Has Been* represent place attachment through the image of the Appalachian Homeplace. These novels present characters who not only experience a cultural place attachment, but a spiritual one as well, often equating a return to and retirement on their Homeplaces to the promise of rest in Heaven, and who therefore experience a devastating loss when their Homeplace is destroyed or purchased from them. The second chapter highlights the use of the Creation Care argument, a Judeo-Christian ideal which states that the earth is a gift from God to be cared for. This argument is voiced through characters in *Flight Behavior* by Kingsolver and *The Evening Hour* by Sickels. These novels both present protagonists who engage with this argument directly, thus reinforcing it as the “correct” ideology to approach these novels with. The novels differ on their representations of the church and mainstream religion in terms of how they interpret Biblical instructions regarding the environment. The third chapter discusses characters who experience nature-venerating spiritualities in *The Coal Tattoo* by House and *Strange as This Weather Has Been*. Nature-venerating spiritualities refers to a spiritual connection with the earth that is reminiscent of, and often appropriated from, Indigenous cultures and faith practices. In these novels, the concept of nature-venerating spiritualities is filtered through a decidedly Christian lens and manifests in characters who experience God through earth and the land, even going as far as to say that they see God within that nature. The way in which these nature-venerating spiritualities is employed is similar to contemporary American Indian

environmental writing. These arguments are used together with authorial strategic empathizing to impart these feelings of spirituality as tied to the environment upon the reader, with the goal of inspiring action on the reader's part.

The Spiritual Connection to Homeplace in *Strange as This Weather Has Been* and the Novels of Denise Giardina

Within Appalachian literature, particularly the works of Denise Giardina and Ann Pancake, a common motif is the concept of the capital-H Homeplace. The Homeplace is more than just the land on which the characters live, but a place to which they feel a strong, sometimes spiritual, connection which is often called “place attachment.” Place attachment is defined as the bond that connects individuals to their environment, generates identification with a place, and fosters social and political involvement in the preservation of that place (Altman and Low). Real-life activists as well as fictional characters claim an attachment to place, as can be seen in the interviews conducted by Shannon Elizabeth Bell for her book *Our Roots Run Deep as Ironweed: Appalachian Women and the Fight for Environmental Justice* (2013). Maria Gunnoe, an activist fighting against MTR, discussed how indignant she gets when people suggest she give up and leave for a better place. She says, “My family was here long before they started mining coal. And why should we have to leave?” (qtd. in Bell 17), invoking that sense of belonging to place. She then goes on to describe how her dad was once encouraged to sell, but “[o]ur place is not for sale- it’s a home place. You can’t buy and sell a homeplace, so of course my dad didn’t sell” (qtd. in Bell 15). The emphasis placed by Gunnoe on this concept of the Homeplace and how it is not a commodity that can simply be bought and sold is revealing of her own feelings of place attachment. Place attachment is often expressed in Appalachian literature through this idea of Homeplace. Many protagonists, including Lace and Bant in *Strange as This Weather Has Been* and the majority of the protagonists of *Storming Heaven* and *The Unquiet Earth* are motivated by

this place attachment which manifests as a sometimes-spiritual reverence and love for their Homeplace.

Place is defined by Irwin Altman and Setha Low in *Place Attachment* (1995) as “repositories and contexts within which interpersonal, community and cultural relationships occur” (Altman and Low 7). Theories of place attachment posit that place becomes a central part of one’s cultural identity, an idea which is supported by bell hooks in *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2009), as she refers to the feelings of place attachment as a “culture of belonging.” In a culture of belonging, people feel a strong sense of entitlement to the land and their Homeplace, as they tie the physicality of the place to their traditions and cultural history, as well as their spiritual and religious beliefs. They begin to feel as though they and their families have always been there, and that they have earned the right to live there in a way that others have not.

A common theme, even among novels that do not explicitly use the term Homeplace, is the idea that one’s Homeplace is the place that calls for you to return. hooks addresses this as well in her essay when she writes, “Away from home, I was able to look back at the world of homeplace differently, separating all that I treasure and all that I needed to cherish from all that I dreaded and wanted to see destroyed” (hooks 60). hooks recognizes the problems within her Homeplace, and that which she wishes to see destroyed is the injustice and inequality which exists within the region, and which affects her particularly as a Black Appalachian. According to hooks, being away from home allowed her to see it in a way that was not possible when she was living there. Lace in *Strange as This Weather Has Been* speaks to the same feelings that hooks expresses when she discusses being able to see the good of her Homeplace only when she is outside of it:

"Because for a long time, I'd known the tightness of these hills, the way they penned. But now, I also felt their comfort, and worse, I'd learned the smallness of me in the away. I understood how when I left, I lost part of myself, but when I stayed, I couldn't stretch myself full" (Pancake, *Strange* 22). Here, Lace describes the feeling of knowing that she has a connection to these mountains, but also that living in her Homeplace makes her feel hemmed in. However, she makes it clear later in the novel when she describes having moved with her husband to Raleigh, North Carolina that she felt unimaginably small living in the big city. She loses that culture of belonging first when she leaves for college and again in Raleigh where she actively feels as though she is shunned and judged by her neighbors who think of her as a hillbilly woman with too many kids. She ultimately chooses to return to the comfort of the mountains, and the comfort of belonging, but only after she is outside of them and can look back and compartmentalize the good and the bad. That is until the end of the novel when she chooses to stay even though her husband and two sons have decided to move back to Raleigh.

Though most of her major decisions are influenced by her place attachment and her strong desire to live in a place where she feels belonging, Lace questions what is keeping her rooted on a Homeplace where her life and the lives of her children are constantly at risk. This question is also posed by those who criticize the rhetoric of anti-MTR activists. If it is so bad to live there, why not just leave? On her way back from North Carolina, she questions:

what is it? I asked myself again. Makes us have to return?...But I'd already figured out it wasn't just me. How could only me and my thirty-three years on that land make me feel for it what I did? No, I had to be drawing it down out of

blood and from memories that belonged to more than me. I had to. It must have come from those that bore me, and from those that bore them. From those who looked on it, ate off it, gathered, hunted, dug, planted, loved, and bled on it, who finally died on it and are now buried in it. Somehow a body knows. (Pancake, *Strange* 258-59)

Rather than making a financial argument for why she will not leave, (a legitimate argument, all the same) Lace ascribes her need to go home to an inherited place attachment, passed down genetically from her ancestors who depended on the land for everything. This theory is supported by the fact that her father experienced this draw to the land as well, to a degree that was concerning to Lace as she watched him slowly succumb to black lung disease. Lace observes that "His lungs are being buried by it, by coal, which is earth, which is this place, and, still, he wants nothing but to be out on it" (Pancake, *Strange* 203). He asks Lace to push him up the mountain in his wheelchair on a regular basis just so he can feel the nature around him. Further supporting the idea that place attachment is genetic is Lace's 15-year-old daughter Bant, who when she considers their brief move to Raleigh states, "I knew, it came to me with the brush moving, how if you left out, your ghost stayed behind. What I call the live ghost, the ghost you carry in you before you die" (Pancake, *Strange* 182). This live ghost she mentions indicates a stronger connection with place than simply living on the land and surviving off of it, but somehow that her living spirit is connected with this place.

Another character in *Strange as This Weather Has Been* who muses on this attachment to place is Avery, the son of Mrs. Taylor, an elderly neighbor. Avery was 12 when he survived the Buffalo Creek disaster, a massive flood which devastated the 16

communities of Buffalo Creek, West Virginia, killing 125 people, injuring one thousand more and leaving over 4,000 homeless. The flood was caused by the collapse of Pittston Coal's Dam 3, a dam constructed of leftover coal slurry which was structurally unsound. Avery, who now lives in Cleveland, has come home to convince his mother to move as she has expressed to him her fear that "One company or another's bound to drown me before I die a natural death" (Pancake, *Strange* 64) as the MTR site above her house has already caused one flood. Avery goes on to discuss his own feelings about leaving home. Even though he has successfully managed to move to Cleveland and is now trying to convince his mother to do the same, he understands her hesitancy because of how "[t]o leave home is not just to leave a piece of land and family and friends, it is to leave your reputation, the respect you've earned from others, your dignity, your place" (Pancake, *Strange* 280). Reputation, respect, and dignity are all aspects of that culture of place, and Avery has identified how difficult it can be for some people to leave that comfortable culture knowing that they will have to start again from scratch building their social circle and reputation. Place, in the case of a Homeplace, is not merely a geographical location, nor is it simply land. It is, as hooks says, the culture that you build in that place which people feel attached to. The idea is that the work that you put into that place should allow you to reap the reward of a comfortable life on your Homeplace. In other words, people expect the work they put into being part of a community, cultivating a livelihood, and building a reputation to have some amount of positive payoff in the end—a rest like they are promised Heaven will be.

Mrs. Taylor, despite her own fears of living below a MTR site as evidenced by her ritualistic retelling of the Buffalo Creek flood, has up until this point refused to hear

anything about moving away from her Homeplace. Avery believes that the reason she is so hesitant to leave is because of "how that promise of return is yet another reason people from here put up with what they do. If you work hard enough you can retire back home, not unlike the promise of Heaven" (Pancake, *Strange* 277). The idea that retiring on the Homeplace is equivalent to ascension to Heaven showcases how sacred the Homeplace is for these characters. For Mrs. Taylor, the blasting and the flooding are driving her not just out of her home but are denying her a Heaven-like comfort which she and, according to Avery, many people feel entitled to. Mrs. Taylor believes that because her father bought and worked the land, that she has a right to retire upon it comfortably. As she puts it, "There have always been Ratliffs [her family name before marriage] in this hollow! My father bought these two lots in 1928, and we worked for what we have!" (Pancake, *Strange* 71). This is a belief system that matches that Christian ideal of the promise of Heaven, in which if you put in the work on earth, worship and meet God's expectations, then you will be allowed to ascend and retire peacefully in Heaven. While some evangelical voices would argue that a good Christian's main concern should be ascending to Heaven rather than concern for their home on earth (more on this later), for Mrs. Taylor, her primary concern is her ability to retire on the land that she feels her family earned through their hard work. This comparison of Heaven to Mrs. Taylor's home in West Virginia makes clear to the reader what is truly at stake for these characters, and that their place attachment is not just a love of an earthly home, but a longing for place equally as strong as Christians' longing for Heaven.

The desire for a payoff to the work done over a lifetime is especially relevant in a place like West Virginia where the topography alone is enough to increase the amount of

effort necessary to build a Homeplace. Lace and Bant both describe memories of having lived through hard times on Yellowroot mountain, and how in those hard times they survived almost entirely on what that mountain gave them. They learned the paths, and the plants, learned what could be used and what could be sold, and their story of hardship and work is likely not a unique one. After all that effort put into living in a place, the expectation is that there should be some tangible benefit, or why else would one suffer the hardships necessary to live in such a place. Mrs. Taylor, nearing the end of her life, expects that now she should have earned that retirement in the Homeplace on which she and her family before her has worked so hard to live on and make into a Homeplace. The conclusion that she comes to—that this place that she worked for for so long cannot be her Heavenly retirement home and cannot even continue to be her Homeplace—is devastating enough that it convinces her to give in to her children and move away to Cleveland, giving up not only the land she worked to maintain, but the community she worked to be a part of and the reputation she worked to build. After the death of Corey, Jimmy Make and Dane also come to this realization, leaving behind Lace and Bant, who are still convinced of the promise of Heaven. Lace and Bant believe that if they just put in enough work into the environmental movement, they too may someday retire on their Homeplace. This belief in that promise of retirement and that the culture of belonging will reap benefits has kept Lace rooted in place, and it is the shared belief that convinces Bant to stick it out with her, and the novel ends on a hopeful, if somber note, with Lace remembering something Uncle Mogey had told when things first started to get bad, “In times like these, you have to grow big enough inside to hold both the loss and the hope”

(Pancake, *Strange* 357). That hope that there might be a brighter future is what convinces Bant to push on.

Storming Heaven and *The Unquiet Earth* by Denise Giardina engage with similar ideas of the Homeplace as a sacred almost-Heavenlike place, but go a bit further showing that the work required to earn that life on your Homeplace goes beyond simply working and living off the land. C.J. Marcum is a character so motivated by that culture of belonging and place attachment that his actions through all *Storming Heaven* are driven by that desire to reclaim the Homeplace that has been stolen from him. C.J.'s family was forced off their land after his grandfather was murdered for refusing to sell his mineral rights. C.J. says, "The field was half plowed when we packed to go, leaving the homeplace the Marcums settled in 1801 when they first come to West Virginia, on the little creek called after us, Marcums Branch" (Giardina, *Storming Heaven* 16). C.J. chooses to move to a nearby town where he spends the rest of his life fighting against the coal company. He joins with the Union organizers, publishes a socialist newspaper, and even goes as far as to participate in armed violence against the hired guards of the coal company, all motivated by the hope that one day he may be able to return to the farm on Marcum's creek that his Papaw had died for. C.J. ultimately dies in a shootout all on the promise that if he just works hard enough, he can get back to that Homeplace and retire. Many people have done less than this for the promise of Heaven, which shows how profoundly meaningful this dream is for C.J. and others like him.

Carrie Bishop, another narrator in *Storming Heaven*'s rotating roster of protagonists, was raised on a farm in Kentucky which she refers to as the Homeplace. She also expresses a connection to her Homeplace as strong as that of C.J.'s. The

Kentucky farm where she grew up and where her family continues to live even after she moves to the coal camps is a comfortable and happy Homeplace strongly juxtaposed against the bleak, industrial backdrop of the West Virginia mining communities. Early in the novel, she expresses her sense of comfort with the land by saying that she could never imagine the land turning on her and hurting her. However, later, when she has had a bit more life experience, she personifies the mountains surrounding the Homeplace saying, "Mountains could be as jealous, as unforgiving, as any spurned lover. Leave them and they may never take you back" (Giardina, *Storming Heaven* 101). Here, we see an opposite view of Homeplace from what is presented in *Strange As this Weather Has Been*, where many characters feel drawn to return to the mountains as if the landscape itself is calling them home and welcoming them in. Here, Carrie evokes a fear that the mountains, and by extension the community within them which contributes to that culture of place, might reject anyone who leaves for too long.

Despite that fear, Carrie still carries a sort of reverence for her Homeplace, as if she, like Mrs. Taylor, is bolstered by the promise of return to it, as though the promise of a return to the Homeplace is equal to that of the promise of Heaven, just as Avery suggests. Carrie's attachment and reverence for the Homeplace is clear, although not every character experiences this attachment as strongly as she does. For example, Albion Freeman, her husband for most of the novel and a Holiness preacher who tries to disentangle Heaven and the Homeplace in Carrie's eyes argues:

The Homeplace ain't Heaven, Carrie. Hit's part of the creation and hit's fallen and hit suffers just like we do. And the only way to live on it happy is to love everthing else that is fallen. And if'n I can't love them gun thugs, God wont call

me back to the Homeplace, because I'll love all the wrong things about it, I'll love it because there ain't no gun thugs there and because there I can turn my back on all the suffering, and I'll make an idol outen it, and worship it. (Giardina, *Storming Heaven* 242)

Albion says directly that the Homeplace is not Heaven, but then goes on in that exact same sentence to say that "God won't call me back to the Homeplace," using the word "Homeplace" instead of "Heaven" in this instance. This implies that despite Albion's theological conviction that the Homeplace is not comparable to Heaven, he, too, has a strong connection to it and believes that he must earn his place at the Homeplace just as he must earn his place in the Kingdom of Heaven. This stands as evidence that sacralizing of the Homeplace is subconscious, and something that these characters and their real-life counterparts experience even despite their best efforts not to. Albion does not want to sacralize the Homeplace, but still does so despite his own convictions.

The concept of deserving the Homeplace as one would deserve Heaven is echoed in *The Unquiet Earth*, the sequel to *Storming Heaven* which primarily follows Carrie Bishop's son Dillon and niece Rachel. Dillon and Rachel have both grown up on the Homeplace, but Dillon has a much stronger attachment to it than Rachel, and his own idea of what it means to deserve the Homeplace. When Rachel decides to move out to become a nurse, Dillon tells her that she "got no right to the Homeplace" (Giardina, *The Unquiet Earth* 24) and that she does not deserve it. Dillon is also fiercely protective of the Homeplace, at one point threatening to shoot anyone who tries to take it from them.

While Rachel does not quite experience the same level of place attachment that Dillon does, she does understand where it is coming from, as she is able to explain to the

reader why so many of her classmates dropped out of nursing school. “Homesickness took them away. It is something you see often in the mountains, for we are tied to kin and land as closely as any people ever were. It is a belief we have, as strong as any religion, that home can be preserved forever and life made everlasting if we only stay put” (Giardina, *The Unquiet Earth* 27). Just as homesickness draws Lace to her Homeplace, it draws these young women as well. This belief that the home can be preserved if you stay is reflected in the actions of the Lloyd family, as well. In *Storming Heaven*, after the Lloyd’s farm is claimed through underhanded legal practices involving patents and mineral rights, Clabe Lloyd decides that he will work as a coal miner and live on what was once his family farm but is now company property. This way, he and his wife and kids can still live on his family’s land, even if it means having to go down in the mines. This choice to cleave so strongly to the land they are attached to ultimately leads to the death of Clabe and his youngest son in a mine explosion.

Readers who find themselves empathizing with the Lloyds, Carrie, C.J., Lace, and Mrs. Taylor, all who feel this place attachment strongly and who view retirement on their Homeplace in the same way that Christians view ascension to Heaven are able to experience what it is to feel so deeply that culture of belonging and place attachment. Alexa Weik von Mossner in her article “Why We Care About (Non)Fictional Places” (2010) supports the research of Richard Gerrig: “Just like actors on a stage, Gerrig proposes, readers engage in acts of simulation during which ‘they must use their own experiences of the world to bridge the gaps in texts’ and must invest their own emotions to ‘give substance to the psychological lives of characters’” (Gerrig qtd. in “Why We Care” 562). Even readers who have never visited Appalachia can still pull from their own

perception of a family farm and their own feelings for their own homes to fully visualize the Homeplace as Carrie and Dillon see it. This is enhanced by the fact that both Giardina and Pancake switch between multiple narrators in the telling of their narratives, giving the reader multiple first-person accounts with which to empathize. Lace and Bant are purposefully told from a first-person perspective to increase the reader's empathetic connection with them specifically over the other characters who do not experience as strong a place attachment. Carrie Bishop and C.J. Marcum's first-person viewpoints, as well, make up a good portion of the narration in *Storming Heaven*, and Dillon commands the attention for a fair portion of *The Unquiet Earth*. This empathy leads to an understanding of what motivates C.J. to go as far as facing armed men in a shootout so that he can reclaim his Homeplace, and what motivates Lace and Bant to stay in West Virginia despite the threats they face to their health and safety. Readers are also able to feel anger on the part of characters like the Lloyds who are killed for their decision to remain on their Homeplace, and Mrs. Taylor who is ultimately driven from her Homeplace and denied the Heaven-like retirement that she has worked toward her whole life.

These authors go further than simply building empathy between the reader and the protagonists. They also build a sense of empathy for the setting by sacralizing the Homeplace. These characters view their Homeplace as sacred and a place where their ancestors walked and are buried, and where generations of people before them established that culture of place and where they themselves have worked to establish their own belonging and right to a peaceful retirement on the land that they have worked so hard for. This sacralizing of their Homeplace is often unconsciously done with many

characters like Mrs. Taylor and Albion exhibiting that place attachment, while characters like Avery and Carrie really interrogate what it is that draws them back home. Whether these characters are aware of their place attachment or not, empathy with a character who experiences this place attachment translates to empathy with the Homeplace itself. Readers may feel as strongly as Dillon the devastation of having to sell the Homeplace and the blasphemous disrespect shown to the Bishop family cemetery as the company digs up the graves of each family member with the intent to move them somewhere else can incite real anger on the part of the reader. Pancake discusses how and why the setting needs to be sacralized in an interview, saying:

I'll propose that artists are also translators between the visible and invisible worlds, intermediaries between the profane and the sacred...Only by desacralizing the world, over centuries, have we given ourselves permission to destroy it. Conversely, to protect and preserve life we must re-recognize its sacredness, and art helps us do that. Literature re-sacralizes by illuminating the profound within the apparently mundane, by restoring reverence and wonder for the everyday, and by heightening our attentiveness and enlarging our compassion. ("Creative Responses" 413)

Pancake and Giardina both accomplish sacralization by not only creating an empathetic connection between the reader and the character, but also between the reader and the Homeplace.

Beyond building empathy with the characters, the first-person perspective gives the reader the experience of walking where the characters walk. hooks discusses the concept of walking to claim place, saying "I need to live where I can walk. Walking, I

will establish my presence, as one who is claiming the earth, creating a sense of belonging, a culture of place” (hooks 2). Walking, moving in an environment and experiencing that environment fully is how these place attachments are established in reality as well as in the fiction. Pancake’s use of tactile imagery allows the reader to not only walk over Yellowroot Mountain with Lace and Bant, but to feel what they feel as they do. At the end of the novel, Bant climbs Yellowroot for the first time in a while to go truly look at the destruction caused by MTR and she describes every sensation of this hike:

Then I was moving the way I used to in the woods, before the distance came between me and it, the way I moved in woods and woods only...I could feel what was nearby, its size its closeness, its give, beech, poplar, oak, holly hickory hemlock laurel, touching nothing, tripping nowhere, what Moge always said about the hum. October smell in my head, and me and Grandma, sassafras and pawpaw and beechnut, like sunflower seeds under your feet, I pushed myself harder. (Pancake, *Strange* 355)

Bant is the focalizer in this case, or the character through which the reader experiences these sensations, and because by this point in the novel the reader has an established empathetic bond with Bant, they can experience her bond with the mountain she walks on. As Weik von Mossner explains in *Affective Ecologies* (2017), “The vivid description of a protagonist’s sensations will help readers imagine *what it is like* to experience that alternative world. However, the emotional and visceral inhabitation of a storyworld is also depended [sic] on the vivid evocation of the material conditions that provoke that sensual experience” (*Affective Ecologies* 27-28). Not only does the reader establish an

emotional empathy for the characters, but they are also able to imagine the physical sensations of living in that character's storyworld. In this way, they can not only be affected by the spiritual connection the characters have to their Homeplace, but they are also able to imagine what it is like to physically live on that Homeplace, and the devastation of having that place ripped away. Characters who experience this place attachment are also likely to make strong arguments in favor of Creation Care.

Creation Care and the Role of the Church in *The Evening Hour* and *Flight Behavior*

Even for characters who do not see their Homeplaces as sacred almost Heaven-like places, the duty of the care of God's creation still heavily influences their thoughts and actions. Creation Care is the most recognized term for the theocentric argument used commonly in anti-MTR spheres. Based on Christian and Jewish arguments of environmental stewardship, it is used by people who believe in a religious mandate to manage and care for the natural world along sustainable guidelines (Witt). The term Creation Care comes from the belief that nature is not ours, but God's, and we simply care for it, otherwise known as stewardship over God's creation. Creation Care advocates are often criticized, specifically in conservative Christian circles where people, "following long-standing religious patterns in the region, often remain silent on environmental concerns forcing theocentric environmental activists out of established church networks and into other social groups" (Witt 100). Arguments in favor of Creation Care, as well as arguments in opposition are showcased in *The Evening Hour* by Carter Sickels and *Flight Behavior* by Barbara Kingsolver.

The argument for Creation Care is utilized in real-life anti-MTR activism to benefit the movement and promote the ideology that the destruction caused by MTR is not only detrimental to the health and safety of those in the area but is sacrilegious on a higher level. Joan Linville, an environmental activist says "The churches here will not take sides, which I think is wrong, because the Bible says you're not to destroy God's creation. That's why I feel that it goes against God's will by doing this. Because see, if God wanted these mountains tore up, He would tear them up himself" (qtd. in Bell 58). The Creation Care argument heavily prioritizes God's will over the will of man, and

sacralizes the earth by framing it as being owned by a higher power and that man is overstepping a spiritual boundary by destroying it for the purposes of utility.

In *The Evening Hour*, Sickles presents a character that struggles to come to terms with the place attachment he feels to his community despite the difficulties of living in a West Virginia coal town. He also struggles with the trauma of having been raised by his grandfather, a strict Holiness pastor who preached fire and brimstone both in his role in the church and his role as Cole's guardian. Cole's relationship with organized religion is complicated, as he is both somewhat traumatized by the way his grandfather raised him—memorizing Bible verses before schoolwork, screaming and preaching hellfire to every mistake Cole made. However, the beliefs he was raised with are still deeply ingrained in him. "In Charleston, he'd gone once to a church where the minister spoke in a gentle voice and the congregation was polite and quiet. He did not know how people could feel God that way, without the sweat and tears and shouting" (Sickels 206). One character even remarks that his Grandfather must have really messed him up when Cole explains that he has never been saved because he has never spoken in tongues.

Cole expresses through most of the novel a secular attachment to the earth, feeling connected to his hometown because it is all he has ever known. However, by the end of the novel, his attachment begins to take on a more spiritual tone. "He'd lived in the state capitol for a few months and hated everything about it, the strangers, the noise, the buildings pressed in from all sides. He felt cut off from the land and from himself. He came back here feeling like he failed, and the old man had met him at the door. 'You come back to get saved?'" (Sickels 36). However, even in this quote, the presence of faith is still undeniable. Cole returns to be reconnected with the land, and his grandfather

assumes that he has come home to be religiously saved, and the juxtaposition of these two ideas implies that Cole has returned to be saved by the land. By the end of the novel, Cole does come to realize that his connections to his home are not only familial but spiritual as well. In the final pages of the novel:

He rolled over on his back and put his hands on his chest and looked at the star-shaped leaves of the sweetgum and heard his heart pumping blood. His grandfather used to say that God was laying on his heart. From far away he heard the clear high notes of a wood thrush melting away into sadness. He looked up through the last of the treetops and saw a jagged piece of blue sky, it was blue and it was good. And he began to weep, he wept for a long time, wept until he felt too big for his own body. Not heavy but big. Filled. Feeling the ground under him, feeling his own muscle and bone and skin. All around him the wilderness sang, the old people sang and God sang. The memory of the place was deep inside him. (Sickels 323)

Before this, Cole also participates in the act of naming. He lays in the woods and names all the elderly who have passed under his care while working as a nursing home aid and all the creeks and all the places that have been buried by MTR.

This naming mimics the recitation of Bible verses, a common motif throughout the novel and habit which Cole has developed as a result of his raising. In this scene, however, Cole cannot think of a Bible verse that encapsulates how he feels in this moment when he has climbed the mountain to confront the damage done by the strip mining, and instead chooses to begin naming everything.

He said all of their names. He said the names of those in his family. He said the names of those who had held him. He said the names of the dead. He said the names of places. Every creek and mountain and hilltop and family cemetery. He said the names of trees and flowers and creatures. He spoke clearly, talking into the dirt. He named everything; the words came easily. (Sickels 323)

This speaking of names is somewhat ritualistic in the same way that reciting the Bible verses was for Cole throughout the rest of the novel. This act of naming is also an act of reclamation. The concept of naming, especially the land and the place, is also a way for Cole to take back some agency and power over place even when he stands on land that is owned by the Heritage company. Heritage Coal Company, ironically, destroys the heritage of the land they overtake, expanding their borders onto what was previously family land and cutting off the children from the homes and resting places of their ancestors and erasing all trace that those people ever had a claim to the land, refusing to call streams and hills by the name given by those who had stewardship of them prior. By walking the land and re-naming the streams and the hills, Cole is engaging in an act of stewardship and re-establishing his own connections to this place.

This act of naming is also an act of care. Where Heritage sees only land made to be taken advantage of, Cole and his community see everything as being significant enough to receive a name. Cole's naming is reminiscent of the first care of creation, Adam's naming of the animals. The Garden of Eden was given to Adam and Eve as a gift for them to care for and have stewardship over, and the first act of stewardship Adam engages in is to give each animal its own unique name. When the land was being cared for rather than mined, each individual landmark was known by a name, a sure sign that

stewardship was taking place, and Cole's intentions in naming is to take back the right to care for the land in a way that is small in the grand scheme of things but which is grounded in Biblical teaching.

The rhetoric in *The Evening Hour* concerning environmental justice and the need for stewardship is clear in multiple other places, primarily in Grandma's conflict with her new church. After Grandfather's death, Grandma begins attending a new church, the denomination of which is unclear, but it is implied that it is not Holiness, as both Grandma and Cole feel out of place in this church and unsure how to engage in worship without the Holiness traditions. Grandma speaks to Pastor Luke Cutter about her land and the threat that the coal company poses, and she asks the church to pray that Heritage does not destroy her land and her home. Pastor Luke responds that the only home that she needs to be concerned about is her home in Heaven, an answer which Grandma is unsatisfied with to the point where she stops attending this church. Pastor Luke's response is based on a crucicentric approach to life and faith which revolves around the crucifixion of Jesus. According to religious studies, "With this crucicentric focus, saving souls for the world to come sometimes becomes more important than challenging social, economic, and environmental policies in the present world" (Witt 104). This belief that one should work towards the promise of a home in Heaven rather than pray for a safe home on earth is what Luke Cutter, and by extension his congregation, uses as a religious reason for remaining neutral environmental justice. However, as we have seen previously, working toward a life on your Homeplace is equivalent to working toward Heaven in the minds of those who experience place attachment. Cole publicly speaks out in favor of Creation Care, arguing that "In Revelations, the Bible talks about who is

going to be saved,' Cole said. 'It says that God *shouldest destroy them which destroy the earth*'" (Sickels 256). Cole makes the claim that Creation Care is not only about caring for the gift of creation, but that to deserve one's home in the next world, one cannot be complicit in the destruction of creation.

The climactic event of *The Evening Hour* is a massive flood reminiscent of and compared to the Buffalo Creek flood, sparking conflict between the Heritage Coal Company whose slurry dam was responsible for the deadly flood and the community that wants to see Heritage held accountable. Pastor Luke Cutter does not want to take sides on the issue at all. He listens to one woman who lost her children to the flood and encourages her not to blame anybody, but instead to think of the event as an "Act of God." Cole fires back that there would not have been that much water up there to kill everyone had it not been for the company, speaking out in a community meeting saying, "'God didn't make those chemicals.' ... 'God n-never made no sludge dam,'" (Sickels 256). The "Act of God" argument is one which Heritage and the real-life coal company behind the Buffalo Creek disaster used to avoid legal culpability for events like this which are deemed "natural disasters" if it is agreed that they are events which were out of the control of man. Such companies claim these disasters to be acts of God in an attempt to invoke feelings of fatalism and pass off the event as a terrible moment of divine intervention, thus taking the blame off their shoulders. Sickels invalidates this argument through Cole.

The "Act of God" argument as well as the apparent stance of neutrality that Luke Cutter's church takes is telling. A strong motivating factor for many of these characters to speak out against the injustices they experience is that they feel that the destruction of the

earth and their home destroys not only their land which they have a place attachment to but destroys something that is fundamentally sacred on a religious level rather than simply a spiritual level. This distinction is important since, particularly in mainstream Appalachian religious denominations, spirituality and religion are considered as two distinct ideals with “religion” being perceived as more appropriate and credible while “spirituality” is seen as more individualistic and therefore less authentic (Witt). The idea that ideals which are agreed upon by a congregation or religious organization are more real and therefore carry more weight gives the Creation Care argument some momentum, especially when churches and organizations come out in favor of it.

However, the presence of Christian organizations that denounce that place attachment and encourage a more untethered way of faith is telling. Sickels makes it clear with his portrayal of Luke Cutter that neutrality on this issue is taking the side of the company. Cole experiences heavy guilt at the end of the novel as he goes to face the destruction up above his house. He expresses remorse because this destruction was happening right over his head and there he was down below “counting his money and selling pills and stealing and screwing and making promises, and all the time this was right here, looming over them” (Sickels 322). Cole’s disdain for Luke Cutter’s unwillingness to pick a side makes it clear Sickels’ intentions with the characterization of this church, as Cole is the protagonist and the reader’s perceptions of the rest of the storyworld are focalized through his perceptions. Silence on the issue condones what is happening, therefore, Luke Cutter and his congregation who refuse to speak out are condemned along with Heritage.

This speaks back to what real-life activist Joan Linville said about it being wrong for the churches to refuse to take a side. The struggle with extractive industries is framed as having two distinct opposing sides by both activist arguments and within these novels, and anyone who has the ability to speak out but chooses not to, such as Luke Cutter, is portrayed as being on the side of extraction. This is complicated somewhat by the discussion of locals who work for the strip mines, as much of Cole's family does. After the flood, Cole picks up a neighbor who works for Heritage and offers to drive him to safety, warning him not to tell anyone where he works, while the man begs forgiveness, saying that he just needed a job. Even so, Cole cares for this neighbor and warns him not to mention who he works for as an act of compassion, but never outright holds it against his neighbor or his cousins as he understands that a need for work in the struggling economy of Appalachia is not necessarily a loyalty to the ideals and ways of the coal company. In this way, the novel condemns those who would willingly be neutral when they have options, but forgives those who are forced to associate with the company by a lack of other opportunity.

Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*, in comparison, relies just as heavily on the Creation Care argument, but presents a narrative where the protagonist and the church fall on the same side of the argument. Dellarobia Turnbow discovers an entire colony of monarch butterflies have roosted on the mountain behind their house just as her father-in-law Bear has decided to log the whole mountain, a decision that she does not fully agree with, regardless of the endangered species roosting there. Contrary to other narratives of this form, the entity that the main character is opposing is not a large extraction company but is a single local man and a member of her family. Dellarobia and her husband Cub

still find themselves in a similar situation to many other characters in extraction narratives, as they live on Cub's parents' land in a house built by his parents and cannot actually claim ownership over the mountain and the trees that Bear is planning to log. They can only make arguments concerning their personal safety, Dellarobia pointing out that logging causes land erosion which could cause the whole mountain to slide into their home, which sits just at the foot of it.

In the case of *Flight Behavior*, the church takes a decidedly strong position against the logging, for the sake of both the butterflies and for the sake of Cub and Dellarobia who are making these arguments for their own personal safety. Bobby Ogle, the pastor at the Mountain Fellowship Church, agrees to mediate the family discussion on the matter, and the Sunday morning prior to the meeting, presents a clear case in favor of Creation Care over dominionism. Dominionism argues that God gave us dominion over the earth so that we may utilize it for our benefit, whereas stewardship is grounded in the idea that the earth is not ours, but that it belongs to God. Dellarobia believes that this service is targeted at Bear in an attempt to appeal to him through religion. The choir starts out with hymns celebrating nature, "Oh this earth is a garden, the garden of my Lord, and He walks in His garden in the cool of the day...My Lord He said unto me, do you like my garden so fair?...You may live in this garden if you keep the grasses green, and I'll return in the cool of the day" (Kingsolver 398-399). The song they are singing, "Now is the Cool of the Day," was written by Jean Ritchie and is about the Garden of Eden. The inclusion of this song is reminiscent of the long history of protest music in Appalachia, and its use here in protest of Bear's plans is highly appropriate.

The song can be interpreted in a couple of ways, either as a simple lyrical retelling of the first few chapters of Genesis in which Adam and Eve are cast out from the Garden of Eden, but also as a direct argument supporting Creation Care, which is how it is being used in this novel. “You may live in this garden if you keep the grasses green... You may live in this garden, if you keep the waters clean” (Ritchie) spoken by God, is a command to care for the earth—the grass, the waters, all of it—because God will be returning to walk in His garden which does not belong to the “you” of the song, and He expects it to be as beautiful as he left it. Kingsolver does not include any direct quotes from the chorus of the song, but it is important to consider it: “Now is the cool of the day (x3)/ Oh this earth it is a garden, the garden of my Lord/ And He walks in His garden/ In the cool of the day” (Ritchie). The implication of the chorus is that God is returning now to see how we have cared for the garden, and the threat toward Bear is that logging the mountain would be the opposite of caring for the earth and would likely displease the Lord.

Bobby Ogle then takes the pulpit and begins a sermon which Dellarobia suspects is also aimed at Bear. “‘What part of *love*,’ he paused, searching his audience, ‘do we not understand? The Bible says God owns these hills. It tells us arrogance is a sin. How is it not arrogance to see the flesh of creation as mere wealth, to be scraped bare for our use?’” (Kingsolver 399). This is an example of the church taking a clear and public position on this issue, not only toward Bear, but toward the idea of extraction itself, calling any system which looks at God’s creation as an opportunity for wealth arrogant. Bobby is staunchly against dominionism, as evidenced by the choir and his sermon. Bobby makes his argument for stewardship in the most public way that he can, speaking from the pulpit of a church in which everybody knows everybody else’s business. In his

closing statement, however, Bobby moves beyond the stewardship argument when he says, “May we look to these mountains that are Your home and see *You are in everything. The earth is the Lord in the fullness thereof*” [emphasis mine] (Kingsolver 400). Here, we have an ordained preacher making a claim that we have seen only in the internal thoughts of characters in other novels: that the Lord can not only be found in nature, but that the Lord is nature “in the fullness thereof.” Here we see organized religion explicitly meeting that natural spirituality.

After the service, the family meets with Bobby in his office so that he can help them mediate the discussion. Hester, Bear’s wife, speaks up “You heard Cub about the well water. If you can’t live by the laws the Lord God made for this world, they’ll go into effect regardless’ ...’That land was bestowed on us for a purpose,’ Hester said. ‘And I don’t think it was to end up looking like a pile of trash’” (Kingsolver 403). Hester clearly makes an argument for Creation Care and stewardship, blending environmental arguments with religious arguments, saying any negative environmental effects would likely be God punishing their hubris, and pointing out that the earth was not given for utilization, but for beauty. It is worth noting that all characters arguing in this scene resist acknowledging the reality of climate change, and are instead focusing on the more immediate personal impacts these environmental effects would have, such as landslides, contaminated water, etc. Hester also initiates an argument of fatalism that claims that their actions will have divine consequences no matter whether they are ready for it or not.

This novel is not only different from others because the church stands on the side of the environment, but it is also different in that the “other side” of the argument is not a massive company or industry but is simply one man who has plans to log on land that he

owns, an act that prior to the arrival of the butterflies, would not have affected anyone else other than Cub and Dellarobia. In this case as well, a majority of the church congregation has also spoken up and expressed their wishes that the monarchs be protected and that Bear not go through with his plans, which is in contrast with other works like *The Evening Hour* in which the community at large is more hesitant to speak out against the company because it is their only source of jobs, and the activists are very much in the minority. Perhaps this is caused by the fact that Bear Turnbow is not a large corporation from outside the area, but a local community member, and he does not hold any sort of larger power over the community in terms of economics and job creation. The church in *The Evening Hour* refuses to take a side on such a divisive issue, while Bobby Ogle feels empowered enough by the majority support to take a side. Likely the reason that the community takes the side against Bear is not because they are taking the side of Cub and Dellarobia, but because they are taking the side of the butterflies. Were the butterflies not a factor, the effects that this logging would have on Cub and Dellarobia would likely not be a factor the larger community would consider, but since the most affected party in their eyes is the monarch butterflies, a beautiful creation of God's, they feel more inclined to speak out. If it were not for the butterflies, the community would likely have no opinion on whether Bear should sacrifice Dellarobia and Cub's personal safety for necessary revenue, but the butterflies are deemed something to be cared for, not sacrificed.

The tension between those who advocate for stewardship and those who feel extraction is their right is clear in the conflict between Grandma and Luke Cutter as well as between Bobby Ogle and Bear. In both of these cases, the reader is more inclined to

side with those who fall on the side of Creation Care, as an empathetic connection is established between the reader and Grandma through Cole's love for her, as well as empathy for Dellarobia who would be negatively impacted by the logging of the mountain and for the monarch butterflies, as well. Sickels debunks the church as the ultimate authority on what is morally and faithfully right, placing Grandma's and Cole's senses of spirituality and their own beliefs in the hierarchy above Luke Cutter's. Luke is shown to be complacent with the fatalities that Heritage has caused, particularly when he tells a grieving woman who has lost multiple children in the flood to let go her anger and forgive Heritage even while she is still devastated over their loss. Cole's religious ideology, though it is difficult for him to reconcile it with the abuse of his Grandfather, clearly takes a side in this debate and places the community and the mountain in the hierarchy above not only the company, but also placing the care of creation above the crucicentric concept of valuing the next world over this one. This reorganizing of the hierarchy comes from a character which the reader has already established an empathetic connection with and who they are more likely to agree with.

Kingsolver, on the other hand, does give the church authority through the support of the majority of the community as well as the support of the protagonist Dellarobia. In this case, the church is not neutral, but takes an active and public stance in favor of Creation Care. She uses evidence from the Bible as well as recognized music in protest to make it clear that the protection of the monarchs ranks higher than any utilitarian benefit that logging would bring to Bear, despite the fact that Bear is in a financially difficult situation. The Creation Care argument is an effective religious argument, even in the face of dominionism, because "human beings need an ordered structure to stabilize their

existences, a subjective experience of order that correlates to the objective material reality...Religion exists as a powerful legitimation tool because of its ability to relate human existence not only to the institutional order but to the cosmological order” (Sanders 8). Sanders argues that religious symbolism as found in these novels helps to affect the reader’s perception of the cosmological order and where this setting falls within it, and the religious arguments as posed by Cole and Bobby Ogle legitimate the idea that the earth is a sacred entity meant to be cared for, thus raising the mountains on which these characters grew up higher in the cosmological order of the reader’s mind. In the case of *Flight Behavior*, Kingsolver uses the religious authority of the church to reinforce the sacred order of the earth, while Sickels’ characters oppose the legitimations of the mainstream church and attributes sacredness to their home through ritualistic naming, but also through direct quotations from a sacred text.

The tension between the church and the advocates for environmental justice exists not just in the debate of stewardship and dominionism, but also exists between the church and the sense of a sacred connection which people often feel with the land. According to bell hooks in *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, she identified this tension early on when she was growing up in Kentucky. “Growing up I had always been torn between the righteous religious fundamentalism of those who practice according to organized church doctrine and dictates and the nature-worshipping ecstatic spirituality of the backwoods” (hooks 15). This tension is one between organized religion and nature-venerating spiritualities.

Nature-Venerating Spiritualities in *The Coal Tattoo* and *Strange as This Weather Has Been*

According to activist Maria Gunnoe, “We’re [Appalachians] more connected to our land than most people are” (qtd. in Bell 23). That connection is the motivating factor in much of Gunnoe’s activism, and it is the motivator for the actions of many characters who experience this deep, often spiritual connection within the fiction. Nature-venerating spiritualities are derived from paganistic and indigenous religious practices which celebrate the inherent spirituality of nature. Even though nature-venerating spiritualities, also sometimes referred to as dark green religions/animisms, are not inherently tied to Christianity, in the case of this literature, all religious ideation and symbolism has been directly related to some form of Christianity. This is true even in those characters who experience spirituality as tied directly to nature rather than the church. Nature-venerating spirituality is the belief that spiritual and religious values are inherent in natural ecosystems and comes from a biocentric belief that non-human beings and ecosystems hold a value beyond their utility. While this form of religious expression is a form of place attachment, the distinctly spiritual nature of it warrants a separate term.

The concept of nature-venerating spirituality is not a Christian ideology but is derived from and akin to a paganistic connection with nature, similar to, and likely also appropriated from, Indigenous religions and spiritual practices which celebrate the land and the ecosystem. In the case of these characters, their nature-venerating spirituality is expressed through Christianity, including in some cases a literal feeling of being closer to God and Heaven by standing atop the mountains, feeling closer to God and inclined to prayer while working in the garden. Silas House explores the ways nature-venerating

spiritualities and religion can co-exist through his sister protagonists Easter and Anneth while Ann Pancake exhibits the ways in which they can be inharmonious when one refuses to recognize the validity of the other. Generally, these spiritualities can be seen as more individualistic than mainstream religions, and the concept of spirituality itself has often been interpreted by critics of dark green religions as less authentic and more self-centered than already established religious practices. Especially in Appalachia, according to Witt, the terms “religion” and “spirituality” are more distinctly defined, religion referring to church and established worship practices and spirituality referring to one’s own individual connection.

Silas House’s trilogy of novels including *A Parchment of Leaves*, *The Coal Tattoo*, and *Clay’s Quilt* (2001) focuses on the life of a single family through multiple generations in a fictional county located in southeastern Kentucky. Easter, the older of the two sister protagonists in *The Coal Tattoo*, is depicted as the more religious of the two, as she is a devout Pentecostal and consistent churchgoer. She and her sister Anneth also have a strong spiritual connection with nature and Pine Mountain on which they grew up. Anneth’s entire spirituality, however, is grounded in nature, as she often finds moments of stillness at night, when looking up at the sky makes her think of looking at God. When it comes to Pine Mountain, “She felt as if she had spent her childhood here, running, lying back, pulling out the stamens of honeysuckle to drink their juice. This was her church, the one place she prayed” (House, *The Coal Tattoo* 188). Anneth whole faith is grounded in nature-venerating spiritualities, however, both sisters experience nature in a way that is more than just a feeling of place attachment to their home. The sisters’ experience of Pine Mountain as a place of spirituality and faith, and this is their

motivation for why they would later choose to lay down in front of a bulldozer to prevent the Altamont Coal Company from stripping their home.

Easter and Anneth are both characters who experience Christian faith, however, Easter is more aligned with traditional concepts of religion, as she attends church weekly, observes, for much of the novel, the Pentecostal tradition of keeping her hair long, and much of her story depicts her struggle to stay devoted to her religion. However, Easter, while she puts a great deal of effort into observing her religion and honoring God in that way, still engages in nature-venerating spiritualities. On a day when Easter is in the midst of her backsliding and has decided to go fishing with her husband rather than go to church, she considers that “God could be found on Pine Mountain in those laurel bushes, could be found in the little ripples on the river’s surface” (House, *The Coal Tattoo* 86), and at one point drops to her knees to pray in the garden as she saw her grandmother Serena do on several occasions in order to feel closer to God among the plants. However, she still feels guilty about leaving the church. While Easter has religion and church in communion with her spirituality, she does not hold Anneth to that same requirement, even though it is clear from her desire to return fully to the church after backsliding that she holds herself to a high standard of dedication to religion. She even holds her own husband to that standard, begging him to go to church with her in a way that she does not with Anneth. The implication that Anneth’s feelings of faith as experienced in connection with nature and her feelings that she is close with God when out on the mountain are so strong that they equal to Easter’s faith which includes both that spirituality and religion, validating Anneth’s way of worship in the eyes of the reader.

Anneth dedicates all of her faith to nature-venerating spirituality, while Easter's faith occupies more of what Joni Adamson in her book *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism* (2001) calls the "middle place." The middle place is described as natural space which is neither "wilderness" nor "civilization." Most mainstream nature writing tends to perpetuate the idea that the most pure and pristine wilderness is that which is completely devoid of any human life or influence and civilization includes industrially advanced areas inhabited by people. This is a position which Adamson points out ignores the historical presence of Indigenous cultures who had survived off the land for many centuries. The middle place is domesticated green space, for example, the garden where Easter prays that serves as a third sphere beyond civilization and "pure" wilderness. House takes it one step further and sacralizes that middle place where Easter engages in religion in a place that is not quite the church but is neither the nature of the mountain.

Easter's narrative culminates in her re-dedicating herself to the church when she and her husband are baptized. Her baptism occurs at a place where organized religion and nature-venerating spirituality meet in that middle place: the river. The tradition of the church (as is the tradition of many Pentecostal and Baptist churches in the region) is for baptisms to occur in the river. "The people kept singing until the preacher waded out into the water and held his Bible high in the air. His shirtsleeves were rolled up and sunlight glinted off the little waves, making golden pockmarks on his face" (House, *The Coal Tattoo* 197). Here, nature and church are inseparably entwined as one of the most faith-driven moments of Easter's life occurs both within the community of the church and out in nature, a sort of sacred middle place in which the religious tradition takes place in the

spiritual wilderness. In *Clay's Quilt*, the novel that takes place chronologically after *The Coal Tattoo*, Easter laments the use of the church baptismal pool rather than the river for baptisms. "Used to be everybody got baptized in the river, which Easter thought was so much prettier, but now they only did that in the summer. In the winter they used the baptism tank behind the pulpit, which had warm water and a painted mural of a blue river behind it" (House, *Clay's Quilt* 42). She clearly feels very comfortable worshipping from that middle place where church and nature intersect, and the fact that the tradition of baptism now happens in warm water in front of a facsimile of nature is displeasing.

Anneth's faith, however, is entirely grounded in nature. Throughout the novel, we never see Anneth set foot in a church house, and her one interaction with organized religion is that she requests a Pentecostal preacher to perform her first marriage. However, this is only because Easter is not present, and she wants to have some connection with her sister at her wedding. Anneth is so opposed to the church and mainstream religion that when we see Easter's baptism from her perspective, what Anneth thinks she sees is starkly different from the meaningful rebirth that Easter is experiencing:

[Anneth] didn't know if she could bear to see Easter be put under. She didn't know why. But when the preacher swooped Easter back, Anneth started, as if she were afraid Easter might drown, and she sat up very straight-backed, peering through the trees. It seemed as if Easter stayed under forever, as if she might never be brought back up. Anneth had a sudden thought that the preacher was holding her under, that he was drowning her. (House, *The Coal Tattoo* 199)

Anneth is confused about why she thinks Easter would drown until she considers that the preacher is what is holding her under the water. It is also significant that in this scene Anneth is not standing on the banks with the congregation but is far up the bank hidden in a thicket of trees. She is so averse to this religious community that she refuses to stand with them even out in nature, and she would consider, even for a moment, that the preacher would be capable of drowning Easter.

The fundamental difference that House details between Anneth and Easter is that Anneth is more free-spirited and takes after her grandmother Vine, who was Cherokee. Vine states in *A Parchment of Leaves* (2002), the novel where she is the protagonist, “He [her father] more or less agreed with my and Mama’s notion that God moved around more on the hill sides than he did in the church” (House, *A Parchment of Leaves* 25). While Vine is herself an Indigenous character, her experience of spirituality is still foregrounded in Christianity, as evidenced by her reference to God. Vine shows an aversion to church, as is described in *A Parchment of Leaves*. She feels like there was too much forbidden by the church, and Anneth shows the same tendencies. The tension between nature-venerating spiritualities and mainstream religion is still presented as the difference between God in the church and God in the woods, reinforcing how Christian-centric these novels tend to be, even when presented from the perspective of an Indigenous character. Easter, more reserved, takes after Grandmother Serena who was white and expressed her Christian faith, but was never overtly religious or churchgoing. It can be argued that Anneth’s spirituality is meant to be more in line with her Cherokee ancestors’ faith practice, but then that leaves a gap in explanation for why Easter is so devoutly religious. Furthermore, they both engage in spirituality through nature, but

Easter does less-so than Anneth and supplements her spirituality with traditional religious devotion.

House does not seem to be using Easter and Anneth to debate nature-venerating spiritualities against mainstream religion but is instead using the sisters to show how these two ways of expressing faith are equal, and how nature plays into Appalachian religion just as strongly as nature-venerating spirituality. The novel is told from the perspective of both sisters and neither one seems to come out the better for their chosen form of faith practice, and again, Easter never shames her sister for her chosen way of worship, nor does she pressure Anneth to be more devoutly religious in the way she does her husband who exhibits no tendencies of faith early in the novel. House instead seems to be interweaving the two: the strength of a connection with nature with the structure of an organized religion. Even their names reflect their faith, as Easter initially feels like a name based on the Christian holiday, but which, in fact, comes from a desire to name both girls after flowers. Easter is named for Easter Lilies and Anneth is named for Queen Anne's Lace (House, *Clay's Quilt*). It is interesting, too, that not only is Easter named for a flower with a religious undertone, but she is also named for the more domesticated flower (Easter Lilies being purposefully grown to be sold and displayed) as opposed to Anneth who is named for a wholly wild-growing flower, perfectly reflecting their personalities and their faith practices, and the fact that even though they seem so different, they are still equal in each other's eyes. Ultimately at the end of the novel, their shared spirituality serves as a motive for their adamant fight against strip mining on the mountain behind their house which is sacred to them for several reasons. They feel closer to God in nature, and they feel closer to their grandmothers. The reader, through an

empathetic connection with both Easter and Anneth, can come to not only understand this motivation, but to feel the anger and the fear that these sisters feel knowing that the mountain where they have felt the closest to God is marked for destruction. Easter and Anneth draw on Christian beliefs and practices to sacralize Pine Mountain, and all the mountains of southeastern Kentucky through the strong connection they establish between Christianity and their own feelings of nature-venerating spiritualities.

Strange as This Weather Has Been, on the other hand, showcases the tension between nature-venerating spirituality and mainstream religion. The character in this novel who is most expressive of his faith is Uncle Mogey, Lace's uncle and Bant's great-uncle, who is a former coal miner retired on disability and whose health is deteriorating much more quickly than expected due to the constant stress of living below an MTR blasting site. An entire chapter is dedicated to his perspective of having grown up in a time before strip mining was commonplace and his connections to his home. While Mogey admits that he feels like the spirituality he feels in the woods is wrong in some way, his feelings of nature-venerating spirituality are most adamantly challenged by Pastor Dick, the preacher at Mogey's church.

Mogey exhibits nature-venerating spirituality in the same way Easter does in *The Coal Tattoo*, with a deep connection to the land and the woods but also a great respect and desire to be involved in church. In these novels, the mountains are portrayed as a place through which God speaks to characters and through which characters like Anneth and Mogey find a way to speak back to God. A juxtaposition is presented between these characters and the coal companies ravaging their mountains, especially in the narratives centered on mountaintop removal. The implication is that these are good Christian folks

who have a spiritual connection with their land, and the coal companies are faithless corporations who sever that connection by disrespecting sacralized land. By desacralizing the coal companies and the churches who refuse to take a side in the debate and sacralizing the land and the earth, the novels are attempting to re-organize the cosmological hierarchy which dictates how a reader may view extraction in Appalachia. The coal companies are deemed less morally good due to their blatant destruction of sacralized land, and the pro-coal and neutral churches are somewhat disconnected from the religion and spirituality as it is presented by these characters.

Unlike House, who shows that mainstream religion and dark green religion can coexist in equality, Pancake reveals the struggle which occurs between the two when mainstream religion refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of a spiritual connection with nature. Mogeys laments:

Although I have been a Christian all my life, I have never felt in church a feeling anyplace near where I get in the woods. This worried me for a very long time. Even when I prayed in a church, I couldn't make much come, where woods, I had only to walk in them. To walk in woods was a prayer. But I knew I was wrong. Some kind of paganism or idolatry, I didn't know what you'd call it, but I knew it must be a sin...So I told Pastor Dick my concern, and he said "Mogey, God gave man the earth and its natural resources for our own use. We are it's caretakers, and we have dominion over it..." (Pancake, *Strange* 222)

Pastor Dick advocates for dominionism as a reason why Mogeys should let go of the reverence he has for the woods around his house, and the connection which he feels, which Mogeys admits, feels somewhat paganistic. Pastor Dick's hesitation to condone

Mogey's spiritual connection to God through nature is likely being influenced by negative stereotypes of Indigenous religious practices which sacralized the land and were deemed "paganistic" or "savage" in order to dehumanize Indigenous peoples and remove them from their land. According to Witt, "In practice, dark green animism often encompasses forms of neo-paganism and indigenous religious practice (sometimes as appropriated by non indigenous persons) or any spiritual tradition that emphasizes the plurality of spirits and intelligent agents in nature" (Witt 155). This prejudice toward dark green religions in combination with Pastor Dick's clear stance supporting dominionism are likely the reason why he discourages Mogey from practicing his faith in such a way that prioritizes his environment.

Mogey, on the other hand, is not entirely convinced by Pastor Dick's advice. "I knew we wasn't separate from it like that. I started to say something, to explain to him...but he looked at me like Mary'd look at our younger boy Kenny when he talked about his pretend friend. So, I cut it off and shut up" (Pancake, *Strange* 222). Mogey makes it clear that this innate draw he has to the land, and his ability to see God and speak to God in the woods is not a conscious choice that he is making but is something that is so natural that he cannot avoid it. Mogey, unlike Easter, struggles to find the middle place and the advice given by Pastor Dick reinforces a strict divide between religion and spirituality:

I tried for a long time to pull the two together, what I knew from church and what I knew from mountains. Of course, it would only be right if I could keep the church part ruling the woods part. So when I'd first walk into the woods, I'd say to myself, "Look here what God's give us." But just about as fast as I could have

that thought, this second one would come from deeper: “This is God.” And then, from under that thought, from deeper yet, another thought would come, saying, “I go here. This is where I go.” And last of all, the most certain thought, but also the most dangerous: “This is me. This, all this, is me,” (Pancake, *Strange* 227)

Mogey tries to picture the woods the way that Pastor Dick says he should, as a gift from God, given for the pleasure and the use of people on Earth. However, he cannot resist that feeling of spirituality, that feeling that God did not just give people the land and that the land is not inherently separate from God, but that the land is God. It feels sacrilegious to him to make such a comparison, but it is one that he feels so deeply that it cannot be separated. After the thought that he is walking surrounded by God comes the feeling that the land “is me.” Mogey feels as though he and the land are one being and, therefore, he and God are one being. This makes the destruction of MTR all the more devastating and traumatic to Mogey, as it feels like he himself is being destroyed. He has dreams of deer chasing him with their teeth bared like rabid dogs, furious over what he has done. Even though Mogey is not involved in any MTR operation, he still feels a sense of personal responsibility because he interprets the sentiment that God gave us dominion over the Earth in a different way from Pastor Dick and the church. Pastor Dick justifies the destruction because God gave the resources as a gift to be taken, while Mogey feels that God did not give us the earth, but that God is the earth, and to violate the earth is to violate God.

The church never spoke out about the destruction according to Mogey, even though some other churches did, and Mogey continued to go to that church and not speak out himself, and therefore feels personally responsible for the destruction being done to

the land, God, and ultimately, himself. In the eyes of his church (and the coal company) dominion means a right and responsibility to dominate and take full advantage of what God has given, while to Mogeys and other characters with a spiritual connection with the land, dominion means a responsibility to protect. This contrast is countered by such Indigenous environmental writers as Adamson who push back against the dichotomy of civilization v. wilderness. The problem with nature writers who insist on this dichotomy is that it often supports the environmentalist idea that humans are what is worst for the planet and if we could only get nature back to that primitive, pristine, uninhabited state, nature would begin to heal. The idea is that there is either dominionism, or there is human-free wilderness and no middle place. This ideology ignores the history and anthropological evidence that humans, namely Indigenous people, have been farming and living off of the land for centuries prior to the destruction caused by “civilization” which is often strongly associated with white western culture as well as industrialization. Adamson instead argues for a middle place of domesticated nature which people care for and subsist off of, and Pancake and House work to sacralize and legitimize that middle place for an environmental purpose.

This struggle between Mogeys and the church reveals a struggle between mainstream organized religion, which is depicted as siding with the colonialist practices of domination over the land, and Mogeys’s spiritual connection to the land in which he feels God around him in the woods, which is a trait commonly attributed to Indigenous environmental writers.

Whereas the nature writer retreats from human culture to observe the flora and fauna, the American Indian writer maps a landscape replete with meaning and

significance for the people who have lived there for long periods of time and often in circumstances in which they have suffered a marginalization and impoverishment connected to the degradation of the environment. (Adamson 17)

Pancake's characterization of Moge's connection to the land reveals nature-venerating spiritualities similar to Adamson's description of American Indian writers who choose to depict nature as inseparable from human history and culture, as Moge feels the woods are one with him. The rhetorical advantage of the American Indian and Appalachian writers' strategy over that of the nature writer is that it stakes the wellbeing of the people as tied to the wellbeing of the land. In the case of nature writing, often these writers draw on pastoralism (Adamson) and pose nature as something outside of what they deem civilization, and often their viewpoint is that once humans begin to encroach on a natural space, it is time to move on and search for a more pristine wilderness, untouched by the naturally destructive nature of humans.

The problem with this portrayal is that it separates culture from nature and places more significance on nature over culture and romanticizes an ideal wilderness which existed in America prior to colonization, without paying mind to the Indigenous cultures which resided in North America who were already cultivating and living off the land. In American Indian environmental writing, "civilization" and nature are not separate entities. Appalachian writers as well as American Indian writers tend to focus more on the middle place, and Appalachian narratives like *Strange as this Weather Has Been* and *The Coal Tattoo* are specifically focused on exploring the middle place that is central Appalachia where people have relied on the land not just for survival, but also for their spiritual well-being.

By experiencing Appalachia as a middle place through Mogeey and Easter, readers are able to sacralize the land in their own minds, and by equating spirituality and religion through the equality of Easter and Anneth, the sacralization of the land is legitimized. One of the biggest influences on how readers conceptualize the place within the novel is determined based on the focalization, or which character is perceiving the environment and reporting back to the reader, and “since as readers we cannot directly perceive a narrative environment, our imaginative experience of it is dependent on—and to some degree determined by—our simulations of a focalizer’s perceptions, thoughts, and feelings in relation to that environment” (Weik von Mossner, “Why We Care” 563). Because Easter and Mogeey, focalizing characters in these novels, experience what it is to experience nature-venerating spiritualities, the reader can approximate what it is to feel this level of connection with the land, thus encouraging them to take action in the environmentalist movement.

Conclusion

All art is inherently political, but these authors chose to make explicitly political extractive fiction in order to best further the anti-MTR environmentalist movement and the labor movement. The religious arguments utilized in these novels are best served in fiction where the empathetic connection between reader and subject is much stronger than it would be in a documentary or nonfiction account. That coupled with the fact that all of the authors discussed are professionals in the genre of fiction and thus had a particular skill set well-suited to creating truly effective extractive fiction means that these novels serve the purpose of political art.

Fiction has always had the ability to affect readers' perceptions of the topics and people about which they read, and this has been used to the advantage of those who would keep Appalachia a sacrifice zone. Film and media which portray Appalachians in a negative and dehumanizing light, for example the Hillbilly Horror genre of films which uses caricatures of Appalachians for horror movie monsters, works to skew society's perceptions of Appalachia. It also reinforces the idea that any suffering on the part of Appalachians is a result of their own personal and moral flaws and failings and not directly affected by their situation but if fiction can be used to influence negative perceptions at the benefit of those who would oppress, then it can also be used to fight back against those stereotypes for the purposes of social and environmental justice.

According to Mark Bracher in *Literature and Social Justice* (2013):

And as discussed with autonomy, the feelings of anger at the system and sympathy for its victims incline one toward actions of helping the victims and harming the system; such inclinations...are encouraged by the novel's

representation of educating and organizing as the prime actions through which the system can be overthrown and its victims transformed. (Bracher 184)

Fiction has the ability to change readers' perceptions of situations. The continued exploitation of Appalachia as a sacrifice zone is dependent upon the larger part of the population agreeing that the Appalachian Mountains and the people who call them home are worth sacrificing in exchange for the energy and resources upon which our society is dependent, which is why dehumanizing portrayals of the area is so prevalent. These books ask their readers to reject common stereotypes and to clearly see the people and the environment as victims of destruction and violence as enacted by these extractive industries. The novels strive to characterize the people in a way that humanizes them and employs religious arguments that sacralize the land in the mind of the reader in the same way that it is sacralized in the mind of Appalachians. This instills in the reader the idea that the benefits of large-scale extraction are not worth sacrificing an entire environment and people.

Out of all these arguments used to sacralize the Appalachian mountain region, it is important to remember that no argument is more "pure" or "authentic" than the others (Witt). All of these arguments—that the Homeplace is sacred, the Creation Care argument and the argument inherent in nature-venerating spiritualities—serve a rhetorical purpose that is elevated through the inherent ability of fiction to create an empathetic connection between reader and character. Ultimately, they create an empathetic connection between reader and the fictional Appalachian environment within the texts, which can then translate to empathy for the nonfictional Appalachian environment and communities. Religious arguments are particularly suited for this, as being associated

with spirituality or religion moves the mountains up in the cosmological hierarchy, even in the eyes of those who are not of the religion discussed or who are not particularly religious. The fact that religious preference is not an indicator is particularly important as Pentecostal, Holiness, speaking in tongues, snake handling, and the tradition of river baptisms are all aspects of Appalachian religious traditions that are not part of mainstream Christianity. The fact that these arguments continue to work despite the fact that they are not relatable to most readers points to the flexibility of religious rhetoric.

While this religious rhetoric has proved effective, it is only one of many ways empathy can be used in fiction to further social and environmental justice arguments. Extractive fiction is a subgenre that has yet to be fully explored and which has global implications. Equally effective arguments can be seen in other forms of environmentalist literature, namely American Indian environmentalist writing which leans on nature-venerating spiritualities and ideas of the middle place similarly to House and Pancake. Studying Appalachian extractive fiction in particular gives us the opportunity to really analyze what arguments against extraction are being utilized in the fiction and which arguments are particularly effective. The novels analyzed here present a single specific experience of Appalachia. All of these arguments come from one Christian-based perspective; therefore, it cannot be stated that this is how all Appalachian fiction will engage with these arguments or even that this is representative of all Appalachian extractive fiction. The commonality of the themes and rhetorical strategies within this particular set of novels was too prominent to ignore, however, more work is still yet needed before any sort of blanket statement can be made about the ways in which environmental and social justice arguments manifest in Appalachian extractive fiction.

Extraction in the region is a known cause for many environmental problems which harm all Appalachians, however, we cannot ignore proof that extraction has larger impacts on certain groups of Appalachians more than others, and the characters represented in these novels do not represent an intersectional view of Appalachia. Therefore, future work in this area needs to reflect the perspectives and experiences of Black and Indigenous Appalachians and Appalachians of color and explore other ways in which empathy is utilized through fiction in order to oppose extraction.

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