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Holding Back the Mountain: Sustaining Place in the Appalachian Poetry of Robert Morgan, Kathryn Stripling Byer, and Ron Rash

Alana Dagenhart Sherrill

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HOLDING BACK THE MOUNTAIN: SUSTAINING PLACE IN THE APPALACHIAN
POETRY OF ROBERT MORGAN, KATHRYN STRIPLING BYER, AND RON RASH

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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The poetry of Robert Morgan, Kay Stripling Byer, and Ron Rash unites the places along the Blue Ridge Parkway in the southern Appalachian mountains. Their voices, which grow from the hollers of this unique bioregion, sustain the people, culture, history, and values of a time and place that are changing beneath their feet. Beginning with the literary legacy of Thomas Wolfe and continuing on to explore the ideas of solastalgia and topophilia as motives to write poetry, and poesis as a means to preserve poetry and place, I show how these three writers sustain the mountains through their poetry.

Through the investigation of poetry in small exterior places in Robert Morgan's poetry to the poetry of artifact, singing, and home in Kay Byer, and finally the influence of voice, character, and landscape in the poetry of Ron Rash, I demonstrate how the writing of these poems is an act of preservation that marks the places of the authors with a lasting memorial for future generations. Exploring concepts of home, place, memory, time, and ecology, one can see how the poems function to sustain, but also to heal the scars of devastation caused by a rapidly changing environment, which is being transformed by outside forces in undesirable ways.

Linked by a bioregion of old mountains, a unique collection of flora and fauna, and a human history of Native Americans dating back thousands of years, the southern Appalachian region is the perfect site to examine the influence of landscape and place on the making of poetry. The place, its people, and its poetry help to preserve this place very memorably and meaningfully.

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is the most difficult and most rewarding experience I've ever had in graduate school. It is amazing how five weeks of intense study can have years of edifying repercussions.

My summers at IUP have been the best of my life. The instructors there are phenomenal and some highlights of my time there span from Dr. David Downing's diagnosis of my sickness in Western Metaphysics, to the late Dr. Karen Dandurand's love and knowledge of American women writers, to fascinating neo-slave narratives with Dr. Veronica Watson.

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When you're about to lose something, then it becomes interesting to you and possible to you as a subject. I think that's true of the South as a whole, which has changed so much, and it's certainly true of Appalachia.

—Michael McFee, “Michael Chitwood Interviews Michael McFee (2002)”

But why had he always felt so strongly the magnetic pull of home, why had he thought so much about it and remembered it with such blazing accuracy, if it did not matter, and if this little town, and the immortal hills around it, was not the only home he had on earth? He did not know. All that he knew was that the years flow by like water, and that one day men come home again. The train rushed onward through the moonlit land.

—Thomas Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again*

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: HISTORY, BIOREGION, AND SOLASTALGIA

We are losing our mountains. In the last forty years, the environment of the southern Appalachians has changed tremendously. Instead of a two-lane road winding through the hills from Lenoir to Boone, North Carolina, we now have a four-lane highway that shoots you straight to the top since road crews blasted through the center of the mountain. Now, more people can get to remote mountain areas for tourists' attractions in less time. Local restaurants have gone out of business and have been replaced by Applebee's, Cracker Barrel, and Outback Steakhouse. If you need a canoe or a new screwdriver, forget the local outfitters or hardware store; you can just stop at the new Walmart for everything you need. Most high-country factories closed in 1995, the year after the government passed NAFTA. As of June, 2015, “the Tarheel State is now open for fracking” as the application process for drilling for natural gas in North Carolina opened and the ban on fracking was lifted (Camp). This rapid development is threatening a way of life that seemed too far out from civilization, in places, to ever change. The

hidden hollows and high ridges once thought unreachable, harsh, and solitary have been discovered by tourists, businesses, and those seeking solace from urban life. They are coming to the mountains in droves, and change is coming too. Fortunately, some poets have been listening and watching. Their poems are sustaining our culture and our voices. In the face of the future, poetry preserves these mountains. In the poetry of Robert Morgan, Kay Byer, and Ron Rash, we can visit the old home place, sing the music of these hills, and hear the voices of generations of Appalachians who have walked these ridges. The poetry sustains us, and the poetry sustains the mountains.

This dissertation is important because no one has ever written about these three poets together and examined their places before. Robert Morgan, Kay Byer, and Ron Rash all write about places from the Blue Ridge Parkway. Their poems serve as memorials that mark the places and voices of this Appalachian mountain region. The poems, each time they are read, sustain this place and protect the memories of people who have lived here. Robert Morgan's poems do this by focusing on physical places. Kay Byers' poems help us to hear the music of the hills and they speak across previous generations, from past to present. Ron Rash's poems let us hear the voices and stories of these mountain people. All three poets speak from the physical landscape of the North Carolinian Blue Ridge, and their poems serve as an eco-historical¹ representation of life in these hills during the past 100 years. This is important because life in the North Carolina mountains is changing rapidly.

¹ *Eco-historical* literature, a term coined by Scott Hanna in his dissertation, is literature that has historical ties to a specific place, maintains cultural tradition, and has ecocentric roots to the place.

For me, and anyone who has a history in the southern Appalachians, this poetry reanimates our relationships to this place. Could a reader outside of Appalachia with no knowledge of this place have the same experience when they read the poetry? No; however, they don't need to have been here or know the culture to have an Appalachian experience when they read the poetry. These poems are steeped in these hills. They grow out of here, and the place influences the poem. Like drinking a wine from Bordeaux versus one from a California grape or a from Australia, a French local will know precisely the place as soon as they experience the wine; they will see the vineyards in the mind's eye, maybe recall the winemaker's name. An outsider stills appreciates the wine, can taste how it is different from a grape from California or Australia, but even though she may not have the local references, she still experiences Bordeaux in the wine and knows the experience is like no other on Earth.

In March of 2013, I found some of Ron Rash's places in Watauga County, North Carolina. He mentions these places in his poetry collection *Waking* (2011). I took as many photographs as I could of the actual poem sites that included roads, a creek, a graveyard, and a church. The most intriguing aspect of being in the stomping grounds of Rash's poetry was the cemetery at Laurel Fork Baptist Church on Jake Storey Road between Boone and Blowing Rock. Rash's poem "White Wings" speaks of a man, Jason Storey, who stands in the graveyard next to the church to listen to hymns being sung because he swore he'd never enter the church again since his wife and son died in childbirth. When I got to the cemetery, there were "Storeys" everywhere. It was the most prominent name in the graveyard and was spelled three different ways on multiple

tombstones. In 1995, I was married in Friendship Church, just one mile from the cemetery where Jason Storey stood every Sunday morning years before.

I also drove through Aho Gap, where Rash spent his childhood summers with his grandmother. Near Aho Gap and Jake Storey Road, just around the mountain off Bamboo Road, is Goshen Creek, which shows up in Rash's poem "In a Deerstand Above Goshen Creek." I saw the creek where it runs under the Blue Ridge Parkway and intersects with North Carolina's Mountains-to-Sea Trail. Just a few miles south of Aho Gap is Julian Price Park. I snapped pictures of the lake in Julian Price Park just outside of Blowing Rock, where Rash's speaker in "Price Lake" tells of a tender moment he observes between his parents. This was interesting to me because my earliest memories are of this park. My parents brought me camping here often as a child, and as for Rash, visions of my parents on a quilt in the sun on the edge of the lake is as vivid a memory as any other in my mind. I don't remember the first time I camped there, but I've been told I was two months old and the June night was so cold my mother thought I'd freeze to death. The temperature dropped to 29 degrees before dawn brought back the late spring warmth. Rash's places are my places.

After I saw Watauga County and the places in Rash's poetry, it was evident that I needed to do this for all three poets in my study. Seeing the places made the poetry more alive for me. Even if there is some element of fiction in the poems (of course there is since it is a creative process), seeing the actual places that inspired the poetry helped me to better understand how place influences the writing. I bought a map of North Carolina and started combing the poetry for place names. When I found a proper noun, I

researched it and started a list of all the possible locations I could visit. Next, I found the places on the map and made a plan to find them. All of the locations are at least an hour's drive from my house, some as much as three hours. I decided to go in several trips that would work with my schedule and if I happened to be in the area of one of the places, I made a point to go see it.

One book that proved to be exceptionally helpful is *Literary Trails of the North Carolina Mountains* by Georgann Eubanks. This guidebook covers much of western North Carolina and gives detailed information on how to find many of the artifacts and places mentioned in the literature of North Carolina writers. For Rash, Eubanks mentions only Madison County and Cullowhee (where he teaches at Western Carolina University). For Byer, she mentions only the Tuckaseegee River and City Lights Bookstore of Sylva (where Byer often conducts workshops and readings), and for Morgan, she covers the Green River, Zirconia, Mount Mitchell, Tryon, and several references he makes in his poetry to artifacts or flowers that are prominent in the area. The guidebook gave me a start to find many of the other physical locations that are mentioned in the poems. Of course I could not travel to all of the places that are mentioned in the poetry of Morgan, Byer, and Rash. The three poets' collections are inundated with proper nouns of the physical landscape. It will definitely be a working project for me as I continue work on this topic, but for this dissertation, I limited the number of places I visited for the sake of time.

I use the words "documenting," "memorializing," "preserving," and "sustaining" in similar ways and interchangeably at times. Of course they are almost synonyms in the

larger sense of the words, but it is important to note the nuances of each word as well. Documenting doesn't necessarily preserve since preservation implies the caring for an artifact, maybe even restoring it to its original condition through cleaning, mending, retouching, covering with protective material, and such. Memorialization, while possibly including a form of documentation—the record of dates, location, and order of events—leans more heavy on memory and keeping memories alive, while sustaining implies a symbiotic relationship between two entities that survive because of each other. While they may not be near definitions in their individual sense, I still need all four words to describe the work poetry is doing in the southern Appalachian mountains. Poetry does all these things—sometimes one more than the other, but poetry is always documenting, preserving, memorializing and sustaining the culture of these hills.

In July of 2014, I climbed Mount Mitchell (named after geologist Elisha Mitchell who first measured its peaks) and took pictures of Elisha Mitchell's grave and asked park rangers if I could hike to the spot where he fell to his death, as depicted in Robert Morgan's poem "The Body of Elisha Mitchell" in *Sigodlin*, (1990). They told me that the pool where Mitchell fell and possibly drowned is not on park lands, but is just west on private property. They would not tell me who owns the land where the pool is located. There is a photograph of the spot hanging in the park office and another one in the Visitor's Center museum on the top of Mount Mitchell, along with an installation of photographs and written text explaining how locals think Elisha Mitchell died (bitten by a poisonous snake and then slipping off a high ledge into the pool below) and reports of the search party that went out looking for him.

In August of 2014, I traveled from Asheville southwest on I-26 towards Hendersonville in search of Robert Morgan's places. I found the Green River Valley at the bottom of a steep and insanely winding road appropriately named Green River Road. *Green River* (1991) is a collection of poetry selections from eight of Morgan's books ranging from 1969 to 1991, most of which are written from and about the area surrounding the Green River Valley. Then I traveled south on the Blue Ridge parkway to the Devil's Courthouse, which is depicted in a poem by the same name in *Groundwork* (1979). It is a short but very steep hike from the parking area to the overlook on an outcropping of rock that is named Devil's Courthouse because legend said that the devil held court deep within the rock on that mountain. "In Cherokee lore, this cave is the private dancing chamber and dwelling place of the slant-eyed giant, Judaculla" ("Devil's"). What's interesting is that Judaculla rock, a petroglyph in Jackson County (about thirty miles from Devil's Courthouse), is considered in Cherokee lore to be the markings of the slant-eyed giant, since the giant bounded between his cave on the mountain peak and valley quite easily ("Judaculla"). Nineteenth Century ethnographer James Mooney said that the name Judaculla was a white corruption of the Cherokee name Tsul'kalu' and that the rock, "a large soapstone slab covered with rude carvings," was formed by "scratches made by the giant in jumping from his farm on the mountain to the creek below" (407). Morgan also has a poem called "Judaculla Rock" in *At the Edge of Orchard Country*, (1987). In the poem, Morgan speaks about the rock as text. Cherokee scholars have never been able to translate the meanings of the petroglyphs, and it is obvious that some of the markings were just to gather soapstone for tool making, but

other marks indicate symbols of some sort. What is serendipitous about my finding the rock is the coincidence of my study of poetry of place and this ancient literature still being “read” as a kind of earth-rock-text. Maybe the symbols of this pre-historic language are lost on me, but the symbolism is not. As Morgan points out in the poem; “what could be more awesome than a message / ancient, untranslatable, true, / up where giants walked on balds, / in text and context, history, word?” What could be more awesome is if the natives of this land were interpreting this rock-text rather than a poet of European descent. This dissertation does not intend to ignore the poetry of the great native people—the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians—who still inhabit the southern Appalachians in the Qualla Boundary (which is the southern terminus of the Blue Ridge Parkway). I did not include any contemporary Cherokee writers since their work does not fall within the scope of this dissertation. My focus is on poetry as a preserver of culture of mountain life in the bioregion outside the Qualla Boundary with an small emphasis on the literary heritage and culture transplanted through immigrants from Celtic regions of Europe. A website page maintained by the Museum of the Cherokee Indian based in North Carolina reads, “About 15,000 people are now members of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. About 9,000 of them live on tribal land, about 60,000 acres in Jackson, Swain, Graham, Macon, and Cherokee counties. They operate their own schools, police and justice departments, hospital and health services. They are still here” (“Contemporary”). Certainly contemporary Cherokee writing also preserves place and culture and needs further attention.

What was really exciting about hiking Devil's Courthouse is that on the walls of the overlook are little directional plaques with sights that indicate the names of the mountains on the distant horizon. The sights are little cones that I aligned in my line of vision and, when I looked just beyond the cone that was farthest from me, it pointed to a mountain crest, and on the plaque is the name of the mountain and its GPS location. One of the mountains was Snowbird, a mountain mentioned in Kay Byers' poem "Burning Wing Gap." It occurred to me, as I stood there lining up the sights and bringing Snowbird into focus in my camera lens, how close these poets are to each other, physically and poetically. Snowbird Mountain is roughly fifty miles from Devil's Courthouse, as the crow flies, but there I stood on one, looking at the other. Had I not read the poems, I would have never made this connection. This Blue Ridge Parkway is the link between my three poets. It is the Parkway, its many points of interests, and the little towns and life along this ridge, even more so than the Appalachian range, that unites and influences Morgan, Byer, and Rash.

On September 5th and 6th of 2014, I ran the Blue Ridge Relay with eleven friends. The Blue Ridge Relay is a long distance relay race that traverses the Blue Ridge Mountains from the North Carolina/Virginia border down to Asheville, North Carolina. We started on Friday morning at Grayson Highlands State Park in southern Virginia. We had twelve runners, each of whom would run three legs of the 208 miles to Asheville, North Carolina by Saturday night. As Thoreau remarked in his journal in 1851, "How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live! Methinks that the moment my legs begin to move my thoughts begin to flow—as if I had given vent to the

stream at the lower end & consequently new fountains flowed into it at the upper” (166). And that is exactly what happened. As I ran my legs of the race and rode in the van down the spine of the Blue Ridge from Virginia to Asheville, I started to realize the connection between my three authors. Of course it did not hurt that we ran through Rash’s beloved Aho Gap and around the foot of Grandfather, and on every curvy mountain back road of North Carolina’s Appalachian range leading to the next drop zone for each runner. It was crossing the terrain, seeing the hills and valleys and old homesteads while poetry echoed in my head, that helped me draw the connection between these mountain people and those people in the pages of Morgan, Byer, and Rash.

These places are not entirely easy to get to. There is no interstate, and the closest major highways besides the Blue Ridge Parkway are state highways, which are never more than two-lane, meandering roads unless they go through a township in front of a Walmart. On my third leg, on Saturday morning, I was running a desolate two-lane stretch just past Mount Mitchell. Jack’s Creek Road was eight miles of a steady climb into Burnsville, North Carolina. I gained 627 feet over the last three miles of the leg, and the morning sun was beginning to heat up the valley and mountainside so much that I got too hot and forced to walk every steep incline. Most of the leg was undulating through bottom farmland, and occasionally I would pass through a mountain cut and climb to the next plateau. As I neared a farm, the chickens started making noise. Two young boys peaked around the side of an old, gray, weathered barn that barely stood just next to the road and looked like the roof had fallen in. They saw me and ran out to the edge of the barbed-wire fence to wave at what must have been the strangest sight at 7 a. m. on a

Saturday morning: this crazy runner woman dressed in neon with bright pink running shoes. I was so much *not* part of the landscape that I must have looked alien. To me, they looked like part of an episode of *The Waltons*. They were shy and dirty and smiling as they waved. It felt like I had gone backwards in time. The broken-down cars, the deserted landscape, the farm, the barn, the boys, and the hollow outside of Burnsville—it all seemed like it had not been touched by civilization or progress. It appeared to be just as it was forty, maybe even seventy-five years ago.

How can something stay the same that long in this digital age of the Internet and the Google car? How can the physical appearance of a place seem in 2014 just like it was in 1944? It was then that I realized that this is my point with this dissertation. It is rare that a place does not change too much in seventy-five years, and that is the point. Things are changing at breakneck speed, and these poems preserve the places like they once were. The places of Morgan, Byer and Rash are also changing, like this mountain hollow outside of Burnsville will change some time in the future, but the poetry of these places is sustaining it and memorializing it. The poems become eco-historical markers that show future generations of readers how this place and its people used to be.

The poetry of the Appalachian Mountains is so distinctly place-based that readers are immediately immersed in the landscape of the home place, the mountain cove, or the pasture in the valley. Poetry forms the groundwork that anchors people—both writers and readers—to place and supports the mountains. Poetry directly links readers to the past through memory and provides a connection to place through the writing. It holds onto the placeness of the Appalachian Mountains and slows the erosion

of a disappearing lifestyle in an environment plagued by urbanization and deforestation. Holding onto these places is crucial in an age where the Appalachian heritage and traditional ways of life are disappearing right before our eyes. From mountaintop removal and fracking in West Virginia to urban sprawl in the southern Appalachians, life in these hills is no longer insular, nor immune from the encroachment of suburbia and the toxins brought in by big box stores, big coal, and big power companies.

People of the Appalachians are affected by their changing ways of life. The environment is changing around their homes, and the result is often manifested in negative ways. Depression, substance abuse, and other forms of psychoterratic illnesses can be brought on by “chronic environmental stressors which negatively affect human health and well being” (Albrecht, *Alternatives* 98). In other words, when changes in a person’s environment cause sustained stress, whether psychological or physiological, it affects them. The poetry of Morgan, Byer, and Rash, coming out of Appalachia in this time of huge environmental and technological change, can be read from this standpoint. Their poetry shows the changes of time in the mountains and how it affects people who live here. The poetry also records histories of the hills for future generations, and enables readers to travel back to the places of Appalachia, time and again when the poems are read. But even more, the poetry sustains the culture of Appalachia through documentation, and through conveying the life experience of these writers to the reader.

This reading is not nostalgic, but *solastalgic*, a term coined by environmental studies professor Glenn Albrecht to describe the psychoterratic illness caused by “the pain or distress caused by loss of, or inability to derive, solace connected to the

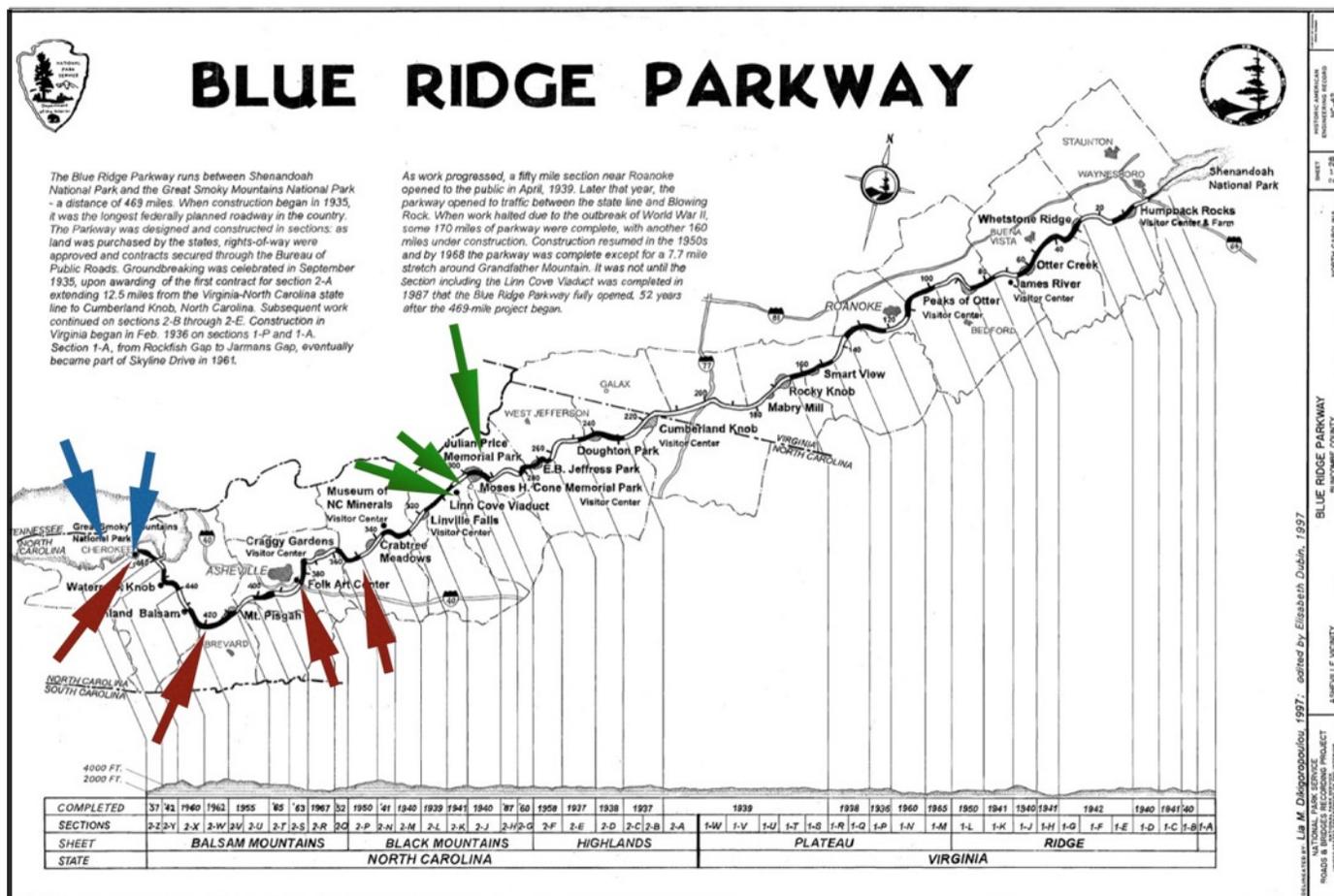
negatively perceived state of one's home environment" (*Alternatives* 35). In his essay on the topic of solastalgia, Albrecht articulates this connection:

Many people sense that something is wrong with our relationship with the planet. This unease just might be an expression of deep-seated solastalgia about non-sustainability. The intense desire to be organically connected to living landscapes is, in part, a desire to overcome solastalgia by finding an earthly home in connection with other living things on this Earth.

(*Alternatives* 36)

Sustainability is important in our throw-away world of consumerism. It has become an urgent topic in farming as a result of the scarcity of growing land and genetically modified foods that threaten future crops. It has become important to conservationists in many disciplines due to over-population, crowded urban centers, land development, and ever-increasing, huge waste production. How can we maintain the organic connection to "living landscapes" if the landscapes are disappearing? We feel this disconnection and develop psychological issues which Albrecht calls solastalgia. Reading poetry and writing poetry are ways we can deal with this solastalgia. The poetry of Robert Morgan, Kay Byer, and Ron Rash continually connects readers to place through memory and poesis in an effort to address their own solastalgia—their pain of losing their place from right beneath their feet. Every time they write a poem, they are preserving memory for their readers. The making of the poem is an act of preservation. Then, each time a poem is read, the place and the voices of the past are seen and heard.

Fig. 1. The Blue Ridge Parkway, Between Shenandoah National Park and the Great Smoky Mountains, Asheville Vicinity, Buncombe County, N.C. (“Blue”).



North Carolina poets Morgan, Byer, and Rash are all natives of the southern Appalachians. This place, this bioregion of the southern Appalachian Mountains, is crucial to the formation of their poetry. I chose these three because of their unique ties to the mountains. All three poets live (or have lived) and have written poetry within eighty-five miles of Asheville, North Carolina. Asheville in and of itself is not that important to this study, but it serves as the center and hub for these three. All three poets also write about landmarks and places associated or nearly associated by their location near the

Blue Ridge Parkway. Certainly there are other poets who are writing in the same bioregion, but Morgan, Byer, and Rash have published extensively and are influenced greatly by the North Carolina Blue Ridge region, and if their poems are placed on a map, they follow the ridge line of the Blue Ridge Parkway watershed. From the north, in his collection *Waking*, Rash writes about Watauga County, Julian Price Park, Grandfather Mountain, and locales around Boone. Further south, Morgan writes from Mount Mitchell, Asheville, Hendersonville, Devil's Courthouse, and Bryson City. Then Byer picks up overlapping areas of Spruce Pine, Cullowhee, The Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and finally—at the southern terminus of the Blue Ridge Parkway—the Qualla Boundary of Cherokee. In the National Park Service map (figure 1), I can trace the poetry of Rash (green arrows), Morgan (red arrows), and Byer (blue arrows) down the backbone of the Blue Ridge of North Carolina. These arrows represent just a few of the poems, but I marked them so that one can see just how relevant the poetry is to the Parkway. Of course, the three poets have poetry from and about other places, but I think it is important to see what the poetry that is common to the Blue Ridge says about the authors, the places, and its readers. The building of the parkway would have had a large impact on the way people think about travel in the mountains. Before the parkway, roads were mostly used for utilitarian purposes, whereas now, the road is a scenic highway purposed for leisure and sight-seeing. Once the parkway was complete, the purpose of roads changed from a path between two destinations, to a destination of its own. People take a Sunday drive up on the parkway, with no particular destination in mind, but to drive and enjoy the scenery, often stopping to picnic or hike along the way.

As stated in the text accompanying this map,² construction on the Parkway was started in 1935, and it was under construction for fifty-two years, with the finishing link, the Linn Cove Viaduct around Grandfather Mountain, finally completing the 469-mile parkway in 1987. Work on the Parkway slowed with the onslaught of World War II, but construction picked back up in the 1950s, and all but the 7.7-mile segment around Grandfather was complete by 1968, the year before Robert Morgan's first book of poetry was published.

That year, Morgan and Byer were both twenty-four years old and Rash was fifteen. Parkway construction, its existence as a scenic route, and its ability to allow people to traverse the top of the world close to sky, rock outcroppings, and mountainous terrain in an automobile, surely affected their lives and their poetry. Their bioregion is bisected by the Blue Ridge Parkway. While their places are the heart of their poetry, the building of and the traveling of the Blue Ridge Parkway allow the authors and their readers to experience the same bioregion in real life, and in the poetry.

Fred Waage's description of the nuanced characteristics of bioregionalism informs

² According to the Historic American Engineering Record in the Library of Congress, "The Blue Ridge Parkway runs between Shenandoah National Park and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park—a distance of 469 Miles. When construction began in 1935, it was the longest federally planned roadway in the country. The Parkway was designed and constructed in sections: as land was purchased by the states, rights-of-way were approved and contracts secured through the Bureau of Public Roads. Groundbreaking was celebrated in September 1935, upon awarding of the first contract for section 2-A extending 12.5 miles from the Virginia-North Carolina stateliness to Cumberland Knob, North Carolina. Subsequent work continued on sections 2-B through 2-E. Construction in Virginia began in February 1936 on sections 1-P and 1-A. Section 1-A, from Rockfish Gap to Jarmans Gap, eventually became part of Skyline Drive in 1961. As work progressed, a fifty mile section near Roanoke opened to the public in April, 1939. Later that year, the parkway opened to traffic between the state line and Blowing Rock. When work halted due to the outbreak of World War II, some 170 miles of parkway were complete, with another 160 miles under construction. Construction resumed in the 1950s and by 1968 the parkway was complete except for a 7.7 mile stretch around Grandfather Mountain. It was not until the Section including the Linn Cove Viaduct was completed in 1987 that the Blue Ridge Parkway fully opened, 52 years after the 469-mile project began" ("Blue").

my own argument here that the poetry of Appalachia grows from the author's place (the personal attachment), from the ecological and geographical place, and also directly from the bioregion's culture: "As applied to the goals of ecocriticism, bioregional ideas would seek to examine cultural creations with reference to the geographical, biological, and cultural milieux of their creation and content, milieux in the definition of which ecological attributes play a prominent role" (143). Why and how authors write also imbues the poetry with importance: The physical act of making the poem gives the poem meaning. The Appalachian bioregion informs the poetry, and also the act of making poetry, *poesis*, is a primal language of the poets that reveals their own *topophilia*³ for this unique culture and region. Humans' interpretations and love of place result from early sensory and psychological experiences in particular places. In the same way that humans can experience place, readers can experience poetry; they have sensory and psychological experiences reading or hearing the poetry. I am using the term *poesis* in its oldest Greek sense; it is the making of the poem. Even more precisely, I'm using *poesis* in the sense of Heidegger's assertion that poetry is "the primitive language of a historical people" (Richter 612). In his essay "Hoderlin and the Essence of Poetry," Heidegger posits that poetry "is the real," an "act of establishing being," and "an act of receiving and yet at the same time a fresh act of giving" (620). Heidegger states that the poet, in the acts of establishing being, capturing the real, and giving back to the reader, creates being through the making of poems. He asks, "What is established in this manner? The

³ A love of place—a term coined by Yi-Fu Tuan, is described as a term that includes "all of the human being's affective ties with the material environment" (*Topophilia* 93).

permanent” (618). This is how I use and consider poesis: as the making of poetry to create permanence in a world where nothing is permanent. The permanence that the poems create is similar to the marking of a gravesite or the erection of a monument to commemorate an event or person. This stems from the human need to mark a geographical place as significant; whether a roadside wreath marking the spot of an accident, the Lincoln Memorial, or a historical marker, each marking preserves and sustains human memory and culture. Poems act in the same way. Poems preserve and sustain human memory and culture.

When moving through the three poets—from the broad concept of Earth in the numerous works of Robert Morgan, and then into the places of house and artifacts of home in Kathryn Stripling Byer, and finally to the individual voice of Ron Rash in the mountains—poesis, poetry, and place come together to connect readers to the past through memory. Robert Morgan’s portrayal of land, farm, and outside spaces unearths a connection to the physical soil where his speakers live. Readers of his poetry are physically connected to Morgan’s places. Kathryn Stripling Byer’s poems are enriched by artifacts representing family heritage and relationship to the “homeplace” (as many Appalachian people refer to their homes, significantly merging “home” and “place” in a single word). While Byer’s poetry focuses more on the inside of the homeplace than Morgan’s, the reading of her poetry still connects her readers to the places in her poems. Ron Rash’s poetry gives us the voices of individual characters; yet in their individuality, the characters are still intricately tied to place in complicated ways. The places represented in the poetry of Morgan, Byer, and Rash reveal how the human need for

significance can be found and recreated in the reading of poetry.

The North Carolina mountains are full of ancient stories and evidence from people who walked these hills. PaleoIndians lived in Tennessee and parts of what is now North Carolina as far back as 11,000 years ago (Chapman 7). As early as 1591, surveyors mapped a town in the midst of the mountains north of Florida called “Apalatchi” that held the promise of gold (John Williams 20). Natives and later explorers regarded this land as beautiful and treacherous. We have documentation from 1593: Imagine the lives and the trails stretching across this land. The heritage is interesting and shows the ancient qualities of culture in these hills. The Cherokee culture has been maintained, mostly, because of the lay of the land. When what is now the Eastern Band of Cherokees was left behind in the Carolina mountains during the great removal, they became the mountaineers of the southern Appalachians and held “the entire Allegheny region from the interlocking head-streams of the Kanawha and the Tennessee southward almost to the site of Atlanta” (Mooney 14). The political, social, and cultural mess that led to the formation of the modern day Qualla Boundary is complicated. “Land hungry” immigrants, corrupt politicians, tribal turncoats, and good-intentioned natives and whites were all part of the results that led to the removal of over 16,000 people—over 4,000 of whom died on the way—to reservations in Oklahoma. In *Appalachia: a History*, John Williams wrote, “The Cherokee Removal , both in racism that underpinned the policy and the brutality with which it was carried out, now ranks as one of the saddest and least honorable events in American history” (80). For a few hundred people who managed to

hide out and escape the removal, staying meant buying back their own land and years of negotiations for a recognized space from the United States Government.

Even still, it was the mountains that protected their way of life. The territory was vast and inaccessible to most people, so the Eastern Cherokees were left unscathed for quite a while. They numbered many. Mooney wrote an ethnography of the Eastern band after many visits to the area during the decade of the 1890s. He wrote in 1900 that “mountaineers guard well the past, and in the secluded forests of the Nantahala and Oconaluftee, far away from the main-traveled road of modern progress, the Cherokee priest still treasures the legends and repeats the mystic rituals handed down from his ancestors” (12).

That the Cherokees were still practicing their ancient rituals as late as 1900 is interesting since we will turn soon to Thomas Wolfe, who was born that year in the bustling town of Asheville, not sixty miles from the Qualla Boundary. The overlap of ancient indigenous tradition and the comparatively recent, modern life lived by Thomas Wolfe speaks to the uniqueness of this region. How can these two experiences exist in such close proximity at the same time? Except for the few crowded cities in the Blue Ridge, particularly Asheville, the larger bioregion was virtually untouched by development until the major interstate I-40 and the Blue Ridge Parkway were built. Interstate 40 was dedicated in October of 1968, the same year the Parkway was finished, except for that 7.7-mile section around Grandfather Mountain (Boyle). This time, the new road is not a scenic route, but a four-lane thoroughfare giving more people the ability to travel up the mountain at high speeds. Before this road, the mountains enveloped people

and allowed them to escape the reach of urban sprawl. Even with the easier access to Asheville, one can still have an appreciation for the isolation of the Blue Ridge. People have been drawn to this place as long as humans have existed in the Americas. Why would they want to settle in terrain that is hard, steep, and harsh for the better part of the year? What is it about these hills that beckon us home? Morgan, Byer, and Rash not only capture the essence of the mountains, but they demonstrate what it means to want to stay, live, and die here in the Appalachians.

Another aspect of this region is the history and ecological uniqueness of the bioregion that includes the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park is unique because, as a bioregion, it has a profound effect on its inhabitants. The mystical “smoke” that hangs in the sky over the mountains is actually water vapor from the Smokies’ misty climate. In “Existing Conditions Report: North Shore Road,” a National Park Service survey, the bioregion is described as characterized by mountainous terrain with flats as floodplains from the Tuckasegee and Little Tennessee Rivers. The elevation of peaks ranges from 1,350 to 5,000 feet. The southeastern border of the park follows the Brevard Fault Zone, separating it from the foothills of the Piedmont province of North Carolina (78). Beyond its topography and geography, though, the bioregion of the GSMNP contains a cultural history that differs from the outside world. Lawrence Buell articulates how bioregionalism moves beyond a mere ecological description of the “geographical area of similar climate where similar ecosystems and groups of species are found on similar sites. Bioregionalism, however, views a bioregion not only as a territory defined by natural markers, such as watersheds,

but also as a domain of consciousness and as a focus of citizenly allegiance that challenges conventional political boundaries” (135). This is certainly evident in the Cherokee lifestyle. These earliest inhabitants of the GSMNP view connections between people and place as a web-like design of the seven clans that emphasizes the interrelatedness of people, plant, and animal life to land. The clans are centered around an appreciation of Earth, “resting confidently against the bosom of Mother Earth . . . gaz[ing] along the mountain’s curve into the dome of the sky, where even the tiniest star has a worthy place—as we do at home in the web” (Awiakta 204). The Cherokee domain of consciousness encompasses all of those that enter the Cherokee bioregion, connecting and building the web that defines their home in the Smoky mountains.

As European immigrants entered this bioregion, they continued to value the sense of community and appreciation of place. This became their domain of consciousness of home and space as defined by land, coves, crags and pinnacles. The isolation of the region and the distance from other modern settlements created cells of people who lived unchanged by time and untouched by the outside world. The bioregion is the root of this domain of consciousness. The characteristics of the land affect the culture and peoples in the area. Topography, ecology, geography, waterfalls, coves, smoke, mist, rock, dirt, flora, fauna, and animals—all shape human actions within the space. How they travel within and through the space, whether “progress” of building is easy or hard, how they settle and make home, how they work, how they build an economy—all is determined, within the GSMNP, by the bioregion.

Wildlife ecologist Peter Berg defines a bioregion as “both geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness . . . best described by the people who have lived within it, through human recognition of the realities of living-in-place” (qtd. in Creswell 134). The literature descending out of the bioregion of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park is shaped dramatically by the land. It cannot exist without the influence of the bioregion. In fact, the bioregion is the inspiration in the poetry itself. As the people were forced to leave this place that meant so much to them, this communal part of Earth that shaped their existence, this home that cannot be duplicated or rebuilt somewhere, eighty miles outside its borders, the literature becomes a space of loss. It exposes the displacement and void in the human heart when the home place is taken and ties to the past are severed.

Parks Lanier encapsulates the role of the bioregion in the life of the Cherokee in his poem “Sequoyah.” He describes the move from orality to literacy made possible by the Cherokee alphabet devised by Sequoyah. The paper of the white man is compared to a leaf of knowledge that can be traded among men, where from the leaf “came power over tribes and men and nations” (Lanier 40). The speaker of the poem, Sequoyah observes and equates his new observations to everything from his environment. Letters are like “tall mountain trees / Bent like the bow that does not break / Sharp like the arrow.” His people, the Cherokee, can now “track their words,” finding them like “hunters / Who trail a deer on snow or stone, / Bringing it down in blood, / Praying to be forgiven” (40). The references to the land, the deer, trees, and environment demonstrate how the bioregion shapes the way Sequoyah thinks about everything. His newfound

knowledge of the possibility of writing must fit into his schema of nature and surviving in that natural world.

When botanist William Bartram first traveled to this area in the 1770s, the Cherokee country covered over 40,000 square miles and “their population numbered 10,000 to 20,000 in forty to sixty settlements clustered along the streams” (Frome 21). He wrote of his impression of the land, “I beheld with rapture and astonishment a sublimely awful scene of power and magnificence, a world of mountains piled upon mountains . . . An amazing prospect of grandeur” (Higgs 34). Horace Kephart felt much the same impression 150 years later when he came to the Smokies to escape his everyday life through space and solitude. He was moved by the landscape and began to chronicle all kinds of things about its people and culture in writing that would later be published as *Our Southern Highlanders* in 1913. In the *Asheville Times*, on July 19, 1925, Kephart wrote: “A national park in the mountains of western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee would not duplicate anything in the western parks. The scenery is altogether different . . . it is typical Appalachia at its best . . . the last hundred square miles of uncut primeval forest, . . . just as it stood, . . . when Columbus discovered America.” Even though Kephart’s work at this time is sometimes seen as nostalgic and overly romantic, the influence of his writing to promote camping, the Smokies, the Great Smoky Mountain National Park, and the Appalachian Trail, can still be felt. In his poem “Looking for Horace Kephart’s Grave, Bryson City, NC,” Michael Chitwood comments on commercialization that Kephart would certainly oppose provided he could be here to see it: “I don’t think he’s up here / in the Oak-filtered light / and grease fumes from the

Hardee's / down on Spring Street. / He's slipped off again / into the blue haze over Deep Creek." Kephart was known for disappearing into days of solitude, and Chitwood captures why the writer would want to withdraw from the town and bustling progress to the blue haze of the Smoky Mountains. To even be buried in the midst of Bryson City instead of some remote corner of the wilds seems a sacrilege for Kephart. He was greatly affected by the bioregion of the Smokies that led to his advocacy for the national park, but ironically, even he is displaced by his burial in the township of Bryson City.

Kephart's appreciation and endorsement of a national park in the Smokies, coupled with the threat of loggers hastily cutting the last virgin stands of primeval forest on the east coast, helped to spur the formation of the park. A delegation from Knoxville met with North Carolina advocates for the park. Willis P. Davis and his wife worked diligently to secure public approval and funds to build the park. They caught the attention of the Chamber of Commerce and the Knoxville Automobile Club, both of which contributed to the formation of the Great Smoky Mountains Conservation Association. Environmentalists were not at the center of the argument. Ironically, "in the strange ways of democracy, the cause of wilderness preservation was led, in that day at least, not by botanists and bird lovers but by energetic civic boosters and businessmen" (Frome 182).

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park was dedicated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on Labor Day, 1940. One third of the 508,000 acres consisted of primeval forests (Frome 173, 177). Huge poplars and virgin chestnuts stood as markers of the grandeur and possibility embodying America. Schoolchildren had saved their pennies to

contribute to the building (173), and throngs numbering 25,000 came to the park dedication (177). It was bittersweet, though, for those people who had to be removed from their homes in the name of conservation. Louisa Walker was one who was actually allowed to remain in her home until she died. She and her sisters sold their land to the Park Service with the agreement that they would be able to remain there until death and maintain their way of life. They even became a spectacle of the park, selling souvenirs to tourists as they “flocked to the Walker home as if it were a museum of Appalachia” (Dykeman 157). Louisa’s poem “My Mountain Home” voices what many in the area felt as the park service snatched up their lands:

But now comes the park Commissioner

Comes all dressed up so gay

Saying this old house of yours

We must now take away

They coax they wheedle

They fret they bark

Saying we have to have this place

For a National Park

But many of us have a title

That is sure and will hold

To the City of peace
Where the streets are pure gold

And no park Commissioner
Will ever dar [sic]
To destruct or molest

Or take our home from us there.

Walker captures the feeling of helplessness of the displaced people. They are too poor and too small when compared to the United States government. Scott Russell Sanders captures the essence of the problem of displacement when he writes of returning to his own homestead that had been flooded by a dam built on the West Branch of the Mahoning River: “One’s native ground is the place where, since before you had words for such knowledge, you have known the smells, the seasons, the birds and the beasts, the human voices, the houses, the ways of working, the lay of the land, and the quality of light. It is the landscape you learn before you retreat inside the illusion of your skin” (Sanders 12). He is amazed at how quickly, “how casually, how relentlessly we sever the bonds between person and place” in our efforts for progress (12). One Appalachian writer who was influenced by his landscape as a young boy is Thomas Wolfe. His Asheville connection links him to Morgan, Byer, and Rash not only by proximity, but also by literary heritage.

Life and literature out of the Southern Appalachians has to include Thomas Wolfe, because he took the story of these hills to the entire world. Born in Asheville, North Carolina in 1900, Wolfe was a literary genius who contemplated place and space in his novels and letters. He of course didn't call it place studies or ecocriticism, since those terms would not be coined until many years in the future, but he was writing with the concept of the influence of home and place in mind. Wolfe's Asheville as depicted in *Look Homeward, Angel* provided home and setting for the characters in the novel and for Wolfe in life. He writes from the place he knows and, even though some aspects are fictitious, most of the details of the novels along with most characters are pulled straight out of Asheville. In a letter written to his teacher and school mentor, Margaret Roberts, Wolfe states that "fiction is not spun out of the air; it is made from the solid stuff of human experience—any other way is unthinkable" (Mitchell 122). Place and fiction are intertwined. Wolfe goes on to discuss how "the world a writer creates is his own world—but it is molded out of the fabric of life, what he has known and felt—in short, out of himself. How in God's name can it be otherwise?" (122). Thus, place and fiction and writer are intertwined for Wolfe, and so it is for us. The text, the writer, and the place all feed off each other.

In an interview published in an introduction of *Look Homeward, Angel* after Wolfe's death, his long-time editor and friend Maxwell Perkins talked about how place and experience might have influenced Wolfe as a writer:

I think no one could understand Thomas Wolfe who had not seen or properly imagined the place in which he was born and grew up. Asheville,

North Carolina, is encircled by mountains. The trains wind in and out through labyrinths of passes. A boy of Wolfe's imagination imprisoned there could think that what was beyond was all wonderful—different from what it was where there was not for him enough of anything . . . I think that those mountainous walls which his imagination vaulted gave him the vision of an America with which his books are fundamentally concerned. He often spoke of the artist in America—how the whole color and character of the country was completely new—never interpreted; how in England, for instance, the writer inherited a long accretion of accepted expression from which he could start. But Tom would say—and he had seen the world—‘who has ever made you know the color of an American box car?’ Wolfe was in those mountains—he tells of the train whistles at night—the trains were winding their way out into the great world where it seemed to the boy there was everything desirable, and vast, and wonderful. (14)

The spark of imagination that drives Wolfe's fiction is the “cup” of plateau where Asheville stands in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The tunnels where trains pass in and out of the town, like tentacles reaching out into the world, seem to serve as wormholes across time and space to the larger world beyond the “cup” that Wolfe would discover in his many travels. The new America, too, seems to serve Wolfe as a text to both explore and document. If he intends to give us the color of the American boxcar, the sound of the whistle, and what the disheartened Oliver thinks as he rides the rails across North

Carolina and ascends into Altamonte in *Look Homeward, Angel*, if Wolfe is going to write all of that with accuracy and authenticity, then surely he got his ideas from his first place, his first text: Asheville.

When *Look Homeward, Angel* was published in October of 1929, Asheville citizens were not particularly fond of Wolfe, or his novel (Teicher 7). They felt that he portrayed their town in a negative manner. They could not believe that he had exposed their secrets. But Wolfe loved his hometown and the people in it. He never felt that he was misrepresenting anything and he certainly did not mean to cause any harm. The people came around by the time he returned “in the summer of 1937,” when “Wolfe worked in a cabin at Oteen, near Asheville. It was his first trip home since the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel*. The people of Asheville who had reviled Wolfe were now ready to receive him with pride. Wolfe welcomed the warm reception, but decided that ‘you can’t go home again’—he had to move onward, not backward” (Perkins 10).

Wolfe’s idea that home changed once one left it, that a visit back would never reveal the same place, brings us back to this idea of solastalgia. Wolfe wasn’t just melancholically or nostalgically speaking about place. He was not just longing to be physically back in the place—the place he once knew to be home—but the actual place was changed. It wasn’t that he couldn’t get to home; it’s that home had changed and was no longer there. Of course some of this change had to do with the amount of change that had taken place in the person returning home; maybe he is older, more experienced, heartbroken by what he has lost or thrilled by what he has found in the world and the

homecoming is interpreted by the traveler as change. And some of the change is of the place itself; buildings have been torn down or built up, roads paved, trees grown, and the natives have aged. What Wolfe shows us is that due to the changes in both the man and the place, the place is no longer home as it once was. In *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*, Lucy Lippard attributes this changing idea about home to the decline in community living. As people gained enough money to separate themselves from the commune, they began to challenge the security of the place, and “home” as a concept of safety, familiarity, and identity became a concern for people:

The Dominant cultural clichés about home are all idealized: “home sweet home,” “a house is not a home,” “be it ever so humble, there’s no place like home,” “home is where the heart is,” and, of course, a more telling pair—“a woman’s place is in the home,” and “a man’s home is his castle.” It was not until the seventeenth century—in Europe—that the comfort and privacy we assume as part of the notion of home was even an issue. It came with the increased isolation of family units, led by the bourgeoisie, as communal living waned. (28)

As people began to isolate themselves, home became ever more present in their minds. This is an example of the contemplation of place versus space—that is, the home versus the house. This contemplation is what Wolfe spent over 700 pages on in his mammoth novel *You Can’t Go Home Again*. It’s ironic to me that as the world progresses, as we gain financial and physical independence in our cultures, we move further away from that which gives us peace and shelter. And that causes suffering. The experience of losing

the place is the solastalgia we are facing. The place is in a constant state of change and, when one leaves and returns, the change is more evident because of the leaving, so upon the return, the place is entirely new, and therefore, you can never truly go home again.

When thinking back to Heidegger, it is evident that poesis, poetry making, preserves place for us by creating something permanent in a changing landscape. David Richter states that Heidegger insists “on the way in which language itself can become a homeland. As a result of the work of the poet, Heidegger believes, art can function as the ‘homeland’ that he felt mass culture was distancing us from; it can give back to us beauty and truth of certain aspects of experience that modern culture treats as mere instrumentalities” (612). The good news is, like W. O. Wolfe’s marble angel watching over the yard of the dead and marking a spot of memorial and remembrance of place, poets such as Robert Morgan, Kay Byer, and Ron Rash are writing too—to mark their place, remember what went on here, and create a memory all of us to come back to.

The first of our poets, Robert Morgan (b. 1944) is the author of numerous volumes of poetry, novels, and short stories. He was born in Hendersonville, North Carolina and now lives in Ithaca, New York. Kay Byer (b. 1944), former North Carolina Poet Laureate, was born in Georgia, now lives in the mountains of western North Carolina, and is the author of several volumes of poetry. Ron Rash (b. 1953) is a native of Boiling Springs, North Carolina, and grew up spending his summers in Boone in the Blue Ridge Mountains. He now lives in Cullowhee, and teaches at Western Carolina University. He is the author of multiple volumes of poetry and several novels.

Morgan, Byer, and Rash have been able to capture some of the ancestral voices that call across the mountains and across time, from Cherokee displacement, then mountaineer displacement to build a national park, to environmental displacement to build roads and fracking sites. Establishing connections to place helps to sustain the home places of each author for future readers. This connection, through poetry, is what Wordsworth would say is the spirit of the poem. The poetry captures the spirit because empirical knowledge is inadequate. We need poetry to explain the clinical—to explain the things that are beyond language, to capture the feelings and experiences that scientific knowledge cannot adequately portray. Good poetry helps us feel the ghosts more closely. Here are the first four lines of Byer’s poem “Tuckasegee” from her collection entitled *Black Shawl*:

Wherever I walk in this house
I hear water. Or time.
Which is water, the same
Tuckasegee that runs past my window. (50)

The Tuckasegee runs through Cullowhee, North Carolina—Byer’s place. The feeling that the river, through the poem, links us to the past and transcends time is a haunting, yet intriguing image. Byer’s personal relationship with the Tuckasegee, coupled with the timelessness of the river-water archetype, bridges generations and links even the most modern reader to the banks of the Tuckasegee. Linking readers to the past and bridging gaps in time is the essence of poesis and why it is so important. Through the making of poetry, authors and readers can sustain memory and culture.

Morgan, Byer, and Rash have spent years representing and meditating upon life in the North Carolina mountains in their writings. It is not surprising that their poetry recalls the past and tends to the homesteads, farms, and personal experiences of living in the Southern Appalachians, but their work not only recalls the past, but sustains it and stops the erosion of time and human impact on their mountain culture, preserving a way of life and landscape that are disappearing with the encroachment of urban development, environmental destruction, and economic depravity. The poems of Morgan, Byer, and Rash are constantly “raising the dead” (as Rash puts it in his poem of the same name) to recreate, validate, and remember the places of the southern Appalachian mountains. If memory and place are intertwined, as leading place-studies scholar Tim Creswell suggests, then one cannot exist without the other. Creswell states:

One of the primary ways in which memories are constituted is through the production of places. Monuments, museums, the preservation of particular buildings (and not others), plaques, inscriptions and the promotion of whole urban neighborhoods as ‘heritage zones’ are all examples of the placing of memory. The very materiality of a place means that memory is not abandoned to the vagaries of mental processes and is instead inscribed in the landscape — a public memory. (85)

Memory, according to Creswell, is actually made through the formation of our attachment to (and production of) place. In the poetry, it is evident that Morgan, Byer, and Rash are “placing” (as Creswell puts it) their memories into their respective landscapes, which allows readers of the poetry to also assign significance to these places through reading.

I investigate this phenomenon through the work of these poets and the mountain places out of which their poetry comes. The detrimental effects of change on place lead inhabitants to experience solastalgia. Solastalgia differs from nostalgia in the fact that subjects do not miss the places they love because they are away from those places in time or space, but because they are still in the place and it is changing around them in undesirable ways, resulting in a feeling of dislocation. In Appalachia, this has certainly happened. From the flooding of the valleys to create power for the Tennessee Valley Authority and later Duke Power, urban development, roads, building and tourism, to fracking and mountaintop removal, the Appalachian region is a changing culture that once was intact, but is now compromised and slowly disappearing. The poetry of Morgan, Byer, and Rash holds pieces of the Appalachian culture, past, present, and future together for readers to experience.

I examine the poetry from an ecocritical perspective, particularly using theories from the intersections of ecocriticism, place studies, and cultural studies—drawing on the writings of Gaston Bachelard, Lawrence Buell, Parks Lanier, Yi-Fu Tuan, Tim Creswell, Maria Damon, Ira Livingston, and Jerome Rothenburg—to show how these texts not only preserve and sustain, but resurrect and reclaim, the places, cultures, and voices of the mountains. I also work with the notion that the act of “making” poetry, *poiesis*, comes right out of the land. This poetry is cultivated, nurtured, and harvested right from these hills and mountains.

The early work of Gaston Bachelard establishes a place from which to advance my thesis: “Every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space

in which we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves, is a symbol of solitude for imagination; that is to say, it is the germ of a room, or of a house” (136). We can start to see how spaces inhabited by our poets become significant places in the texts . This idea is further developed in Parks Lanier’s edited collection of essays *The Poetics of Appalachian Space*, in which scholars apply the philosophy of Bachelard to Appalachia. Bachelard’s notion that all places influence literature and Creswell’s idea that there is a distinct difference between space and place enable us to evaluate culture and literature in relation to place-ness: Place is political, personal, and always evolving and constructing a material landscape with which we form our identities (Creswell 35). “Place and memory are, it seems, inevitably intertwined” (85). The significance of any place is dependent on the human assignment of that significance: Place-ness is dependent on the inhabitants of that place. Yet even after leaving a place, inhabitants remember what it was like there—what it looked like and smelled like. Memory is inherent in the essence of place. One can’t exist without the other. If one has no memories of a place, it has no significance. This interdependence between place and memory is crucial to the argument that poetry connects readers to place through memory. Creswell—and other place-studies scholars and ecocritics since his influential 2004 book *Place: A Short Introduction*—define “space” as a place empty of meaning, whereas “place” is a space that is full of meaning. One person’s space can be another person’s place, depending on their different backgrounds and experiences. When I cite Bachelard and other important theorists and critics before Creswell using the word “space” as containing meaning, I translate their use of “space” to mean “place” according to Creswell’s definition.

Placed-based poetics and poesis are entwined in both cultural studies and the process of writing. Culture affects place, territory, and poetry-making, and it determines why a poet writes in certain ways. Creswell in *Place*, and before that his dissertation director, Yi-Fu Tuan, in *Topophilia*, have made the argument that place and literature are interdependent and that humans' interpretation and love of place results from early sensory and psychological experiences in particular places. In the same way that humans can experience place, readers can experience poetry; they have sensory and psychological experiences reading or hearing the poetry. Essentially, readers move about in the landscape of the poem much like they might explore a familiar place from their pasts. Through imagination, poetry allows the reader to experience the places of the southern Appalachian past. Unlike reading fiction where readers may witness action of the text or even feel empathy for characters, poetry actively engages the reader in the text through sensory experience. Rhythm, lyricism, form, sound, and other poetic conventions involve the reader in an experience that deeply connects them to the place of the poetry. It does not matter if the reader has any knowledge of Appalachia or its history, because the act of reading the poetry includes the reader now in the place of the poem. This is one way in which the poetry functions to sustain the culture of Appalachia.

Tuan also articulates why humans feel the need to preserve an environment. In societies where people feel that they are "in control of their destiny, they have little cause for nostalgia;" however, when people think their community is changing "too rapidly, or spinning out of control, nostalgia for an idyllic past waxes strong" (*Space and Place* 195). Tuan states that this need for the past, this attraction to preserve historical buildings

and artifacts, rises from the human necessity to support a sense of identity (*Space and Place* 197). Morgan, Byer, and Rash are not directly aiming to preserve the past through writing as artifact, but they do preserve a way of life in the poetry. When they write about specific places such as their hometowns or buildings where they spent time, the place is preserved for the reader, and also for the author.

But writing about place is more than a historical reading into that specific time; it lets the reader experience the place again, and the author's own relationship to place, each time the poem is read. The place, then, is always in the present as the poem is in the present and is, therefore, preserved. The poetry is able to transcend time in this way. If time and place are always linked, and time determines how a place is perceived, either through memory or the current time being spent at the place, then each time the poetry is read, the place is again real for the reader. Lucy Lippard comments on life and home as the center of human existence and that place and our attachments to place extend out from this fluid center in a "circular notion, embracing and radiating from the specific place," but the area away from the center "'out there' is a line of sight, the view, a metaphor for linear time" (23). Inhabitants of the place circle back to the idea of the place through time. These ideas make the history of the place, both as it was at a certain time, and as it is in the present. It is important to distinguish between the concept of home and *homeplace*, a word used throughout to describe the original house or farm where a family stems from. In his article "Teaching Hometown Literature," Jim Cahalan makes this distinction: the Appalachian "'homeplace' refers more specifically to one's house and property" (268, N.). The homeplace is where the adults were born and grew

up, and often one of the family members still lives there. It is where the family gathers for holidays and celebrations, and funerals. If it is old enough, it may contain a family burial plot. In short, the home is full of place-ness because of the meaning descendants attribute to the space of land. Once the homeplace is sold or gone from the family, the symbolic center of family is gone. If some poet writes about the homeplace though, the place is intact in memory and alive in the reading of the poems. Poetry that heavily relies on place, or poetry with a strong sense of place, serves as a marker or tangible object that preserves the place even if the place is no longer in physical existence. When Morgan writes about his Green River Valley, he writes of the place as he experienced it and in doing so, captures a “snapshot” of the time he spent there to preserve. Snapshots such as these poems preserve the life represented in the poetry. Snapshots do not provide the entire picture of life in this place, or even enough information to make conclusions about place at all, but they do capture a snippet of the experience. When compared to the content of other poems, the culture and experiences are reanimated to give the reader a sense of the place.

The place influences the literature in such a way that the poem is a piece of the landscape. In Lawrence Buell’s chapter “The Place of Place: Five Dimensions of Place Connectedness” (in *Writing for an Endangered World*), he focuses on arriving “at a workable conception that helps to explain the importance of place sense to literary and cultural imagination, and the cultural work that place-responsiveness imagination acts can perform” (64). Not only does the author feel and show the connection to place, the reader now has a connection—however different—of place established by the author’s

text. Establishing a “place-sense” helps readers identify with the poetry. Buell goes on to address concepts of time and memory. He explores the idea that “identity shaping places” are also cultural artifacts (70).

Place and memory are intertwined, poetry and place are interdependent, and each time readers engages with poetry, they experience the landscape of the poem viscerally. But what about the author? Maria Damon makes this assertion, in *Margins in American Vanguard Poetry*, about the intersections among poet, place, and culture:

The metaphysics and utter physicality of place and placelessness are key issues in each poet’s oeuvre, though the *way* in which this is so is exquisitely peculiar and unique for each poet. I am not concerned with a poetics of space per se, much less with regionalism, except to note that space and place are imbued with social meaning, and heavily inflect what we call culture: the social location (a metaphysical and physical place) out of which each poet writes. (6)

Place derives meaning from the poet, and in reverse yet complementary fashion, the poet uses the significance of place in the formation of poetry. The author now relies on the poem to supply the significance of place. Through what Damon and Livingston call poesis, the poet brings life and sustained significance to the places of his or her poetry. A working definition of poesis also comes from Damon and Livingston’s work in *Poetry and Cultural Studies*. Poesis has to do with the feeling and making of poetry. It’s the juncture of the poem itself and the “‘poetic activity’ (thus honoring *poesis* in its broader etymological sense as “making”).” Poesis is the interplay among form, meaning,

language, and reader. The act of making poetry helps “sustain counter-hegemonic identities, knowledges, and commitments” (Damon and Livingston 3). The author, text, culture, and place all inform the poetry. The making of a poem is determined by the exchange among language, form, meaning, and audience. This is important because we can now see the different forces in play during the formation of poetry, and we can also better analyze poetry using this model. Reading Morgan, Byer, and Rash while using this model, I show how influential place is to these authors, and how place, poet, and poetry work through form, language, meaning, and memory to connect readers to Appalachia.

Morgan, Byer, and Rash are vital to study because there has not been work on their poetry in regard to place as it is intertwined with memory or on the three poets together. There has been some study of place and memory in the individual poets—such as Robert West’s investigation of sacred places in Morgan, Kathryn’s poetry-scholar husband James Byer’s examination of the woman’s place in her poetry, and Mary C. Williams’ study of interior places and the movement between inside and outside places in Morgan. However, there is no current research on place that includes all three poets, or that incorporates the emphasis of place studies on the binding of memory and place and how this concept matters in the poetry. Using ecocriticism and, even more so, place studies, I demonstrate how this poetry and the reading of it is critically and always linked to the places from which it grows.

In Chapter Two I investigate “ground work” in the poetry of Robert Morgan. So much of Morgan’s poetry deals with the land and human’s interactions with the soil. Through close reading of Morgan’s outside places, I show how his poetry reclaims

Appalachian places. It is fitting to start with Morgan, because I move from the more general outside places of farm and earth to the inside places in the poetry of Kay Byer, and finally to the specific voices of those people inhabiting the places within Ron Rash's poetry. Morgan's poems relate to themes of earth and groundwork. He is the first of these three poets to write about his place in the southern Appalachians. His poems ripple out from his hometown of Hendersonville, North Carolina to various points all over the southern Appalachians of North Carolina. Place is an important factor in his poetry. He speaks of small places, such as the "potato hole" to regional landmarks as prominent as Mount Mitchell. These places influence Morgan's writing of the poetry and the poetry, as a result, acts to preserve the place for Morgan and his audience. Using William Rueckert's article "Literature and Ecology" (1978), in which he coined the word "ecocriticism," we can see how Morgan's poetry actually grows out of the places of Morgan's life to build community that connects readers. The act of making the poem creates connections and spurs more creative growth among readers. Rueckert's "poems as plants"—coupled with Morgan's rock piles, dirt, lightening, cedars and pumpkins—demonstrate how Morgan's poetry rises out of the Earth to shelter and sustain his places.

In Chapter Three I explore Kathryn Stripling Byer's poetry as it deals with interior spaces and artifacts. Byer's poetry is inundated with place—like Morgan's, it is both regional and specific—but she delves more into the interior spaces of the house than either Morgan or Rash. This chapter investigates how Byer's places affect her poetry and how her poetry works to create places of home for her readers. Her use of artifacts—quilts, family traditions, and domestic aspects of daily life—differentiates her poetry from

both Morgan's and Rash's. This distinction brings up an interesting question about the gender expectations of writers and readers: Why does Byer write about these domestic issues, whereas both male writers do not? Is this motivated by gender? Is the inclusion of these themes important in relation to place? I address these questions as well as the overarching issue of how Byer's poetry works to sustain place. Using Gaston Bachelard's theories of house and universe, we can see how Byer's poetry connects to readers, place, and time. Byer's poetry marks time in traditions, holidays, seasons, and songs. Through these markers she connects readers to place through memory.

In Chapter Four I develop the idea of the inhabitant's voice in these places as Ron Rash writes the characters that voice the ecological fight to maintain Appalachian placeness in a time when so much is changing and disappearing. After a close reading of Morgan's outside places and Byers' interior places, it is interesting to see how the human voice of Rash's poetry occupies the same spaces and moves to preserve them. More so than the other two poets, Rash writes about vivid Appalachian characters grappling with timeless themes like environmentalism, family tragedies, and heritage. In this chapter I explore how these characters function in his poetry to sustain place—both for the author and the reader. We can also see how Rash uses sound and speech to connect readers to the act of poetry making.

Finally, in Chapter Five I make final connections among the three poets, their places, and conclude with a discussion of areas for further study. While certainly more work can be done on Morgan, Byer, and Rash, I also suggest to ecocritics and place studies scholars that the Appalachian bioregion needs their attention. The old ways of

the mountain are rapidly disappearing with globalization. Scholars, in addition to writers of place, need to document what is changing and how these changes affect Appalachia.

Like Wolfe's young Oliver in *Look Homeward, Angel*, the poet intends to "wreak something dark and unspeakable" in her constant search for the eternal (*Look* 22). Poems are the memorial, the tombstones of our "forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven" (23). The poet, like Wolfe, seeks to preserve the place, and like Oliver, yearns to render the face; the details of our humanity we can easily recognize. These poems point us to places, songs, and voices that have existed thousands of years in the palms of the Blue Ridge. The poetry of Morgan, Byer, and Rash is our angel—homeward facing.

The Wolfe Angel that inspired the image in Thomas Wolfe's first novel stands today in Robert Morgan's hometown of Hendersonville, North Carolina. Wolfe's title is actually part of a line in Milton's poem "Lycidas": "Look homeward Angel now, and melt with ruth; / And, O ye dolphins, waft the hapless youth." In Milton's poem the speaker is grieving the loss of Lycidas: "For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime, / Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer. / Who would not sing for Lycidas?" The connection between Lycidas and Tom's brothers Grover and Ben, who were both lost at a young age, are certainly ringing in his head as he chose this for the book's title, but the poem is a portent that can also allude to Tom himself, died at barely the age of 38. The marble angel sculpture was made in Carrara, Italy and was sold by Wolfe's father to the Johnson family and now marks the grave of Mrs. Margaret Bates Johnson. The angel stands as a memorial marker to acknowledge the life of Mrs. Johnson. She sustains Mrs. Johnson's name and her story—even now, here I am writing about her. The angel marks the place

just like the poems mark the places they write about. There was some debate as to which angel was referenced in the book, because W. O. Wolfe sold several angels over the years, but Mrs. Wolfe said it was in Oakdale Cemetery in Hendersonville. Young Tom was six years old when the angel was sold (Eubanks 226-27). John Parris wrote of the Wolfe Angel that it is “a ‘haunting sorrow for the buried men’ which he felt in the golden warmth of October when there was ‘an exultancy for all the men who were returning’ to the hills of home” (Eubanks 228). Hendersonville is home to more than just the Wolfe angel; it’s also home to Robert Morgan, who was born there on Wolfe’s birthday, October 3, 1944. Wolfe would have been 44. The overlap of generations is intriguing. Had Wolfe lived another twenty-five years to the age of 69, he would have probably heard of the new poet from UNC publishing poems about Hendersonville, N. C. in *Zirconia*.

This bioregion is ripe for poetry. The Blue Ridge Parkway, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Cherokee history, and the literary legacy of Thomas Wolfe form the perfect conditions for poems to grow from the landscape of the southern Appalachian mountains. Poetry holds the mountains when they are threatened by humans and the natural environment, and it sustains memories of these places in the minds of readers. Three poets write about this place because of their topophilia and for fear of losing it. The first is Robert Morgan.

Fig. 2. The Wolfe Angel, Oakdale Cemetery, Hendersonville, North Carolina



The mountains were his masters. They rimmed in life. They were the cup of reality, beyond growth, beyond struggle and death. They were his absolute unity in the midst of eternal change.

—Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel*

CHAPTER 2

ROBERT MORGAN: POETRY OF EARTH

Robert Morgan's earliest memory is "waking and seeing stars so bright and close they seemed to brush [his] face" as his father carried him home from a church prayer meeting at "about two" years old (Anderson 20). Morgan (b. 1944) grew up on a farm in the Green River Valley near Hendersonville, North Carolina. The Green River Valley, twenty miles south of Asheville, extends about forty miles and is flanked by townships Morgan writes about in his poems: Zirconia (his home), Flat Rock, and Saluda, a steep grade where the land flattens out into South Carolina. On the day I visited the Green River Valley, it was August 2014 and sunny. We drove down Green River Road, not far off I-26 South. Green River Cove Road is a steep road leading from a ridge on the Interstate, down into the river valley. It took about twenty minutes of hair-pin turns at ten miles an hour to get to the bottom of the valley, where the road straightened out and we found the river (Fig. 3 and 4). Seeing these places gave me a first-hand experience to complement the poetry. I could see what they looked like in real life and compare that to the depictions in the poems. Most of the time, readers never get to see the places of the literature they are reading. However, since I am writing about place and poetry and live so close to the settings in the poetry, I wanted to see them in real life. I did not learn anything new about Robert Morgan, but the excursion enriched my reading of the poetry

from and about these places.



Fig. 3 and 4. Green River Cove Road (left) and the Green River (right) near Henderson, North Carolina.

I did realize the proximity between my three poets and how their relative closeness reinforces the theory that place is important to the formation of poetry. The place of the southern Appalachians is distinct, and the poetry coming out of there is distinct. Place influences the poetry and marks each text with a fingerprint. You can read any of these three writers and know that they came from the southern Appalachians because of the place references, the voices, and the stories. Being able to see these places, firsthand, gave me another facet of knowledge about the place and the poetry.

As a boy, Morgan worked in the fields and spent his playtime outside digging in gully walls, swimming in trout pools in the river, fishing, and digging for arrowheads left by Cherokee Indians who inhabited this valley hundreds of years prior (Anderson 20). To clarify, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians still exist not far from Morgan's Green

River Valley. Church was a huge part of his upbringing. He attended services several times a week at the Baptist church (his great-grandfather had once donated the land for Green River Baptist Church) and when his father was drawn to the Pentecostal Holiness, Robert went along to watch him speaking in tongues in amazement: “The gift of tongues was electrifying, frightening, thrilling. I remember living in terror of those services, of the preachers’ constant threats of hell, threats of the Rapture and Tribulation” (Byer, Chappell, Giardina, and Morgan “Religion” 43). This strict religious environment helped Morgan to appreciate other philosophies of human existence: “World opened upon exciting world, and I thought of geological time, astronomical distances, atomic infinitesimals [. . .] A new freedom and assurance promised to sustain me” (44). This staunch, narrow, fundamentalist experience, paired with a curiosity to understand the natural world, no doubt drives a lot of Morgan’s poetry later in his life. His meshing of the two worlds, combined with his education first in science and then in literature, led to “the emerging connections to the secular as well as the ecclesiastical present and past and future” (44), which gives his poems a unique perspective that helps to ground them in the southern Appalachians.

He wrote his first story in sixth grade when the rest of his class was gone for the day on a field trip to the Biltmore House in Asheville. As a teen, Morgan loved music and writing, but because he grew up on the brink of the space race, Morgan was encouraged to pursue engineering and mathematics when he went to college at North Carolina State University. He started with a major in engineering and applied science, but recalls his writing class as the most pivotal moment of his college career. After his

professor, novelist Guy Owen, encouraged him to write about his home and later revealed that Morgan's story had made him cry, Morgan stated that it "was better praise than [he] had gotten in math classes" and he "was hooked on writing." He transferred to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and graduated in 1965 with a Bachelor of Arts in English. Morgan went on to graduate school and received a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1968 from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where he was influenced by UNCG faculty writer Fred Chappell. Morgan published his first book of poems, *Zirconia*, in 1969. He joined the faculty at Cornell in 1971. He received National Endowment for the Arts grants in 1974, 1981, and 1987 and, in 1988, won both a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship. In 1991, he was awarded both the James G. Hanes Poetry Prize by the Fellowship of Southern Writers and the North Carolina Literature Award. At present, Morgan is the Kappa Alpha Professor of English at Cornell. Morgan makes frequent appearances all over the east coast and is still publishing regularly. His full schedule of readings can be found on his website ("Appearances"). Over the last three decades, he has also served as a distinguished visiting professor of writing at Davidson College, Appalachian State University, Furman University, Duke University, and East Carolina University ("About").

Morgan published his first book of poetry, *Zirconia Poems*, in 1969 and his most recent collection, *Dark Energy*, was published in May 2015. He has been publishing poetry, novels, stories and nonfiction books for forty-six years. Morgan has managed to put out twenty-seven books during his writing career. That's one book nearly every other year, and he has never gone more than four years between publications. His settings are

mostly in the Appalachian South, even though he hasn't lived there in decades. It does not take long to find him in the area, though. As of June 2015, Morgan had read seven times in the Carolinas since February, when he appeared in Asheville to accept the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award from the Western North Carolina Historical Society.

Robert Morgan connects readers to the past through memory and place. His elemental style and use of symbolism create for the reader a place that they can inhabit and adopt as their own. His use of earth, rock piles, dirt, lightening, cedars, and other natural features demonstrates how Morgan's symbols do the groundwork needed to stabilize poetry coming out of the southern Appalachians. He realized that he could write about objects and pieces of his culture that would be interesting and even exotic to readers outside of the mountains. "In 1967 or 1968 I started writing about things that I had never seen poems about, like hog pens and manure piles . . . it turns out that you can write about anything" (Lang 98). His poetry undergirds the literary tradition and stops the literal erosion of the mountain by enabling readers to access a time and place that are disappearing due to the encroachment of development. In an interview with William Harmon, Morgan attributes Appalachia as subject matter to the fact that he was living and working in New York at Cornell. This is a common literary phenomenon—writing about home places as provoked by exile or expatriation. James Joyce is perhaps the most famous modern example; the quintessential Appalachian one is Thomas Wolfe. Both of them spent most of their mature lives living far away from their hometowns, but

both wrote a great deal about them; all of Joyce's creative writing was about Dublin and Wolfe wrote about Asheville, when believing he could not "go home" again.

Being removed from his hometown possibly caused Morgan to write even more about the area than if he'd been able to stay in the southern mountains and get a job there. "I'm not sure I would have ever written as much about the place if I had stayed down here. I can know that, but because I was away from it, I was awfully nostalgic and began to think more and more about it" (Lang 94). The etymology of nostalgia comes from the Greek *algos* "pain, grief, distress" (see *-algia*) *nostos* 'homecoming,' from PIE *nes-* 'to return safely home' (cf. Old Norse *nest* 'food for a journey,' Sanskrit *nasate* 'approaches, joins,' German *genesen* 'to recover,' Gothic *ganisan* 'to heal,' Old English *genesen* 'to recover'). Even within the etymology, we can see joining, healing, and nesting that indicates a need to establish or maintain connections to a place to overcome the feeling of pain due to the loss of a past time or situation. Viewing nostalgia as a form of nesting is interesting because, as Bachelard states, it is a primal tendency to want to create a nest. Poets can create these places of shelter to return to again and again as we need to feel comfort: "For not only do we come back to it, but we dream of coming back to it, the way a bird comes back to its nest, or a lamb to the fold." This return is what Bachelard calls a "daydream," which allows humans to travel back to a time and place where they were at home, and it also allows the poet a means to write about those places to enable people to experience the place again. The returning, and the remembering, fill empty spaces with place-ness. It is "a rhythm that reaches back across the years and, through

the dream, combats all absence” (99). This absence can be a psychological void, which fills with the memory of home, or a physical void, where the space is without meaning.

Stretching this concept that nesting combats absence to a cosmic level—and this is a long stretch, but scientifically it still makes sense—the opposite is true in an expanding universe, where empty spaces appear completely void, but might be filled with dark matter or black holes. The only reason we know dark matter exists is because of its gravitational effect on other entities with mass (Hawking 65). So space between objects in the universe is not necessarily empty; however, it may be void of meaning because a human has not occupied the space and attributed any meaning to it, except possibly for astronauts, due to the inhospitable nature of outer space. The reason for my quantum leap from the very smallest version of place—a nest—to the largest versions of home, our universe, is Robert Morgan. If ever a poet is exploring the concepts of place studies, it is Morgan. It is almost as if, in the course of his career, he has moved from the very dirt of Earth and writing poems about nests, to writing about the far reaches of the universe. His latest collection, *Dark Energy*, explores all scientific aspects of the geographical history of earth, time, and outer space. In the title poem, “Dark Energy,” Morgan contemplates the “empty space / between the stars and galaxies” that “produces a repulsive force, / that emptiness will push away / all matter it encounters with / some kind of antigravity” (*Dark Energy* 79). In “Neutrino,” he talks about the smallest bits “of matter, / creation’s building speck” and how we as humans are compelled to “look into the vast / remoteness of the tiny,” and even then, we will never be able to see one, only see the “winks where it has gone” (78). In “Living Tree,” the trees planted near graves grow down “to soak up

spirits of the dead / through roots” in order for the souls to rise “with sap through capillaries / into an upright, fragrant trunk . . . erect as truth, a testimony, / in ground that’s dignified by loss, / around a melancholy tree / that’s pointing toward infinity” (46). The self changes from cadaver to tree to inhabit the world once again, through a new place—a new nest. In this case, the nest is also a “personal house,” an extension of the self that fills space in the world with the human being. In human terms, the nests created by people are decorated, arranged, and filled with personal belonging that represent the inhabitants’ ideals (Bachelard 101). Morgan’s sentiment here—his writing to return to the Appalachians (even if returning only in the writing), his longing to be back home—drives his motivation to write about his places. He states that “as you lose something, it becomes more important, and it also becomes available for writing” (Lang 100). The writing helps the author to preserve the place for others who may want to see the place as it is right now, as in “Fern Glade”:

As wind stirs through an opening in woods,
green feathers long as plumes on peacocks write
in pools of sunlight from the canopy.
And what they scribble must be dank as earth
with ink of roots and alphabet of worms
and rot of last year’s leaves and fallen bugs.
The syllables they seem to scratch now rise—
yes, levitate—a spinning hologram
of vapor glittering in the shaft of light:

a visitation of illuminated gnats

above the shadowy glade's scriptorium. (*Terroir* 14)

As this poem suggests, the landscape *becomes* the writer. Green feathers write with the ink of roots in an alphabet of worms and rot. The text is rising from the ground; the “gnats” produce the text that is written from the worm alphabet that is now hovering in the *scriptorium*, a place of writing. Morgan’s metaphoric depiction of how humans create meaning from their interactions with the natural world is an interesting place to start this investigation of writing poetry to preserve place. As Morgan is suggesting here, the environment can be read. This environment is not just a generic book of nature that applies anywhere at any time, but a specific reading, unique to place, culture, and time, where artifacts, people, and geographic bioregion all influence the “reading.” This is a crucial aspect of place studies. The environment, the space, the objects included in the space—all work together to influence a person’s creation of place. In a published panel presentation called “Nature, Place, and the Appalachian Writer,” Morgan talks about the importance of landscape to a writer and laments, “It’s a very different world . . . part of my impulse is to write about the landscape, the land, of the southern mountains comes from a sense of writing about a world that is rapidly vanishing. In fact, it’s gone, the world I grew up in” (Anderson, Chappell, Gardiana, and Morgan 21). Morgan’s poetry forms the groundwork that anchors people—both writer and reader—to place and supports the mountains. In an interview with William Harmon, Morgan talks about why the need to write about home is so important, and this sets up the argument that poets preserve their places through writing:

I think I, and a lot of other people, are writing about the mountain past because we feel we are very quickly losing it and we want to recapture it. Once I gave a reading in Hendersonville and one of my cousins, I think the only relative of mine who has ever come to a poetry reading, came to me and said “It’s wonderful. You can actually remember how it was. I had forgotten those things.” I think that’s an important function of writing.

(14)

What Morgan does with his poetry, maybe without even realizing it, more than just knowing he needs to write what he knows, is that he preserves a way of life and the language of the inhabitants of his places. He’s documenting experiences but in the poems, he is giving future readers the chance to have those same experiences, and this connects readers to the place—even if it is not the same as it once was. The poetry of Robert Morgan is continually connecting readers to place through memory and poesis in an effort to address their own solastalgia—their pain of losing their place from right beneath their feet. But now, with solastalgia, there is still pain involved just as in nostalgia, but this time, the yearning cannot be satisfied by returning to a place or thinking about the time spent in that place, because these authors imaginatively have never left their places, but are writing about it because the places are leaving them. The place is changing, not the inhabitant.

In this case, Morgan, his experiences, Appalachian culture, and the mountains he writes from all inform the poetry. This is important because we can now see the different forces at play during the formation of his poetry. We can see how influential place is to

him, and how place, poet, and poetry work through form, language, meaning, and memory to connect readers to Appalachia. Consider Morgan's "Terroir":

That quality that seems unique,
as thriving from a special spot
of soil, air flow and light specific,
and also frost and winter sleep,
conditions of particular year,
as every instance comes just once
with mix of mineral and grease,
what Hopkins chose to call inscape,
or individuation, sounds
so close to terror you'd confuse
the two, as if the finest and
the rarest blend would come with just
a hint of fear or pain, the sting
and shiver of revulsion with
the savor of the earth and sun,
of this once, not returning, sung
for this one ear, on this one tongue. (*Terroir* 5)

Terroir is a French term related to wine-making referring to how location, soil, and environment affect the taste and aroma of grapes grown in a place. Morgan's concepts of

terroir, his play on the word “terror,” combined with Hopkin’s “inscape,”⁴ serve as metaphor for the environmental conditions needed to grow poetry (*terroir* being the soil and climate that give wine a unique flavor and aroma, terror the fear of the passing of time, and inscape the unique essence of inner nature of place as depicted in art). Both *terroir* and inscape imply that the place, the environment, is inherent in the poetry coming out of that place, and terror indicates what happens when a place is being lost. Wine connoisseurs can tell if a wine is “old world” (European) or “new world” (not from Europe) by the taste. The environment changes the flavor so much that some people can tell the exact origin. Appalachian poetry does the same thing. The place, the environment, is distinctly evident in the poems. As wine from Bordeaux can be blindly identified by its distinct flavor, place infuses poetry.

His play with etymologies and the pronunciations of *terroir* and terror constructs Morgan’s “ground work,” which here deals not only place, earth or *terra*, time, and human interaction with air and soil, but also with the song of earth and sun as these songs are sung for each of us, individually in our experience with place. This connection among earth, poetry, time, and humans is beyond the concrete page and beyond language. There is an element of the spiritual world that Morgan suggests provides the link between poetry and place or time: “I can’t imagine poetry without some sense of worlds beyond the merely physical; perhaps poetry is the unifier, seeing at once the spiritual and the physical . . . the great poets like Milton, Dante and Virgil talk about the interaction of

⁴ “A term used by Gerard Manley Hopkins to refer to the ‘individually distinctive’ inner structure or nature of a thing; hence the essence of a natural object, which, being perceived through a moment of illumination—an epiphany—reveals the unity of all creation” (Harmon 265).

the divine world and the world of time” (Lang 104). Through close reading of Morgan’s outside places, we can see that his poetry reclaims Appalachian places.

One way that Morgan reclaims Appalachian places is articulated best through the essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” by William Rueckert, the 1978 essay that coined that word “ecocriticism.” Rueckert’s argument links literature to ecology by applying biological concepts to poetry. He states that poems are a “verbal equivalent of fossil fuel (stored energy), but they are a renewable source of energy” because they come from both language and imagination. Poems are relevant because of the work that they do to transfer energy that “sustains life and the human community” (108). Rueckert posits that through poetry, creativity is captured in the form of language (which acts as a vehicle for storing the energy-creativity) and poems “can be used over and over again as a renewable resource by the same individual” (109). The energy transfer takes place when the poem “is released and flows back into the language centers and creative imaginations of the readers” (110). In this way, poems can sustain place. When Morgan writes about the Road to Elmira, driving “the winding stairs” down to Greenville to market, and the reader thinks of winding stairs and what that reference might look like, or imagines the driver trying to control the wagon down the mountain, or thinks of what the market might smell like on a Saturday, then the transfer of energy has taken place. Yeats wrote a poem called “The Winding Stair” and even gave a poetry collection the same name. “The collection’s title refers literally to the stairs in Thoor Ballylee, Yeats’s Norman tower in County Galway, and figuratively to the path towards death on which the poet twists and turns” (O’Toole). Just making the connection

between Morgan's image and Yeats's collection demonstrates Rueckert's idea of energy transfer. The reader now connects one poem to another. The only relation that Yeats's poem has to Morgan's beyond the image is the documentation of a life and the events of that life. The poems share that theme of documenting life. Yeats's poem divides the speaker, in separate stanzas, into the soul and the self, and contemplates the role and fate of each, finally reaching a resolution in the last two stanzas, declaring that "I am content to live it all again / And yet again" because "we are blest by everything, / Everything we look upon is blest." Similarly, Morgan spends the first half of his poem "The Road From Elmira" describing the details of the road to Elmira that the subject of the poem travels each year, and then the second half of the poem tells the personal history of this speaker. The use of the preposition "from" in the title gives the road its significance. Even though the subject is traveling down the road to Elmira in the first half of the poem, the road is known in its relationship to Elmira. It leads away from there and leads to home for the subject of the poem. The reason this is so significant is that he was in a Civil War prison camp near the road in Elmira and, when he is finally freed a year later, he walks the road again, back up the winding stairs, "into the yard ghostlike / at milking time, scaring everyone / under the full spring-planting moon" (Morgan, *Sigodlin* 61-63). In Morgan's poem, Winding Stairs is the name of a physical location near Saluda, North Carolina. In Yeats's poem, "the winding ancient stair" is a metaphor for the work his soul needs to do, to climb and conquer to achieve peace. However, symbolically, the road to Elmira that travels through "Winding Stairs" is also a metaphor for where the subject of the poem needs to go to get home, to peace. Celtic writers have long influenced modern

Appalachian writers and even if unconsciously, Morgan surely had this connection with Yeats in mind. Indeed, a great many American poets have been influenced by Yeats, including Robinson Jeffers, who built and lived in his own Yeatsian tower in California. But even if Morgan didn't have Yeats in mind, if the reader makes the connection, the poem is performing work to establish connections among reader, poem, place, and author. There is an exchange of meaning, an exchange of energy.

The subject matter of the poem isn't as important as the communication the poem is performing. A connection is now formed among poet, text, and reader that enables a flow of energy. Rueckert says that this "first Law of Ecology—that everything is connected to everything else—applies to poems as well as to nature" (110). Poems are the plants that provide us with the metaphorical oxygen to not only survive in a world of chaos, but to thrive in the world. The reading and criticism of poetry elevates our brains. In turn, we are creative, we build communities, and we help others grow: "Poems are green plants among us; if poets are suns, then poems are green plants among us for they clearly arrest energy on its path to entropy and in so doing, not only raise matter from lower to higher order, but help to create a self-perpetuating and evolving system" (111). In our time, poetry is essential to life and sustainability on our planet. Poetry also helps us to sustain the culture we already have.

Morgan's poem "The Hollow" speaks to the bioregion of the Smokies as an asylum for its residents from the ills of society and time. "First travelers to the coves of the Blue Ridge / . . . found no trails between / the cabin clearings" indicating that the land had either not been marked up by the feet of many people yet, or the people that

were there tread lightly on the land. It depicts a life of contentment, where the best accomplishment is “watching the mountain haze, the blue / haunt overhead.” The accomplishment here is not on possession or goods or progress, but reading the land. However, by the end of the poem, it is evident that change will come soon enough to these sheltered hollows as Morgan describes the blue haze as

. . . an incense of their
lifelong vigil between the unstoned graves
and the wormy appletree, a screen
sent up from the oaks and hickories
to keep them hidden from disease
and god and government and time.

Morgan reinforces the importance of the bioregion and the thread of displacement in Smoky Mountain poetry with the imagery of the blue smoky haze in his last lines: “a screen / sent up from the oaks and hickories / to keep them hidden from disease / and god and government and time.” The trees here are protectors of the people among them, echoing that web-like existence or interconnectedness that the Cherokee envisioned centuries before. The bioregion of the Smokies not only shapes the culture, but protects it as well.

“Cellar,” “Woodpile,” “Well,” “Tool Shed,” “Potato Hole,” “Earth Closet,” “Hay Scuttle”— these are all titles of Robert Morgan’s poems that pay some tribute to the safety and comfort of small, outside places. These are just a few poems whose titles indicate place; there are many other references to small places in different poems. To say

that place is important to Morgan is an understatement, but what is interesting is how place is represented. He refers to physical places such as the Green River Valley and the town of Saluda, North Carolina, and he refers to places that can offer some sort of shelter—neither mentally or physically, from the Baptists and Pentecostal churches he grew up in to the potato hole. In her essay “The Toolshed, the Feed Room, and the Potato Hole: Place in Robert Morgan’s Poetry,” Mary C. Williams talks about how Morgan not only wants to explore these spaces, going beyond even Bachelard’s notion of space to consider the *inside* of the space, and how occupying that space was some germ or seed of memory that leads to the present conditions: “Not only does Morgan want to get down inside earth, he wants to get inside a chestnut” (28) to reveal how the interior material contains remnants of the past and is still present in the environment. My claim moves beyond Williams’s idea of the genetic material as the end product of the poetry. Instead of the material of the past being carried in the chestnut or any other individual symbol portrayed in the poetry, it is actually in Morgan’s poems.

The poems carry the genetic memory, the *thick description* (in the sense of Clifford Geertz⁵) of the place of which the poem is speaking; we can hear the dialect, smell the food, see the land, know the legends, feel the joy and pain, and therefore know the place. Williams notes that Morgan’s places are mostly man-made outdoor shelters whose purpose is to hide some object of little or no importance. He is not collecting

⁵ Geertz stated that “ethnography is thick description. What the ethnographer is in fact faced with [. . .] is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures” to study in order to understand a culture. These multiplicities might consist of rituals, maps, dialect, property lines, censusing households, diet, etc. which the ethnographer needs to “construct a reading of” (10).

treasured artifacts like we see in Byer's poetry—the quilt, or the tea cup. Williams thinks that Morgan's focus on the impersonal objects is his effort to uncover something:

“Morgan is often seeking not only to ground himself or his work but to penetrate the earth to get at whatever hidden reality lies inside” (26). He writes about these places to recover some part of his own history, preserve that history for the reader, and reveal “the internalness and secrecy of earth” (28). Morgan's places are sheltering the history and culture of place for future readers to experience. “The poem ‘Potato Hole’ takes the reader back to a day of hiding out in a warm and secure shelter where a boy can escape all the troubles and complications of outside . . . the potato hole is a place where an adult poet can escape his life by returning to an enclosure where a boy can dream” (30). The potato hole harbors the dreams of boys and men, and escapes time by being recreated in the poem each time it is read.

Morgan's elemental style and use of symbolism create for the reader a place they can inhabit and call their own. His use of earth, rock piles, dirt, lightening, cedars, and other details demonstrates how symbols do the groundwork needed to stabilize the poetry of Appalachia. Morgan's poetic roots formed a structural system that started in 1969 and will continue to grow and flourish in future writers and poets of Appalachia. He finds shelter in the outside spaces such as the hollow of a tree or rock—proof that poetry can hold these hills, in the smallest and harshest of environs.

In his article on Morgan's poetic career, Michael McFee comments on how “Morgan seems to draw strength in his poems from contact with soil, dirt, earth, land: all of the poetry is a kind of ground-work, a land-diving, a geologos” (21). Geologos is the

optimal term in this case because poetry of place is nothing more than the understanding of earth, of ground, of the dirt on which we stand and occupy our space on the globe.

Poetry of place enables us to leave our mark. “In his stories and poems, in the steady witness of his many writings, Robert Morgan transmits to us that ‘ache to be back,’ that homeward instinct we all know, so complicated and yet satisfying like nothing else. Out of all his vivid words, as he once said, ‘the real word is home’” (McFee 23).

Robert Morgan certainly practices geologos in his poetry. Many of his poems pay tribute to physical places or teach some bit of mountain history or legend. He writes about Elisha Mitchell’s death on Mount Mitchell, about Cherokee legends of Devil’s Courthouse and Judaculla, the slanted-eyed monster. Every time I read a poem by Morgan about some place I knew, I made a note and eventually had points on a map to visit. My first place to see was Mount Mitchell. Morgan writes about the accidental death of Elisha Mitchell in his poem “The Body of Elisha Mitchell.” After being allegedly bitten by a rattlesnake, Elisha Mitchell fell off a ledge into the pool below a waterfall, and that is where search parties found him two weeks after he’d gone missing. Mitchell, a professor at UNC-Chapel Hill, had been studying and measuring Mount Mitchell for years. He’d explored all of it and was out on a hike at the age of sixty-four when he died. Morgan’s attention to the accident and Mitchell’s death creates a memorial for the professor. His comparison of Mitchell’s scientific discoveries on Mount Mitchell to the way that he died is poignant; his body shifted in the pool “like a compass needle pointing to the summit” and his face is “white as marble.” Mitchell becomes part of the mountain. Then, the search party finds him: “They came to a cliff edge and saw / the

body fifty feet below / staring past them at the peak / he'd measured highest in the east, / his eyes wide and blue and clear / as the eye of his barometer / used to get elevation.”

Mitchell is now an instrument himself, still measuring the mountain. Then in the last line of the poem, a reference to his whiteness again, his “body white as a breathless statue,” it is almost as if Mitchell has become a memorial of himself. Morgan’s depiction of Mitchell’s death memorializes Mitchell for readers, it documents the history of the event, but also, it shows how the poem reveals those interior places that we want to inhabit. Through the reading, we travel to the place and hone in on the precise location of the body—the place of beloved Mount Mitchell, the trail, the edge of the cliff, the pool. Elisha Mitchell is now entombed in the mountain, and the poem grows out of that place as a white marble statue marking the significance (Morgan, *Sigodlin* 52). Mitchell’s literal tomb is on the top of the mountain now, just adjacent to the overlook. It is made of stone and has loose rock placed all around the monument (see figures 5-7).

Fig. 5. The gravesite of Elisha Mitchell, located in Mount Mitchell State Park, N.C.



Fig. 7. Another view of Mitchell’s tomb.



Fig. 6. The view from Mount Mitchell facing West



Fig. 8. Graver marker on Mitchell's tomb.



Fig. 9. Mount Mitchell elevation marker.



Mount Mitchell is the highest peak east of the Mississippi River. Elisha Mitchell calculated the mountain within twelve feet of modern-day calculations, using barometric equipment. His measurement in 1835 was 6,672 feet; the current elevation estimate is 6,684 feet (Mewborn).

“The Body of Elisha Mitchell” is just one example of how Morgan uses poetry to sustain the people and the history of the southern Appalachians. In the same volume of poetry (*Sigodlin* 1990), Morgan mentions proper nouns of more than a dozen places: The French Broad River, Tryon, Tryon Mountain, Saluda, Watauga, Flat Woods, Olivet Ridge, Yadkin, Fletcher, Chemung, Columbia, Elmira, Greenville, and others. He is constantly pulling the landscape back into the poetry. Even when he doesn't refer to a place by its name, he references locales by landmarks—“Jugs in the Smokehouse,” “Mountain Graveyard,” “below the crest of Meetinghouse Hill,” “past the Old Fields of the Catawbas,” “Upstairs at the Country Store”—or he references them by descriptors: “Zircon Pit,” “Mica Country,” “The Hollow,” “Blueridge,” “Plankroad.” Morgan's poems are always concerned with place. You can't find a poem without a place. Or as

Buell says: “There never was an is without a where” (*Writing* 55). This writing of poetry about place documents history, compiles evidence of events, records the voices and place names, and sustains the identity of the Green River Valley. Morgan’s poems function as the life form, as in Ruekert’s notion, poems as plants, that is growing out of the bottom land of the Green River Valley. The places don’t disappear as Morgan feared; the places are sustained in the poems. This is evidence of Morgan’s topophilia (Tuan’s term)—his love for his place, and that gets passed on to the reader.

Morgan certainly carries on the legend of the Devil’s Courthouse in his poem by the same name. This time, the place is an outcropping of rock on the Blue Ridge Parkway in the Pisgah National Forest. Cherokee Medicine men would “Pitch bits of fur and birds and blessed / leaves into the updrafts to be shot” and pulled aloft in the thermals. If the bits fell back down to earth, the “hunt would fail” and if they were pulled aloft and vanished, “the autumn hunt might prosper” (Morgan, *Groundwork* 52). The plaque in the parking lot reads,

The bare rock profile named Devil’s Courthouse is sinister in appearance and legend. Its ‘devilish’ look has contributed to the many folk tales surrounding this mountain. Within the mountain is a cave where, legend claims, the devil holds court. In Cherokee lore, this cave is the private dancing chamber and dwelling place of the slant-eyed giant, Judaculla.

Morgan’s poem relates all of this information too, but he goes on to offer a commentary about how white settlers might have warped the Cherokee legend into their own tale out of fear: “Told of its efficacy the whites / named the rock Devil’s Courthouse for / the

nature of the judgements handed down / from its ugly silence / and the nature of their fear.” Since Morgan is tying the two myths together and explaining why white legend is more sinister than its Cherokee counterpart, he writes history with his poem. The poem grows from the crevices of mountain rock and now links the reader from one myth, to the other myth. The profile of the outcropping is unique (see fig. 10). It is not a hard walk from the parking lot to the summit, but it is steep and winding. One walks a small ridge up the backside of the mountain from the rock formation in figure 10. The last part of the trail actually consists of steps through a laurel hell that opens up to the mountain bald (fig. 12). Once at the summit—I was there on an overcast day in August, 2014—it is considerably cooler and windy. I could see distant mountain ranges and the side of the mountain at the outcropping of rock, shearing off hundreds of feet straight down into a steep ravine between the summit overlook and the parking lot. It is stunning.

Fig. 10. Profile of Devil’s Courthouse



Fig. 11. Closeup of sign. The Devil’s Courthouse is the legendary dancing chamber of the Cherokee mythic figure the slant-eyed giant, Judaculla, who lives in a cave just under the summit.



Fig. 12. Overlook at Devil's Courthouse.



The most fascinating aspect about being on the top of the Devil's Courthouse was when I realized what I was seeing. I had taken the road trip to find the places of Morgan, Byer, and Rash. I had read the poems, researched the

places, bought a map, plotted them out, and driven to them with my camera. But what I found when I got up here to this overlook linked everything together for me. Along the rock wall railing of the overlook were sight cones on plaques naming, and stating the distance of the peaks on the horizon, in every direction (fig. 15).

Fig. 13. Close-up of sight cones.



Fig. 14. Sight cones, with focus on Horizon.



I walked around lining up the cones
in my line of vision with the mountain peaks
in the distance. As I faced west and lined up
the cones, thirty-five miles away, I saw
Snowbird Mountain, a mountain that appears
in Kathryn Stripling Byer's poems. I
realized how close these poets are—and how
close the poems are. Morgan's poem "Devil's

Fig. 15. Sight cone plaque.



Courthouse" brought me to Kay's poem, "Last Light," where she speaks about the loss of daylight, the loss of years, and the loss of memory. She says the names of places near her where the day's last light has already passed "always unscrolling beneath me / the names I already know. Snowbird. / Buzzards Roost. / Weyahutta. / Oconaluftee." Byer's Snowbird Mountain is now my Snowbird Mountain because I can see it, here where I stood, on top of Robert Morgan's poem, "Devil's Courthouse." The poems make the connection. The land falls away, rolls, plummets, and spikes between these poems, between their places, but the reader experiences both, at the same time. This is the space-time-warping that Yi-Fu Tuan speaks of in his chapter entitled "Time and Experiential Space." Tuan explains that when viewing a horizon "open space itself is an image of hopeful time" (*Space and Place* 123) and that "both the past and the future can be evoked by the distant scene" (124). Being able to see Snowbird from where I stood allowed me to contemplate time and space between where I was and what had happened at Devil's Courthouse for the Cherokee, for the white mountain people, for me, for Robert Morgan

and what the distant Snowbird would also mean to those who knew it, and for Kay Byer. As Tuan notes, “Language itself reveals the intimate connectivity among people, space, and time. I am (or we are) here; here is now. You (or they) are there; there is then, and then refers to a time which may be either the past or the future” (126). The poems of these places allow the reader to cross time and space temporally. Its fascinating to think about. It is astonishing that the poems connect us to the past and the place at the same time.

Moving through Robert Morgan’s poetry, the connections keep popping up over and over. Whether it is because of place-name references, descriptions, or actual connections in the poem narratives, the experience for the reader is the re-creation of place. Judaculla (Tsu-tla-ka-la), the slant-eyed giant that Cherokee lore says danced in the mountain chamber below the rock outcropping at Devil’s Courthouse, could leap from ridge to ridge and left his handprint on a rock over in Jackson County, just outside of Cullowhee, North Carolina. The Cherokee Cultural Heritage site is maintained by the Jackson County Parks and Recreation Department. The signage on site states that the rock is a petroglyph and is covered with carvings that date back at least a thousand years. Cullowhee used to be a historic Cherokee town and the petroglyph, known as Judaculla Rock, may have marked the boundary of Cherokee hunting lands. The same design of carvings on Judaculla Rock are on other boulders throughout Cherokee territory. You can see the carvings and marks in figure 17, the Judaculla handprint in figure 18, and the size of the rock in figure 19.

Fig. 16. Historic Highway Marker.

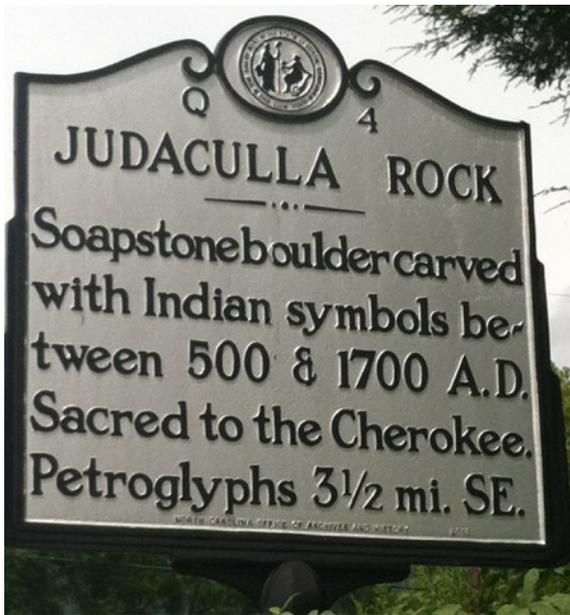


Fig. 17. Close-up of Judaculla Rock



Fig. 18. Judaculla's handprint.



Fig. 19. Photo for scale of boulder.



Photographs 18 and 19 by John S. Sherrill. 2014.

Morgan writes, “Up in Jackson County they have / this soapstone in a field, scored all over / with hieroglyphics no one has solved” in his poem “Judaculla Rock” (*At the Edge of Orchard County* 63). He muses about the significance of the writings, about how they look in the rain “like fresh-ink chromosomes / or voice-prints of quasars” and wonders

what could “be more awesome than a message / ancient, untranslatable, true, / up where giants walked on balds, / in text and context, history, world?” (63). The *awesomeness* Morgan asks about links the Cherokee hands that wrote the marks on Judaculla Rock to his own hands that write the poem about the rock, to my hands that hold the book with the poem about the rock.

The intertextuality of being at the rock and seeing the carvings, reading historical articles about the soapstone carvings and Cherokee culture, and the poem itself, demonstrates, again, Tuan’s ideas of crossing space and time in the texts, and Reuckert’s ideas of poems as green plants; this poem grew from this rock. Specifically, from Judaculla’s handprint in the rock. That interior space that Bachelard and Williams talk about, the inside of the space, the bit of soapstone on the inside of one of those’s giant’s fingers—that’s where Morgan’s poem comes from. Judaculla Rock is not the only reference to other “texts” in Morgan’s poems. Time and again, like the chestnut where “we find a huge eye . . . to remind us / we’re being watched / through the earth’s dark lens” (*Red Owl* 41), Morgan uses elements of the natural world as vehicles that convey writing, knowledge, and hidden messages for us to find. It is as if everything in nature carries the DNA, or the encrypted code of life, but more than just that scientific DNA chain—of course every natural element would carry that kind of code, but more of a message or a code to live by, to study and to remember. In “Writing Spider” Morgan compares the spider’s web making to writing “the whole dictionary of a life to be abstracted from / the Jacob’s ladder of floss and dew / in the eye of the beholder” (*The Strange Attractor* 109), and in “Wild Peavines” the vines curve “like some word from a

lost language once flourishing on every tongue” (126). From a June Bug near his ear he feels the wind “from its wings like a love whisper” (137). The “Mountain Graveyard” has “slate tales” and “stone notes” (105), bats are “receiving and transmitting the code,” whippoorwills interpret “the news from the dead and unborn” (33), in “Rhymer Spring” the “spring still speaks of lonely cove and mountain peaks, / and rhymes with clearest winter sky” (15), Horace Kephart is still writing “on the Little Fork / of the Sugar Fork of Hazel Creek” (76), and even the legends of Thomas Wolfe are “rising in a rage to join all / sentences with mighty ocean, / past the mystery wall of mountains, / sung from spark of angel’s finger, / new millennium, century later” (11). The entire environment is writing. In Morgan’s poetry, the poems come from every natural element. All of nature has something to convey. Whether the poetry is a green plant growing from the environment as Rueckert might suggest, or a pathway that crosses and connects time periods as Tuan might say, Morgan’s poetry is sustaining this mountain region through memory and poesis. The poems are coming from the landscape, from the insects, the birds, the stones, the water. They are holding this place.

Morgan’s poems also provide a geological history. In *Dark Energy* he explores the progression of geological time in relation to human places. In “Big Bone Lick,” the place gets its name from the big bones of woolly mammoths that were found there. Explorers “dug out teeth the size of bricks” where it all “seemed wreckage from a mighty dream, / a graveyard from a golden age, / or killing ground of titans. Here / they saw the ruins of a world survived by its diminutives” (4). The last line is a commentary on the devastation caused by human impact when he states that the site, once an “Eden,” is now

“just a regular promised land / to fit our deadly, human scale” (4). The four sections of this collection take on such subjects as the history of the jaguar in the Appalachians, family history, breaking seed pods in spring earth, to dark matter and deep space. Seemingly unrelated at times, the poems still have the continuity of science.

In “Zircon,” Morgan comments on how his great-uncles, when digging for zircons, had no idea that the stones were “a token from the planet’s fiery birth. / For Zircons are almost as old as earth’s / creation in the conflagration from / debris that formed the galaxies of suns” (72). He is linking the old-timers of Appalachia to the Big Bang era through this “register / of time from the beginning” that “keeps / the fingerprints of isotopes from clouds / of the original primordial dust” (72). This linking of people and place over time within the poem also connects readers outside the poem to the same people and place. The rock of zircon carries the mark of the beginning of time as we know it, and these mountaineers are unknowingly picking up remnants of the Big Bang explosion.

Several poems in this collection are concerned with how ancient geological history is still present in the landscape today. In “Toothmarks,” Morgan is pondering the movement of glaciers after he notices “scratches on / this rock, all cut the same direction,” tracks of glaciers, “traces of a crushing dome, . . . the work of far millennium / writ small as epitaph for tomb” (56). Just as in his earlier poems, nature is writing to future generations, leaving her marks on the rock faces as an epitaph, which could also be commentary (again) on a dying modern Earth, withering away at the hands of humans. In “Log Tote,” this human devastation of the Earth is portrayed as a

celebration marking the clear cutting and burning of old growth forests. Workers, lumberjacks, and their families and the community are roasting deer, passing the brandy, playing fiddles, and dancing as the “logs that lived a half millennium / rolled to heaps and set ablazing / lit the firmament with roaring, / lifting higher than the trees had” (14). It all seems like a jovial occasion until some of the people step out of the light of the fire into the darkness and see “the fires on other mountains, / glow of dying forests’ embers / reaching far into the future” (14). Every mountaintop was clear-cut and with the sight of all those mountain tops burning, it is evident that the regions forests have been devoured by humans looking to make money on timber and cleared out farmland. The firelight physically travels out to the far reaches of Earth, but Morgan is suggesting here that the light travels into the future as well as underscoring the metaphorical irony of how human destruction will wreak havoc on these mountains for all of the future.

Some poems explore ideas of the land communicating in ways that humans may or may not be able to understand. In “Big Talk,” “Signal Fires,” “Blowing Rock,” “The Grain of Sound,” and “Music of the Spheres,” the earth and elements of the earth are communicating to each other or to some other entity—maybe even humans, but not necessarily. The signal fires “roared as / messages sent mountaintop to / mountaintop” as light traveled “faster than the quickest runner,” to communicate with surrounding people. “The mountains tipped articulate / about the tangles trails and creeks” (*Topsoil 2*). Up there, the shortest distance to the next group of people was by the light of the fires. On the “Blowing Rock,” a “lip of ridge where breath of deep blue valleys / ascends and keeps ascending like a prayer / or song of praise, of supplication, sent / from busy fields

and crossways far below / to oracle the towering element” (*Topsoil* 10). Here, the land below is praying up the side of the mountain.

In “Big Talk” the rocks are having a conversation, part of which is only heard, but not understood by people, but “Indians said the peaks / were talking to each other in / the idiom that mountains use / across the mighty distances, / with giant syllables and rests,” as if some big code exists to allow the mountains to speak to one another. If the language of the rock exists, it might be akin to the “Music of the Spheres,” which alludes to a gospel hymn “This is My Father’s World,” written by Maltbie D. Babcock in 1901. In Babcock’s hymn, “all nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres.” In Morgan’s poem, the same nature singing, but he has brought in modern knowledge of science that Babcock would not have known in 1901. It is “the first music we don’t hear but / know . . . the rings around / atoms singing, the bright levels / in matter revealed by colors / through spectrum scales . . . each / zone voicing its wavelength with / choirs in the tiny stadiums / of harmony of the deeper / galaxies” (*Topsoil* 39). In “The Grain of Sound,” a banjo maker is choosing wood to make a banjo; “a hickory makes the brightest sound; / the poplar has a mellow ease. / But only the straightest grain will keep / the purity of tone, the sought— / for depth that makes the licks sparkle.” Near the end of the poem the banjo brings its natural elements back to life to communicate through its music, “as tree will sing again from root / and vein and sap and twig in wind / and cat will moan as hand plucks nerve, / picks bone and skin and gut.” The banjo, made with a cat-skin drum and wood frame, is now alive with sound. Morgan allows the natural world to have a voice in his poetry by paying attention to the sounds of nature as talk instead of just a

soundtrack-backdrop to human life.

Morgan's poetry, his little places, writing spiders, and mythical landscapes all serve to preserve the place-ness of the southern Appalachian Mountains. His poems grow out of the landscape and stop the erosion of memory and culture that might take place without the poetry being there. His poetry connects readers and writers and place by defying the effects of time. Robert Morgan, like his literary predecessor Thomas Wolfe, reaches between generations of the ancient Cherokee and the modern Asheville citizen and ties them all to these mountains.

And who shall say —whatever disenchantment follows —that we ever forget magic; or that we can ever betray, on this leaden earth, the apple-tree, the singing, and the gold?
—Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel*

CHAPTER 3

KAY BYER: POETRY OF HOME

Kathryn Stripling Byer (b. 1944) “dreamed of the mountains before she ever went there” (Smith 33). She grew up on a farm in southern Georgia, but her grandmother’s love of the mountains led her to live and write in North Carolina. One thing she loved about the mountains was the singing. “When I came to western North Carolina, I was drawn to the singing of mountain people because they could openly sing” (32). Her home was full of books, and her parents were great readers. Her father loved history and wrote a weekly newsletter for the Farm Bureau, and her mother would read to her as a child. Byer read more than both her parents, though, and was often scolded by her mother for reading too much. Her love for literature eventually led her to be an English major as an undergraduate and to pursue creative writing in graduate school. Byer graduated from Wesleyan College in Macon in 1966, and earned her Master of Fine Arts in 1968 from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro where she studied with Fred Chappell and Robert Watson. While at UNCG, she also met James Applewhite, Gibbons Ruark, Peter Taylor, William Pitt Root, and Robert Morgan.

Influenced by writers such as James Dickey, W. S. Merwin, and Eudora Welty, Byer published poetry, thick with storytelling and community. It was at this time that she began work on her first book of poetry, *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest* (1986),

which portrays themes of her Georgia farm life. She settled in Cullowhee, North Carolina in 1968, and fell in love with mountain music, weaving, and wildflowers (36). This mountain experience and Byer's desire to soak up the place led to the formation of Alma, a mountain woman she portrays in her two collections of poetry *Wildwood Flower* (1992) and *Black Shawl* (1998). Alma embodies Appalachian women's stories from early mountaineer days. Her story is woven through two collections and a chapbook.

Byer served as North Carolina's first woman poet laureate from 2005 to 2009, and received the Hanes Award for Poetry from the Fellowship of Southern Writers in March 2007. She has published eleven collections of poetry (either books or chapbooks), including *Wildwood Flower*, which won the 1992 Thomas Wolfe Award and the Lamont Prize from the Academy of American Poets. Byer was poet in residence at both Western Carolina University and Lenoir-Rhyne College, is also a former poetry instructor in the Master of Fine Arts Program at UNC-Greensboro, and has served on the boards of the North Carolina Writers' Network, Writer's Workshop, and *The Arts Journal*. She has received writing fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the North Carolina Arts Council ("Kathryn Stripling Byer," Academy).

Kay Byer's representations of artifact, tradition, seasons, and home in her poetry establish a connection to place for her readers. Whereas Morgan focused mainly on outside places, Byer is concerned with the culture of home and the meaning created there. She lays claim to the places of home and helps readers also claim these places as their own. This is important because through these connections, Byer is able to attach value to Appalachian places that might otherwise seem insignificant to an outsider. Her poetry

continually opens windows on a culture and time in Appalachia that are often inaccessible. It is fruitful to begin this discussion with Gaston Bachelard's notion that the house is the symbolic protector of memory. When we read house images in Byer's poetry, "we touch the ultimate poetic depth of the space of the house" (6). This experience doesn't recover the history of the house itself as much as it recovers personal memories and connections to the place. Memories are "fixed in space," and to recall the tangible structure surrounding that memory is to be able to both reach the reader and make the memory more vivid for the author. "To localize a memory in time is merely a matter for the biographer and only corresponds to a sort of external history, for external use, to be communicated to others" (9). Bachelard says that this space is creative. The human mind recreates the space to experience the memory of that place. It doesn't matter if the house is long gone. When we recall the memory, the place exists again. "Even when we no longer have a garret, when the attic room is lost and gone, there remains the fact that we once loved a garret, once lived in an attic" (10). The way writers and readers connect and exchange their memories is to "'write a room,' 'read a room,' or 'read a house.'" Thus, very quickly, at the very first word, at the first poetic overture, the reader who is 'reading a room' leaves off reading and starts to think of some place in his own past . . . the values of intimacy are so absorbing that the reader has ceased to read your room: he sees his own again" (14). Thus, readers are actively engaged in reading and experiencing their own memories as they read the description of the house or place in the text. As Bachelard states, to read a room, or to read a house, is to investigate the "psychological diagrams" that hold memories and intimacies of writers and readers.

Reading the house gives one insight into the place, but also causes the reader to remember his or her own places.

In his discussion about voices inhabiting a house, Bachelard comments that “the old house, for those who know how to listen, is a sort of geometry of echoes. The voices of the past do not sound the same in the big room as in the little bed chamber, and calls on the stairs have yet another sound. Among the most difficult memories, well beyond any geometry that can be drawn, we must recapture the quality of light: then come the week smells that linger in the empty rooms, setting and aerial seal on each room in the house of memory” (60). The house is a memory map. One can see several instances in Byer’s poems where the author is listening to the house—yearning to hear the long-lost voices heard in the halls and the sounds the house still makes or doesn’t make, because silence is as important to the listener as sounds. In “Lullaby,” the speaker of the poem hears the “rafters creak / as if a wishbone cracked / and I had wished the sky to fall” (*Wildwood Flower* 15). She wonders who is walking on the roof, when it is actually just the weight of the snow on the roof bearing down on the house and making the roof creak. In “I Listen,” the speaker hears “the old hymn / of April again, / dawn beginning the same / way my grandmother’s jewelry box / opens, its little tune tinkling / as the ballerina turns.” She is launched into a memory of her mother staring at her vanity mirror trying to choose a silver chain to wear, when she awakes from this little day dream, she realizes she can’t recall the words to the hymn. The sound of the hymn brought on by the music box song triggered the memory for the speaker. The sounds, once made in the house, upon the opening of the music box, cause the speaker to have a

flashback of memory (*Coming to Rest* 12).

In “Unanswerable,” the speaker asks “when I am gone from this house / will a coil of my silver hair navigate / stairwells and empty rooms / when there’s enough wind to find it, / enough light to shine on my almost gone presence?” She wonders “who would be here to see it? / To notice my cups with their coffee stains / still in the bottom, / the clothesline that once held my wet garments / up to the sun”? The house holds the evidence of her life and it will continue to be there, even when she is gone—and probably someone will come along to read it and figure out some idea about the previous inhabitant based on the reading of the little bits of herself left in the house (*Catching Light* 46).

Even more specific than Bachelard’s ideas about space, though, is the fact that Kay Byer’s space is *Appalachian* space, framed by the Blue Ridge mountains. The poetry from here has to be viewed with the bioregion in mind so as not to forget how Byer sustains the place through the writing of poetry. Even though we often move to the inside with Byer (inside a house or an object), reading artifacts and rooms as text, it is still an Appalachian space. As Parks Lanier states in his introduction, “we go inside . . . without forgetting that outside lie the mountains which make our region unique. In that sense, the interior space continues always to be ‘Appalachian space’” (8).

Two of the interesting places that Byer writes about are a bathtub and a kitchen sink. In “I Inherit the Light of My Grandmother’s House,” the opening line of part 1 entitled “Ashes” in *The Girl In The Midst Of The Harvest*, is “Only the bath tub was left.” This first image, so personal, so intimate, and yet so universal, sets the reader up to

read the coming artifacts of “bone china,” a “clove-studded orange,” “greasy coins knotted in handkerchiefs,” and “a wandering slip strap” as personal and intimate belongings. We are acquainted with the lost grandmother through her personal belongings after her death. The rest of the poem proceeds to recall memories of both grandmother and grandfather called back through the artifacts of the rooms of this house; the four-poster bed in her bedroom, her hair falling on the back of her chair, her sink and the basin where grandfather shaved his whiskers, her bridal quilt, shadows in the sandy yard (65-71). Then, in part 6, entitled “Sunrise,” the specific things become a “house of wind, / house of nothing but wind passing through, / and the sky, / an enormous tub holding the sun” (71). The switch from the physical to the intangible air parallels the speaker’s sense of loss for the spirits of her grandparents that once inhabited the house. Part 7, entitled “Prayer,” brings the spirits back to life in an impossible prayer for their lives to always be in the present; “May she wake on a Saturday Morning,” “It will be late June,” “The coffee pot’s ready. / The house needs no cleaning,” “May she live in that homeplace forever” (72). The prayer is a lament for the life the grandmother indeed lived, yet never got to live.

The final part of the poem, part 8, “Kitchen Sink,” is a litany of things put up, “treasures on earth, / as if heaven were here, worth believing” (73). The spaces, the tub, the bedroom, the sink, and the yard are all places the grandparents occupy. They are where their lives are spent and where the most human pieces of them remain, such as the hair on the chair or whiskers in the basin; these spaces physically hold remains of the family. So much history of people is held in the places where they spent the most time—

the patterns scuffed on floors and worn on carpets, the way a door wears down where it is touched or slammed over and over, the worn treads of stairs. These are the connections Byer has to the house, not that the house itself holds the memories, but the humans connected to the space permeate the place with the memories.

Kay's husband James Byer's essay "A Woman's Place is in the House" calls to mind Bachelard's notions that domesticity in the home establishes a "community of order: through with the poet relies for creativity. James Byer echoes Bachelard here again: "The interplay between labor and thought is essentially creative and generates the world just as in Taoist thought the interaction of the yin and yang generates the ten thousand things, or all there is" (Lanier 170). Not only does the labors of her domestic work provide creative influence, but also connects to readers. Domesticity is a positive aspect that Byer relies on for stability and control of her speakers' lives. Byer's women of Appalachia are strong, grounded, and exert their voice through their daily existence in the home and family. Instead of being oppressive and burdensome as it often stereotypically seen, the work and resulting artifact in the poetry—a quilt, childbirth, or water, hauled uphill—gives the speaker, and the reader, a standard by which to measure life. In James Byer's words, Kay Byer's poetry, "while deriving much of its subject matter and imagery from the Appalachian region, nonetheless transcends 'regionalism,' finding in home, in labor, in human relationships the source of that spring that sustains us all" (182). While some might think that James Byers' remarks imply a universality that deprecated Kay Byers' poetry of place, I would argue that her poems capture a woman's domestic experiences during this time period, which were the same experiences as those

of many other women, my grandmothers included. This voice is an Appalachian voice singing ballads of the old country and passing down stories she heard about this place to anyone that will listen.

Lucy Lippard explains why traditionally a woman's place is considered to be in the home: "Domesticity was, from the beginning, 'a feminine achievement,' as was the success of a newly scientific approach to housekeeping called 'domestic engineering' in the nineteenth century, and, from the other side of the door, the later need for 'a room of her own'" (28). And so is born "the gendered landscape," the rough, unsafe inner-city of apartments for single working people, and the domesticated life of the suburbs, where families belonged. Women and children were pushed to the edges of towns where life is both a "prison and refuge, confining and protecting, different—especially for women—in daylight and dark" (Lippard 28). Women and children were marginalized from the center of town, where men dominated the landscape in government, business, and city council. But in the home, women create their "center." Referred to as "around here," home is "a circular notion, embracing and radiating from the specific place where generalizations about land, landscape, and nature come home to roost" (Lippard 23). The concept of home is defined by everything around it and the relation to the center. This implies that everything that radiates out of the home—the people, the driveway, the landscape, the songs and voices, the communication with the larger outside world—defines that place and the connections inhabitants have to the place. This definition may change as the place itself changes, but the way in which the concept of home is created in the minds of the inhabitants determines their memories and attachment to that place. The

familiarity of the place reinforces the feelings of connection one might have to it, and memories stem from those connections.

When Kay Byer is “Thinking Myself Home” in the poem of that title, she thinks her way back to her childhood home instead of making the actual journey. “This is the best way, / by stealth, no one knows I am coming, / no cake to be baked,” no obligations of having to prepare for the visit or having to say goodbye. She can “leave when I want to, without feeling guilty” and return to her present place (*Descent* 49-50). Home always comes with obligations to those that are or were there. In this case, her mother would worry about her driving home in bad weather and her father would be sad when she wanted to leave, so not going back is easy than actually going because of the worry and pain in would cause everyone. The poem is the traveling between the present place and the home place.

In “Almost Home,” she is on a bus, making the actual journey home “as the Blue Ridge begins / to take shape, its backbone / of oldest rock greener / than I believed possible last week / in Utah.” The speaker has been away and seeing the topography change as she makes the cross-country journey—from the desert of Utah, the brown Rockies, the flat lands of the Texas plains, and finally the green foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains in Tennessee—makes a visual impression on her, but is also full of the familiarity of home. The physical differences in land type and topography in the United States makes people identify emotions with certain land masses. For instance, I lived in Breckenridge, Colorado in the 1990s with several friends from college. We were all from Boone, North Carolina, so the mountains of the Rockies were very foreign, steep, and

abrupt to us, coming from the older, weather-worn, smooth Appalachians. In comparison, the Rockies were brown, jagged, and bare above the tree line. The only mountain in North Carolina with a tree line is Mount Mitchell. All the other Carolina mountains are covered in trees, so to see the mountains with no trees and very little shrubbery growing was odd and a little disarming. It felt barren and isolated, as if something bad had happened there to kill the trees. Of course, it is only a matter of elevation and what will grow at 14,000 feet above sea level. But to an outsider with only the perspective of treelined ridges and 3,500-foot-high old-growth forests, the environment looked like Mars. So when my roommate went out to Colorado first to find us a house to live in, she chose a house on the small mountain—a large hill to those in Breckenridge—near the edge of town because she said it made her feel like she was home, meaning Boone, North Carolina. This is the same feeling I think Byer's speaker feels in "Almost Home" when she sees the Blue Ridge mountains again. She sees the familiar topography and identifies with home.

Extending out from the center of home is the self. Home is where people's identities are formed and home is an "extension of their soul and spirit." This is what Lippard calls a "mythical search for the *axis mundi*, for a center, for some place to stand, for something to hang on to" (27). The sense of place can be felt "as an extension of the body, especially the walking body, passing through and becoming part of the landscape" (34). In "River Bed," the speaker lies down and lets "water throw quilt after / quilt on me, each of them older than any I know / how to piece and called endless / names none of us knows how to utter" which is the rain and wind "wearing down this mountain"

scattered “like a lifetime / of scraps from an old woman’s sewing box.” The river becomes the quilt of warmth, comfort, and familiarity (*Wildwood Flower* 51-52).

In “Burning Wing Gap” a wife laments the old, possibly dying “fire we first found on our courting” between herself and her husband, as she sees his socks and her gray dress dripping on the line in the back yard. In contrast to the drab, soaked, and limp garments hanging on the clothesline are the fiery colors of a bush or tree changing in autumn. The sight triggers a memory of a time when they were together in love and she wants him to remember when she led him “up the darkest / side of Snowbird like a blind man / through those bushes burning to the edge / of where we stopped and sky began” (*Wildwood Flower* 7). The clothes extend out from the house to dry in the air, and the changing colors of the bush attract the attention of the speaker and links her to the time long ago on the dark side of Snowbird mountain, when their love was new. The memories are felt because of the speaker’s observation of seeing them in that place. Then the memory is remembered again, each time the poem is read.

The “Black Shawl,” which is a relic of the speaker’s past, holds the memory of place and relationships, and demonstrates how place acts as an extension of the self. Not only does the shawl resurrect memories from the past, it includes parts of the landscape—a swirling hawk, smoke from the burning fields, a rock in the mine shaft with the fossilized imprint of an anemone. The speaker tells of another woman, a woman crocheting the shawl with “her / black thoughts made / manifest night / after night as she / labored, her silver / hook gleaming by/ candlelight. Memory / chained unto / memory.” The artifact of the black shawl embodies the memories of its previous owner, now

presumably gone, and the memories remain in the space of the shawl unraveling and bring her “back piece by / piece to me, even the sound / of her breath in my / oldest dream . . . filling my arms / with a snatch of her / hair, muddy ribbons, this / tangle of black roots / that drags my hands down” (*Wildwood Flower* 41-42). The inhabitants are always present in the place in the remaining artifacts, even after they are gone. The black shawl and the poem about it hold the memories and keep them alive for the reader.

Sometimes the inhabitants can be felt as spirits or stories about the place as in “Ghost Story,” where “she stalks these mountains / in high button shoes / and the silk skirt she wore / when she flirted with cowboys / and wild Irish miners . . . in the tame Appalachians / she later called home . . . now she stalks these mountains / from Big Fork to Snowbird, / her shoe buttons gleaming, / her silk skirt a cloud / trailing after the full moon” (*The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest* 21). The buttons on her shoes and her silk skirt remain to walk the places of Big Fork and Snowbird, more than the actual human remains. Her artifacts remain to mark the place. The artifacts are tied to the memories of those that remember her. Seeing an object that belonged to the dead triggers memories of that person and conjures up stories about their life. These stories are retold and collected into the family narrative that surrounds a homeplace. “Family histories are transparent or opaque layers over maps of places we’ve never seen,” and these layers build a family consciousness that connects them to the land. The place is their homeplace, their rooted spot that defines who they are in the world.

In “Over,” Byer dedicates the poem to her father and speaks directly to him using second person point of view as she talks about watching her father’s ashes being scattered

by a crop duster where “the field waited, / October light keen / as a ploughman’s blade / slicing through sod / . . . we knew / you’d settled yourself / into alfalfa stubble, / eternally comfortable / inside the dirt / you had tilled” (*Descent* 41). Her father’s remains become part of the landscape and that is where he is most at peace. Seeing the ashes on his fields comforts the daughter as well—she knows it is where he wanted to be. At a talk Kay Byer gave that I attended in the fall of 2014 at City Lights Bookstore in Sylva, North Carolina, she said of her father and this poem that “he just loved the place. He wanted to be part of the land.” She captures his feeling in the last stanza of the poem:

What a helluva way
to come home,
Daddy. Oh
you knew all along
what you wanted,
a crop duster’s yellow plane
diving so low
the weeds shimmied,
you floating down,
in no hurry
at last, to the earth
you claimed
always knew you
better than
you knew yourself. (41)

The long stretch of the poem in short lines slows down the reading so that the feeling mimics the realization the speaker is having as her father's ashes are falling from the sky, and the feeling of the father who wanted this so much. It is a reverent contemplation of the last bits of his life and how much the landscape participated in that life, even somehow had some control over him as it "knew" him better than he knew himself. Speaking in a literal sense, how would the land know him? But even if the earth cannot have a memory, the landscape still dictates the human actions in a place, especially a farm. Humans have to react to what the earth will bare, the weather conditions, the high and low places, the water drainage or lack of it, so when he says the land "knows" him, he could also mean that it controls him. This relationship of knowledge between land and inhabitant is the concept that drives people to think about their place in the landscape and possibly even their consideration of ownership of it.

When Emerson wrote in *Nature* that anyone can own a piece of land, but no man can own the landscape, he was articulating part of this human need to possess the land. To have a place is to be able to feel safe because one knows where things are, where the water source is, where to build shelter, the best light for growing food. But the landscape belongs to everyone. Even when one looks across the land where fences mark property lines, the division of place is less obvious than the landscape as a whole: "Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men's farms, yet to this their warranty-deeds give no title" (Emerson). The poet gets the rights to the land

because he is willing to see all of the facets that most of us miss in everyday activities. He is the one willing to sit and contemplate the landscape and share all of its characteristics with an audience of readers. Poets, in a way, are mapping the landscape in words, but not for possession of the landscape, like the landowner, but in a gesture of liberation; the poet makes the landscape accessible again to all people, not just the land owners. Poets and artists redraw the maps of the oppressor who seeks to control the land. They “combat and expose hegemony,” through the making of art (Lippard 78). Poems are one map of a place.

In Kay Byer’s poem “Quilt,” she likens a quilt to the landscape. The quilt is made up of birds eating scattered crusts, a trail, the bridle on a horse, a pail, “tracks / over new snow. The rats in the woodpile.” She decides to call the quilt “Waiting for Spring,” a patchwork where “the dead / sleep beneath it forever.” The speaker is piecing the place together through the connection of outdoor things she sees from the door. The irony that the pieces make a quilt—typically an inside blanket, used for warmth—is an interesting attempt to bring on Spring to this cold and isolated winter landscape. It also implies that the inside is now outside and vice versa. Maybe the chill has reached her inside a drafty house, or she is possible just longing for spring after a harsh winter, but a quilt alludes to warmth and comfort, and this landscape is anything but comfortable. The birds are eating crumbs the speaker has thrown out because there is nothing to eat for them otherwise, the person she is waiting for is not coming up the trail, she sees the “front yard as a jumble / of shapes I have never succeeded in piecing / together,” and even the pail is empty (*Wildwood Flower* 17). Then suddenly, it is a quilt that covers the dead. She has pieced

it together after all, in an attempt to explain her world. Bachelard talks about the need to make sense of place, particularly inside and outside places as a way to situate ourselves in the larger map of the world: “‘This side’ and ‘beyond’ are faint repetitions of the dialectics of inside and outside: everything takes form, even infinity. We seek to determine being and, in so doing, transcend all situations, to give a situation of all situations. Man’s being is confronted with the world’s being, as though primitivity could be easily arrived at” (212). Byer is working to make sense of her place in the world.

Kay Byer adds value and complexity to the reputedly simplistic lives of women and girls in the Appalachian Mountains, while connecting readers to intimate details of the culture. In a poem called “Afternoon,” Byer describes what it is like to spend several hours being caught up in crocheting, taking “pains / to pass the time. It’s true / the chains link up / so quickly you may hardly / notice when it’s time / to turn.” The act of crocheting enables a woman to “make something out of / almost nothing,” as her mother did and “her mother and her mother’s mother” (*The Girl* 40). Crocheting involves joining loops of loosely woven chains of yarn. In a crocheted piece, there are often open spaces in the design, much like lace but on a larger scale. There are spaces in between the loops of yarn where “nothing” actually becomes the center between knots that eventually become part of the whole garment or blanket. This center space now has a duty in the design. Most crocheted things are made of thick yarn and are used for warmth; even though the piece might have large holes, because of the yarn, it is still a warm blanket. Crocheting is the perfect metaphor for Byer to use to illustrate how Appalachian women had to make home goods from resources they had and also how

they had to make a life—a center of home—out of weaving other things together. This multi-generational work is what James Byer is referring to; the women are making art and writing the meaning of their place through their creativity.

Ecofeminism is relevant to the larger conversation about how poesis ties the reader to place through memory, but also because it seems in conflict with the ideas of Bachelard and James Byer. Greg Garrard describes ecofeminism as possessing a “logic of domination” in which women are often associated with the natural world, yet in more recent theory and criticism, and certainly for Bachelard and James Byers, women are associated with setting up house. From an ecofeminist perspective, Kathryn Byer’s women, their domestic routines, and their attachments to heritage and family build—at the bidding of Virginia Woolf—rooms of their own. Sarah Kennedy considers Byer’s monologues a breakthrough in Appalachian poetry to convey the female voice because she writes “a historical first person woman’s voice to break through the accepted feminine binary of what Byer calls ‘cutesy Southern’ and ‘good ole girl,’” leaving tradition to speak about “domestic oppression and sexual transgression” (9). Kennedy goes on to say that Byer’s depictions of women re-write Appalachian culture by using the female body and female labor as texts. “Clothmaking, sewing, lace-making, crocheting all become intertwined as the yarn or thread tangles into the speaker’s fingers, linking the female body to female labor and creation” that ties together generations of grandmothers, mothers, and daughters (10-11).

In a panel presentation called “Religion, the Sacred, and the Appalachian Writer,” Byer talks about how she came to write the mountain woman’s voice. She said that as

she began to write about that place, “every blade of grass was fierce with meaning to me as I would walk the trails of the Smokies and as I began to talk with some of the women of the area who were natives, as I was not” (39). One such woman was Delphia.

Modeled after a real woman Byer knew, the character of Delphia is the quintessential mountain voice; she’s strong, determined, skilled, and isolated. She teaches the younger women how to quilt. Almost every poem in section three entitled “Delphia” in *Black Shawl* is about a woman and her role in mountain life. In “*Ripe*,” the speaker asks “*where is the sun?*” and follows up with more questions: “*Where is the woman who lately leaned / over her washbasin, / daring the cold water / splash her eyes shut?*” The answer is that she is spinning wild berries into black thread—presumably the same thread she will use to weave into a *Black Shawl*, the title of the book, of an individual poem, and a recurrent symbol throughout Byer’s poetry (33). This poem is in italics, and is the first in the section entitled “Delphia.” Three poems are italicized in the book: the first poem in Part One, “*The Ballad Singers*”; “*Ripe*,” which begins Part Three; and the last poem in the book, “*Sile*.” The connection between these three italicized poems is the voice. The ballad singers find themselves in a new land by no choice of their own, being gypsies, “having no say / in their journey, they came / here. They stood / on the high ridges, listening / into ceaseless / wind sounding the bedrock / of what lay beyond them . . . one by / one, I see them open their mouths. / Here I am, / they sing, / having become their own voices” (4). They sing, in the new world, the old songs of the Celts, the Scots, and the Irish (53). In “*Ripe*,” we come in closer to a single woman, unnamed, weaving the berries into thread, and in “*Sile*,” a woman, identified by name, is “each woman’s voice /

[who] echoes the other as verse after verse . . . with her eyes closed, she's singing / him back through the centuries" (52). Sile is the collective voice of the Appalachian woman calling across time and place. "'Sile' is the Gaelic spelling of Sheila," and Byer notes this at the end of the collection where she mentions that the poem is written for two different "Sheila's" in her life, a ballad singer, Sheila Kay Adams from Madison County and Mrs. Dellie Norton, "who taught her, 'knee to knee,' the old ballads brought from Scotland and Ireland" (*Blackshawl* 53).

Byer makes no explicit reference to the Celtic folklore figure of the Sheela na gig, a grotesque pagan-fertility-anima figure with bulging vulva which is portrayed on churches and buildings all over Ireland to ward off evil, but the name Sile certainly alludes to her and serves Byer's themes of relentless residence and mystic power of the collective women in *Black Shawl* ("The Sheela"). The entire section is full of the voices of these women. "Delphia" gives the younger women lessons on quilting: "what keeps the whole blooming / patchwork from falling to pieces / is stitches no bigger than pinpricks . . . so fasten your calicoes steady by mites / and they'll hold till the last of you / lies dreaming under these pretty scraps" (34). In "The Morning of the First Day," the omnipresent "She" gathers the speaker of the poem "into her black shawl that smelled of the smokey hearth" and leads her metaphorically to see "for the first time / to know it, the world outside / me" (36). In "Timberline," the trees on the ridge have "turned back to women again, having grown / old along with these mountains" but "the wind through their branches / keeps trying to make them sway, / supple as girls again, line dancing / over the rocky horizon of Snowbird" (37). The women have become the horizon. In

“Latin,” the “She” is teaching the unspoken language to Delphia (38), and “Wild” reflects on the women making lace where they “knotted the roots / of the last weeping willow tree” and the “maidens wore / daisy crowns to the fish markets” (38). So much of the landscape is turned into lace, like the quilt she patched together from the artifacts in the surrounding yard. “She” is every woman, a collective she that walks these hills and echoes back the isolation of the women; “Granny they call me . . . My real name? / A fiddle string snapped in the course / of a slip jig, the sound of no more left” (48).

Delphia is an embodiment of many women from the southern Appalachians. Her actions in the poems demonstrate her beliefs. As Julie Howard writes, “while the surface text of Delphia’s monologue is about quilting, her language, as well as her choice of quilting squares, suggests that Delphia operates out of a Christian mythos. Encouraging her young charges to go slowly and pay attention to detail, Delphia tells her students they will want ‘a pattern’” (29). In real life, Delphia was the mother of a woman, Willa Mae Pressley, whom Kay Byer met in the mountains near Cullowhee, North Carolina. Delphia had taught her daughters to read, stitch, and pattern. “Her stories became woven into the poems I had begun to write” and they joined other voices from other women Kay knew from the mountains (“Deepwater” 67).

Byer’s women’s rooms exemplify their topophilia for their own homeplaces, and also for Appalachian culture and tradition, and the reader feels it too. These women function in a male-dominated society through their actions, their domesticity, which works to give them rich voices that mesh into culture, place, and the very nature of the Appalachians.

Yi-Fu Tuan's chapter in *Space and Place* "Architectural Space and Awareness" has informed my reading of Byer's poetry as a cultural door into women's roles in the Appalachian past. Tuan shows a map of male and female places within architecture, which is an interesting subject to discuss in relation to gender roles and expectations. In a diagram entitled "Cosmic and Social Order in Atoni House" (in Indonesia), Tuan shows Clark E. Cunningham's drawing of "Order in Atoni House" (113). In the drawing, the interior is "female" and the exterior is "male." Gradiations continue within and without the space; the absolute center of the structure, which looks like a typical drawing of a house (walls with a pitched forty-five-degree-angle roof), is female. Cunningham calls this center the hearth and ritual center, the female interior. Then outside of the center is the inner female, then the lower female, and just outside the back of the structure, the lower female secular. The levels of maleness don't occur in the house at all, except in the attic which is labeled upper male. The male outer is just outside the door, followed by the exterior male (113). The entire image shows the principles of classification within this structure and within this culture. I do not think this model is far removed from that of a traditional Appalachian homestead. The woman's center is certainly the hearth of the cabin. The differentiation between "inside" and "outside" provides a sense of "intimacy and exposure of private life and public space. People everywhere recognize these distinctions . . . in Neolithic times the basic shelter was a round semisubterranean hut, a womblike enclosure that contrasted vividly with the space beyond" (Tuan 107). Byer's poetry captures historical traditions of Appalachian women through their actions in its houses. The contexts of the house, the river, the quilt, and the

voice serve to connect readers to place through memory.

In the 283 pages of poems in five collections that Kathryn Stripling Byer has published since 1992, there are at least fifty-four references to singing. Byers's use of song in her poetry shows the impact of changes of time in the mountains and how it affects people who live here. The songs record histories of the hills for future generations, and enable readers to travel back to the places of Appalachia, time and again, when the poems are read. But even more, the poetry—the songs— sustain the culture of Appalachia through documentation, and through conveying the life experience of this writer to the reader.

Through imagination, poetry allows the reader to experience the places of the southern Appalachian past. Unlike reading fiction, in which readers may witness action of the text or even feel empathy for characters, poetry actively engages the reader in the text through sensory experience. Rhythm, lyricism, form, sound, and other poetic conventions involve the reader in an experience that deeply connects them to the place of the poetry. It does not matter if the reader has any prior knowledge of Appalachia or its history, because the act of reading the poetry includes the reader now in the place of the poem. This is one way the poetry functions to sustain the culture of Appalachia.

Yi-Fu Tuan also articulates why humans feel the need to preserve an environment. In societies where people feel that they are “in control of their destiny, they have little cause for nostalgia;” however, when people think their community is changing “too rapidly, or spinning out of control, nostalgia for an idyllic past waxes strong” (*Space and Place* 195). Tuan states that this need for the past, this attraction to preserve historical

buildings and artifacts, rises from the human necessity to support a sense of identity (197). Byer is not directly aiming to preserve the past through writing song as artifact, but she does preserve a way of life in the songs she includes in her poetry, and through her own writing of verse that shows the culture.

Writing about place is more than a historical reading into that specific time; it lets the reader experience the place again, and the author's own relationship to place, each time the poem is read or the song is heard. The place, then, is always in the present as the poem is in the present and is, therefore, preserved. The poetry is able to transcend time in this way. If time and place are always linked, and time determines how a place is perceived, either through memory or the current time being spent at the place, then each time the poetry is read and the song is heard, the place is again real for the reader. In her book *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*, Lucy Lippard comments on life and home as the center of human existence and that place and our attachments to place extend out from this fluid center in a "circular notion, embracing and radiating from the specific place," but the area away from the center "'out there' is a line of sight, the view, a metaphor for linear time" (23). Inhabitants of the place circle back to the idea of the place through time. These ideas make the history of the place, both as it was at a certain time, and as it is in the present.

Singing also plays with the natural rhythms of poetry. Robert West talks about Byer's use of rhythm to pull the reader into her poetry; Byer "is a metrical poet, given that her rhythms are remarkably regular," but that "regularity isn't reflected by the poem's lineation Byer's habit of braking the line mid-foot has a definite effect; the

need to complete that broken foot pulls you forcefully down to the next line” (17). This tactic keeps the momentum going in the poetry, but also keeps readers engaged and interested to see what comes next. It also likens her poetry to songs so that the reading sounds like a verse of a song. There is clear rhythm and cadence in much of her poetry. “Singing turns out to be the single most characteristic action of a Byer poem, in much the same way that walking is central to poems by Wordsworth and Frost” (West 20). Poem after poem refers to singing or splices in a lyric from somewhere. Singing is elemental in the life of these Appalachian women, whether to pass the time while working, or for entertainment and education, it is a huge part of life. Singing also marks history. The songs they sing are story telling ballads and folk songs from the old country. But the songs also ground these women in their places in the Appalachians.

In “Aria,” the speaker is listening to “Vissi d’arte” on old records where “the Goddess herself, / it’s true, crooned to us mortals” and “come evening, I’ll hear / her chorus of frogs in the low / pasture, long after Tosca / has leapt to her death, / singing not for the glory of art / but for earthly awakenings / into another spring.” The Italian opera is now joined by the frogs in the pasture. The opera, played in the space of the house, is now part of the environment of these mountains, and for a young girl growing up listening to this soundtrack as a backdrop for life, the foreign music is now music of these hills and her identity. The epigraph “I live for art, I lived for love . . . Why, O Lord, why Dost thou repay me thus?” is part of the opera and speaks to the notion that the speaker is making in the poem that life continues relentlessly with or without one’s appreciation or attention to art. However, “thus does she sometimes repay / us, her

stubborn joy rising / again out of thawed ground / like the breath from a diva's / throat spiraling into bel canto" (*Catching Light* 29). The art may not stop the progression of time, but it will resurface again to show the beauty of the world.

Byer's connection of the beauty in art and poetry to the natural world and the passage of time helps to sustain people and culture by linking them through time. The making of the poetry and the references to singing in the poems are both productive ways in which Byer recreates place and memory. She builds the poem that remembers the song, that connects to the person of that place. "The earth's rotation, phases of the moon, geological change, and the weather—she groups her singing self with the unstoppable, inorganic forces of nature, not with the animals hiding out of sight. Her singing . . . signals an imaginative desire to unite with those aspects of nature which are eternal" (West 21). Byer's association of music to nature helps to sustain this place. In *Music Lessons*, a young girl is practicing "The Last Rose of Summer," while her grandmother plays piano accompaniment. She wonders "when I too become old, would I smell / like the rose water she like to splash / on her neck and her wrists?" Then her thoughts are interrupted by the grandmother's urging to sing the second verse and the speaker succumbs; "so we opened / our mouths to the lure of that Irish air, / chirping of shadows that fell on a faraway garden," while her grandmother's garden "rife with petunia's / and blossoming okra plants, honeybees reveled / inside it all afternoon" (*Catching Light* 22).

The girls are singing the old song about a rose in an Irish garden while they stand in the Appalachian mountains near a garden full of blossoms of its own, while thinking

about what they might smell like when they are old. The intersection between past and present and place is the interesting part; the song is in a sense a poem that recreates the Irish garden in the poem for the speaker, and the poem being read by me, recreates the life of these women in the Appalachians. But as a reader, I'm also drawn into the Irish element when I read and suddenly I'm involved in the grandmother's life, an Irish folk song, two girls singing, and a garden just outside their door—which they do not pay any attention to, but which has a completely separate microcosm of life going on while the rest of this action goes on in the music room. “Byer's interest in singing takes on . . . new value as a means of achieving continuity between past and present” (West 21). The reader gets lost in a time warp between the poems and the singing, so that all kinds of historical allusions connect them to the past and present at the same time.

In her essay “Deep Water,” Byer speaks of singing as a method of travel for the mountain women unable to physically leave their homes:

To the women living in these mountains years ago, singing must have seemed the only way they could travel . . . they knew their place . . . and their place knew them. Out of that reciprocal knowing, they were able to sing their way through their solitude and into a larger web of voices, voices that I have come to see as connective tissue stretching across these hills. (63)

Singing and poetry is Byer's connective tissue linking the hopes, fears, and memories of those inhabiting the southern Appalachian Mountains. Her poems are “the lace of dead branches, / lace of an unraveling cloud, / every edge yearning / toward its disappearance,”

a metaphor for all of the places that women of the Appalachian mountains tried to create for themselves through the crocheting and the embellishment of some drab garment or space. “She,” the voice of the mountain woman, wants to fill the empty space with beauty: “*this needs a touch of lace*, she’d say to nobody, / fingering the emptiness / while I squirmed at her side, / thinking, *Let the end / come, no matter how / ragged the finish*” (*Catching Light* 27). The “I” here might be Byer, or simply the speaker of the poem wishing to silence the need to constantly fill the holes. Whatever her motive, she captures the essence of the women’s need for creativity in her poems. Byer’s poetic rhythm sustains mountain culture and re-create the “places” of Appalachia that are disappearing. Her songs join in chorus with the music of these mountains and sustains its voices.

Byer weaves the places into her poetry through her experience in the actual landscape. In “Some Rock Remembers” she falls and fractures an ankle while hiking Ramsey Cascades. The rocks sing for hours while she waits, presumably for help to limp out of the woods. Her bones knit back together in a quilt pattern she names *Some Rock Remembers*. Her interaction, connection with the rock, and her resulting broken ankle leave her trying to recall their constant song. In “Here,” she describes the significance of the intersection of two trails in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (which I will call GSMNP in figures 20-24) to her life: “I’ve followed a lacework of trails / to their jump-offs, where sky always waits / like an ocean in which I hear voices roll over me.” The voices seem to come out of the valley, the air and the place. She goes on to say how she came to be here; “I arrived, not a moment too soon, at the junction / of Thomas

Divide and Kanati Fork, / air ripe with bear scat and leaf mold.” She wonders if this is the place she dreamed of every night before she arrived, as seen in figures 22 and 23.

(*Descent 57*).

Fig. 20. Trail marker for Thomas Divide Trail, GSMNP.



Fig. 21. The Tuckasegee River, Cullowhee, NC.



Fig. 22. Trail marker on Thomas Divide Trail, GSMNP.



There is a cosmic element of the past in Byer’s poems that transcends the present. These hills are filled with voices singing their histories and their places. It comes up again in the poem “Kanati,” which is referenced in “Here” as Kanati Trail (figure 20), a trail in the

Great Smoky Mountains National Park about six miles up from the Oconoluftee Visitor Center (figure 24). “Kanati,” published in *Black Shawl*, gives the history of the trail

“named for the hunter / who whistled / his wolves to the chase / in those days we call / *wilderness*,” she tells of the Cherokee myth and how these mountains “promise a way home, their roots / of a million trees holding this long / climb together for me, / so that I might arrive at the top” where she hears

blood in her “ears drum the oldest of riddles” (46-47). In this poem, trail and myth are one. The poem links the past of Kanati and his family on this land with the present moment and the poet on the mountain trail speaking to the reader of the poem. This link

Fig. 23. Conjunction of Kanati Fork and Thomas Divide, GSMNP.



Fig. 24. Oconoluftee Vistors' Center. GSMNP.



ties together memory, landscape, place, and poetry.

In an interview for *Town Creek Poetry*, Byer echoes Lippard's theory of meaning growing out from the "center" of a place, when she talks about her views of the intersection between place, landscape and memory:

Yusef Komunyakaa once referred to the landscape that one carries within one's imagination throughout one's life as necessary to the artist's vision. I would say that it's necessary to anyone's "vision." It derives from that first landscape to which we awaken, but of course it changes as one moves through one's life . . . how the interior and exterior landscapes interact, dance, dialog with each other, and when the two come into harmony, then the eye/I of the seer and the writer expands and enfolds what she sees into her own creative center. ("Interview")

Poetry with a strong sense of place serves as a marker or tangible object that preserves the place even if the place is no longer in physical existence. In a panel presentation entitled "Continuity and Change: Future Directions of Appalachian Literature," Byer attributes storytelling to saving cultures. Storytelling is important to preserve any way of life and any landscape. The act of storytelling transforms our landscapes by making them more intense in our imaginations and as a result, we think about the landscape in new ways. "If we can continue that storytelling, maybe we can even stop mountain-top removal, if we can just tell good stories and send our students, our children, all of us our into this landscape we love" (57). As readers, we move about the poetry in much the same way we might move about in the physical world—reading

and circling back, both in the text and in memory as the images and rhythm of the poem triggers thoughts. Each time we read a poem, or hear a song, we experience that time and place again. The experience is still in the present tense.

In an essay entitled “Time Lines,” Kay Byer talks about the similarities between physically hiking the landscape and writing poetry:

As I negotiated the trail, I negotiated the poem. What is poetry, after all, but the negotiation of time? (And prosody, as I once read somewhere, is the repository of time). All our rhythmic devices restructure time: a run of iambs does not move along in the same way as a gaggle of anapests. Moving through time is what a poem does, so why should anyone find it strange that the trail under my feet and the poem in my head became one? Sometimes, even back home as I read what I’d written, I couldn’t tell the two of them apart. Come to think of it, perhaps the hiker and the poet ask the same questions, one of them being-- how long before we get there? Or, asked a different way, as I did once when facing a section of cross-country hike that was pure laurel hell, how do we get through? How to get through, isn’t that the most urgent question one can ask? How to get through the day, or the hike, or the poem?

Byer’s representation of songs as artifact, tradition, seasons, and home in her poetry establishes a connection to place for her readers. Byer is concerned with the culture of home and the meaning created there. She lays claim to the places of home and helps readers also claim these places as their own. This is important because through these

connections, Byer is able to attach value to Appalachian places that might otherwise seem insignificant to an outsider. Her poetry continually opens windows on a culture and time in Appalachia that is often inaccessible. When Byer writes about her Kanati Trail or Tuckasegee River, she writes of the place as she experienced it and in doing so, captures a “snapshot” of the time she spent there to preserve, and in the reading of the poem, the reader gets to be there too.

Even more than an image created for the reader, the act of storytelling, the act of writing, the making of poetry, the poesis is what saves and sustains these mountains. The houses protect memory, the outside external world contains the history, and the internal space is creative. The inhabitants and their places sustain the people and the culture. In her article “Still Here” Byer talks about how “it was the writing itself that signified . . . whether they be our own words and those of other writers, or words folded into the letters and diaries of ones whose bones may or may not lie now in the soil.” These words, this poetry is what remains; “their vanishing histories on yellowing sheets across an ink pen once moved as if possessed by the power of language itself, which always says, no matter the context, ‘Here. Still here’” (60).

Each moment is the fruit of 40,000 years. The minute-winning days, like flies, bus home to death, and every moment is a window on all time.

—Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel*

CHAPTER 4

RON RASH: POETRY OF VOICE

Ron Rash (b. 1953) was born in Chester, South Carolina, grew up in the Appalachian foothills of Boiling Springs, North Carolina, and spent his summers with his grandparents in rural Watauga County, just outside of Boone, North Carolina. His love for stories began in his preschool days when he asked his Grandfather to read *Cat in the Hat* because every time his grandfather read it, the story was different. From him, “Ron learned the magic of words, the power of imagination, ignorant at the time that his grandfather could neither read nor write” (Inman 42). His parents worked hard for what they had and created a home environment of art, books, and magazines. In his sophomore year of college, he began writing under the influence of his English teacher at Gardner-Webb, Joyce Brown. Rash attended college at Gardner-Webb University for his undergraduate degree and at Clemson for his M.A. Once in graduate school Rash submitted a manuscript that was shredded by an unidentified “famous writer” in front of the class. He was devastated, but realized later that the author was right and was determined he “could write a better story” (43). He continued to read and write and published his first story “My Father’s Cadillac” when he was twenty-seven. He spent years teaching a full course load and writing on the side. Rash has taught at TriCounty Technical College in Pendleton, South Carolina as an English instructor, at Queens

College in Charlotte, North Carolina as a poetry instructor, and at Clemson University and the University of Georgia as an instructor.

In 1994 he published his first book, a collection of short stories entitled *The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth*. Since then, Rash has published four collections of poetry, three short-story collections, and six novels, with two more scheduled to come out soon. Rash's poems and stories have appeared in more than one hundred magazines and journals. Once he started publishing in 1994, it took four more years for his second book, a collection of poetry, *Eureka Mill*, to be published. Then he published his third book, another book of poetry, *Among the Believers*, two years later in 2000. After that, Rash published a book every two years until 2010 when he began publishing one a year, with one slated to come out in 2016. In 1996, Rash won the Sherwood Anderson Prize; in 2005, he won the prestigious O. Henry Prize for his short story "Speckled Trout"; and in 2008, his collection *Chemistry and Other Stories* was a PEN/Faulkner finalist, as was his novel *Serena* in 2009. Currently, he holds the John Parris Chair in Appalachian Studies at Western Carolina University.

Most people recognize Rash from his bestselling novels, and especially since the 2014 film version of *Serena*; however, he also has published enchanting poetry. His most recent books of poetry, *Raising the Dead*, (2002) and *Waking* (2011), are filled with haunting characters of southern Appalachia. Some elements of his poetry follow the tradition of other Appalachian poets such as Morgan and Byer, but he is different in his creation of unique characters and gothic narratives. It could be that he sketches characters as he sees them in reality. It could be that his own genuine humility plays out

in his poetry. The authenticity Rash presents is often under sinister circumstances in writing reminiscent of Flannery O'Connor, with a flair for the southern gothic. Between his honesty and his yarns of the odd mysticism of the mountains, Rash has opened a new vein in southern Appalachia.

Rash agrees with what Robert "Morgan says about the sense of change as a motive for writing" and finds this "to be true with the explosion of books that have been written about the textile mills in the Piedmont region of the Carolinas, because that world has disappeared." The writing stems from generations of Appalachian families that are now seeing their family lands being sold for vacation homes and planned neighborhoods. Suburbia has reached these hills, and the traditional way of life is threatened. "When you're in dangerous times, when you're conflicted in your hearts, when you see all kinds of things disappearing, you're often impelled to write. I've seen my grandmother's farm up in Watauga County subdivided" (Byer, Huddle, McFee, and Rash "Continuity" 54). In much the same way that Morgan and Byer write to preserve their places, Rash is writing his part of the Blue Ridge. He characteristically uses darkness and tragedy to reach the reader. Many poems are heartbreaking, and it seems Rash wants to grab readers by the throat to show them this heartbreak.

In his poem "The Pact," a group of young cousins head off on a Christmas Day hunting excursion that ends in the tragic death of the youngest, who is shot and killed accidentally. The heart-wrenching story is told in a single sentence which forces the reader to read all the way to the terrible end where the boys' "blood-oath made so / no one of them alone will / bear pity or blame, carried / the same way they will carry / the

coffin, to the grave” (*Waking* 57). The tragedy is made even more dark by the juxtaposition of the images of “Christmas gifts of brass-capped shells,” bright knives, and the boys’ shared “gray eyes” with the deep gorge, the guns, the bone, the blood. The shared blood and shed-blood are symbols that one sees over and over in Rash’s poetry. The irony that blood is shed on Christmas Day is not by accident. Rash explains his fascination with the macabre:

One thing that I got from my family in the mountains is a sense of the world being a place of mystery, a place of wonder. I've always been attracted to the part of nature that is terrifying or unsettling. I was always out hunting for timber rattlesnakes, though fortunately I didn't find any. The idea that nature is complex, that it is both consoling and terrifying, is one that has stuck with me. (Lang 340)

No matter what the poem is about, though, the reader is left with some sense that it is all right. Life in these hills is just this way, and there is no good and no bad; it just *is*. The redeeming point in “The Pact” is the pact itself. The boys had such loyalty to each other that even in the worst situation, they stood together in courage. The wisdom at such young ages and the realization that the emotional burden would be too much to bear alone testify to the quality of people in Rash’s Appalachia. But his sense of place and people is more accurate than Appalachian stereotypes will allow.

Rash, in his simple and quiet voice, shows the world the real people of Appalachia. He states, “‘A good poem is a contribution to reality.’ Poetry enlarges the world for us, destroys the illusion that we can grasp it” (Lang 341). By getting at the

“real,” Rash uses a tactic that differentiates him from his contemporaries. Newton Smith asks, “Where else in America do we find a poet like Rash committed to resurrection, to raising our heritage from silence of the deep, and to harrowing our consciousness from the graves of our comfortable lives?” (20). Rash challenges us to feel the past in the present tense. His poems feel like they are happening in the present, not a hundred years ago, or even ten years back. He has figured out how to keep us in the present tense of these mountains no matter what the time setting is. His use of straight forward voices is how he does it. The language of the poetry is not old or constructed to be old-sounding, but rather authentic and appropriate. In fact, if dates were not listed beside some of the titles, any one of his poems would seem to be written about events that could have happened yesterday.

Sometimes the poems *are* about recent events. On May 29, 1999, seventeen-year-old Rachel Trois was swept down the Raven’s Chute of the Chattooga River. Her body, pinned at the foot of the falls, could not be recovered for weeks. Rash’s poem “The Girl in the River” brings life to the news account, and captures the grim feelings of rescuers involved in the event. The image of a young girl trapped beneath the river haunts the workers trying to recover her body. “Men tried three days to raise her” until finally divers went into the river to see if they could retrieve the body. One diver “came close / enough to brush the yellow / flow of hair and almost drown / before others roped him back” (*Waking* 41). Rash weaves reality and fiction together for readers to experience the event as it happened.

The dead girl appears again in, and the same story is the crux of, Rash's novel *Saints at the River*, which depicts a fictional twelve-year-old drowning and the struggle between environmentalists and the family over her recovery. The juxtaposition of the "cold, beckoning eyes" of the drowned girl with grotesque beauty, "a face clear as a lover's," coupled with her "yellow flow of hair," enchants the reader (41). After all, what would she really look like after weeks under the surface? She beckons like a siren, enticing her rescuers in death. She physically obstructs the natural flow of the river, and interrupts life in this place; ironically, until drought comes, the girl cannot be moved. Rash's comparison of the natural force of drought with the recovery of the body is an example of how he ties his characters to place. The girl becomes part of the river, held there until nature decides that she can be freed. John Lane comments on Rash's meshing of fact and fiction:

It's now almost a decade since the drowning, and it's become harder to draw conclusions about the differences and similarities between Rash's story and the real one. Maybe that's a good thing. Fiction often takes precedence over documentary fact as a way of building what we believe to be true about the world. The popular imagination often creates its own history out of the fictional world of plays, novels, and films [. . .] Ron Rash's novel *Saints at the River* gives flesh and immortal life to what happened on the Chattooga in the summer of 1999. (167)

The merging of fact and fiction is one way Rash sustains the place for future generations of readers. Much like Morgan and Byer's connection between Devil's Courthouse and

Snowbird Mountain, Rash has linked the Grandfather Mountain watershed into the mountain chain of poetry. The poems grow from each cove and mountain hollow to map out the voices of Appalachia.

Rash's poetry is steeped in gothic Appalachian voices. In four collections, he writes about historical and contemporary topics affecting people of the Appalachian region—at times alternating between then and now. Rash uses the voices of the past—those of his grandfather, and a ghostly woman under Lake Jocassee, among others, to connect readers to past moments in time that give these places meaning. Rash focuses on names, heritage, environment, and gothic elements to create an experience of time travel for the reader.

In an interview entitled “The Power of Blood Memory” with Joyce Compton Brown, we can hear in Rash's own words how his poetry works to connect readers to place through memory: “I truly believe that the more we know of one place, the more we're going to make that place universal, because if you go far enough and deep enough into it, you're going to realize what its essence is, and this is going to be human, to involve what it means to be a human being, what defines us” (Lang 344). Yi-Fu Tuan writes similarly about such ideas in his discussion of “Time and Experiential Space” in his book *Space and Place: the Perception of Experience*, where he examines human perception of time in relation to space. The most intriguing part of his discussion is the aspect of music and what happens to time perception once music is introduced: “Music can negate a person's awareness of directional time and space” (128). I use Tuan's ideas here about “rhythmic sound that synchronizes with body movement cancels one's sense

of purposeful action, of moving through historical space and time toward a goal,” to reinforce the position that poetry, also rhythmic, can synchronize with the body to create a kind of time warp in which the author and reader transcend time through the act of poetry making and reading (128). There is no physical distance between singer and song, between poet and poem. Poetry closes the loop of human perception of time and in this way, the reader can cross time to the past like cutting through rings on a tree.

This argument is reinforced by Marilou Awiakta’s essays “Sound” and “Daydreaming the Primal Space,” in which she speaks about sound and dialect shaping her world view. She states that “we are going from contemporary space to primal space, from life ‘on the square’ to ‘life in the round,’ and from the line to the curve of time” (“Daydreamin” 194). Sound is demonstrated in Rash’s poem “My Grandfather Comes Calling” where three five-line stanzas sing in ten syllable rhythms: “He was country-shy and hardly looked my way, / just stepped onto the porch and talked to Dad / about the weather; Shoeless Joe, the best / type of knife to skin a catfish with. / until Dad winked at me and went inside” (*Eureka Mill* 29). The rhythm, paired with the narrative, evokes the dialect, the people, and their day-to-day lives. This is a deliberate choice for Rash. He has studied speech patterns and literature to make sure his work echoes the heritage of his characters. He aims to “make the writing as vivid as possible for the reader.” Rash says that even when he is writing prose, he is always seeking sound. “When I do my last draft, I’m not even reading it for content. I’m just listening to the way the vowels and consonants are rubbing up against each other” (qtd. in Wallace).

In “The Ballad of Ella Mae Wiggins,” he uses three stanzas again, this time six lines, each with end rhymes, and a repetitive rhyme scheme. The final words of the lines are; “September,” “nine,” “cotton field,” “line,” “day,” “down.” “Die,” “town,” “earth,” “crown,” “day,” “down.” “Tale,” “grown,” “union,” “own,” “day,” and “down.” Not only does Rash write a ballad here, but it sings on the page much like Ella Mae Wiggins⁶ sang her protest songs from the bed of a truck in real life; Rash tells us the historical event, lets us experience what happened, and lets us hear Ella Mae’s own voice when we hear the poem’s rhythms (38). About Eureka Mill, Newton Smith states that “in one sense this book is a eulogy, perhaps the most characteristic stance of Rash's poetry, for very few poets can equal his elegiac tone or form. The book is not a nostalgic look at the past, nor is it polemic against the mill owners and the life the workers had to endure” (14). The content (the milltown, the workers, the details of daily life) works with the form—the ballads, the cadence, and rhythm—in the text to show readers the beauty and tragedy in this seemingly small, dead existence. Rash studied the heritage of those millworkers and his own family to come up with the seven-syllable line, a form common to many welsh writings. As Tim Peeler notes, “His study of Welsh poetry has led him to develop his own kind of syllabic verse, one propelled by a marvelously rhythmic seven-syllable line. It is the odd syllable at the end of these lines that often pushes the reader to the next line. This device, along with alliterative language and echo effects, creates a sense of momentum in these poems” (11). The syllables and the rhythm

⁶ Ella Mae Wiggins wrote ballads and protest songs as a Union leader for the rights of all workers; men, women, black and white. In 1929, at age twenty-nine, she was killed by an armed mob while supporting striking workers in Gastonia, North Carolina (“The Mill”).

creates a mood for the poetry and an essence for the characters of the poetry for the readers to hear.

“In Middlefork Gorge” demonstrates the seven-syllable line which also employs an ABCB end rhyme in six four-line stanzas: “The white smoke of my own breath / led me down the logging road, / the sky darkening like a bruise. / I was too proud to be cold.” Rash captures the speaker’s memory in these lines as he sees the old homestead, crumbling chimney, and finally a clock “set in cement to weather / time but now all time erased, / each numbered hour swept away, / the hands torn free from the face” (*Among The Believers* 58); The rhythm of Rash’s seven syllable-line paired with the rhyme scheme, gives this poem the music that Marilou Awiakta speaks of; the form of the syllables and rhyme control the meaning of the story of the speaker, a young man on his first hunt, alone. He is not singing. He is “walking ground that once belonged / to [his] family, now game land” (58), he is observing the decay of the old homestead and realizing that time, even cemented into the hearth, will not stand still. The metaphor of hands being “torn free from the face” conjures up images of real people having to remove their hands from their covered eyes to see what is really going on, even though they may not want to know the truth. At times, the rhythm of the poem ticks like a metronome. Again, the form of the syllabic lines follows the meaning of passing time. We have images of snow, glaciers, “white smoke of breath,” the sky as a bruise, “marble slabs,” and “bleached stumps.” The hints of blue-gray shades and white are prevalent throughout the poem. The gorge itself would have been brown with the winter greens of cedars or laurels, but the poem evokes the cold blues and whites to symbolize winter

more than any other colors. The landscape is no longer the warm browns and ambers of occupied houses with lamps burning. These remnants are cold facades of what used to be home.

In “Lasting Water,” Rash uses alliteration to achieve the sound effects. “Fingers raked out the caul / of black leaves, and spring lizards / scuttled and settled like things / blown by the wind” (*Among the Believers* 52). Every line is a seven-syllable line except the first which, with a southern drawl, might sound like seven. The poem, this time, is without a distinct rhyme scheme, but near rhymes in the end of several lines, coupled with the alliteration and the syllabic rhythm, really keep this poem as a specimen of Rash’s talents. Peeler writes, “it is important that the voice and tone be in sync with the music of the words. With the written words, Ron Rash establishes a music that echoes the traditions of the past and yet reveals his own singular vision. When he reads or speaks about his works, Rash adds another layer of effectiveness to his poetry and prose” (12). The reader doesn’t have to hear Rash read the words aloud, though, because the poetry is so precisely written that one can hear the voice from the text.

In the blurb for *Among The Believers*, Robert Morgan states of Ron Rash’s poetry, “the poems evoke a special memory of everyday life, and they are haunted by mortality, while turning to honor the dead. With his fresh, surprising voice, Ron Rash creates a living past” (back cover). “A living past” is a good description of what all three of these poets do in the making of their poetry to sustain the culture of the southern Appalachian mountains.

Ron Rash’s poesis, dialect, rhythm, and voice both ground his characters in place

and appeal to modern audiences to connect readers to the past through memory, invoking Gary Snyder's "Poetry and the Primitive: Notes on Poetry as an Ecological Survival Technique." Snyder brings us full circle with his discussion of voice:

Poetry, it should not have to be said, is not writing or books. Non-literate cultures with their traditional training methods of hearing and reciting, carry thousands of poems—death, war, love, dream, work, and spirit-power songs—through time. The voice of inspiration as an "other" has long been known in the West as The Muse. Widely speaking, the muse is anything other that touches you and moves you. Be it a mountain range, a band of people, the morning star, or a diesel generator. (94)

This carrying of story that Snyder emphasizes is not accomplished by just reading alone, but by the making of the poem, and the memory of the event and of the poem, and the openness to receiving the muse from wherever or whomever it comes.

In Rash's poetry, the muse is sometimes the cotton mill, and sometimes a lizard. His poem "Abandoned Homestead in Watauga County" demonstrates how he uses many kinds of different elements from the environment as muses for his poetry. In this poem Rash boils the entire legacy of an old homestead down into two stanzas of lines each between six and eight syllables long. "All that once was is this / shattered glass, a rot / of tin and wood, the hum / of limp-legged wasps that ascend / like mote swirls in the headlight" (*Among the Believers* 63). The muse here is the house and what it once was, how time has decayed it, how its inhabitants left, what it is now compared to how it used to be. Yet, ironically, all that remains is still "all that once was." This paradox sets up a

statement about how meaning is assigned to place. Of course the abandoned house is nothing like what it once was, but metaphorically it is the same as it has always been: glass, wood, tin, a cherry tree, fruit, yellow jackets, starlings, the wind, the rain, and the sun. Rash shows us how the place—the old homeplace—has evolved into a place where the wasps hum and the yellow jackets and starlings do the harvesting. It is a commentary on place. Who gives the place meaning? The inhabitants are long gone. Is the meaning gone then, too? Not if the poem gives meaning to the place. The poem keeps the place in existence and we are even still talking about it.

In his essay “The Wild Boar in These Woods: The Influence of Seamus Heaney on the Poetry of Ron Rash,” Matthew Boyleston talks about Rash “returning home” in comparison to Heaney’s linkage of Irish history to the tradition of going back to the someplace after a funeral to talk about the life of the recently deceased. The process verifies life and community. Boyleston states:

For Rash: his returning home is largely carried out in the dramatic monologue—his voice giving voice to the voices that are gone. That he has the poetic authority to do so is not necessarily a political question (that he is descended from the very speakers of which he writes); it is an authority manifested in craft and technique, getting the voice just right, the appropriateness of marrying the form to the content. (15)

Rash does this throughout his poetry. The topics of the poetry vary widely, but his focus is persistent: how people lived here in the North Carolina mountains. His use of the seven-syllable line gives a rhythm that provides consistency among the poems. The vivid

stories and individual characters' voices sustain the past. Rash is carrying on the lives and cultures, like Snyder's non-literate culture carried stories through memory and story telling.

Rash's poetry is a survival technique for the people of the mountains. His muses are history—the stories, the songs, the people, and the places—but they are now our muses too as readers. The places are preserved in the poems, in the protest ballad, in the tragic event, in the spirit of the places that Rash presents to us in the poetry.

In voices from all over the North Carolina mountains, Ron Rash uses his muse to open a connection to another time and place. Many of Rash's poems deal with loss, memory, and heritage—wrapped up and intertwined. In "Under Jocassee," the second poem in *Raising the Dead*, Rash reveals the weird connection one might feel when out on Jocassee Lake, which, after being flooded by Duke Power in the 1970s, now covers over old homesteads and graveyards of those that lived there years before. In this poem, Rash encourages readers to paddle their boat to "follow that road into / the deeper water where / you'll pass a family graveyard, / then a house and barn. / All that's changed is time" and you will see the woman in the August sun looking up, who feels "someone / has crossed her grave, although / she will go to her grave, / a grave you've just passed over, / wondering why she looked up" (*Raising the Dead* 4). Rash entices his readers through an eerie connection between past and present.

Not only does he pay homage to those who are buried under the man-made lake, but he allows them to live in a circular time warp where no one remains untouched. Jocassee, in Cherokee, means "place of the lost." A real valley (and now lake) in South

Carolina, it is the perfect locale for Rash to bring together the spirits of the Cherokee, early settlers, later mill town workers, and the modern reader.

It doesn't matter if readers know the history of this place before they come to the text, because they know now and they have suddenly been made a part of this woman's story. There is also a remnant of folk culture within the text: "She believes someone has crossed her grave." Rash is known to intertwine wives' tales and mountain superstition to stay true to Appalachian heritage. In an interview, Joyce Compton Brown asked Rash why he would include "folk belief, superstition, and folklore into [his] work, and he replied, "I believe that an important value of art, as Francis Bacon said, is 'to deepen the mystery'" (Lang 341). Deepen the mystery he does. One of the most precious aspects of his poetry is how beautifully terrible it can be. Yeats famously declared that once the man is changed through his experience, "a terrible beauty is born." ("Easter, 1916"). Rash, like Morgan, knows Yeats, reflects his Celtic influence, and we can see remnants of the terrible beauty throughout Rash's poetry. He does not rely on sentimentality or nostalgia to tell the stories, but only plain and often brutal honesty. As his fellow celebrated Appalachian Author Silas House writes, "In both his fiction and his poetry Ron Rash takes us to a place where the living and the dead coexist, a place where there is a thin line between the past and the present. Not only that, but he also creates a world in which times overlap and occasionally interrupt one another" (21).

We can see this interruption with the woman in the lake in "Under Jocassee" (*Raising The Dead* 4). She's looking up, feeling the presence of someone (the reader of the future), and the boater (the reader in this case) is looking down to the farm

under the water as though it has never been touched by the flooding waters or by time. Rash creates another time-warp in the manner of Tuan with this poem. He links the past, the present, and the future together with the poem. Silas House comments on this phenomena:

While Rash is obviously commenting on the way superstitions and the supernatural inform Appalachian life, it also seems that he is making a statement on life in Appalachia as a whole. In Rash's writing the dead represent the past while the living represent the present- or even the future. Appalachia is a place where these two forces- the past and the present- are constantly colliding. This region is always trying to find that fine balance where we can embrace and celebrate our pasts while also accepting the present, namely progress. (21)

He melds the past and present together to address the solastalgia of all of us living in the Southern Appalachians and losing it from right beneath our feet. He also documents the culture and voices here for readers outside of Appalachia. "Appalachia, a place that is changing rapidly with the influx of satellite dishes, snowbirds, and changing values," House notes, "is a place that is trying desperately to hold on to its heritage. Its people strive to preserve the old ways while also moving forward. Naturally, many things die in the name of progress" (22). Rash captures memory and the spirits of the Appalachian mountains; it is not terribly gruesome, just one that screams of reality. Most of all, he makes the reader care about this place and its people.

From Boone and Blowing Rock to the mossy banks of Price Lake, Ron Rash haunts readers with timeless characters from Watauga County. This place, this bioregion of Watauga, is crucial to the formation of Rash’s *Waking*. Fred Waage’s notion of the “bioregional identity of Appalachia as a definable ecological community including humans” proves that the Appalachian bioregion—Aho Gap, Laurel Fork, Grandfather Mountain, Goshen Creek—informs this poetry, but the act of making poetry, poesis, is a primal language of the poet that reveals his own *topophilia* for this unique culture and region. Through a bioregional lens and poetry making, the place becomes the text we are reading. In this case, Watauga County places represented in Rash’s poetry reveal how the human need for significance can be found and recreated in the reading of poetry.

Fig. 25. Laurel Fork Church From Aho Gap.



Fig. 26. Laurel Fork Baptist Church.



In the poem “White Wings,” Rash recounts the tragedy of Jason Storey, a man who after the death of his wife and unborn child refuses to step foot again in the church. In reality, Laurel Fork Church Road links Aho Road to Jake Storey Road, and the church can be seen from the parkway at Aho Gap (figure 25). In this poem, “Jason Storey would remain / true to his word, yet was there / in that field come rain or cold, / but came no closer, between / church and field two marble stones, / angel-winged, impassible” (*Waking* 40). We can view the church from Jason Storie’s perspective in the third photograph. Standing there among the headstones (fig. 26), listening to hymns, Jason Storie negotiates the space between living and dying, paralleling Rash’s own push and pull between past and present in these hills. Like the space between the church and the graveyard, the space between the past (the cemetery) and the present (the church) is a liminal space, a threshold where we make sense of things. The liminal space is where meaning-making happens in the exchange between writer and text and reader. Before the reader engages with the text, there is no liminal space, because there is no in-between. Once the reader engages with the text, the space in between is created, yet is void of meaning. The reader then creates meaning. In Rash’s poems, he sets up a physical space to make meaning in the text. In this case, Jason Storey is trying to make sense of the death of his wife and child. He cannot enter the church because a just God would never let such a tragic thing happen, he can’t stay in the graveyard because he is yet alive, he can’t leave altogether because he needs the church to survive, so he is caught in the threshold, unable to move. The poem is also the liminal place where meaning takes place and the mountains are sustained. Rash “reminds us of what is lost when a place

Fig. 27. Laurel fork Cemetery as seen from the church door.



disappears. He is concerned with history and heritage and the importance of family ties, the land, and the battle between good and evil that occurs in the human

heart” (House 25). Even the physical body is a space to be occupied and defined.

In the background of figure 29, taken at Laurel Fork Church in March 2013, we can see Grandfather Mountain in the distance, and there are numerous gravestones to the side of the church with the surnames Storie, Story, and Storey. Growing up in the shadow of Grandfather Mountain influenced Rash; one can see it from the church and

Fig. 28. The corner of Jake Storie Road at Laurel Fork Church.



Fig. 29. View of Grandfather Mountain behind Laurel Fork Church.



from the parkway, and the presence of the looming mountain can certainly be felt in the poetry. He even mentions it in “Tobacco Barn” when “older eyes saw green changed to gold, / leaves crisp as new dollar bills, / a promise close as a raised hand, / chastened each time dark clouds rumbled / across Grandfather Mountain toward Dismal / too late in the year to be welcomed” (*Waking* 22).

The ever-present intersection between place and culture is evident in how the storm rolling over the mountain affects everyday life and livelihood in the mountains. There is a colloquial saying in Boone, “if you don’t like the weather, wait ten minutes.” The weather here is unpredictable, volatile, and the local economy is completely dependent on it.

Apples, Christmas trees, ginseng, skiing, and tourism are the some of the largest products coming out of the high country. Rash wrote a poem entitled “Ginseng” which describes his trip back into the mountain shadows with his grandfather to harvest the root. “It was here / my grandfather searched each fall / the deep coves, the gloam under / cliffhanger where yellow leaves pooled / so bright it seemed what sun had / scattered in since spring was held / until October, then freed / to light the vivid stem-wings / into a brief golden star” (*Among* 51). With one pound of ginseng being worth about \$200, North Carolina was able to harvest and export 7.1 million worth to China in 2012. Ginseng grows in the damp soil of the Great Smoky Mountains. If the climate becomes too dry, the soil and the ginseng roots dry out and plants suffer (Frankel). North Carolina is ranked among the top ten states for apple-growing. With over 200 orchards, the apple growing industry contributes around \$20 million to North Carolina’s economy. When

weather conditions are severely cold, it is very difficult to grow fruits, and if the winter is too hot, apple trees don't produce (Osment).

In the northern part of the state, Christmas tree growers have utilized the colder climate and well-drained soil that is ideal for growing the trees. Growing trees also comes with federal and state economic incentives, so farms don't have to be sold off to land developers if they can still turn a profit (Sidebottom). Christmas tree farms have taken the place of farms that used to grow cabbage, green beans, tobacco, and cattle. North Carolina has over 400 tree farms producing \$5,000,000 in revenue. The economic impact is crucial to the state.

The 2014-15 ski season attracted 653,654 skiers to the mountains, bringing in a total economic impact of 197.2 million. The ski industry relies on the colder weather to be able to create the man-made snow. If the winter starts too warm, like it has this year, or if it is not cold enough, the ski season is delayed and slopes as well as workers wait for the perfect temperature ("Skiing"). Even for builders, the number of days to do construction is limited by rain and temperatures too cold to pour concrete. Many residents rely on the weather for work and prosperity. The elements and characteristics of this bioregion are more influential on the daily life of the residents than would be the case in an urban or flat land area, where industry can proceed regardless of weather. If people can't make a living, they have to move to where they can work. The place determines whether or not their family gets to eat in winter. Often moving meant giving up what they loved to make a living.

Fig. 30. Sign for Aho Gap on the Blue Ridge Parkway.



The older Rash generations moved down the mountain to the foothills to work in the cotton mills, though they didn't necessarily want to leave the mountains. Many people did this to survive. Rash captures the solastalgia of factory workers in his poem "Spring Fever": When the men got "that far-away look in their eyes. / You'd know they were behind a mule and a plow. / They'd drink a lot more whiskey that time of year," as they remembered what it was like to be planting versus working in the cotton mill. The speaker goes on to note that the men were only remembering the best of being farmers "not the things they'd gladly left behind, / that made them leave" and they'd forgotten how hard life is when you are dependent on nature for work; "what a hailstorm / does in fifteen minutes time to six weeks work, / how long it took a hay-filled barn to burn, / when a lantern spilled its flame or lightning struck" (*Eureka* 17). Sometimes, weather affected the millwork too, when in summer drought the mill couldn't run because the water was too low. But as the workers enjoyed their break from over-heated mill work, "when no rain came for a month, we thought of kin / back in the mountains praying hard as us / for crops that withered in dirt turned into dust. / Each of us praying for the other's misery. / That's when we knew the world was truly evil" (*Eureka* 16). The distinctness of

the place influences the poetry coming out of that place.

Rash also spent time at Goshen Creek, and his poetry captures the independence he felt being in Watauga County during those summers he spent with his grandmother. “Above Goshen Creek” depicts two boys; one on a rickety platform above a swollen creek and one on the bank, watching. The boy above the river won the dare and risks his life to stand “there between earth and sky / when water crests, oak slats slip / and shudder beneath his feet” (*Raising The Dead* 35). Even though he stands in a seemingly life-threatening situation, he is the one who got to experience the thrill of standing on the platform as the water shook and rocked it. He gets to feel the power of the water and dare death. This poem was published in 2002. Rash comes back to the same place, a little bit differently, in 2011. “In a Deerstand Above Goshen Creek” depicts the speaker suspended above Goshen Creek on a wooden platform “like a raft snagged in trees after flood” as he “dreamed between earth and sky, / of falling away from earth, toward heaven” once again portraying the characteristic of being caught in-between (*Waking* 73). Both Goshen Creek poems portray a middle ground for the speaker. In the first poem, he is young, probably twelve or thirteen since he is out in the woods alone, but he is making adolescent dares. When he is back on the stand in the second poem, he is hunting and then when no deer shows up, he takes a nap and seems to be alone there, still “between earth and sky,” the only phrase repeated in both poems. Again, being in the deerstand, the reader occupies a liminal space between, paralleling, resembling, the solastalgic need to neither go nor stay.

Fig. 31. Goshen Creek sign
Bamboo Road, Boone, NC.



Fig. 32. The rapids of Goshen Creek
under the Parkway Bridge on Bamboo Road.



The voices we hear, of Jason Storey and the young hunter-dreamer in the deer stand, do not seem to be much different. We know they are probably characters from very different generations, yet their poems speak with the same voice. There are five parts to this collection, yet in each part, it is difficult to figure out the significance of the order. The first includes young childhood memories. Part II contains historical poems about Celtic ancestors, Rebecca Boone, and the general hardship of living in this land. Part III introduces readers to a veterinarian, an old man who deconstructs his house to use as firewood to survive the snow squall, and Merle Watson. Part IV tells of specific events, and Part V seems to be Rash's own personal place poems. The final poem in the collection, "Price Lake," describes a boy's realization that he is outside and independent of his parent's relationship as he stumbles upon them on the mossy bank of the lake. They do not see him and he "slips away unnoticed." He would not fully know what he was feeling as "the gift of that summer took years to unveil, something stirred even that day when they came back to me" (*Waking* 74). Rash's own memory swirls with the event and recreates a *Waking* moment from his earlier life.

Fig. 33. View of Price lake from the Parkway pull-off.



In four different poems in three books, Rash alludes to a historical tragedy from January 1863, the Shelton Massacre. After a bad winter in the divided counties of Madison and Yancey, the North Carolina 164th Division executed fifteen Yancey County men between the ages of twelve and fifty-nine for raiding their homes for rationed goods, particularly salt. Rash commented about why this event has haunted him enough to show up in his poetry and in his novel *The World Made Straight*: "After a visit to Shelton Laurel in the spring of 2003, I finally began a story that dealt not only with the massacre but also with its continuing importance over a century later to the participants' descendants." The tension during the Civil War was high in the mountains because the mountains split—even counties spilt—to serve either the north or the south. This truly was a borderlands at that time, and people were caught on both sides fighting against neighbors and kin. Rash was bothered by the fact that the youngest of the executed was killed last, even after begging to be released to his mother.

I have finished my novel now, have put all that I know and feel about the Shelton Laurel massacre in its pages; yet the image of David Shelton standing in that snowy Madison County meadow remains: He is shot in

both arms, his father and three brothers dead beside him. He tells the soldiers that he forgives them all for killing his father and brothers, then pleads to be allowed to go home to his mother and sister. But the soldiers do their duty. I am haunted still. (*Shelton Laurel* 71)

One poem that is reminiscent of but not a direct allusion to the massacre is “On The Border” in *Among The Believers* (2000). The poem actually alludes to England and Scotland as Rash describes the land as “hard country, / bare hills, dark valleys, gray juts / of stone against gray sky. Here / men argued map lines with blood” where “their hearts became their landscape, / as did their acts,” referring to the raids by Yancey county men on Madison county. The poem ends with the men drowning “in a river called Eden,” dragged down by the golden crosses and chalices which hung about their necks. But the story, even set in his Celtic history, is the same story that will be similarly played out between Madison and Yancey Counties in 1863. The first poem that actually alludes to the massacre is “Madison County: 1864” and the second poem is “Allen’s Command” on the very next page of *Among The Believers*. Both poems depict the legacy of hate caused by the massacre; one poem is set a year after the massacre in 1864 when “down in Shelton Laurel / Widow Franklin told her sons / *If you die, die like a dog, / your teeth in somebody’s throat*” (11), and the second poem refers to decades after that when “mothers in Shelton Laurel / knew mention of Allen’s name / would quiet the surliest son” (12).

In 2002, Shelton Laurel is back in the poem “Shelton Laurel,” in the book *Raising The Dead*, this time a longer piece that reads like a letter: “Sister, I have come to understand / the world will have its way with us despite / what we might wish, or once

believed. Last week / I watched our neighbors die like snakes. Gut-shot, / then hacked with hoes until their moaning ceased” (23). This time the speaker is one of the men from Allen’s group who shot at the Yancey County men, and who is hiding in a cavern. He envies the trout of the cave “whose eyes are blind from years of too much dark.” His tone is grave and he is haunted by what he has been part of, the things that “drape upon [his] soul like heavy shackles” (24). Rash is plagued by Shelton Laurel so much that he tries to see the event again and again from every possible perspective: from those of Colonel Allen, the mother, the widow, the boys on the shooting end of the guns, and young David Shelton pleading for mercy. In isolation, the poems entertain, disturb, and provoke questions about the massacre, while read together, the poems also provide context and perspective. The reader can understand why this feud is still in the consciousness of those living in Bloody Madison County even to this day. The poems also tell of how these mountains were divided during the Civil War and what a tragedy that division became for families and communities spawning deep-set hate and multi-generational rivalry.

In his poem “Good Friday, 2006: Shelton Laurel,” Rash observes a man planting near the memorial marker of the Shelton Massacre. The man is a “bringer / of light” to this dark place where “oak trees knit tight shadows / across the marble that marks / the grave of David Shelton” then “wind lifts / the leaves, grows still A man sows / his field the old way. The land / unscrolls like a palimpsest” (*Waking* 60). He is building a bridge between past and present and future with this poem. We can see the farmer sowing in the light, yet we also see the execution of David Shelton, 143 years earlier. There is also the

fact that the planter is sowing seeds to grow here in the future, in the same ground “darkened” by the bodies of all those Shelton men. The plants that will grow will have been fertilized by the dirt of those decayed bodies, ironically giving life to the future growth in that place, essentially re-writing history, the landscape becoming the text on which the farmer writes. But it is not a new blank page. The landscape is compared to a “palimpsest”; it is an old document being written over. The re-writing of the landscape, re-appropriating meaning from a site of tragedy to a site of growth, is an example of how poesis sustains the place through poetry. In this example, too, the bodies feed the plants of the future, while the men, lost completely to their families, are now symbolically growing into the crops this farmer is planting, and the poem captures this. Thinking back to Reukert’s metaphor cited in Chapter One of “poems as green plants,” this poetry is growing from this place and it is both sustaining it and improving the place.

With all of the dark overtones and heart-breaking loss in Rash’s poetry, there is still always an element of light or truth to be considered. He regularly offers some redeeming qualities through the poetry to offset the tragedy. These are not happy endings per se, but at least in the grim tale, the reader can come away with a deeper appreciation for how hard life for these mountain people was, but also how connected they were to their places. In reality, tragedy, loss, and heartbreak are found in every culture and every place, and the mountains are no different from anywhere else in this aspect. What the poetry does, though, is to clarify for the reader how these mountain people were affected by their place, and how they dealt with it. In reference to *The World Made Straight* and

the story of Shelton Laurel that also shows up in his poetry, Rash talks about how the mountains affect the residents:

It's a darker book than my other books . . . There's a sense that the mountains are trapping these people, that they can't get away. There's also that physical sense of not getting enough light. Traditionally, people have not lived on mountain-tops, but have had to live in coves and valleys where the water supply is - places where, very often, you only get a few hours of direct sunlight. (Rash, "Shelton Laurel" 71)

Here again, the bioregion affects the people in the place, the culture, and the poetry produced by and about that culture. Because folks lived in hollows and valleys, the days were slightly shorter than in the flatlands or even those on mountain tops. The shadows grow longer, temperatures drop, and the sun is hidden as soon as it drops behind the mountain horizon. Just the physical barriers of the mountains limit the line of vision of the mountaineer. One can only see to the next bend in the road, or river; at times one can only see one's immediate surroundings, depending on where one is. Maybe one can see only an eighth of a mile or so because mountain walls rise to block one's view. Even when the space opens up in a bottomland or plateau, unless one is on the ridge, one's distance of sight is limited. Often, and year-round, fog hangs between the valley and the ridge, so that even the sky is obscured. Walking to the ridge can be treacherous, and a hike would be indulgent when there is work to do, so life in the mountain cove of North Carolina might feel boxed-in much of the time.

The characteristics of weather in the southern Appalachians mirrors the fatalistic tendency of Rash's characters. The reader continually encountered suicide, accidental death, hopelessness, drug abuse, homicide, infidelity, sacrifice, and despair. In an article published by Arminta Wallace, she quotes Rash as saying, "I think what was going on with those stories is that it was an attempt, consciously or unconsciously, to capture the zeitgeist of rural America. Right now there's a real feeling of hopelessness in the US, and particularly in the rural areas, because so many of the young people are going off to fight these wars. There's very high unemployment. Farming as a way of life in the area where I live is now pretty much gone. And there's the meth" (Wallace). Every attempt of writing poetry is to hold onto the place. Even searching for the zeitgeist, as Rash states, is an attempt to get at what is bothering the people of this place and figure it out. Just the search for it, in the making of poems, helps to preserve or at least sustain the culture, the good parts of the culture by exposing the causes of the problems in the culture.

All of the poems in *Waking* ebb and flow through past and present to keep readers in a virtual time warp. Is it 1962? 1949? No, it is right now. Memory is inherent in the essence of place. One can't exist without the other. Yi-Fu Tuan explains that this intricate relationship with the environment shows how humans' sensory and psychological experiences lead to their connections to—and affinity for—places. Topophilia—love of place, results from early sensory and psychological experiences in particular places, like those summers young Ron spent in Aho Gap. "Awareness of the past is an important element in the love of place" (*Topophilia* 99). Place is an extension of self and determines how one acts and re-act to various aspects of life.

Tuan articulates the need to preserve in *Space and Place*, stating that “the passion for preservation arises out of the need for tangible objects that can support a sense of identity” (197). Writing poetry about lost people, lost history, or lost places provides the tangible object needed to sustain those things that were once lost. Just as we’ve know all along, poetry preserves and acts as a memorial. Each poem marks the spot of significance where something happened or where someone walked. Rash understands the importance of his poetry to the people of his place, kin or not. In the opening of *Eureka Mill*, an entire book of poems about mill life, the first poem is “Invocation,” a prayer from the speaker to his dead Grandfather to come to him as he lights moonshine on the kitchen table spread with a “Springmaid bedsheet” to “guide [his] hand / to weave with words a thread / of truth as I write down / your life and other lives, / close knit strangers too, / those lives all lived as gears / in Springs’ cotton mill / and let me not forget / your lives were more than that” (xvi). Rash resurrects memories from the mill and creates a tangible thing—a collection of poems that serve as a memorial to sustain those lives.

Life in the mill town was not something the mountaineer longed to do. Most of those workers who came down from the mountains to work in the foothill mill towns only did so out of desperation. The mills offered a place to live and financial security, but moving from a rural mountain environment to a bustling mill village was an adjustment. It was also a constructed place that the mill owners had built for the sole purpose of housing workers. Mill villages had row houses that all looked alike, and the hierarchy of social status which valued large land tracts, large herds of cattle, or a successful farm was reduced to nothing when everyone lived on an equal-sized, carbon-copied, small box

house. In "Mill Village," the "houses lined both sides of every road / like boxcars on a track. They were so close / a man could piss off of his own front porch, / hit four houses if he had the wind" (*Eureka Mill* 13). In Bachelard's chapter on "corners," he entertains the ideas that corners and angles are "traps" that detain the dreamer; "Yet even in this prison, there is peace. In these angles and corners, the dreamer could appear to enjoy the repose that divides being and non being" (145). This idea can be extended to explain life in the mill town. Its ordered, regimented corners and blocks of angles provide structure, but also imprison the dreamer. The only way to escape the prison mill town life is by dreaming, like when the speaker of "Mill Village" "bought a digester picture, a country scene, / . . . no people in it, just a lot of land, / stretching out behind an empty barn." The picture that hangs on the wall is a pastoral scene similar to the landscape of the mountain home he has had to abandon for mill life. Looking at the rural landscape in the picture helps him to deal with the corners and angles that frame him in; "sometimes at night if I was feeling low, / I'd stuff my ears with cotton. Then I'd stare / up at that picture like it was a window, / and I was back home listening to the farm" (*Eureka Mill* 13). The mill village is full of noise, so even in the house, one can't escape the intrusion of mill life into personal life. Privacy is compromised and silence is a desired commodity.

In "Bearings," the speaker of the poem, James Rash, has "scraped manure off his boots a last time" and now stands alone on the porch of a mill house on a "strange level road." He ventures out for a meal, and upon return, soon finds that he is lost. When he leaves again, he "threw his boots on the roof so they might / guide him back those first

evenings and later / the Saturday nights he weaved under moonshine, / searching roof after roof trying to find home” (28). He cannot find home because home is not his own anymore. It is an identical existence determined by his employer and holds no personal significance for him. Tuan says that “the built environment, like language, has the power to define and refine sensibility. It can sharpen and enlarge consciousness” (*Space and Place* 107). In the case of the mill town, the buildings defined the movement of the workers through established roads, and the close proximity hindered privacy, exposed people to more opportunity for drama with neighbors, and declared their social status as a mill worker just from the site of the house. Once James Rash left his home in the mountains and entered the space of the mill house, his life was controlled by the mill. He left his space, his stuff, and the day-to-day outdoors for a constructed, regimented life ruled by the whistle. “A man’s belongings are an extension of his personality; to be deprived of them is to diminish, in his own estimation, his worth as a human being” (Tuan, *Topophilia* 99).

In “Boundaries” Rash describes a girl who feels the wrath of those trapped in the space of the mill village because she “thought that her beauty brought her a way out” of the mill town; “she thought she could live like she wasn’t a linthead,” until bullies cut off her dress with a knife, cut her hair, and beat up her city boyfriend. When she turns up pregnant later, “some men, unmarried helped her make production / though none them offered to give her their name. / Their help was enough more than she deserved” (41). The culture of the mill town determines what happens to everyone in it. Even when the girl tries to date someone on the outside in town, tries to escape, she can’t because other

girls won't let her. In the last poem in the collection, Rash reflects backward in "July, 1949." The first line—"this is what I cannot remember"—sets the reader up for an interesting progression due to the paradox. He proceeds to tell everything he cannot remember in three stanzas that depict how his mother came to leave the fields for life in the mill town. "She is dreaming another life, / young enough to believe / it can only be better— / indoor plumbing, eight hour shifts, a man / who waits unknowingly for her," as she "runs toward him, toward me" (62). Her fate—and Rash's—will be decided by the place.

He talks about place determining destiny in a panel presentation published in *Iron Mountain Review*:

[This] is an idea I've been haunted by most of my life, though I didn't even realize I was haunted by it. I finally wrote about it more fully in my most recent novel. It's the idea that landscape is destiny. I find this notion really interesting, but it's an idea that I haven't fully thought out, although I continue to try to understand it. But I'm very interested in how landscape affects the way we perceive reality and perceive ourselves. I'm absolutely convinced that if you grow up on an island, for instance, that landscape had to have an effect on how you perceive the world and how you interact with the world. (Anderson 21)

Landscape determines destiny. We can see the Cherokee absence and how the European immigrant mountaineers are affected by the bioregion, how the mill villagers are affected by the built construction, and how both Morgan and Byer are affected by their own

places. Even more so, though, is the impact on people who have lost their home places due to destruction or modernization, development, or because they had to leave. This is where the solastalgia comes into play and people suffer the most. The past, present, and future are brought together in space and defined by places.

When James Rash enters the mill village to get work, he moves into his future—the unwritten space of the mill house (however bleak), leaving his home in the mountains with its memories and familiar paths and scratches of living. The new place is void of meaning until he sets his boots on the roof. Then he has claimed his space, and it becomes home—his place. If he returns to his mountain home at some future date, he returns to the past by visiting. Each time he responds to the whistle and walks into work, he walks into his future; when he returns to his familiar surroundings and his boots on the roof, he walks back into his past. Time and space are constraints on us and they behave in interesting ways depending on how we look at them. “Space has a temporal meaning in the reflections of a poet, in the mystique of exploration, and in the drama of migration. Space also has temporal meaning at the level of day-to-day personal experiences. Language itself reveals the intimate connectivity among people, space, and time.” “Then” can mean the past or the present; “here” means now (Tuan 126-28). Language, in this poetry, allows us to revisit home and travel back to that time each time we read.

The idea of landscape as destiny is prevalent in Rash’s poetry. Over and over, we can see how place impacts the people. The mountains shelter, yet isolate, the mill town brings security, yet controls people, the farm brings peace and yet hardship. The mountaineers learn the lay of the land and how to read the landscape and the weather for

survival. In “Waterdogs,” which are little underlings that hang below storm clouds, “small ephemeral rainbows” that one can live a lifetime not needing to know about, unless one lives a life of a farmer. Even then, one needs to be a farmer who can read the “lost tongue” of passing clouds “like pages turned in a book / to find these damasked commas / which promise coming thunder” (*Among The Believers* 64). Because the farmer is dependent on the rain for his corn and tobacco, he has to be able to read the language of the landscape, and his landscape will determine his destiny in the coming winter. In “October on Middlefork Creek,” Rash captures the connection he feels to the landscape of his place in Watauga County, “the mountains / that shadow my ancestors’ sleep / in two cemeteries, one row / of creek stones in a pasture.” They seem close to him here, where “fog lifts / off the stream like risen souls” (*Waking* 68). Identity is formed out of the landscape and the culture is controlled by the environment in the Appalachian mountains.

In his presentation for *Iron Mountain Review*, Rash asks “what does it mean to grow up in a landscape of mountains, whether it’s in Appalachia or the Himalayas or the Andes?” How does the place shape the persons and poetry coming from there? He goes to explain what he has observed in his own family:

It seems to me that two things happen. One, which is very positive, is the idea of the mountains enclosing us from the outside world, protecting us, almost womb- like, nurturing us . . . what does it do to you to grow up in a place where the mountains are constantly looming over you, reminding you of your smallness? What does it do to people who live on

family farms in coves and hollows with little light coming in? One thing I've seen in my own family - and I've talked to many others from the region who agree with this idea - is a kind of deep-rooted fatalism that seems to be a part of our identity. (Anderson 22)

He is on point about fatalism if his poetry is any indication of real life. The horrors that take place usually have something of a redeeming quality if we read them as political commentary. The poems make statements about society to enrich the understanding of those outside of his place in the Appalachians, and to sustain those left here living and doing. His poesis brings back memories and events and rewrites history with the truth.

Place derives meaning from the poet, but the poet too uses the significance of the place in the formation of poetry. The author now relies on the poem to supply the significance of place. Through poesis, Rash brings life and sustained significance to the places of his poetry. It is the juncture of the poem itself and the “‘poetic activity’ (thus honoring *poesis* in its broader etymological sense as “making”).” Poesis is the interplay among form, meaning, language, and reader. The act of making poetry helps “sustain counter-hegemonic identities, knowledges, and commitments” (Damon and Livingston 3). Rash and his poems work through form, language, meaning, and memory to connect readers to Watauga County.

Imagine all the lives and the trails stretching across Watauga and the mountains beyond. Ron Rash has been able to capture some of the ancestral voices that call across the mountains across time. This connection, through poetry, is what Wordsworth would say is the spirit of the poem. The poetry captures the spirit because empirical knowledge

is inadequate. Good poetry helps us feel the ghosts more closely.

And the angels on Gant's porch were frozen in hard marble silence, and at a distance life of awoke, and there was a rattle of lean wheels, a slow clangor of shod hoofs. And he heard the whistle wail along the river. Yet, as he stood for the last time by the angels of his father's porch, it seemed as if the square were already far and lost; or, I should say, he was like a man who stands up on a hill above the town he is left, yet does not say 'The town is near,' but turns his eyes upon the distant soaring ranges.

— Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward Angel*

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: CONNECTIONS AND OPPORTUNITY

Moving from *Earth to Home to Voice*, Robert Morgan, Kay Byer, and Ron Rash share common ideas about the southern Appalachian experience. They write from this place—the southern Appalachians—and because of their strong ties to the land, their poetry sustains these mountains. Having begun with Morgan with his general, earthen, agricultural, environmental, and scientific influence, then coming into and around the house places with Byer, and finally mingling intimately with the family and neighbors of Rash, this study furthers ecocriticism and validates it as a literary theory by showing how these poets sustain place. It is important to sustain this place because the Appalachian Mountains are facing some of the biggest challenges in mountaintop removal, a growing methamphetamine industry, falling education standards, and a rising population of people living under the poverty line. These mountains may be on the brink of economic and environmental destruction if things go unchecked. This bioregion is unique and precious, but it's also home to some many people who, without these poets voice's, the world may not notice. They write to sustain this place because it is their home, but it is also a human experience.

Ron Rash states in his short article (which captures the essence of this dissertation), “The Importance of Place,” that “the best regional writers are like framers drilling for water; if they bore deep and true enough in to that particular place, beyond the surface of local color, they tap into universal correspondences, what Jung called the collective unconscious. Thus Faulkner’s Mississippi, Munro’s Ontario, and Marquez’s Colombia are both exotic *and* familiar.” Getting below the surface is what Morgan, Byer, and Rash do with the Appalachians. They dig deep enough to reveal the human spirit so that the place is anchored through memory and preserved in poetry. Rash thinks this writing is important because it can re-generate the place: “Joyce, another great regionalist, once claimed that if Dublin were destroyed, it could be recreated by reading *Ulysses*. I would make no similar claim for my novel’s depiction of the Jocassee valley, but I have brought all that I know of that place into my story, hoping that I might go deep enough to bring something of that place, and all places, to the surface.” Morgan and Byer do the much the same as Rash; they write deeply enough about place to bring humanity to light.

Interestingly, these three poets are sustaining place in not only the southern Appalachians, but also the transplanted “place” of the old countries of Celtic, Scottish, and Irish influences. Morgan, Byer, and Rash make frequent allusions to ballads, stories, and speech patterns that can be traced to Europe. This makes sense since many early mountaineers were Celtic and Welsh immigrants, and their speech patterns would be carried on in their descendants, especially since these communities are isolated from larger, more diverse populations. The syllabic verse that Rash uses is found in the Welsh

tradition. The Celtic people “forced a wild living out of the back country under the ethos of tribal honor and unique vigilante justice; they distilled whiskey, played new versions of ancient songs, took up jobs in the textile mills when the farms went bad, worked for the TVA, and watched their glens and hollows soaked up by hydroelectricity and the advance of progress. These are Ron Rash’s people” (Boyleston 11). But these are Morgan and Byer’s people too. They are telling the same tales from their parts of the Appalachians, so you know the existence was similar between these groups of Celtic immigrants. Behind the music and literature of these Appalachian mountains is a rich Celtic tradition.

Joyce Compton Brown, professor emeritus at Gardner-Webb University and Ron Rash’s former teacher, wrote to me that Ron Rash “loved Yeats even in undergraduate school and I think you would easily see how Ron’s use of mountain lore and Scotch-Irish lore in family parallels Yeats’ early period of lore. Although his personal origins were Welsh rather than Irish or Scotch-Irish.” Rash is known to have been influenced by many people, and definitely by John Keats, Jeffrey Hill, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Seamus Heaney (Shurbutt), among other American and Celtic place poets, as were Robert Morgan and Kay Byer. Of course, with Literature and Creative Writing degrees, they would have read other poets extensively. William Butler Yeats shows up in allusions of all three poets. Yeats was known to follow in the footsteps of Keats, too, but mostly Blake and Shelley, when he wrote his mystical poetry. As the Poetry Foundation notes, “Most of Yeats’s poetry, however, used symbols from ordinary life and from familiar traditions, and much of his poetry in the 1890s continued to reflect his interest in Irish

subjects.” He believed in patterns and that “all art [should] be full of energy.” If anything about Yeats influenced these poets, it was his mission to “transform the local concerns of his own life by embodying them in the resonantly universal language of his poems” (“William”). Morgan, Byer, and Rash likewise seek to transform their individual concerns by making them resonate in their poetry.

One aspect of Yeats’s work that ties into this discussion is his ability to write across time and place to portray the people and culture around him. In his essay “Poet of Anglo Ireland,” Thomas Whitaker comments on how he could write to broad audiences and his exploration of the space between the world of the living and the world of the dead. “Yeats could reach a universal history—the Renaissance, Phidian Athens, all the antinomies of *primary* and *antithetical* or of blood and the moon. Fleeting in personal meditation, enduringly in the poems, he merged dramatic experience and panoramic vision in a full-bodied yet comprehensive reality” (Whitaker 66). More than any other aspect that Morgan, Byer, and Rash may have gotten from Yeats, his attention to negotiating the in-between time of heaven and earth is what most influenced their poetry. And Yeats wrote rhythmic poetry that influenced the poems of Ron Rash.

Wolfe may have been right that you can never go home again, but Morgan, Byer, and Rash are preserving home so that when you try to go home, you can in the reading of this poetry. Because all three incorporate actual places and historically accurate details of events happening in those places, they have re-written historical accounts for future generations to study in order to understand the place. Thinking back to Geertz’s *thick description*, we know that to truly understand a place and its people, we have to read the

culture in the larger anthropological context, which includes poetry and songs as much as it includes maps and first-hand accounts of historical events. In Robert Morgan's poetry we read potato holes, rocks, and tool sheds; in Byer's poetry we read kitchen sinks, lace, and songs, and in Ron Rash's poetry, we read grave markers, creeks, and legends. All of these artifacts become texts to read through the poetry and the poetry sustains the place.

The most interesting follow-up result that stems from this dissertation is a database I am building for Appalachian poetry. Using the concept of *thick description*, I thought of how useful it would be to have a database that implements *thick description* in a virtual sense. It could help students contextualize the poem, poet, and place in history. Much like PennSound is for voice recordings, I want a database that maps poets with the places they are writing from and about. Imagine an interactive, searchable map built in a web-based program that shows a topographical image of the Appalachian range. Click anywhere on the map to zoom in to a specific locale and see the poetry that comes from that place. I want to include recordings of the poems in their voices. From the entry point of the poem about each place, you can also link to information about the author, the geography, the history, and any allusions in the poem. For instance, when zooming in on Devil's Courthouse, you would see and hear Robert Morgan's poem, as well as other links to read about the Cherokee legend of Judaculla, the history of the Blue Ridge Parkway, Robert Morgan's biography, and other references. Using icons on the map, poems will be represented with a pencil, and poets with a stick figure. You could zoom in over Maryville, Tennessee and find poets from there, or zoom in over Harlan, Kentucky and find poems about that place. Of course there will be overlap and, within each place,

there will be multiple levels of information included with each poem to provide the *thick description* including history, ancestry, music (songs and ballads), food, environment, geography, climate, arts, literature, economy, cultural ethnicity and religion. Any one point on the map will have a dataset that includes all of this information like a cross section that shows a slice of the place, but instead of just a horizontal cross section, there will be vertical and diagonal sections too, and the poem is the center point of this “star” of information. This database could be used by scholars to further their research as well as the public, for information purposes.

Originally I wanted to build this database as part of this dissertation research, and made a website to act as a prototype to use when explaining my ideas to programmers. I have talked to many people on the best way to build this database. It will be more complex than the little website I first imagined, so I will have to have some help writing it. My colleague and digital humanities expert Uzzie Cannon is working now to link up all of the criteria for each map point in a program and then programmers will design and build the framework for the database. Dr. Cannon informed me that we can link to existing databases, such as Google Earth and Ancestry.com to provide the most extensive cross-section of information possible. I will determine what information is included (such as in the list in the previous paragraph) and they will write the program framework that I will be able to edit and add to in the future. I will start with North Carolina poets and places and will build to incorporate the entire Appalachian region. My hope is that poetry scholars can really see how a poem grows out of its place when they explore the virtual mountains. I would also like to use this database as a tool to promote Appalachian

poets, and to fight environmental issues such as mountaintop removal, fracking, and general abuse of underprivileged people living in the region.

The challenge will be determining where to start. I will of course begin with Morgan, Byer, and Rash, and add North Carolina writers Fred Chappell, Michael Chitwood, Michael McFee, Joseph Bathanti, Hilda Downer, and Thomas Rain Crowe. Beyond North Carolina I would have to include Jim Wayne Miller, Danny Marion, Linda Parsons Marion, Marianne Worthington, Maurice Manning (nominated for the Pulitzer Prize), George Ella Lyon (currently the poet laureate of Kentucky), Frank X. Walker, Richard Hague, Pauletta Hansel, Nikki Giovanni, Marc Harshen (currently poet laureate of West Virginia), Jim Minick, Diane Gilliam Fisher, Jeanne Bryner, and Jesse Graves. Eventually, I will need to establish baseline criteria for being included on the map. I would think the poet should have at least one chapbook out before they could be added to the database.

Similar databases already exist, but they do not include the larger cross section of information that I believe will be more helpful to researchers. One database that lists authors by county is the North Carolina Literary Map which is mainly sponsored by UNC-Greensboro. This map of North Carolina is divided by different colored counties. You can click on any county and find out the number of authors that live in that county, and titles of publications. Then, you can search the names and dates of titles published and find out more about the author. It is interesting to note that in Jackson County, where Kay Byer and Ron Rash are listed, so is story teller, Gary Neil Carden, poet Thomas Rain Crowe, and biographer Horace Kephart (“North”).

Ecocriticism and place studies scholars could further the work of ecocriticism, poetry, and Appalachian literature studies by focusing on the Appalachian bioregion. The Great Smoky Mountain National Park the most diverse bioregion in the world next to the Amazon, with “125 species of native trees, 125 species of shrubs, 1,500 species of vascular plants, 60 ferns, 280 mosses, 250 species of lichens, 200 species of birds, 40 reptiles, 40 amphibians, 80 species of fish, 50 mammals, and uncounted species of insects and other arthropods (Pierce xiv). The place is also rich for ethnography studies of the modern Cherokee population, amidst the deprived socio-economic communities that harbor the largest methamphetamine labs in the state, along side the indulgent luxurious neighbors of Biltmore Forest on the fringes of the estate left by George Vanderbilt. And that is just in North Carolina. I can see huge opportunity in writing about the West Virginia coal mining country and mountains afflicted by fracking. The Appalachian range is distinct for the United States. What characteristics, themes, and similarities are common to this place? How are authors from Appalachia different from writers on the coastal plains? What is the future of Appalachia in terms of economic development and sustainability of its native residents?

I did not realize how much these three poets often get grouped together until I saw the panel presentations they did at the 25th Anniversary of *Iron Mountain Review*. At that conference, held in Spring 2007, Robert Morgan and Ron Rash spoke on a panel entitled “Nature, Place, and the Appalachian Writer,” Morgan and Kay Byer spoke on the “Religion, the Sacred, and the Appalachian Writer” panel, and Byer and Rash spoke on “Continuity and Change: Future Directions in Appalachian Literature,” all within a two-

day conference. The three poets are very similar in their writing, their subjects, and their treatment of landscape as text. I chose them because of their obvious link to the Blue Ridge Parkway and to represent North Carolina poetry, but they are considered to be similar also by other entities such as *Iron Mountain*. The twenty-fifth Anniversary Literary Festival included other poets too—Michael McFee, Fred Chappell, and George Ella Lyon—as well as other genre writers such as Sharon McCrumb, Gurney Norman, Maggie Anderson, Lee Smith, and John Ehle, among others.

I should note that by grouping Morgan, Byer, and Rash together and emphasizing their commonalities, I do not mean to ignore their differences. For example, Robert Morgan is writing from his life in New York State, during his career as an academic at Cornell University. His poetry is isolated and exclusive in terms of language. What do readers outside of Appalachia know of a potato hole? Kay Byer is channeling women of the mountains and their personal stories. Whether it is Alma or the voices of native Cherokees, Byer is weaving their stories into her black shawl. Ron Rash appeals to readers inside and outside of Appalachia due to his tendency to make an image and then compare it to something non-Appalachian to open up this world to readers from Brooklyn or even Belfast. His poetry and novels have an appeal with a larger audience than either Byer or Morgan.

It was interesting to see the poetic legacy of Appalachian writers in Kentucky versus North Carolina. This is due in part to a program Gurney Norman helped John Stephenson with at the University of Kentucky in 1980 called the “Appalachian Poetry Project” (Lyon 7). This program got a \$20,000 grant from the Witter Bynner Foundation

and “held twenty workshops in six states conducted by local writers.” George Ella Lyon’s job was to contact the writers. Many poets came out of this program, and the Appalachian poetry of Kentucky flourished (6-7). The legacy of this program is huge. The difference that a program like this makes is exponential growth because people get access to workshops and teacher-writers that they may not have gotten otherwise, due to cost or accessibility. Poets grew out of the place because poetry was valued with vested interests. The benefits in turn, build education, culture, art, creativity, and a literary community. It is good that the funding was available to these Kentucky writers, but it makes me wonder how many poets are out there now in other states, just needing a workshop or a poetic community to enable them to further their art.

With the cutting of arts funding across the nation, the future for grants and programs like the Appalachian Poetry Project might be bleak. Continuous study of poetry, support of local writers through workshops, open mic opportunities, and just getting poetry out and into the lives of the general population is more important than ever. In North Carolina, we have cells of poets around the larger metro areas of Charlotte and Raleigh-Durham (especially around the universities), and we even have outlier poetic communities in smaller towns, but it seems to me that if you do not live near these poetic communities, the opportunity to share work, learn from other writers, or to be exposed to published poets, is virtually non-existent. Poetry is an accessible literary form for many people from all walks of life. People already participate in poetry through writing and reading, even though they may not have a formal education or very little training in writing poetry. No other literary form reaches drastically different demographics like

poetry does, nor has the capacity to be read at events like presidential inaugurations, city council meetings, or to commemorate a high-school graduation. There are no appointments of state or national novelists, or essayists, yet many states have a poet laureate. Poetry is the only literary genre that captures the audience or reader through the way it conveys different facets of story, music, imagination, and structure (Orr). Poetry can be appealing on multiple levels to cater to differences in aesthetic preferences, educational backgrounds, and world view. It is crucial to foster poets and poetry because of its potential to reach a diverse population and its importance as a vehicle to express the creative arts. Poetry sustains culture and memory, it holds our places and enables our voices to be preserved for the future, and therefore it is imperative that it be nurtured and supported to maintain our selves and our communities.

North Carolina native Fred Chappell offers a plea of hope for the southern Appalachians in his poem “A Prayer for the Mountains.” He acknowledges the mountains’ past and asks his readers to let them be. The language of stillness permeates the poem; “Let me lie there too and share the sleep / Of the cool ground’s mildest children” (Higgs 347). Chappell urges us all to revision the mountains as places that have influenced our lives and will continue to if left alone:

Let these peaks have happened.
The Hawk-haunted knobs and hollers,
The blind coves, blind as meditation, the white
Rock-face, the laurel hells, the terraced pasture ridge
With its broom sedge combed back by wind:

Let these have taken place, let them be place.

Chappell brings us back to the Cherokee web of life and interconnections that sustains humanity. We've come full circle to realize that the bioregion is more than rocks and plants and weather, but also a force that shapes and molds our actions, our communication, and our very existence. We must recognize that in our need to preserve this wilderness for future generations, there is conflict with the need to maintain the home place. Finding a way to exist within and yet preserve our environment will truly sustain both Earth and humanity. Making poetry allows us to do both.

Poetry also allows us to preserve history by sustaining place for future generations. It's an unearthing of place to reveal what was once here. Ms. Steele was my grandmother Vera's neighbor. Although Ms. Steele has been dead for nearly thirty-five years now, when she was alive she told my mother stories of how her daddy cooked for "those rebel and yankee boys" that slept in their barn while they were traveling—walking — either north or south through the North Carolina foothills during the Civil War. At that time the three persimmon trees that still grow in my grandmother's yard were at the edge of the Old Hickory Highway that used to curve around the trees and wrap around the corner to Ms. Steele's house. Today, the old road bed can still be seen when one looks across the landscape. It is evident where the flat road was, even though now some of it has fencing and a orchard in the road bed. The Old Hickory Highway, which traveled from Salisbury, North Carolina to Asheville, was replaced by NC HWY 70 and later bypassed altogether by Interstate 40. The new road may be the chosen thoroughfare now, but in the old road bed, Vera is finding all kinds of artifacts from former travelers. Each

spring when she tills the land for her garden in the old road bed, she finds something new for her collection she's gathered over the years: arrowheads, tiny glass elixir bottles, carved stones, metal utensils, shards of pottery and buttons. The place is still telling stories of history through the artifacts surfacing year after year in the dirt. The history, which seems ancient now, was really only two generations from me, from 2016. Even I remember Ms. Steele from childhood, and my mother remembers the stories of those soldiers in the barn. Even though 151 years have passed since the time of the Civil War, it is only two people away in someone's memory.

The point is that the place is changing so much more rapidly than people can keep up. It would seem to me that almost everyone living in this global economy of digital overload in 2016 is experiencing some type of solastalgia. Poetry helps us slow the experience and sustain our memories.

In Robert Morgan's "Ancient Talk," he shows us the ties between literature and place through the stories of Thomas Wolfe's travels across the American West. Wolfe stands at the foot of "a great sequoia / for minutes that stretched to an hour, / as though communing with the soul / and roots and monolithic height / of the largest living thing on earth," in an attempt to breach the gap between human and tree, to tap into the energy of earth. He was a "colossus of a man himself, / he clearly felt a bond with peak / and pass and mighty glaciers, / with Rockies and the High Sierra" . . . he was attentive to / the land, the forest, wind, and lore / of native history and craft, / the ancient talk of waterfall" (*Dark Energy* 6). Wolfe is listening to what the land has to say to him. Morgan is listening too, and writing what he notices for readers. Morgan laments that because

Wolfe died a few months after the end of this trip—in fact, his trip was cut short by the illness that eventually killed him—he never got a chance to write down what he learned from listening to the sequoias: “before that wisdom could be fixed / in words and narrative he had / been taken from our mortal sphere.” Literature remains to stand the test of time that humans cannot. In writing, the poet becomes immortal and can speak to generations. Had Wolfe been able to live to tell what he heard, as he had in his other novels, we might have a different understanding today of the sequoias. This might not be a new scientific understanding, as in how Morgan understood Neutrinos after he knew the science behind the tiniest particle, but a poet’s understanding, as in how we can better understand the Neutrino, because of the reading of Morgan’s poem.

The poet supplies an understanding that science cannot. Poets respond to what Professor Peter Middleton—who has written extensively on the connections between science and poetry—calls the scientific need for precision in poetic language:

A poet concerned to understand how contemporary society might become less violent, exploitive, more just, more educated, more integrated into shared social purposes, will be aware that scientific research offers everything from medical improvements and better communication, to models of cooperative understanding embedded in its own research protocols. Science aspires to be progressive . . . Poets interested in the historical forces at work today will therefore be in a somewhat similar position to their predecessors faced with utopian political projects, trying

to distinguish valid ideas from coercive and destructive practices.

(390-91)

Writing poetry beyond a scientific perspective involves the employment of that scientific language in poetry, which is traditionally considered non-technical territory. Using the language of science, poets can explain the nuances of parts of the natural world from a dialectic of aesthetics. Poets can “distinguish between the known and the unknown character of everything from matter to mind” (Middleton 386).

In the study of the sequoia, Wolfe is making sense of the natural world to interpret in and explain it. Morgan, in writing about Wolfe’s contemplation of the sequoia, is acting as a medium between science and poetry in writing his poem. He bridges the gap between the natural element, the sequoia, and the human understanding of that tree. He is a interpreter of nature in this aspect. Morgan goes on to urge readers that Wolfe’s “gift to us . . . is the / suggestion that we find our own / communion with the noble trees / and rocks and diamond peaks, and pause / to see and listen to the whisper / of our now fragile hemisphere” (*Dark Energy* 7). Now Wolfe is speaking again, through Morgan, saying that we should listen to the “fragile hemisphere,” the delicate earth. Poetry in this way serves as a voice for Earth. Poets are the oracles of what nature is trying to tell us.

Writers leave a legacy for other writers to follow. In her article “Thomas Wolfe and Robert Morgan: Influence and Correspondences,” Rebecca Godwin discusses how Morgan was influenced greatly by Wolfe because they came from the same place: “Seeing in print Wolfe’s descriptions of places he knew made Morgan recognize his spot of earth as literature—worthy and exhorted him to write” (55). Audiences love to read

about their places. The familiarity and connection helps readers attribute an enriched meaning of the place. “It is this meaning of story that motivates Morgan . . . showing that he shares Wolfe’s autobiographical impulse and sense that connection over time is integral to human experience . . . Morgan knows that he can preserve the lives of ancestors through recounting their stories in fictionalized and poetic forms” (65).

Godwin is speaking about Morgan here, but it can be argued that Byer and Rash know this too—absolutely they are preserving their ancestors through their writing. Thomas Wolfe’s writing can also be viewed through the lens of solastalgia. Further work could also be done, especially with the concept of home in mind. I would argue that his novels prove that Wolfe cannot go home again because his beloved Asheville is no longer the place it was when he left.

A distinct aspect of poetry is that, like painting and sculpture, it delves into the creative process. However, in sculpture and painting there is material object-ness; there is a tangible object the artist is working on. With poetry, the poem is on the page, yet exists without it. It becomes real the moment it is read. It exists outside of its physical form. Is it in the mind of the poet, the reader, or the audience? It is in all of these. Additionally, it is altered by who reads it, where they read, and when. The same poem can have different contexts and yet continue to be the same poem. Poetry is a unique record of the culture and place, capturing the depth of personal perception and experience of the time it was created. Poetry is inspirational in the sense that we can identify with other human beings and it lets us know that we share our experiences of the tactile world through our senses, our rationale, and our emotions. It contributes to a fuller, richer life

by contrasting our own experiences and perceptions of life with those of others. To promote poetry is to promote humanity.

Poetry is art, and art is about freedom. If art theorist Joseph Beuys is correct when he says “art is the science of freedom,” then poets are the scientists. Poets describe “the essence of being human, the human being as the expression of freedom, embodying, carrying forward and further evolving the world’s evolutionary impulse” (10-11). Beuys may have been thinking about the visual arts when he made this statement, but the creation of poetry is also a visual art in this sense; the making of a poem is an act of freedom, too. In making the poem, the poet also gives a gift—as Heidegger said—the making of a poem is giving. The making of a poem is building, and it’s Maria Damon’s saving. It’s Bachelard’s nests, it’s Wordsworth’s spirit, it’s Thomas Wolfe’s home. Poetry keeps us here, when here isn’t here anymore. Most of all, poetry sustains place and people.

In a letter to his editor, Maxwell Perkins, Thomas Wolfe articulated how people here embody this place:

I know what I know: The people of North Carolina have these same wonderful qualities as the tobacco, the great juicy peaches, melons, apples, the wonderful shad and oysters of the coast, the rich red clay, the haunting brooding quality of the earth. They are rich, juicy, deliberate, full of pungent and sardonic humor and honesty, conservative and cautious on top, but at bottom, wild, savage and full of the murderous innocence of the earth and the wilderness. (Adams)

Certainly Morgan, Byer, and Rash are these North Carolinians that are so much like the tobacco and peaches, oysters and clay. They are rooting these southern Appalachians mountains with poetry so rich and deep that it'll hold these hills for a good, long time.

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APPENDIX A

Six Poems by Me Inspired by These Poets' Places

Poetry of Place

While outside the analytical body of this dissertation, these poems were inspired by the poems and places of Morgan, Byer, and Rash. They were composed during the writing of the dissertation, usually after the photography trips, which allowed me to see the places first hand. Then, as Rueckert would attest, the poems just grew out of those places through me. They certainly demonstrate how poetry grows from and out of the landscape and how my mind, processing the theoretical approaches and poetry of the mountains, came up with poems to demonstrate the argument. In other words, these poems are the art to the dissertation's science.

A MEMORIAL IS WHAT'S LEFT

to mark a place
a place is where you are
where you are is not here
here means nothing
nothing is space
space is all
I have

THE OLD FORT ANGEL WAS LOST IN A POKER GAME

she was put to good use the next year when the winner's wife died.
Wife number two was always too jealous.
She knew she'd never get an angel like that.
Until she realized it had all been a gamble, a fluke, luck.

THE MARBLE IS CARVED USING CHISELS

the finished piece is not the whole
not ever what it was once
missing edges, gone roughness
years of geological time
chipped off. The piece
is losing something the whole time.
To be an angel you need to have been good.
God's right-hand girl
almost all, but lost.

THE DAY WE SEARCHED FOR THE ANGELS

Dad talked about what it will mean to die
how he doesn't really want a burial anymore
but liked this cemetery
the family part
the big embossed lettered names
the stone stories

WE SHALL NOT COME AGAIN. WE NEVER SHALL COME BACK AGAIN

here where I stand on top of Robert Morgan's poem
the Devil's Courthouse, facing west
there is Snowbird Mountain—
another poem, this time Kay Byer's Tuckaseegee
I can see the last light of years leaving lavender into Tennessee
how memory un-scrolls as it falls away
shears and spikes between poems
as black takes the sky dome

the words rise, rough and jagged
topographic shifts between last summer
and a decade ago
between crag and gorge
when we laughed all night
last night as leaves let go of limbs
and rime ice glazed prisms in first light
then fell at noon, marbles thinking in snowmelt

here is a night, a tent on Price Lake
the bobcat cries, a bat is wisping against the red nylon wall, trying to get heat— I unzip
the door
the same door that opens again, each time—the same time. Across the ridge there is a full
moon over Pisgah
there is then, before you left the Deerlick overlook
under the Little Dipper, or Orion, or any star—
because we are here, and I smell balsam in your hair.

THE WOLFE ANGEL

When we stood in Oakdale Cemetery in Hendersonville in that little square earth, not close at all to Pack Square, her old haunt; I thought about her hands, her hair, how she'd been first caressed in Italy—Carrara, over a century ago, then crated for her Atlantic voyage, a train ride from a coastal port like Charleston, up across the Sandhills into the foothills, up Old Fort hill then through the Blacks, the mountain tunnel—to be born again into a teacup of ash, loaded onto a horse-drawn wagon and rocked over to W.O.'s porch to stand eye-to-eye with the six-year-old, to singe his boy brain with marble feathers, to ride again forty miles to this green square for Mrs. Margaret Bates-Johnson—but not for her—for me she came: to weather snow, rain, lightening: for forty thousand days until I would come to her in search of home.