Of This Ground:
Land as Refuge in the Works of Three Kentucky Women Writers

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DEDICATION

For Ethan, whom I carried with me on this journey: may you come to know your Kentucky roots through experience, through family, and through story.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the memoirs, novels, and short stories of three women writers whose work is heavily invested in a sense of place and privileges women's relationships to the land: Harriette Simpson Arnow, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Barbara Kingsolver. All of these women spent their formative years in Kentucky, which for the purposes of this project classifies them as "Kentucky writers." As a group these women offer a one possible solution to modern concerns for women: a relationship to the land as refuge. Engagement with the land as refuge provides a sense of satisfaction, a source of therapy, and a place of solace from which female characters in their work gain empowerment in the dynamic era following 1945. This solution is a response to issues such as economic displacement; the desire and necessity for a higher education; adventure and freedom from family and community expectations; increased opportunities to gain employment; greater independence; and prejudice, divorce, abuse, war, illness, and the death of a child or other family member. Whether these characters garden, subsume themselves in nature, or decide to live in cooperation with their environment when other options are readily available, choosing to engage with the land when faced with such concerns, both physically and ideologically, allows them to move forward. Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver therefore reconceptualize the land through rhetorical regionalism, repurposing it to benefit characters in the modern era. As a result, this work affirms the relevance of regionalism in the twenty-first century. In order to do so effectively, it is organized into two parts. Part one offers a discussion of regionalism, an exploration of modern women's history, and an overview of ecofeminist literary criticism. Part two presents primary texts and critical interpretations of those texts. Ultimately, as this dissertation shows, Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver offer confirmation that literary depictions born out of a writer's rootedness in a place maintain their potency, especially as women continue to present their unique concerns and assess dominant views at both local and societal levels in new ways in new eras.

PREFACE

"I am a product of this ground."

Bobbie Ann Mason,
Clear Springs

I would like to preface this dissertation by acknowledging my own rootedness in Kentucky. I was born in Fayette County and raised in both Fayette County (Lexington) and Harrison County (Cynthiana). I also come from a farming family. My grandparents, Paul and Rilla Juett, were farmers in rural Harrison County where they grew tobacco and corn and raised beef cattle. My grandmother also maintained a vegetable garden, sewed often, raised chickens, and worked alongside my grandfather in the fields. My experiences on their farm, from the time I was born until they passed away in 1999, were extremely formative; they attuned me to the importance of the land, the beauty of nature, and the rewards of hard work. The influence of that place and those times is forever with me, coloring not only my scholarship, but my worldview.

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Introduction

Of This Ground:

Land as Refuge in the Works of Three Kentucky Women Writers

In *Regionalism and the Humanities: Decline or Revival?* (2008) Wendy J. Katz and Timothy R. Mahoney question the position of place and space studies near the end of the twenty-first century's first decade. Not only are such studies alive, well, and relevant in their estimation, but they also represent a "repackaged, more aggressive endeavor" to understand who we are as humans in an increasingly globalized world. Even more than gender, race, or class today, theorists of place posit that understanding oneself through location, whether it is the place where one lives, "makes" home, or travels to, "h(as) come to matter even more for many people, as they struggle to hold on to that which makes them distinct" (ix - x). While distinctiveness is often problematic, privileging what is perceived as mainstream and cosmopolitan at the expense of the unfamiliar and rare, or highlighting the exceptional and failing to see commonalities, the "desire to belong somewhere," continues to intensify as the world shrinks. Thus, we wield human capacities in art, literature, music, architecture, etc., in local and regional ways "to establish a connection to a place and community" that will allow us a "benign kind of difference," we hope, to be met with "understanding, appreciation, and respect" (xxiv – xxv).

Certainly, a respect for difference combined with an appreciation for the universal is a tall order, even with today's increased awareness of economic constraints, gender inequalities, and racial bias as taught through the struggles and successes of previous eras. Although the excesses of the nineteenth-century local color movement have faded, the impulse within them for the recognition of "unique" places remains strong today. In fact, a desire to identify with and

speak from individual places and experiences only increases as both readers and authors face an era increasingly marked by national and global homogeneity.

"Of This Ground: Land as Refuge in the Works of Three Kentucky Writers" tracks the response of three women writers who have sought to maintain one tenet of the local color tradition in the modern era: preserving uniqueness of place and depicting local culture. Yet, they dramatically shift the paradigm governing how that place and culture are represented. What was once based on geography and primarily constructed through a voyeuristic, exploitive lens has become for them a means of perpetuating a community rather than providing an image of that community. In other words, Harriette Simpson Arnow, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Barbara Kingsolver employ a rhetorical regionalism wherein they, and writers like them, speak from inside the culture they write about to preserve and validate regional identity. The clearer understanding of local people and culture offered through their resident perspectives provides an expression of place that resonates with readers.

Examples of characters in the regional tradition demonstrate sharp contrast, for instance, in regard to mountain women depicted from outside and inside the culture: the negatively stereotyped female characters of southern Appalachia found in local color stories written in the nineteenth-century differ greatly from the strong, knowledgeable female types found in the twentieth-century work of James Still, Wilma Dykeman, Lee Smith, Charles Frazier, and Robert Morgan. It is impressive that the scale of types for southern Appalachian women has significantly enlarged in a hundred years, turning as it has on evidence evaluated from different perspectives. Such a shift is no small feat for a region that, in the words of Lee Smith's Ivy Rowe, has often been "robbed and left for dead" (295). As writing in the twentieth-century and beyond pushed for "truer," or more authentic, understanding of places and people, it not only

remained vital, as Katz and Mahoney attest, but it also opened the door to theories of regionalism wherein place is "a lived space that is actively created by inhabiting it as well as writing about it" (Miller 80; Mitchell, T. 409). In speaking of the region, then, these writers speak the region; that is, they create and re-create it rhetorically, so readers may maintain their desired identifications with place.

For women practitioners especially, writing about regions, or more specifically places within them, has offered a significant avenue for entrance to and entrenchment in the American literary scene. According to Sherrie A. Inness and Diana Royer in *Breaking Boundaries: New Perspectives on Women's Regional Writing*, the largely female local color movement was only one "small phase" in women's writing about places and people. Instead of constraining women, they aptly argue, "throughout U.S. history, regional writing has been a way for women to write about their unique experiences and to critique hegemonic concepts" (2). They continue:

> Over the decades, women's regional literature has dealt with recurring issues that are of particular interest to women, such as the relationship of the local community with the larger society, the interpersonal relationships of community members, and the position of women both within the community and in larger society. By addressing these issues and others, women's regional literature passes on a legacy of subversion, employing the conventions of the genre to put forth, whether covertly or not, social criticism and correctives. As regional writers present their communities, real and imagined, they engage in multiple discourses born out of those communities, discourses that embody cultural conflict and reflect social tension even as they seek to resolve those very issues. (2 – 3)

If regionalism continually provides a framework from which women not only participate in our national literature, but also present and critique their concerns both for specific communities and the larger society, and if regionalism is increasingly relevant in our globalized world, then what solutions do women regionalists offer to modern concerns?

In response to this question, "Of This Ground" investigates the memoirs, novels, and short stories of Harriette Simpson Arnow, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Barbara Kingsolver, authors whose work is heavily invested in a sense of place and privileges women's relationship to the land. All of these women spent their formative years, the years of childhood and youth that help to shape one's worldview, in Kentucky, which for the purposes of this work classifies them as "Kentucky writers." Categorizing these women in this way primarily helps to limit, organize, and generalize this study since the places within Kentucky that Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver know and create are individual to each woman and her work: the Carlisle area is not Clear Springs which is not the Cumberland, for instance. In other words, labeling these women collectively as Kentucky writers does not overlook the qualities of each woman's native locale within Kentucky. In her 1956 essay "Place in Fiction," Eudora Welty recognizes the important link between the discovery of place and the personal for each writer; it is, she indicates, a matter of creating a new vision, which is "longest understood" in art when it "speaks most clearly, explicitly, directly, and passionately from its place of origin" (453).

Writing about specific places also connects these women and their work to larger regions that include part of, but are not limited to, Kentucky. Each author depicts geography, cultural practices, speech patterns, or addresses concerns readily identifiable with a region, or an area within a region, as well as with the local community. Arnow explores Appalachian eastern Kentucky, an area in the heart of southern Appalachia which bears the brunt of the nation's worst

stereotypes, experiences the deep devastations of mountain history associated with logging, coal mining, and the War on Poverty, and yet maintains a proud cultural resilience. Kingsolver is connected with the central Kentucky Bluegrass, an area known for its horse racing, including the Kentucky Derby, bourbon, and tourism, but she is more often viewed nationally as connected to the American Southwest and southwestern Virginia. Mason writes about the western area of the state, a Kentucky more removed from outside perceptions and akin to the American Midwest. As a literary group, the three writers are more generally considered Southern or southern Appalachian, highlighting the sensibilities all three derive from their rural upbringings. Although each has lived in and written fiction set in places other than Kentucky, from Detroit to the Congo, this analysis considers primarily the work each woman has set, in whole or part, in Kentucky and surrounding areas. Also presented are secondary examples of land as refuge when the themes appear in works not set in these locations since the "palpable, organic [and] local" qualities of each place make each woman's work simultaneously regional and universal (Hardwig qtd. in Ensor).

The southern and/or southern Appalachian, rural settings each author uses help bring to the fore a connectedness to land that allows characters to call on a common solution to issues confronted by the modern woman and, often as corollary, representation of longstanding human trials such as:

- economic displacement
- the desire and necessity for higher education
- adventure and freedom from community or family expectations
- increased opportunities to gain employment

- greater independence
- prejudice, divorce, abuse, war, illness, or the loss of a child or other family member

These issues are of particular concern to women from the post-WWII era to the present as jobs in rural areas, such as farming and factory work, become less profitable or available and families seek work outside their communities. Rural areas give way to development and more women enter the workforce, creating a tension between home and career. The feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s proclaims equality and encourages women to seek personal fulfillment, while increasing automobile ownership provides women a means of reaching their goals, further compromising traditional expectations.

Harriette Simpson Arnow, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Barbara Kingsolver's depictions of women in particular communities engage one possible solution to the changing roles of women presented by modern dynamics: a relationship with the land as refuge. Their female characters grow gardens, subsume themselves in nature, or make choices to live cooperatively with their environment when other options are easier and more readily available. Often, engaging with the land in this way, both physically and ideologically, allows women to move forward. As such, characters' engagement with the land as a refuge provides a sense of satisfaction, a source of therapy, and a place of solace from which they gain empowerment. Arnow's Gertie Nevels, for instance, must leave Kentucky for Detroit due to economic reasons, but she never fully leaves it behind; ultimately her little garden plot pulls her through discrimination and disappointment to reconnect to her home and herself. Kingsolver's Taylor Greer leaves Kentucky for the West to escape her hometown fate as a young wife and mother only to recreate it through experiences

and people, bringing herself full circle with thoughts of wisteria vines or "bean trees." Mason's Samantha Hughes reenacts her father's Vietnam experience at the local lake to understand more fully what it is to experience the extremes of tranquility and terror under the same night sky. In their memoirs, *Clear Springs* and *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, respectively, Mason and Kingsolver rediscover lost desires; not wanting to be bound by the gender constraints of their mothers they leave home, become educated, and start careers only to be most fulfilled when they reestablish their early connections to land, physically touching the earth.

Engaging the land may be interpreted by some as a retreat from the pressures of modern life or as antithetical to progress for women, primarily when associated with the rural lives many worked hard to leave. As Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver saw first-hand through their foremothers, women's lives lived close to the land in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were primarily tied to the manual labor associated with family sustenance. Especially prominent in the work of authors native to the region who set their stories in rural places prior to the modern era, such women face great hardship the next generation would certainly avoid if possible. Even so, their lives are depicted with sincerity and not entirely without reward. A concept developed in my master's thesis, "Angel on the Mountain: Homestead Heroism in Appalachian Fiction," homestead heroism provides a means of identifying and labeling positive female character types who care for their families, work the land to provide sustenance, are appreciative of and knowledgeable about their surroundings, maintain tradition, etc.

Prior to her depiction of Gertie Nevels in *The Dollmaker*, for example, Harriette Simpson Arnow offers readers Corie Cal in *Mountain Path* and Milly Ballew in *Hunter's Horn*, both of whom fit the criteria for this character type. Corie and Milly toil endlessly to raise children and maintain the homestead, exhibiting a resolve born of necessity. Yet, they find some respite in

their natural surroundings. Alone between moonset and dawn, when her work is finished and her children asleep, Milly recaptures "all the mystery of the world that belonged with childhood – the scrape of a windblown leaf against a stone, the black hills against the stars, the creek fog seen dimly, like a milk-white river rolling slowly past the little barn; the black east with the morning star, and in front of her, like it was stuck into the hill across the creek, the Big Dipper riding straight upon its handle" (39). Reminded of the awe she once felt for nature's beauty, Milly gathers strength for the next day's work on the farm.

"Products of This Ground" explores, then, how the land still "figure(s) in" for women in the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first when it is no longer a necessary means for sustenance on an individual or familial basis (Dyer 3). Working or appreciating the land in modern contexts, while still based on the knowledge women gain from growing up in farming families, becomes a choice derived from psychological need or individual desire rather than from primary food production. In other words, Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver present female characters from 1945 to the present that maintain the connection to land evident in Milly's nighttime observations, but leave behind the necessity of the rigorous, unyielding manual toil her lifestyle demands. Thus, Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver depict women in ways that involve environmentalism, preservation, food, and inspiration but as secondary to a woman's need to solve modern problems. The land becomes more than a brief respite or a romantic retreat in such instances; it is the site of support women seek when considering the problems the modern era puts before them. As a refuge, then, connection to land allows women to gather strength from their own rural experiences and those of the generations before them to support them in their modern lives. While both avenues of representation privilege land and its potential, giving it agency, one portrays the land as primary to the relationship, while the other focuses on the

human need to solve problems as primary. As Bobbie Ann Mason indicates in *Clear Springs*, women can turn to their rural heritage physically and/or mentally in times of trial without relapsing into the lifestyle modern opportunities allow them to avoid.

Indeed, the decision to turn to the land as refuge is a distinctive choice and should, in fact, be read as a feminist act. In the foreword to Norman Wirzba's *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, Barbara Kingsolver tellingly speaks of reclaiming her rural origins: "with some chagrin I'll admit that I grew up among farmers and spent the first decades of my life plotting my escape from a place that seemed to offer me almost no potential for economic, intellectual, or spiritual satisfaction. It took nigh onto half a lifetime before the valuables I'd casually left behind turned up in the lost and found" (ix). Although it took Kingsolver a while to understand the value of her seemingly limited upbringing, her reconnection to the land has left an indelible impression on her work. Indeed, the intentional turn to nature in Kingsolver, Mason, and Arnow's depictions of women's engagement with land sets these three writers apart for study; while other women regionalists have provided female characters who are homestead heroes, environmentalists, preservationists, and the like who extol the land for its role in human sustenance, local ecology, and natural beauty, Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver are unique in the way they use interaction with the land as a desired, direct response to the modern concerns women face. As they confront the promises and pitfalls of modern society, as well as longstanding trials, they turn to nature as a refuge for healing, connection, and understanding.

The difference noted here between working with and appreciating the land for family survival versus working with and appreciating the land as a refuge when subsistence farming is no longer necessary also helps us to more clearly differentiate between the role land plays in men

and women's writing, especially in the South and/or southern Appalachia. While both groups of writers readily produce the homestead heroes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as seen in the aforementioned list of southern Appalachian fiction writers associated with strong female character types, writing that portrays a modern setting appears to diverge somewhat. Male writers, when writing against the backdrop of their modern concerns, particularly the loss of rural farmland for industry, development, and suburban living, as well as changes in technology, tend to provide models embedded in a farming lifestyle rather than a response that repurposes the land for modern use.

Wendell Berry, for example, centers his fiction on Port William, Kentucky, tracing the life of a farming community as its citizens experience modern concerns; the juxtapositions he creates make it clear that the previous way of life is preferable, more sustainable, and celebrates stewardship of the land. His depictions bring to mind the Vanderbilt Agrarians, a distinctly Southern-identified, male literary movement, which reconstructed the South's agrarian past as "a metaphor for the good life" in contrast with the industrial challenges of their day (Ward 189). We could certainly consider Berry a modern-day Agrarian, although his agrarianism is as much practice as it is position; he did indeed move back to his native land, where he farms, and promotes ecological health. His portrayals of Port William and its characters, therefore, not only show us a "better" way of life, but how that life must be maintained over generations if it is to survive. In short, male writers like Berry maintain a vision of lives lived in cooperation with the land as it was and could be in varying degrees. Yet, there is an overarching sense in such works of attempting to hold on to something rapidly fading or already lost.

Women writers like Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver, on the other hand, do not seek to model a particular way of life as the solution to their problems. Connie R. Schomburg finds that

exploring "the importance of the land," has remained a "defining characteristic of …southern [and southern Appalachian] women's writing" from its "very beginning" to the present, but what should intrigue us now in a changing landscape, she states, are the "wide variety of responses" southern women writers provide to those changes, especially in the latter twentieth century (478). In the instances explored here, interacting with the land is itself a response used to deal effectively with women's modern concerns; thus, the depiction of the land is different from previous eras. Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver reconceptualize the land, repurposing it to benefit female characters confronting contemporary issues. While this can and often does take place in a rural setting, it is also accessible in small garden plots or terracotta porch pots. In short, the characteristic signs of land as refuge in women's writing are the links between a modern concern, interaction with the land as the response, or refuge, and as a result, attaining the ability to deal with or overcome the issue.

The land's role in sustaining human souls compellingly links Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver to Romanticism. Romanticism, in both British and American literature, as defined by William Harmon and Hugh Holman:

> [is]…a literary and philosophical theory that tends to see the individual at the center of all life and…therefore, at the center of art, making literature valuable as an expression of unique feelings and particular attitudes… [;] it more often sees in nature a revelation of Truth… [and] a more suitable subject for art…[and] seeks to find the Absolute, the Ideal by transcending the actual. (457)

Similarly, the depictions considered here reveal an individual's struggle to rise above her immediate circumstances through a connection to nature; her interactions with nature while gardening, occupying, and cooperating with the land are the means of seeking identity**.** However,

to regard this group of writers solely as modern day Romantics is to overlook the realistic presentation of and factors inherent in the modern concerns they present, critique, and attempt to resolve through an attention to land as a refuge. What we see here, then, is a significant merging of the romantic and the real, a blending of the Romantic tradition and the Realism that followed it, including the verisimilitude that has helped to foster a rhetorical regionalism. In short, romanticism allows modern women to effectively manage, critique, and even more clearly understand their reality.

To investigate more deeply the way Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver link land and the modern era this work considers how theoretical conversations regarding ecofeminist literary criticism help illuminate their texts. Perhaps more than any other critic, Elizabeth S.D. Englehardt has eloquently and convincingly brought ecofeminism's "promise," a cooperative understanding between humans and their environment, to the forefront of regional literature, particularly in southern Appalachia (Englehardt 351; *Tangled Roots* 3 – 4). As a response to mainstream feminism, ecological feminism has historically sought to redefine woman's relationship to nature so that it is no longer a site of misogyny, but rather a work-related, knowledge-based familiarity with the land (Alaimo 2-4).

In "Nature-Loving Souls and Appalachian Mountains: The Promise of Feminist Ecocriticism" Englehardt states, "Today's theoretical stance of feminist ecocriticism combines a focus on place…with an attention to the workings of social and cultural power in the place" (341). Consequently, there are two categorical questions that help to aid the application of feminist ecocriticism to literature: "how does an author talk about – in theoretical terms, 'construct' – nature in his or her text? And, how does the author's discussion of race, class, and gender intersect with that construction of nature in the text?" (343). Using these questions as

starting points for theoretical investigation links these authors through the creation of land as refuge and highlights how each writer builds upon this central theme through the uses of specific landscapes such as garden, national park, farm, lake, etc. Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver create characters who return purposefully to land in particular communities to address economic, social, and educational challenges confronting modern women. Primarily revealing a gendered response, albeit one inherently tied to race and class, the natural environments these authors create reveal the effectiveness of a character's interaction with the land.

It is important to note here that feminist ecocriticism is not essentialist in nature. It "avoids big statements about 'all women' or 'all men' and instead begins with the assumption that gender, race, class, and other categories of power and privilege are inseparable and must be analyzed together" (Englehardt "Promise" 342). While my concentration in this work is on women writers whose female characters employ land as refuge in response to modern problems, I do not mean to suggest that men do not use land in the same way in literature. Indeed, considering texts by and/or about men in much this same way could be a useful addition to this discussion in the future. A text such as Gurney Norman's *Divine Right's Trip* (1972), for example, might provide some compelling connections. In this text the main character David Ray travels across the country with his girlfriend Estelle only to find a true sense of self back home in Kentucky (Arnold).

In addition to the fictional representations of female connectedness to land, all three authors in my study have expressed a deep personal connection to the places they write about and the physical landscapes they have encountered; they have done so passionately and repeatedly in non-fiction essays and memoirs. In the acknowledgements to *Prodigal Summer*, for example, Barbara Kingsolver recognizes the impact of one's investment in place on personal

worldview. She states, "I'm pretty sure I owe my particular way of looking at the world, colored heavily in greens, to my parents' choosing to rear me in the wrinkle on the map that lies between farms and wilderness…" (x). Each is also acutely attuned to what George Ella Lyon, another female writer from Kentucky, has called "Voiceplace." "Voice" for Lyon reaches well beyond dialect to encompass the whole of storytelling and place is more than just location or geography. Voice and place together offer a rootedness that nourishes; it "gives [writers] a context, a tapestry of conditions and stories into which [their] own stories will be woven and from which [they] can follow the thread of others" (171 – 172). Each woman has rooted herself in the places she writes about, giving readers compelling depictions of people and culture while exploring and responding to contemporary social issues.

These authors are regionalists primarily because they have at some point lived in, made a home in, or significantly visited, the locations where they set their stories, investing themselves in a community and the environment and considering the roles those communities play in identity formation (Inness and Royer 7). They tap into what Lawrence Durrell has called "ness," "an enduring faculty of self-expression," derived from those locations, since "their culture-productions…bear the unmistakable signature of the place" (157). For Durrell, familiarity with "ness" requires an intimate knowledge crafted through stillness, quiet, and ultimately identification, whether through visitation or birth, to which I add being raised, and/or living in a certain locale. In short, a true regionalist is intimately familiar with what he or she is talking about based on significant personal experience; Kingsolver, like Arnow and Mason, writes about the "sort of places [she] know(s)" (38). In doing so, all three avoid the pitfalls of new regionalism wherein a writer might base "literary landscapes on an artist's paintings," as Annie

Proulx's "Dangerous Ground, Landscape in American Fiction" attests, without ever visiting the places she depicts (Katz and Mahoney xii; Proulx 23).

The regional fiction analyzed in this work thus begins first and foremost with rootedness, to borrow Lyon's term, the site of sustenance for the author and her work. Place, understood in this way, becomes much more than setting, even faithfully represented. With one eye toward history and one eye toward the future, Arnow, Lyon, and Kingsolver offer realistic portrayals of customs and people, environments, and issues and responses that have resonance with local and regional readers and the capacity to contribute to national, even global, conversations about human concerns. As theories of new regionalism indicate, regionalism as a discourse encourages reader identification in a globalized world, connects to communities and thoughtfully presents differences, thereby more fully recognizing, even privileging, the work of authors who write from the inside out. Rhetorical regionalism, however, goes beyond our present understanding of regionalism as a rhetorical practice. As explained in detail in chapter one, it calls attention to the way regionalism promotes identity, especially for women facing modern concerns in a globalized world.

***

"Of This Ground" includes an introduction, a conclusion, and two sections containing two chapters each. Part one, chapter one builds on Jim Wayne Miller's assertion that regional history should be taught for the sake of the present and the future. To do so, it first offers an extended definition of rhetorical regionalism. In order to contextualize this definition, the chapter then traces regionalism into the twenty-first century. Important discussion points from the history of regionalism include local color, literary access for women, geographic determinism, empathetic narration, the Agrarians, postmodernism, and regionalism as discourse.

Ultimately, this chapter promotes a more prominent place for regionalism within the body of American literature through the rhetorical regionalism Harriette Simpson Arnow, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Barbara Kingsolver employ in creating their fiction.

Since rhetorical regionalism is especially relevant for women regionalists, it is closely linked to the concerns that women face. For the three women writers considered in this study modern concerns are closely associated with changes in expectations and opportunities for rural women. Thus, part one, chapter two establishes the need to respond to modern concerns for women by discussing the changes women experienced following WWII, especially in rural areas. In order to see more clearly how the concerns arising from those changes lead women to engage the land as a refuge the theory of ecofeminism is then established as the critical apparatus for reading the regional literature of Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver.

Part two considers the primary works and critical interpretation of various texts by any and/or all of the three authors to illustrate the convergence of modern social issues and the depiction of land as refuge. Chapter three centers on the modern concern of economic displacement and resulting prejudice influencing Harriette Simpson Arnow's *The Dollmaker* (1954). In doing so, it positions Arnow as the literary foremother of Mason and Kingsolver. Writing most prolifically in the generation before them, Arnow's seminal text shows most clearly the shift from homestead heroism to the engagement of the land as refuge as well as the latter's ability in helping modern women from rural backgrounds more fully connect to their disparate identities. Thus, chapter three also explores lesser known works by Arnow such as *Mountain Path* (1936) and *Hunter's Horn* (1949).

Building on Arnow's work, chapter four examines the search for "more" Bobbie Ann Mason and Barbara Kingsolver experience and depict. In an era of new opportunity for women

these authors and their characters seek the satisfaction that education, adventure, and employment promise, only to find something lacking in their modern lives. In the multiple works considered in this chapter – including both authors' memoirs, *Clear Springs* (1999) *and Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (2007); Mason's novels *In Country* (1985) and *Nancy Culpepper* (2007), and her collection *Shiloh and Other Stories* (1982); and Kingsolver's novels *The Bean Trees* (1988) and *Prodigal Summer* (2000) and her collection *Homeland and Other Stories* (1989) – Mason and Kingsolver show that modern women from rural backgrounds need to establish a mutually beneficial relationship with the land as a refuge in order to fully express their identity and gain the fulfillment they ultimately seek.

Part I

Regionalism, Modern Women's History, & Ecofeminist Literary Criticism

Chapter One

To Establish and Maintain Identity:

Tracing Regionalism into the Twenty-first Century

*"*The writer of a given region cannot shut himself away under the name, regionalist; but he must, from his region, confront the total and moving world*."*

- Donald Davidson,
"Regionalism and Nationalism in American Literature"

Renowned Appalachian scholar Jim Wayne Miller offers a brief, pointed defense for contemporary regional studies. He states, "We should be concerned with teaching the history and culture of our different regions not for the past's sake, but for the sake of the present and the future…Such [a] view counters the rootless uniformity of popular culture with the realization of rooted diversity" (qtd. in McNeil and Squibb xviii). A poet and novelist, Miller knows firsthand the important role literature plays in this effort. Stories written from an author's rootedness in place resist homogeneity while offering connections to common human experience. Readers can sustain their desired regional identities as they identify with the characters and cultures they read about and more fully empathize with others when they do not. As suggested in the introduction, contemporary regional fiction thereby provides a means for achieving the seemingly impossible balance between a respect for difference and an appreciation for the universal in a rapidly globalizing world. Long marginalized within American literature, regionalism's role in maintaining identity and mediating distinction promises place-based fiction a greater prominence as the twenty-first century progresses, a function Miller himself predicted in "A Cosmopolitan Regionalism" in 1991. In order to situate "Of This Ground" and the authors it considers prominently within regional literature and regional literature more notably within the wider body

of American literature, this chapter more fully defines rhetorical regionalism in the twenty-first century and traces the history of regionalism that supports it.

Rhetorical Regionalism

Regional literature's ability to negotiate the specificity of place and the common qualities of human experience is directly linked to place-based writing's rhetorical qualities. Although regional writing has been understood as a highly rhetorical practice since the 1970s, just what that means for readers seeking desired identifications in a globalized post-millennial world has yet to be fully considered. As regional places change with increasing rapidity, no longer existing as they once did, and readers come to depend more and more on fiction to create, recreate, and thereby maintain places with which they wish to identify, what exists for many only in memory remains alive and well on the page. Miller affirms, "Our writers contribute significantly to our awareness of ourselves as people of a region and of a particular community. For in contemporary America, just as they have done in all times and places, writers function as creators and sustainers of communities of memory" ("Cosmopolitan"). How that memory influences self-identification is of central concern for regional scholars in the twenty-first century.

Rhetorical regionalism builds therefore upon "new" understandings of region as "the experience of a social group" connected to a place and the politics acting in and upon that place to recognize more fully that regional writers both preserve regions – not as static images but as active expressions – and validate regional experience (Wilson xii – xiii). Rhetorical regionalism pinpoints the capability of fiction to be closer to one's desired truth than fact; such illustrations allow readers' regional identities to be ever present regardless of current or past circumstances. Stories about a place similar to one's family farm and rural culture, for example, become a more powerful reality than the actual facts of life on that farm, lives lived far removed from that farm,

or the loss of that family farm all together (L'Engle 89). In effect, readers who claim regional identities take their regionalism with them: they take what they desire from their own experiences; find support for those experiences through the rhetoric of regional writers; and use them as influences in their present lives wherever and however those lives are lived. Essentially, rhetorical regionalism provides terminology for the intuitive process readers experience when they encounter themselves and their culture on the written page and then bring that affirmation to bear on their daily lives. As Kenneth Burke suggests, readers are invited "to make [themselves] over in the imagery offered" (281). Scenes, whether created through physical displays or depicted in literature, "invite the transformation of one's self" (Halloran and Clark 142). Regionalism thereby remains current and active both through the rhetorical practice of writers and through the self-identification of readers, whether or not they live within their regional culture, as they continue to see themselves regionally.

Rhetorical regionalism is especially tied to the work of women regionalists like Harriette Simpson Arnow, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Barbara Kingsolver. As women writers rooted in rural backgrounds who experienced and write about dramatic shifts in women's lives in the modern era and the concerns inherent in such changes, these three Kentucky women writers have an awesome responsibility. For women who identify with their fiction, the places and characters they create often provide the only link they have left to a way of life that continues to inform who they are as individuals when the rural places they once knew have changed significantly, been left behind, or no longer exist. Thus, their depictions of the land as a refuge in response to modern concerns provide reparation for this loss. Regional author and scholar Gurney Norman tellingly states that "our best writers are true heroes to the community." Not only do such writers "take the materials of local life and make something universal from this part of the world" as

Norman goes on to state, but they also preserve our regions and provide the means by which we continue to see ourselves as tied to the places and cultures associated with those regions, validating our identity (85).

Tracing Regionalism into the Twenty-first Century

If we are to see women's rhetorical regionalism as reflected in the work of Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver as worthy of personal identity, then the core of its significance cannot be separated from faithful representation of places, people, and the issues regional women face. Furthermore, the works these women regionalists produce need to be validated, seen as significant pieces of both regional and American literature, even as they validate the attitudes of readers. The local color movement of the late nineteenth century thus offers a key starting point for tracing the qualities associated with rhetorical regionalism into the twenty-first century. Preserving uniqueness of place and depicting local culture; women's access to publication and the potential of fiction to express unique concerns; and the widely accepted view of regional literature as inconsequential all converge in the years following the Civil War. These moments thus provide an important foundation for appreciating regionalism's role in establishing identity in the twentieth century and maintaining it through rhetorical regionalism in the twenty-first.

Preserving Uniqueness of Place and Depicting Local Culture

Whether to reunify the nation, as in Amy Kaplan's estimation, to capture the culture of seemingly unknown or rapidly vanishing locales according to Eric Sundquist and Cratis D. Williams, to satisfy public curiosity about unknown places as Nathalia Wright suggests, or to ease a post-war identity crisis fueled by jarring economic change in Bill Hardwig's assessment, scores of stories set in specific locations poured out of widely read magazines like *Harper's*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Century*, and *Lippincott's* between 1865 and 1900. Critically deemed "local

color writers," the authors of these stories portrayed supposedly authentic dialect, dress, character, and customs naturally found in specific, isolated geographical locations. Sometimes invested in the communities they wrote about, sometimes not, local color writers offered cosmopolitan readers in Boston and New York intriguing, voyeuristic entertainment "focus(ed) heavily on people and regions at the margins of mainstream American society" (Pryse "Origins" 17; Fetterly and Pryse *Writing Out of Place* 52; 135; Englehardt 5; Hardwig xi). Often told from the perspective of an outside narrator who could interpret local culture for the reader, local color stories generally reinforced the superior thinking of northeastern readers, engaging them in a kind of armchair tourism (Fetterly and Pryse *American Women Regionalists* xi – xii; Englehardt 5; Hardwig xi). In fact, offers Harry R. Warfel, "implicitly and explicitly local color emphasizes the differentness of the native characters from the norms of society at large" (155 – 156).

Additionally, as readers "toured" unknown places, the "strange and peculiar" qualities of characters associated regional people with geography (Harney 45). *In Appalachia: A History*, John Williams explains that the nineteenth century understanding of region was put forth by geographers. Thus, a "region" was "a territory set apart from others by an enumerated set of attributes, features that could be mapped in their distribution from regional core to periphery and measured in intensity so that one could know how 'Appalachian' (or southern or western or New Englandish) a given place was" (12). In literary depictions human characteristics and culture were viewed through much the same lens: as a natural outgrowth of one's geographical place. One's identity was presented and understood as a fixed image. Such images would become nearly indelible excessive stereotypes of people and culture.

Discussions of local color generally include Kate Chopin, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett, Constance Fenimore Woolson, Mary Noailles Murfree, John Fox, Jr., Bret

Harte, Hamlin Garland, Sherwood Bonner, and George Washington Cable, among others, and center most fully upon representations of New England, the South, southern Appalachia, and the West (Inness and Royer 3; Fetterly and Pryse *American Women Regionalists* xi; Sundquist 510). Undoubtedly, local color was a "vital popular tradition": one that "served as the principle [sic] place of literary access in America" in the late nineteenth century (Brodhead). Such access was particularly important for women writers who seized the opportunity to enter a male-dominated field and use its conventions to serve their own purposes (Inness and Royer 1; 4 - 5). Their contributions would help create an opening for women regionalists like Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver to come.

Women's Access to Publication & The Potential of Fiction to Express Their Unique Concerns

In Mary Noailles Murfree one finds an example of a woman whose local color writing afforded her a substantial literary career. A genteel native of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Murfree was well-educated and raised in a "cultivated, bookish environment" that encouraged her talent for "writing fiction of manners" (Wright viii – ix). She found a tantalizing subject for her skills while visiting Beersheba Springs, a resort area in the Cumberland Mountains. According to Murfree's sister, "she wanted to do for Tennessee what other writers had done for other regions, to make East Tennessee in particular well known before the railroads penetrated it entirely" (Wright ix). In half a century she would do just that, producing eighteen novels and seven short story collections. The eight stories in her seminal text, *In the Tennessee Mountains* (1884), were first published in *Atlantic Monthly*, one on average per three to six month period between 1878 and 1884 at the height of local color's popularity. Although Murfree initially found it necessary to use the pseudonyms R. Emmett Dembry and, more prolifically, Charles Egbert Craddock, her

true identity was revealed in March 1885. The mystery surrounding Murfree's penname and the realization that a petite, sophisticated woman could write so convincingly about rough, unmannerly mountaineers only enhanced her success (Wright xiii).

Despite the significance of Murfree gaining access to publication and retaining, even gaining, popularity when her gender was revealed, Appalachian scholars often target her as a purveyor of heinous stereotypes, rightfully concerned with the idea that "most readers accepted her picture as entirely authentic, as the work of someone thoroughly familiar with the mountains and mountaineers," when in reality her experience was much more limited (Ensor "Geography" 199). To discount Murfree, however, overlooks both her abilities as a local color writer and the adroit ways she writes about women and their concerns. In "What is the Place of Mary Noailles Murfree Today?" Allison Ensor considers the intricacies in Murfree's fiction, conjecturing whether or not there "are substantial reasons for feminists to be interested in Murfree's work" (202).

In "The Star in the Valley," for example, Celia Shaw is depicted as a waif-like, beautiful girl whose association with nature makes her attractive to a visiting society male, Reginald Chevis. The narrator's description of Celia as "hardly more human to Chevis than certain little woodland flowers," likely elicits both his and the reader's pity (131 – 132). Despite such a judgment, Celia receives admiration for her homestead production and willingness to speak out firmly against the potential raid on the Peel family while her mother and grandmother sit "by the fire monotonously carding wool" (147). As an outstanding female among mountain women who dies after braving snow to warn the Peels, Celia appears deserving of a better life than her mountain culture can afford her. Unlike her own people, Chevis and Varney "[break] into enthusiastic commendation of the girl's high heroism and courage" when they hear of her deed,

likening her rarity to a work of art (151 – 152). Although Celia remains an object to marvel at in a violent and unseemly place, she is at least portrayed with inner strength and resolve. Concerned about unnecessary violence, she does all she can to prevent it. Furthermore, Bill Hardwig finds that Chevis' own flattering of himself allows the narrator to reveal that "he was as far as ever from the basis of common humanity" in his assessments of "these people" (29 - 30). Consequently, his cultural framework appears in some ways more unbecoming than hers.

Thus, a writer such as Murfree uses local color to highlight the strength of mountain women even while she indicates that their culture is on one hand undesirable, oppressive, and curious, and on the other picturesque and romantic. Reconsidering Murfree as Ensor suggests, allows us to see the "subtle" and "complex" ways she writes about southern Appalachian women (Englehardt 103). If the eastern Tennessee area where Celia lives is "strange," or outside the norm of American culture, then perhaps Celia is "peculiar" for her ability to assert herself. As a concern for women represented in fiction, then, Celia can do what other women cannot because she is outside the mainstream. She shows an independence her late-nineteenth century readers in the northeast might wish for or appreciate even if her culture is undesirable. The work of a writer like Murfree, therefore, "justifies the contradictory readings and assessments that have shaped our understanding of local color, a deceptively complex genre" (Hardwig 31).

Two of the preeminent scholars working in the fields of regionalism and women's studies, Judith Fetterly and Marjorie Pryse, however, question local color as regionalism. They surmise instead that regionalism is a tradition among women in the nineteenth century distinguishable from realism and naturalism and different from local color due to a "shift in the center of perception" resulting in empathetic narration. In their estimation, authors are regionalists when they identify with the characters and cultures they represent; regional writers

not only include themselves within that culture, but they also view the characters therein as agents of their own lives (*American Women Regionalists* 3; xvii – xviii). Fetterly and Pryse pinpoint Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Lot" (1834) as the beginning of regionalism. Predating Murfree's *In the Tennessee Mountains* by fifty years, Stowe's sketch is more representational in nature. Her characters and their culture are more desirably portrayed than Murfree's even if they are overly romanticized (*Writing Out of Place* 83; 93). Like Murfree, however, Stowe took advantage of a literary access point for women through the sketch form, adding her name to a significant list of women authors including Lydia Maria Child, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, and Lydia Huntley Sigourney.

In "Uncle Lot," Stowe employs a first-person, empathetic narrator who very clearly states her purpose of describing a village near and dear to her just as anyone might when recalling a place he or she loves and/or has a deep personal investment in. The narrator states,

> It is merely a little introductory breeze of patriotism, such as occasionally brushes over every mind, bearing on its wings the remembrance of all we ever loved or cherished in the land of our early years; and if it should seem to be rodomontade to any people in other parts of the earth, let them only imagine it to be said about "Old Kentuck," old England, or any other corner of the world in which they happen to be born and they will find it quite rational. (4)

Stowe does not "giv(e) voice" to Grace, but she clearly identifies the narrator's familiarity with the community, views the characters as subjects of their own lives, and defies expectations in her story's content. Although it seems that the sketch that follows will revolve around Master James's attempts to win over his future father-in-law, the return and subsequent death of Grace's brother George refocuses the narrative on the bonds of friendship and family. Stowe avoids the

predictable in women's writing; she instead decentralizes romance in favor of exhibiting the regional as a space open to faithful depictions of people and culture and discussions central to the realities of women's lives (Fetterly and Pryse *American Women Regionalists* 2).

Based on the examples provided from Mary Noailles Murfree and Harriet Beecher Stowe, one might surmise that regionalists are different from local colorists in that the former write from the inside out while the latter write from the outside in. Bill Hardwig finds, however, that while separating local color from regionalism may "allow us critical space to explore the valuable moments and writers of a much-disparaged genre of writing," such an approach "create(s) false divisions" (27). In other words, to attempt to view literary categories as finite limits our analysis; throughout an author's work or even within the same story or novel we can find evidence for various, even conflicting readings of characters, ideas, and themes (27 – 31). Simply stated, local color is clearly regional fiction and regional fiction must include local color. Since both texts considered here provide literary access for women, draw attention to the role of the narrator, emphasize character, portray those characters in a specific location with its own cultural and geographic qualities, and allow women to raise their unique concerns, both provide a foundation for our understanding of rhetorical regionalism today. As Sandra Zagarell argues, such stories "constitut(e) [an] important site of an ongoing debate about the composition and character of America – a dispute about the place of difference and diversity in this nation" ("America" 143). Our best bet, as Hardwig suggests, is to let go of exclusionary 'good guy' and 'bad guy' labels, and instead evaluate individual authors on their own merits and within their own contexts as regionalists (27; 33).

As contemporary regionalists commenting upon modern concerns for women, Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver thus maintain local color's focus on preserving uniqueness of place and

depicting local culture. Yet, they dramatically shift the paradigm governing how that place and culture are represented – a shift empathetic narration anticipates. Priority is given to their inside perspectives based on knowledge, empathy, and personal investment so that cultural identity is faithfully maintained. Their rootedness or voiceplace thereby provides the avenue through which these women regionalists present an expression of people and culture rather than an image of them. Even though the nineteenth century saw significant developments in women's regional writing, the very fact that women were closely associated with these developments would push regionalism itself far into the background of American literature.

Regional Literature as Secondary

Whether in the form of a sketch or a local color story, regional literature in the nineteenth century was viewed as inferior at best. Associated with women, insignificant forms, and the local such stories easily found a niche as popular literature, but not as serious fiction. Instead, critical attention near the turn of the century was focused on the established mode of the day: realism (Gebhard 85). As the vogue of the late nineteenth century, American realism sought "fidelity to actuality" in representations of common everyday subject matter. Closely associated with the novel, albeit not in traditional patterns, realism centered on character, often eliciting satire or comedy to comment upon "complex ethical choices" (Harmon 432). Although some of the same might be said about regional literature at the time, Hardwig describes the power of gender as an indicator of literary merit. He states,

> Society was accustomed to seeing men as the scientific explorers and authoritative speakers of truth. For this reason, realism was often seen as a 'male' genre, in part because of its attention to urban issues and 'true' and unflinching depiction of social scenes. On the other hand, local color writing was generally

> seen as presenting authentic sketches of rural lands and domestic scenes, with women disproportionately publishing in this genre. Women could, after all, write 'realistically' about domestic space. (20)

Dividing literature across gender lines in this way further solidified writing with an emphasis on regional ties as secondary and has even caused some scholars to limit regionalism to the local color years.

Yet, almost every writer at the time, except for William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Mark Twain, made his or her way into print through works with some regional association. Twain, however, helps to show the distance between critically acclaimed American literature of the day and secondary, easily dismissible popular fiction while also showing an interesting caveat to such categorization with stories like "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." Even though he is certainly most recognizable as an important figure of American realism, Twain's use of an outside narrator and regional dialect, as well as his portrayal of regional characters and their cultural attitudes, also make him identifiable as a regionalist. Tucked far back in a footnote in *Writing Out of Place*, Fetterly and Pryse speak to this "phenomenon": "In American literary history, regional writers like Mark Twain...do not become local-color writers, but rather 'exceptions' to regional specificity" (386). In other words, Twain's status in the American literary canon supersedes all other associations; the regional qualities of his work are subordinate to his position as a realist.

In the introduction to *Regionalism Reconsidered: New Approaches to the Field* David Jordan uses Hamlin Garland as an example to illustrate an important regionalist reaction that grew out of Howells' call to realism. In response to what Jordan calls a postwar "collective cultural crisis" in the United States, realism touted that "verisimilar depictions of local environs

would produce a unified image of the national character" and thereby generate a "distinctly American art," once again distinguishing American literature from its British counterpart (ix – x). Authors like Garland attempting this brand of realism, however, found that regionalism was more about difference than any one American image. He found, quite tellingly, that "regionalism does not originate out there in an external world of local artifacts, but within the artist, in *a deep personal affinity with a particular place*" (Jordan x). While Garland continued to write the "local-color realism that Howells advocated," his insight, like Stowe's empathetic narration, tells us a great deal about regionalism and its future. Writing about specific places one knows well – a place in which one is rooted – rather than or in addition to a location of particular personal interest or prime for popular exposure or even exploitation, becomes the focus of regional writing in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: the core of the genre for writers like Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver (Jordan x – xi).

Establishing Identity in the 20th Century

A focus on identity is the most powerful means of unlocking the potential of a regionalism written out of rootedness, especially for writers, readers, and critics for whom, in the words of Agrarian Donald Davidson, "regionalism [would become] a battle-cry, the symbol of all they feel is worth fighting for…" (228). In a century of rapid, unprecedented change, regionalism would come to mean much more than faithfully representing a location to establishing and maintaining regional identities associated with locations and from geographical understandings of region to rhetorical ones. Writers would take on the responsibility of creating regional spaces that resonate with local and regional readers. Simultaneously, they would broach subjects of interest on local, regional, national, and even global scales thereby promoting regions

as sites of discourse. In fact, in the early twentieth century Southern Agrarianism reveals a watershed moment in understanding these important turns in the purpose of regional literature.

In the 1920s Americans found themselves in a post-World War I climate fraught with the results of rapid change begun in 1865. Beginning with industrialization in the late nineteenth century, technological advancements leading to the Great War "had now become an engine of death and destruction…[and] a divisive force, alienating individuals and communities from the land they inhabited, and dissolving communal ties that assure each individual a secure place in the world" (Jordan xi). Additionally, the theories of Freud, Nietzsche, and Einstein were attaining major influence and the consumerist byproduct of modernization was continuing to alter the nation's economy (Wilson x). In response, the Agrarians at Vanderbilt University, namely John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren, and Andrew Lytle advocated a turn toward the agricultural way of life from their vantage point as Southerners.

Vehemently opposed to the industrialism and urbanization sweeping the New South, the Agrarians deemed what others considered "progress" the "dehumanization of society." As they saw rural farms, strong family ties, community homecomings, religious fervor, and Confederate sympathies give way to an economic dependence on the North – evidenced in North Carolina textile mills, Alabama steel mills, and oil and chemical plants in Louisiana – they offered an alternative vision of life as it had once been and should be in contrast to the industrial present (Ward 187 – 189). Thus, regionalism, as Hamlin Garland theorized, became directly linked to the importance of place in establishing identity. The Agrarians gave Southerners feeling displaced within their own region visions of their desired truth. Rather than being simply an outdated nostalgia for the past, therefore, the "mythic" agrarian community offered something concrete

that America was now lacking: "a sense of community, roots in the land, and the values of tradition" (Wilson x).

Jordan offers a telling list of what the brief Agrarian movement contributed to our understanding of regionalism: "in offering an alternative to the prevailing trend toward 'rootlessness,' these critics and authors freed regionalism from the constraints of naïve realism; they repudiated common assumptions about a homogeneous national identity; and they suggested that a harmonious interaction between a human community and the environment it inhabits need not be an anachronism, even in developed industrial societies" (xv). Regional writing could now offer a view of life where writers and readers alike could find what they desired and identified with; a literary work could create, maintain, and comment upon a region. Thus, much of regionalism's role, moving forward, would be to reproduce somehow desirable attributes as regions and places within them continued to evolve. According to Robert L. Dorman, viewing America through a regional lens would now mean presenting regions as "deliberative works of collective art" (qtd. in Wilson x). Regionalism could break free from geographical determinism; it could bring the local and universal into simultaneous view and negotiate the relationship between them.

As the epigraph from Donald Davidson states, the Agrarians found that regional writers must respond to the "total and moving world" (230). As they do so, they offer a de-centered worldview, or, more specifically, a "decentered perspective of the dominant culture's values" (Jordan *New World* 8). When approached with an affinity for a place such a perspective "shifts [our] center of perception" (Fetterly and Pryse *American Women Regionalists* xviii). As a result, we encounter questions relevant to the regional view and its interaction with other, more dominant perspectives: who speaks for whom; who defines our regions; how are they defined

and for what purposes; who maintains power and who appears powerless. Perhaps most importantly, we consider how our similarities *and* differences connect us to others and establish our own unique identities.

Maintaining Identity in the Twenty-first Century

Both scholars and authors, perhaps unconsciously contributing to Dorman's appeal for the perpetuation of regions through a collective art, have furthered regionalism's connection to identity since the 1920s by churning out award-winning essays, histories, poetry, short stories, and novels that "talk back" to perceived truths about the places where they live and work (Billings 1). Regional people, especially in places long maligned on the national stage like southern Appalachia, have seized the opportunity to speak for themselves. As a result, we have come to understand that one's position as regional is not inherent in his or her identity simply because he or she is from a certain geographical locale; instead, it is comprised of "a dynamic interplay of [environmental, economic,] political, cultural, and psychological forces" acting within and upon that locale (Jordan *Regionalism* ix). Thus, modern regional authors not only create and maintain regions through rhetoric, they also "denaturalize what it means to claim a regionalist identity" for those who inhabit certain regions or for texts that are set in an identifiable region (Davey 4).

Deemed "contemporary new regionalism" in the 1970s, regional writing crafted from the inside out has been tied to postmodern experience (Wilson xiv). Although postmodernism, with its blurring of forms, fragmented combinations, and self-conscious construction may seem at odds with regionalism, it informs our understanding of how regional places now survive through rhetoric rather than as geographical realities. This "new" regionalist or more contemporary approach to defining regions "recognizes that every place is a zone characterized by the

interaction of global and local human and environmental forces and that regional boundaries inevitably shift with the perspectives of both subject and object." As a result, a region like Appalachia is "a zone of interaction among the diverse peoples who have lived in or acted upon it, as it is also of their interactions with the region's complex environment" (Williams 12). Readers experience the diversity of characters and culture they associate with a region, finding a previously unrecognized validity.

Although we may choose to identify with the validity authors give to regional culture, one could certainly argue, especially due to advancements in technology and thereby increasing globalization, that an attachment to particular place no longer seems necessary to a fulfilling, well-rounded life, and that regions themselves no longer have meaning if they even exist. Regions may help us to categorize history, but have no real bearing on how we now understand our world and ourselves. Indeed, we are, as Todd Gitlin states, "hip deep in cultural debris"; as a result, we can pick and choose our identities out of what seem to be "limitless cultural possibilities" from, quite literally, a world of options (qtd in Wilson xiv - xv). For example, as Charles Reagan Wilson offers through French theoretician Lyotard: "One listens to reggae music, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong" (xiv). Consequently, regional literature appears quaint and outmoded and a scholarly work like this one as a foolish enterprise destined for obscurity.

Asserting a New Place for Place-based Fiction

Just as in the nineteenth century, regionalism remains relegated to a secondary position, considered less important than "'real' literature," or "our 'national' literature." In chapter one of *Writing Out of Place* (2003), Judith Fetterly and Marjorie Pryse offer interesting insight into the subordination of regionalism through the etymology of the word "region." Defined through the

ages as "an area ruled by a more powerful entity, earlier a king, in modern times a state or nation, and even global economic interests [,] the very words 'region' and 'regionalism'…convey… subordination" (5). As evidence of problematic connotations associated with the very term that identifies this area of literary study, editors often wish to separate writers from any regional association. Regional fiction is often viewed as "narrow" and the text as valuable only in its universality, rather than for a compelling combination of the local and the universal (35). Donald Davidson captured the derisiveness of this sentiment in 1938: "For one group of critics regionalism is a catch-word which they use almost as a formula for dismissal for tendencies that they do not bother to take seriously" (228).

Histories of American literature, such as the *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1921), the *Literary History of the United States* (1948), and the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988), which largely defined the field throughout the twentieth century, have also played a major role in the positioning of regionalism. Eric Sundquist's seminal essay, "Realism and Regionalism" included in the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988), for example, reiterates prevailing thoughts on the subject, identifying realism as a broad concept, regionalism as a lesser subset of realism, and local color as interchangeable with regionalism (501 - 524). Regionalism therefore does not provide a distinctive area of study despite the importance of place in literature's ability to establish national identity; it is simply a sub-category of realism.

What often gets overlooked in this configuration, however, are the significant links between American literature and regionalism through the use of local places in fiction. For example, one of the first well-known American writers whose popularity garnered a British audience, Washington Irving conspicuously set two of his *Sketch-Book* stories, "Rip Van

Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," in a particular place: a foothill village in the Catskill Mountains and a remote Hudson River Valley village, respectively (Norberg xiii). In doing so, according to Peter Norberg, Irving gave "American culture…a local habitation and a name," contributing greatly to the new nation's need for a distinctive indigenous literature. Sleepy Hollow is not merely an imitation of English or other European landscapes and culture; it shows a prominent American author intentionally linking place with creative space much as we might when describing regionalist American authors today. Not only did the *Sketch-Book* establish Irving's reputation, it was also "hailed as evidence that America possessed the raw materials necessary to produce a culture of its own" (Norberg xiii – xv). Ultimately, Lawrence Buell credits Irving for playing the central role in "teaching… writers to exploit regional material for literary purposes" (qtd. in Pryse "Origins" 35). Still, regional literature is seen as unworthy of serious attention. Even canonical twentieth-century American writers associated with regions, like Mark Twain in the nineteenth century, are often more prominently identified through major literary movements instead. Robert Frost, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor, for example, are often considered modernists (Cox 771).

The regionalist writer, the regional scholar, and readers who wish to identify with a given region, however, would argue that regionalism has not been given the attention it deserves. In *An American Vein: Critical Readings in Appalachian Literature* (2005) Danny Miller, Sharon Hatfield, and Gurney Norman call for a wider view of Appalachian literature within the larger scope of American literature (xvii). Also released in 2005, Ronald Eller comments upon the influx of newcomers to southern Appalachia at the end of the PBS video series *The Appalachians*. He suggests that the "rootless" postmodern existence we are privy to leaves us restless, searching for tangible, place-based connections to people, culture, and history. Fourteen

years after Jim Wayne Miller's assertion that regionalism counters the uniformity of popular culture, Eller confirms that people are looking for exactly what regionalism offers. Despite any previously perceived limitations, the value of regionalism is becoming increasingly apparent as questions about location, culture, history, environment, and relationships intensify in a globalized world (Inness and Royer 5; 2). There is presently an opportunity for regional literature to answer these questions, asserting a wider view and calling for a revaluation of its role in the history of American literature. Regionalism truly reflects an "impulse," as Fetterly and Pryse surmise and indeed it does "matter even more for many people" today as Katz and Mahoney posit. Regionalism speaks to the core of what it means to be human; we instinctively seek to establish and maintain our identity (*Writing Out of Place* 77; Pryse "Origins" 34; Katz and Mahoney ix - x).

Indeed, for many, staying connected to the places we know, where we grew up and/or have lived in for a significant length of time, provides a means of both identifying ourselves and reacting to the world at large especially as we attempt to understand who we are and where we fit in a globalized world. Regional writers like Harriette Simpson Arnow, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Barbara Kingsolver, therefore, play an immensely important role in our ability to stay connected to the places with which we wish to identify. Their rhetorical regionalism not only allows for the creation and maintenance of the places and regions readers know well, it also preserves and validates them even as physical locations, community circumstances, and individual life paths change. If we move away from the place we were raised, take a job or attend a school that moves us away from a location we know well, face the pain of selling family property, etc., we can still find the connection those locales have to who we are or how we see ourselves through their

fiction. Regional literature encourages reader identification, especially in an era of globalization where writers and readers alike negotiate numerous boundaries daily.

As "Of This Ground" shows, the ability of regional writing to function in this way is especially important for depictions of women in the modern era due to the concerns that they face. For readers who have experience in rural places like those Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver know well, staying connected to land in new ways that fit modern lives is paramount to personal fulfillment. Even though women are more able to live the lives they desire in the modern era, as will be explored in the next chapter, rural places continue to retain lasting significance. When concerns arise, then, whether out of new opportunities or unforeseen circumstances, women from rural backgrounds as Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver depict them, seek the land as a refuge as a solution to those concerns. Women can thus reconcile the seemingly disparate parts of their lives to form a cohesive identity. As a result, regionalists like Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver assert a new, more prominent place in American literature for regionalism. By incorporating characteristics long associated with place-based fiction, moving beyond them to create and maintain the places where those characteristics exist, and using rhetorical regionalism ultimately to preserve and validate our relationship to those places, they offer us a protected space where we can harbor identity in a globalizing twenty-first century world. As Jim Wayne Miller concludes, it is through "writers with a strong sense of their place and their connection to it that we are most likely to recover and carry forward our sense of community" ("Cosmopolitan").

Chapter Two

The Mystique of Fulfillment:

Modern Women's History & The "Promise" of Feminist Ecocriticism

> But even if they urged, insisted, fought to help us educate ourselves, even if they talked with yearning of careers that were not open to them, they could not give us an image of what we could be. They could only tell us that their lives were too empty, tied to home; that children, cooking, clothes, bridge, and charities were not enough. A mother might tell her daughter, spell it out, "Don't be just a housewife like me." But that daughter, sensing that her mother was too frustrated to savor the love of her husband and children, might feel: "I will succeed where my mother failed, I will fulfill myself as a woman," and never read the lesson of her mother's life.
>
> - Betty Friedan,
> *The Feminine Mystique*

Much of rhetorical regionalism's importance for women writers and their readers comes from the assessment of women's unique concerns in place-based, discursive contexts. Although this is an important feature of women's regional writing in earlier eras as shown in the introduction and chapter one, it makes rhetorical regionalism especially relevant in the twenty-first century. When women's concerns speak to the dynamic changes in an era that inform feelings of displacement in a globalized world, rhetorical regionalism allows us to understand more fully how women regionalists stake out a space for identities that draw from disparate sources. For Harriette Simpson Arnow, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Barbara Kingsolver, creating, maintaining, preserving, and validating that space means pinpointing the convergence of traditional, rural values for women and opportunities to assert their autonomy in the modern era.

In order to situate more fully the depictions of land as refuge in response to women's modern concerns that follow in the second part of this work, this chapter recounts women's history in the modern era, highlighting the allure of change women felt in rural Southern and southern Appalachian places, and introduces ecofeminist theory. Although three decades separate the publishing careers of Harriette Simpson Arnow and Barbara Kingsolver, both they

and Bobbie Ann Mason inherit and feel deeply the pressures of modern women's history and its distinct implications for women. These three writers watched first-hand as the modern era made its way into rural Kentucky.

The Allure of Change

Indeed, it is during this time of profound change nationally that the isolation "country people" felt was beginning to give way, allowing alluring promises of lifestyles free of manual labor and based on new, more progressive ideas to come through. In fact, Bobbie Ann Mason pinpoints World War II as the turning point for rural southern families:

> World War II hurled us into the twentieth century. After my father came home from the Navy, we got a radio the size of a jukebox, and we started going to drive-in movies. I began dreaming of a rootless way of life, one that would knock me loose from the rock-solid homestead and catapult me into the fluid, musical motions of faraway cities…My elders had to carry on with their inevitable labors, but seductive promises seemed to whirl in front of my eyes like fireworks on a pinwheel. I was mesmerized by popular songs and Hollywood images that filled me with longing. Suddenly it was possible for the newest generation of country people in our region to go to college, travel to Europe, and even choose a life off the farm… (*Clear Springs* Preface x)

An astute observer of these times, Mason, recognizes the sheer sense of elation, especially for young rural women, found in the possibility of the post-war era. The presence of opportunity, however, did not mean that seizing it would be easy.

In fact, worlds were colliding for the farmers' daughters and small town girls growing up in the 1950s and 60s. At home, they had the examples of their mothers and other women in the

community who upheld social norms for women, touting the beauty, charm, marriage, and deference attributed to the American housewife. Many also worked alongside their husbands on farms, putting in long hours to raise children, feed hired workers, plant crops, raise a garden, keep chickens, and take on "public work" when necessary, or both. Outside their rural communities, as Mason describes, they had the examples of young women seeking educations, traveling, and living lives outside of rural confines. Although the allure of the latter examples makes the initial decision to follow them seem simple, unfulfilling results later caused some women to re-engage the former. Furthermore, not all changes in the modern era fostered excitement; rather, they crippled rural communities, driving women from homes they did not wish to leave.

Social Norms for Women

As the recent 2011 publication of Stephaine Coontz's *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* suggests, Betty Freidan's now "classic" feminist text illuminates the cultural climate of the time in regards to gender norms through popular magazines, attitudes, and academic studies: women were thought to be well-suited for the role of housewife in the domestic sphere. Presented nationally as a positive, even envied figure, such a woman is described by Friedan as:

> The suburban housewife – she was the dream image of the young American women and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world. The American housewife – freed by science and labor-saving appliances from the drudgery, the dangers of childbirth and the illnesses of her grandmother. She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfillment. As a housewife and mother, she was

> respected as a full and equal partner to man in his world. She was free to choose automobiles, clothes, appliances, supermarkets; she had everything that women ever dreamed of. (18)

Yet, Freidan identifies an unsettling separation between such glowing societal expectations and "privileges" for women and women's realities and desires. Friedan famously states her concern: "There was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique. I wondered if other women faced this schizophrenic split, and what it meant" (9). Equated here with serious mental illness, the dichotomy between who women were asked to be and who they were would expose not only the role of the market economy in welcoming women as a new, inexpensive source of labor, but also women's wishes to use their skills and talents beyond the home. Although outside suburbia, rural women also felt the pressure of the American housewife image and the concerns accompanying new opportunities for women in part due to the media: movies, television programs, magazines, etc.

However, women from rural places in the South and southern Appalachia faced an even more complex dynamic during this transitional time. For them, questioning the make-up of women's lives, especially their mothers', also meant confronting the long accepted and often expected female roles in their regional communities. As in early, predominately rural America, women were viewed as "a source of wealth in the household economy" for their production as child-bearers, water-haulers, gardeners, cooks, seamstresses, poultry-tenders, and, quite often, as field-hands (Thistle 35; 38 – 39). A rural woman's work thus extended beyond the actual domestic sphere of the house into fields, gardens, and/or livestock pens. Her tasks, even when lightened somewhat in the 1950s once electricity for vacuum cleaners and washing machines

finally became available in rural areas, remained much the same as they had for her mother, grandmother, and even great-grandmother. Indeed, domestic work in rural areas continued to be so strenuous until the 1950s that the government provided pamphlets for women on subjects such as conserving strength (Thistle 27 – 29). Women's tasks as homemakers on family farms in the 1960s retained the cultural connotations of homesteading if not all of the actual tasks.

It is no surprise, then, that impressionable young women felt stifled by the restrictions of farm life. Such feelings influenced them to pursue their personal talents and interests wherever they might lead. Yet, stepping out of the long line of women expected to carry on rural duties now lauded in regional literature, required more than personal desire or a reluctant willingness and a thick skin. In many cases traditional women's labor was also tied to land that families had worked for generations. Leaving home and pursuing a different way of life, therefore, meant breaking or at least significantly bending such ties and navigating hurt feelings, loss of tradition, and economic shifts as a result.

Outside Rural Communities

Outside farms and small towns, however, young women knew that their peers nationwide were entering the workforce and college in record numbers; many were abandoning expectations to pursue careers that could take them far from the country to large towns and big cities, enriching their lives with culture and economic success rather than young motherhood and civic clubs or physical exhaustion and mud-stained hands. Just as their predecessors earlier in the century had fought for and won the right to vote, promoted birth control, and rallied for workers' rights, such women in the 1960s and 70s demanded more: more opportunities, including more jobs, more pay, more education, more adventure, and ultimately, more independence and equality. Like feminist activists earlier in the century, women in the 1960s and 70s became

vocal and visible, marching on Washington, forming the National Organization for Women, aiding African American students seeking entrance to southern universities, and seeking noticeable roles on par with men as sportscasters, Olympians, television personalities, members of Congress, financial investors, etc. Even the outlook on marriage was evolving, moving toward a union based on emotion rather than labor and ushering in significant alterations in family law (Thistle 47 - 51).

Taking advantage of "more" would also bring with it a great source of concern. Women from rural places entering adulthood in the late 60s and early 70s found themselves at a crossroads: If they reached for the education, adventure, jobs, and autonomy they so desperately desired, who would they anger? Who would they disappoint? Would their achievements speak for themselves? Would they find the fulfillment their mothers could not? Still, for many young rural women who helped their mothers with daily tasks, the farm and its endless needs and/or the limits of small town life paled in comparison to the possibilities of what they could do and who they could be in this new era of women's rights; they could work hard in more desirable ways in distant and exciting places for what they believed was a better life.

Crippling Rural Communities

Other women would find, however, that the choice to pursue a different existence would not be the exciting result of personal longing, but instead a source of great anxiety due to forces their foremothers might not have imagined. As traditional sources of labor, including farming and coal mining declined in the modern era, especially after relative prosperity during the war effort, rural workers sought jobs in cities: Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Louisville, Dayton, Atlanta, etc. Many women, particularly those already married and working on farms, like Arnow, had no choice but to accept their husbands' need for an hourly wage. Even though

half of Americans had moved to cities prior to the war, another quarter would join them by the mid-1950s. From southern Appalachia, particularly, the years 1940 to 1960 produced one of the greatest internal migrations in U.S. history (Pippert 342 – 343; *The Appalachians*). Renowned Bluegrass musician Ricky Skaggs recalls that in his eastern Kentucky county the "three Rs" teachers presented to students were not reading, writing, and arithmetic, but reading, writing, and Route 23 north to Columbus, Ohio (*The Appalachians*).

Many workers returned to rural homeplaces with their families on weekends and holidays, but according to Marvin Pippert, "Estimates of out-migration during this time period indicate that Appalachia lost approximately three million out–migrants during those three decades alone" (342). The enormity of this shift crippled many Appalachian communities. According to Arnow, life in the hills of eastern Kentucky had already been marred by the loss of resources before 1945. Even before the Depression and the New Deal, she states, "the timber was gone, the oil, and the soil washed from the hillsides and ridge tops; game was scarce. There was little left but scrub timber, worn out soil…" (Introduction *Mountain Path* 2). Factory jobs in the modern era took much of the final resource: the people. Many out-migrants had to live in slums or projects and face continued economic difficulties. The stark contrast between lives once lived off the land or in small towns among family and friends and lives lived dependent upon factories and grocery bills, forced many men and women into uncomfortable situations fraught with new fears and dangers, often making them victims of prejudice.

Re-engaging the Land as a Refuge

Even though engaging the land may seem antithetical to women's desires to leave farms and small towns or impractical in urban areas, the works of Mason, Kingsolver, and Arnow reveal that women have a deep need to do so in the midst of their modern lives. For some, as

with Mason and Kingsolver, it would be a somewhat startling recognition. In a telling statement from *Clear Springs* Bobbie Ann Mason posits: "we've been able to roam because we've always known where home is" (13). Although she is directly addressing herself and her siblings in this statement, implied in her use of "we" are the other young people of her generation like Barbara Kingsolver whose rural ties have never been fully severed despite their desires to seek lives away from farms and small towns. Mason asks, "What happened to me and my generation? What made us leave home and abandon the old ways? Why did we lose our knowledge of nature? Why wasn't it satisfying? Why would only rock-and-roll music do? What did we want?" (11). For Arnow, engaging the land would serve as an antidote to urban living, making it more bearable for the economically displaced. As each author pursued a new way of life, however, she would find that re-engaging her rural upbringings was paramount to fulfillment in the modern era.

Ecofeminist Literary Criticism

Through today's lens of ecofeminist literary criticism we can more clearly see that a requisite action once perceived as oppressive can also be an avenue for women's empowerment. In other words, we can use this theory to help illuminate the inner workings of particular revelations in fiction – in this case women's return to the land as a refuge in the modern era. Relatively new on the critical scene, ecofeminist literary criticism offers a means of more thoroughly and thoughtfully assessing depictions of nature in literature through a blending of theories. Accurately described as a "hybrid criticism," ecofeminist literary criticism brings together ecological or environmental criticism with feminist literary criticism. Such a combination provides a "special lens" whereby links between representations of nature and representations of gender, race, class, and sexuality, as well as the "cultural construction of nature," become increasingly clear (Legler 227).

More specifically, the core components represented in this hybrid criticism are ecology - the study of the environment in its various interconnected relationships, including humans, as well as its changes and conservation - and feminism - a commitment to "exposing, critiquing, and ending the oppression of women," including the challenging of patriarchy (Murphy 4 - 5). Both of these theories, in their respective fields of study, require a revaluation of well-established Western modes of thought so that an entity viewed as inferior, or as an "other," is fully recognized and rendered as an active, valuable participant: both nature and women have historically been viewed as entities to be dominated. Ynestra King, prior to ecofeminism's popularity, noted the propensity of ecologists to overlook this important connection:

> For the most part, ecologists, with their concern for nonhuman nature, have yet to understand that they have a particular stake in ending the domination of women because a central reason for woman's oppression is her association with the despised nature they are so concerned about. The hatred of women and the hatred of nature are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing. (qtd. in Murphy 7)

King's observation reveals the closely bound conditions and intricate relationship between women and land and the potential the liberation of one has for the other. Women from rural backgrounds, due to the previously described history of women's work, feel such connections acutely. While a woman's relationship to the land may cause shame due to the hatred King describes and perceptions of people who work the land as inferior, a women's relationship to the land may also be empowering. For women in the modern era, especially those from rural backgrounds, reconnecting to land offers a fulfillment otherwise unattainable.

Barbara Kingsolver, for example, first sought fulfillment in the modern era by leaving Kentucky to attend college at DePauw University. Kingsolver relished the idea of starting

college some three hundred miles northeast of Carlisle. For her, leaving was not explicitly about escaping farm life or becoming a writer; it was tied to asserting her autonomy. Overshadowed by her nurturing, but accomplished family, Kingsolver saw becoming a college woman as her opportunity to strike out as an individual. As she branched out to meet other first-year students, she found people who liked to discuss books and the timely issues of the 1970s. She grew more and more displeased with the women of her mother's generation who had married and given up their own dreams to run men's households. She agreed with Betty Friedan's assessment of the feminine mystique and read other feminists, vowing that if she did ever marry she would not automatically take her husband's name. Free to read whatever she pleased, Kingsolver read late into the night and all day on Saturdays. She states, "every word made sense to me, every claim brought me closer to being a friend to myself…these writers allowed me to imagine other possibilities" (*Small Wonder* 153 – 154; Wagner-Martin 33).

One of the most significant of those possibilities for Kingsolver, which is explicated more fully in chapter four, turned out to be that of imagining a relationship with the land not subject to the constraining expectations placed on her foremothers. Instead, she preserves and creates land and landscapes that liberate; they become a source of ecological salvation – a refuge for her female characters. In order to present such a constructive relationship, one that supports an enduring fulfillment in contrast to or in addition to the modern concerns education, adventure, and careers present, Kingsolver requires that both women and the environment be viewed as autonomous entities: a concern at the very core of ecofeminist literary criticism.

Our ecological environment, according to Patrick Murphy, can be divided into "things-in-themselves" and "things-for-us" (4). As things-in-themselves, interconnected natural elements function together in a particular place. When humans recognize themselves as members of the

natural world, therefore, they consider how the place where they exist coincides with history, gender, religious belief, sexuality, philosophy, and their own personal relationship with the natural world; ecology becomes a means whereby humans learn how to "live appropriately" in a place and time in order "to preserve, contribute to, and recycle the ecosystem" (4). As things-for-us, however, the natural world is manipulated, changed for purposes related to human desires such as housing and commerce. Shopping centers and neighborhoods are generally positioned for human convenience rather than in deference to the needs of the natural world. In the process ecosystems can be gravely altered or destroyed. Additionally, offers Murphy, if we see the natural world as things-for-us we will also be viewed as things-for-them: mudslides, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, animal attacks, etc. remind us that we encroach upon an existing, living place when we seek to alter it rather than work within it. In short, we can either see the ecological world as something malleable to our desires or as a system worthy of protection and consideration since we exist within it. Thus, ecological or environmental criticism, at its base, positions the natural world as a "self-existent entity" with which we cohabitate rather than compete (4; 36).

Feminism, with its examinations of gender, arises from a similar desire to understand an other, a woman, as a self-existent entity. Viewed through the opposing gender categories of male and female, feminism insists that gender is not absolute; associated with sex, gender is the result of culture. Well-known feminist scholar Judith Butler, for example, uses performance theory, specifically "performativity," to more clearly explain how cultural enactment constructs identity. As a person sexed as female (or male) replicates a set of culturally acceptable "stylized repetition of acts," including "bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds," that person produces "a performative accomplishment": as a result, both the audience and the

performer come to believe the constructed identity and perform that mode of belief (Butler 402). Consequently, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" (qtd in Butler 402). Thus, feminists argue, differences and/or similarities between genders should be recognized more fully as should the inherent equality between genders. In order to accomplish this, as with the ecological view of nature, we must view "the concepts of both self and other as interdependent [and] mutually determinable" (Murphy 5).

For both ecological criticism and feminist criticism, then, the recognition of others as autonomous entities is the primary goal. When achieved, we begin to see additional sources and levels of interrelationship between male and female or humans and nature via heterarchy rather than hierarchy. In other words, we consider that differences exist, but without assigning superiority to those differences. As a result, the health of an ecosystem is akin to the health of gender since both require a reevaluation of long-accepted views regarding women and nature as well as the recognition of diversity for sustainability. Gretchen Legler, like Ynestra King, identifies what now seems to be an obvious connection this way: "dealing with practical environmental problems…is both an ecological and a feminist task because the uses and abuses of the environment…are largely due to a patriarchal environmental ethic that has conceptualized land as 'woman'" (227 – 228). Ecofeminist criticism thereby streamlines our perspectives on these fields primarily by seeing all nature as interrelated and secondly by reconfiguring women's perceived relationship to nature.

When applied to literature ecofeminist literary criticism considers how nature is depicted in a given work and how that depiction involves women's knowledge and experience, including issues such as race, class, and gender. While feminist literary criticism has presented women as speaking subjects, ecofeminist literary criticism does not necessarily intend to speak for nature,

but rather to illuminate depictions of nature that signify through speaking subjects (Murphy 13 – 14). The descriptions and dialogue of characters and by narrators thereby show us how women interact with nature in productive, often mutually beneficial, ways. In ecofeminist works female characters often recognize nature's oppression and their own either consciously or subconsciously, linking, in varying degrees, women's oppression to environmental degradation (Murphy 26 – 27). In many ways the land thereby becomes a character, a "signifying agent," interpreted and represented by a speaker who presents both a worldview and a view of herself as related to the land (39). Donna Haraway has noted that to move nature from a passive to an active agent in literature, it must be "embodied," or written out of one position and into the other; as a result, it is no longer "a resource to be mapped and appropriated in bourgeois, Marxist or masculinist projects," just as a woman is no longer to be considered in such a way (qtd. in Legler 229). In short, as one is rewritten from passive to active so is the other (Legler 233).

Certainly, the Romantic and Transcendentalist traditions, as suggested in the introduction, are invoked with any attempt to assess what we might broadly categorize as "nature writing." Nature writing has long been a marginalized genre in part because it does not fit neatly within established modes of criticism and because it has primarily been the things-for-us "site for human endeavors rather than an entity in its own right" since the Enlightenment (Murphy 31). A usual theme for nature writers, the "search for a lost pastoral haven, for a home in an inhospitable and threatening world" casts the environment as a threatening, wild, unknown place to either be subdued or observed.

Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) are clear examples of this perspective: both writers enter the wilderness "to observe rather than participate, forever aloof and transcendent, and to escape that part of nature known as human

society" (Murphy 32). Nature is depicted as a sacred place where solitary figures go to "cleanse their spirits" and "be one with God" (Legler 229). Thus, alienation is cast as autonomy, nostalgia for the Garden is fully apparent, and the authors speak to a passive audience from a romantic, self-centered perspective (Murphy 33). When humans are cast as observers rather than participatory members of the natural world, then nature becomes a backdrop to their experience; beauty, fecundity, solitude and inspiration may still be depicted and enjoyed, but only narrowly. However, offers Legler, ecofeminist literary criticism could and should be used to produce a more well-rounded assessment of both canonical and non-canonical nature writers. She suggests that scholars investigate the "ways in which gender, race, and class" are represented in the works of nature writers, reevaluate the canon of American nature writing itself in favor of a broader understanding of "nature," who writes about it, and why, and raise awareness about unknown or ignored texts that help us to "re-vision" human relationships with the natural world (229).

Harriette Simpson Arnow, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Barbara Kingsolver fruitfully engage many of the "emancipatory strategies" considered by ecofeminist Gretchen Legler through the work of Patrick Murphy (230): For example, each presents the author and/or her characters' participation in nature as a response to the historical and political forces of the modern era. Each draws from her rural upbringing knowledge connected to both body and mind, which facilitates her interactions with the environment. Based on her studies of southern Appalachian texts, for instance, Elizabeth S.D. Englehardt has found that women and nature can be pragmatically connected based on familiarity though labor. As women work with the land to provide for the health of their families, their interaction produces an environmental expertise that is not only far removed from any sort of essential quality, but also capable of redefining the relationship itself (3 – 4; Alaimo 2 – 4). Finally, as regional writers, Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver contribute

significantly to the locatedness of human subjects, their stories and characters growing out of a deep connection to specific places. These possibilities for women writers to "reimagine nature and human relationships with the natural world" allow us a new understanding of the continuity and contribution of Harriet Simpson Arnow to the regionalist writing of Kentucky women.

Like Arnow, Bobbie Ann Mason and Barbara Kingsolver draw on the sustaining qualities of nature in ways suggestive of the male-centered Romantic and Transcendental traditions; however, as demonstrated in the coming chapters, they also exhibit a commitment to recreate their Kentucky regions and provide entry into a rhetorical regionalism increasingly necessary as urbanization and mass culture threaten place identifications. Characters in their work adopt or readopt environmental practices that in some ways reach backward in order to move forward.

Rather than modeling an ideal community of the past or the future, however, Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver place their characters in the here and now of their lives, offering environmental awareness as a productive solution to the fragmentation and isolation of modern women. Regional texts like theirs could be viewed as what Legler deems the "postmodern pastoral": "a posthumanist construction of human relationships with nature that makes more sense in a postmodern world; a vision that is informed by ecological and feminist theories, and one that images human/nature relationships as 'conversations' between knowing subjects" (229). Exploring such an analysis as the remainder of this study does, draws on the promise of ecofeminist literary criticism like that of rhetorical regionalism to "dig" beyond current labels, traditions, and boundaries to explore, in the words of Annette Kolodny, "the *possibilities* of experience…[and] call into play once more our evolutionary adaptability to create and re-create our own images of reality" (qtd. in Murphy 69).

Part Two:

Primary Works & Critical Interpretations of Texts

Chapter Three

Losing Home, Finding Connection:

Harriette Simpson Arnow & Economic Displacement

"My Country is Kentucky."

- Gertie Nevels,
Harriette Simpson Arnow's *The Dollmaker*

Published in 1954, Harriette Simpson Arnow's *The Dollmaker* focuses pointedly on the modern concern of economic displacement. As Arnow traces Gertie Nevels' tumultuous move from eastern Kentucky to Detroit, Michigan, she illustrates the difficulties faced by many women out-migrants from southern Appalachia following WWII. Although attractive in economically depressed areas, the promise of an hourly wage crippled rural communities and sent families to places vastly different from what they knew. Rather than finding prosperous new lives, many discovered even worse living conditions. Whereas the modern era offered a sense of possibility to younger women like Bobbie Ann Mason and Barbara Kingsolver, leading to another set of concerns discussed in chapter four, it ushered in a time of unsettling transition for women like Arnow who lamented the loss of traditional culture but had to adapt.

Thus, Arnow's Kentucky Trilogy, or the "long story" as she called it, provides an important example of rhetorical regionalism's ability to mobilize regional identity. Indeed, Arnow "saw much of life in terms of roads" from an early age and used them to describe the progressive sequence of her first three novels. She states,

> *Mountain Path* I originally called 'Path,'…My next work on the hills…was the story of a hill community near the end of a graveled road where the outside world was bringing change to the home community and at the same time taking men and families away…The last fiction centered on a hill family began where the

> graveled road led onto the highway, and ended in a wartime housing development in Detroit. (Introduction 7 – 8)

With each successive novel, *Mountain Path* (1936), *Hunter's Horn* (1949), and *The Dollmaker* (1954), Arnow highlights women's traditional experiences in rural Appalachian communities, drawing attention to the positive values found therein. These depictions then serve as a distinctive contrast to the disagreeable environment Gertie Nevels encounters in Detroit and lead to the seminal moment in Arnow's three-part work: Gertie's "return" to Kentucky.

In order to fully appreciate how Arnow provides reparation for Gertie's loss of her rural way of life and the loss of women readers like her and establishes an important precursor to the rhetorical regionalism of Mason and Kingsolver, this chapter upholds Arnow's vision with a sequential analysis of her trilogy. As it chronicles the transition from rural life to city life, drawing on Arnow's rootedness in place, it shows more clearly how the homestead heroism of previous generations is validated in modern lives rhetorically connected to rural regional pasts. Additionally, these novels provide the backdrop necessary to fully illuminate Arnow's critique of modern life in *The Weedkiller's Daughter* (1970). Throughout her series Arnow maintains remarkable continuity of theme, revealing an appreciation for the nobility of a woman's rural work in the 1920s, the clash between rural living and "opportunities" for families in large cities during the war fervor of the 1940s, a rural woman's journey into urban living during and after the war despite her heart's desire to farm, and ultimately, a young woman's inability to claim autonomy in a suburban world disconnected from the natural environment in the 1960s.

***Mountain Path* (1936)**

In the first novel of the Kentucky Trilogy, *Mountain Path*, Arnow uses a classic trope to highlight the cultural values found in 1920s Appalachian Kentucky – a stranger comes to town. Through the unlikely viewpoint of Louisa Sheridan, we are introduced to Canebrake and the Cal family. Teaching out of financial necessity in order to return to school and "people of her own kind," Louisa clearly sees herself as an outsider in this area of the state (12). A young woman from Lexington, Louisa wonders "how a place one hundred and ten miles away could seem to be on the other side of the world" (16). Her preconceived notions paint Canebrake as "that awful place wherever it [is]" and the Cal family home as uninhabitable for its "old and lost and forgotten" appearance (15; 31).

Like Louisa, Arnow taught in Kentucky rural schools for two terms between college enrollments to save money; after growing up in economic comfort on a farm outside the small community of Burnside, Arnow was determined to take responsibility for herself after her father's job loss altered the family's fortunes. She states, "I had learned my future depended not on the plans of another, but on fate and myself" (*Old Burnside* 125). Arnow's future was tied to achieving a higher education, an especially impressive goal for a young rural woman prior to the modern era. Such an accomplishment took Arnow to the places beyond the hills, that had captivated her since childhood. She recounts:

> I was a small girl hunting the family cows on Tyree's Knob above Burnside on the Cumberland, for it was then I saw the other world. This lay in the rows and rows of hills to the east; I wondered on the life there, where few people whom I knew had ever visited. True, Burnside was in the hills, and all my people had lived more or less in the hills of another county. Still, though not living in the

> small town below me on the river, family life was shaped by town life – the graded school we attended, the Southern Railway with most of its passenger trains then stopping in the town, the lumber mills, and the steamboats. I had grown up within hearing of train and steamboat whistles, and most of the time I looked toward the world of which they spoke – Nashville, Cincinnati, Detroit, Louisville, Chicago. (*Mountain Path* Introduction1)

Out there beyond what she could see lay an exciting world filled with possibility; the trains and steamboats all came from and went somewhere else. Even the lumber left Burnside, floating down the Cumberland River into the unknown. Arnow's need to go farther into the hills to teach was certainly counter to her longings. The contrast she encountered between the academic culture of college and the people-centered culture of the mountains is clearly reflected in Louisa's initial impressions of Canebrake.

Yet, Arnow's experiences as a rural educator were also some of her most valued, providing experiences that would deeply influence her writing. Through her teaching and boarding Arnow came to know the "sons and daughters of subsistence farmers" and their hardworking, but often struggling families (qtd. in Ballard "Life as a Writer" 19). As noted in chapter two, both the environment and people appeared oppressed and depleted to Arnow. Especially when compared to county seat towns, numerous disadvantages in the hills were clear: mail arrived on mule back, roads and electricity were almost non-existent, families used the forests around them for firewood and wild game, county health and hospitals were scarce, one room schools had no plumbing or help from the state, few students could afford education beyond eighth grade, men left for periods to earn daily wages but would return to put out crops while others turned to moonshining, and cars and radios were few. Arnow summarizes her

observations: "depleted natural resources, lack of state aid for roads and education made for a poverty of environment that in turn impoverished the family." However, economic poverty did not necessarily mean a poverty of spirit. In many of the older log homes Arnow found much that was pleasant and beautiful: "open fires, hounds, children, human talk and song instead of TV and radio, the wisdom of the old who had seen all of life from birth to death, none of it hidden behind institutional walls, there was a richness of human life and dignity seldom found in the United States today [1963]" (*Mountain Path* Introduction 2 -4).

Such richness and dignity bring Arnow's Louisa Sheridan to a personal crossroads in *Mountain Path*. Moving quickly past her first impressions, Louisa compares the Cal family's values to those she knows back in Lexington; she finds that they draw strength from a source foreign to her sensibilities. They display "some reservoir of primitive strength and calmness" in their steady eyes, hands, and voices "that she [can] not understand or define because it [is] lacking in her own life" (53). Unlike the Cals, whose relationships with one another provide a firm foundation for daily living, Louisa's way of life, "her world," revolves around university studies rather than people (171). The culture that she knows views people competitively, not cooperatively. Indeed, Louisa readily admits that "she had never really loved anyone" (122). She surmises, "back in Lexington and in school people were tagged and labeled; they were worth so much, or had bred so many winners, or had so many letters after their names, or had published so many books, or spent so many years in research. Here there was none of that" (125).

In Canebrake is a culture "rooted in freedom and living in people rather than in books" (124). Clearly preferable, life in Canebrake privileges hospitality, honesty, and the intrinsic dignity of hard work:

> Chris and Lee Buck and Corie and others of their kind, she knew with the same certainty that she knew her name, would not steal or fail to give a guest the best place their table afforded. They would not lie except in connection with moonshining, neither would they be friendly with an enemy or forget to hate one they had determined to hate. They sent their children to school because they wanted to, and not because of a state law they had never heard of (124).

Accomplishments here are measured in such different, more pleasing ways: through one's care of people and community, not the individual pursuits academic success demands. Louisa wonders, "What was her life but a thing to be given away, not hoarded for a mythical success…Wouldn't [it] be better – living here? She could "give herself to such a life…to be a woman and bear children and learn the things Corie knew" (367 – 368).

Indeed, it is Corie Cal's influence that most inspires Louisa to question the true value of her current aspirations. Within a few moments of being inside the cabin that appears too dilapidated for human habitation, Louisa is drawn to Corie's "unexpected friendliness" (34 – 36). Corie is a revered figure in her family and community. She knows how to interact with the land to ensure the best for her family with a knowledge garnered from experience rather than books. Grateful and thankful for all things, Corie recognizes the effects of the weather on her family's livelihood. According to Louisa, Corie appreciates "dry wood, rain when the spring was low, cold snaps that cured up colds and made a spell for killing hogs, sunshiny days, snow days (they meant good crops), hard frozen bare ground, for it was then that the children did not wet their feet or ruin their shoes" (215). Through these observations, Louisa shows great respect for Corie's knowledge and perspective; her intimate relationship with the land is central to her role as matriarch.

Like many female characters found in southern Appalachian literature set in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Arnow's Corie is identifiable as a homestead hero. As suggested in the introduction and part one, female characters are homestead heroes when their labor is indispensable to family welfare in a challenging environment where skill, courage, and independence are required to maintain livelihood. Their achievement "affirms life" when the everyday is heroic; the "deliberate risking of life itself" is inherent in their subsistence (Pearson and Pope 8; Featherstone 159 – 160). Even though a future as a homestead hero does not pan out for Louisa, her fondness for Corie highlights the knowledgeable relationship many rural farm women maintained with the land prior to the modern era. Corie's empowerment as a woman in her place and time is ineradicably tied to it. Rather than accepting the dominant Western view that such a relationship inherently subordinates Corie and the land, ecofeminist literary criticism asks us to reinterpret both as self-existent, necessary, productive entities in a mutually beneficial relationship central to southern Appalachian culture. Corie thus provides a foundation for more fully understanding Gertie Nevels, the magnitude of the change she faces, and her deep need to engage the land as a refuge.

Furthermore, the contrast between Corie and Louisa highlights the dual nature of Arnow's own experience. On one hand, she was drawn to and pursued a life like Louisa's that took her away from eastern Kentucky in search of education and a literary career. In Cincinnati, the largest town Arnow knew as a young woman, she gained 'worldly' experience following her academic studies at Berea College and the University of Louisville as a writer for the Federal Writer's Project (Miller "Harriette Simpson and Harold Arnow" 33). Determined to be a writer, Arnow made a compelling statement about her time in Cincinnati in 1986: "I decided I would rather starve as a writer than a teacher" (qtd. in Miller 34). Although her family found her move

to Cincinnati to be "quite scandalous," she found it "stimulating and exciting." Living near what was then one of the nation's premier public libraries, Arnow read great novelists and became more aware of world affairs. For such a reason Arnow states, "I like to live near a city. A city is, or was, supposed to be man's greatest achievement – a symbol of civilization" (Miller 35 - 36).

On the other hand, Arnow knew first-hand the allure of rural living, especially for women. Although she bristled at some of her chores, – fetching an unruly cow, churning "contrary" clabber for butter, caring for her younger sisters, gathering firewood, pulling weeds – Arnow's mother and grandmother instilled in her the importance of gardening. She observed her mother's intense study of seed catalogs and listened to ensuing discussions between her mother and grandmother over the varieties to be ordered. She helped her grandmother germinate seeds; together they filled wooden boxes with earth, adding cabbage, tomato, and pepper seeds to "warm" before being planted outdoors. Even though she was not quite healed from childbirth at planting time, Arnow's mother insisted on helping; according to Arnow, "Mama said the smell of the freshly plowed ground made her feel better" – a sentiment that both Milly Ballew and Gertie Nevels echo in Arnow's fiction. Later, when her grandmother died, Arnow's mother busied herself in the garden to deal with her grief, again providing precedence for characters who engage the land as a refuge. When she had a break from chores, Arnow would retreat into the woods to observe the flowers. Her grandmother taught her many names: yellow adder's-tongue, creeping iris, hepatica, anemone, wild blue phlox, red-brown trillium, jack-in-the-pulpit, mayapple, and others (*Old Burnside* 60 – 72; 116). These early experiences taught Arnow that growing vegetables and flowers not only connected women's autonomy to the land, but also provided an avenue to the land's sustaining role in human physical and psychological well-being.

The push and pull of Arnow's connection to Kentucky would bring her home intermittently. Most significantly Arnow returned with Harold after their marriage to subsistence farm and write. In an unpublished journal, "Early Days at Keno," Arnow chronicles her experience at "Submarginal Manor" – the telling name the Arnows gave their home (Miller "Harriette Simpson and Harold Arnow" 42). Often wearing overalls, she tended chickens, milked cows, carried water from a spring, kept a vegetable garden, canned, cooked, and cleaned as she had been taught by her mother and grandmother. When she had time between tasks or in the evenings Arnow would read and write. She also started teaching again when the couple's savings ran out. After six years in Kentucky, however, the Arnows followed other southern Appalachian out-migrants to Detroit in search of income and time. In 1945 they settled into wartime housing, setting the final stage Harriette Simpson Arnow would need to faithfully complete her vision in the Kentucky Trilogy. Yet, the Arnows would not stay in Detroit. Unable to live comfortably apart from the land, they ultimately settled in rural Michigan outside Ann Arbor in 1950 (Ballard "Life as a Writer 24 – 26).

***Hunter's Horn* (1949)**

If Arnow provides us with an example of a homestead hero through the eyes of a stranger in *Mountain Path*, then she solidifies the importance of such a figure from within the community as a woman who partners with her husband to run a family farm in *Hunter's Horn*. In this work Arnow depicts an era of dramatic change for rural Appalachian people and their communities through the development of roads and the lure of factory jobs in big cities. Both significantly contrast the rural farming lifestyle Nunnely and Milly Ballew attempt to maintain in the 1940s.

The Ballews dream of fixing up the "Old Place" on Little Smokey Creek in ways that will please Nunn's deceased grandmother (3). When farming like the generations before them, the

Ballews find self-sufficiency, comfort, and the ability to face winter with confidence. The narrator states, "They had grub and feed enough to last till spring, so what did they care? And all of them…felt a pleasant security, a closeness not of kinship only, but also as a group of workers who after working long and hard together were now able to rest and enjoy the things they had earned" (353). Working together and working with the land, the family functions as a unit; each person, like the land itself, contributes value so that everyone's needs are met.

Like Corie Cal, Milly Ballew is described as appreciating and caring for the land around her, recognizing full well what it can do:

> She pulled at the long red root, savoring the strong sweet odor of sassafras that came from the bruised wood; with it there was the smell of the fresh-dug clayey earth, and Milly sniffed with pleasure, for the earth smell made her think of spring; she squeezed a handful of earth, let her fingers spring away, and saw the earth fall slowly apart in her hands. (466)

For Milly, the land not only has the ability to sustain her and her family, it also delights her with its promise – if she treats the land well, it will produce for her, over and over again the food they need. She seems to join hands with the earth in this moment, gazing at it with confidence. Furthermore, as discussed in the introduction, Milly turns to the natural world when she needs a respite from her roles as wife, mother, and fellow laborer. Even as the earth sustains her physically with its production, it delights her imaginatively and emotionally. She both observes and actively engages the land, growing from a child who appreciates its mysteries into a woman who appreciates its sustenance. Milly's intimate connection to the land shows the continued importance of a character like Corie and anticipates Gertie's need to engage the land as a refuge.

Arnow's own delight in the land in southern Appalachia is increasingly apparent through Milly Ballew. About six years old in 1913 when her family settled on Tyree's Knob outside Burnside, Arnow wanted nothing more than to be out in the woods. In this environment she thrived, climbing slender hickories even though "girls were not supposed to climb," often finding a seat where she could "better…see the sky and listen to the world around [her]" (53). In *Old Burnside* she remembers:

> The woods were never silent. During the rare times when I could feel no breeze, the pines that crowned the hill talked in low voices, and on windy days they roared and quarreled in loud tones…and then on an especially still day I would hear a faint roaring that was neither a distant train nor the murmur of the pines…it was the Cumberland River roaring her way down to Smith Shoals. (53)

The trees talk, murmur, and roar to express their reaction to the breeze just as the river voices her movements, engaging Arnow. Unlike the "dead" logs held in the Kentucky Lumber boom in town, the trees at home "[are] alive" (65).

Always beyond the woods when the wind was low, however, Arnow could hear the sounds down in Burnside that intrigued her: mill whistles, church bells, steamboat whistles, trains. Arnow's imaginative interest in both her natural environment and the world outside the hills of eastern Kentucky predicted her movements between the two. Although Arnow would follow many of her "people" to distant cities, since such places "offered most," like access to college educations, jobs, and publishing, the "hills beyond the sound of train whistles," would always remain her first love (1). The complexity of Arnow's own experience is reflected in Gertie's; both indicate the need to reconcile the positive attributes of traditional rural life as

portrayed in Corie's and Milly's experiences and the circumstances, however unpleasant, of modern urban life.

Best symbolized in *Hunter's Horn* by the new gravel road making its way into the Smokey Creek community, significant changes are taking place in the area. Nunn notes that whereas people he had known as a boy left out of necessity when flooding washed away land and destroyed crops, people now willingly head north to Indiana, Cincinnati, and Detroit to find factory work (366 – 367). Due to the country's WWII demands, jobs seem plentiful and pay astronomical compared with that in the hills. Indicative of such changes, the men at Battle John Brand's revival do not talk as in previous years about "crops, neighbors, politics, and religion, but of the war and the wild excitement in the outside world" (409). Although Nunn does not leave to seek work elsewhere once his farm is purchased, his obsession with hunting King Devil, a fox, and the turmoil it causes his land and family provide a vision of what will happen to the area and its people as the modern world makes its way in or they make their way out. Much like the fox that captured Nunn's attention, members of his community are being drawn to the promise of finery in big cities. If Nunn's experience with King Devil is any indication, foregoing farm life for factory life will lead them to ruin.

In both Louisville and Cincinnati, Arnow came to know many economically displaced people who had given up life in the hills for paychecks that would provide, they hoped, glasses, shoes, and much more for their families. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Arnow's experience as a rural teacher had shown her the poor conditions many communities in eastern Kentucky faced. Even though federal funds would begin to improve conditions in the hills by 1933, many young people had already left. Without good land to farm or infrastructure to support business, they turned to industry in cities to the north. Although many men went to the

cities alone, returning to visit with their families when possible, the Great Migration to come after WWII would take away wives and children as well. Thus, government improvements, like roads, and increased access to automobiles to use on those roads offered both a blessing and a curse (Arnow Introduction *Mountain Path* 7). Rural people could more readily access the outside world, but often for a hefty price: the crippling or loss of their home communities. Nevertheless, for many, the appeal of "opportunities" was just too great.

Nunn's eldest daughter Suse and Lureenie Cramer, for example, find the idea of happenings in far flung places irresistible. Always desirous of more material possessions than what life in the hills could afford her, Lureenie wishes for a big house with fine furniture. Thus, her husband's decision to leave for a "real job" in Cincinnati makes her "proudheaded": electricity, running water, and a radio seem well within her grasp (65; 219). Lureenie's point of view strongly influences Suse, who projects her longing onto the new teacher: she imagines that Miss Burdine has known bathrooms, furnace heat, innerspring mattresses, automobiles, elevators, movies, and possibly even dancing. Suse determines that "some day she too would be like that – a part of the outside world" (235).

Suse's vision of the world outside Ballew, however, does not hold true for Lureenie's experience. While Lureenie's eventual life in Cincinnati with Rans does include furnished rooms, electricity, and trips to the movies, she returns to the hills alone with her children looking "old and tired, ugly tired, with her skin yellow and her eyes red and pouchy rings under them, as if from overmuch weeping or too little sleep" (332). Indeed, Nunn finds Lureenie pathetically foraging in the woods for a few morsels to feed her children. Lureenie's stories of Cincinnati, far from Suse's hope of "wonder and glory," center on things that made her miss rural Kentucky: a household view of her neighbor's brick wall, a two-burner gas plate, smog, and a battery-

operated radio without batteries (270; 333 – 334). Perhaps the greatest insult, the inoperable radio, is much like the hollow promise of big cities and big factories to the north: it looks appealing and has the potential to work, but it does not – a promise much different from what Milly experiences as a woman interconnected to the earth.

Like Lureenie's stories, Suse's letters from Mark include ominous descriptions of Detroit: "The factories at night they make you think of Hell, Suse. People say we'll go to war – ugly women – funny sounding people – fat – called me hill billy – mashed his mouth – place where they make the machines that make machines – a union – big lake – cold and ugly – drive their cars like they was running from the devil" (336). Dominated by machines and factories, life in Detroit is harsh. Rather than respect for people, the community, and the environment, Mark finds prejudice, hostility, and indifference. Although Suse is not dissuaded from her desire to leave until her pregnancy is revealed, Arnow's overall picture of the world outside Ballew is more than unpleasant; the juxtaposition between life in rural Kentucky and life in urban centers Cincinnati and Detroit reads much like a warning to those who leave the land and the sustaining promise of the natural world for the false promise of mass-produced goods, utility services, and factories. Gertie will come to know this false promise first hand, but all will not be lost. The solution of land as refuge to her modern concern of economic displacement will prove more powerful than her hardships.

***The Dollmaker* (1954)**

Pressured to follow her husband Clovis to Detroit in the modern post-war era rather than buy a farm, Gertie is thrust into a place and way of life completely unknown to her. Like coal miner Brack Baldridge in James Still's *River of Earth* (1940), Gertie's husband Clovis is drawn to work other than farming (15). Drafted into the Army at the beginning of the novel, Clovis'

absence allows Gertie to live life on her terms; a homestead hero like Corie Cal and Milly Ballew, she successfully supports her children through farming and saves to buy her own land. Like Alpha, Gertie knows farming will afford her family a dependable life, but, also like Alpha, she goes with her husband when he finds a job that "suits" him. Clovis believes his "pay day" at a factory in Detroit will make all of their lives easier (119).

While Beth Harrison aptly claims that Gertie in *The Dollmaker* is not a simple 'earth mother' stereotype because she "gains strength and autonomy from her association with the land," she does not call attention to the strength and autonomy women like Corie Cal and Milly Ballew gain from the land in Arnow's earlier fiction. Instead, she finds their "connection to place" to be an "ambivalent blessing" because "subsistence farming is a harsh existence." While farming is hard work, the examples previously given of Corie and Milly not only show that they are just as connected to the land as Gertie, but that they also provide precedence for Gertie's character. The blessing they find from the land is not ambivalent in any way; it is a tangible, real connection for which they are thankful. By the time we reach Gertie's character in the sequence of novels, therefore, it is clear that Arnow had moved well beyond stereotypes of mountain women in the very first one. Furthermore, where Harrison finds that Gertie avoids the trap of "toil and misery" because of her move to Detroit, it is more accurate to note that Detroit is the site of toil and misery for Gertie (130). In Kentucky Gertie was liberated through the land; she must reconnect to it in order to maintain and validate her identity and move forward in Detroit.

Indeed, the urban world Gertie Nevels finds in Detroit appears empty of all the positive attributes Arnow assigns to rural Kentucky in her first two novels. Arriving "bewildered and dirty" from her journey on an overcrowded, foul smelling train, Gertie finds her new residence in government housing to be "like a large closet…smotheringly crowded with curious

contrivances…all halls and walls and doors and windows" (157; 165). The many walls are thin enough to convey neighbors' conversations and the tap water stinks (166 – 168). The size and conditions of the unit appear even more stifling against the "sounds, the smoke, and steam" of the nearby war plant (162). In addition to an ominous living situation, Gertie and her children immediately meet with prejudice and unkindness: they are labeled, like Mark, as "hillbillies" and while attempting to borrow some kindling for the furnace, Reuben receives an unexpected snowball in the face (169).

Initial shock at the living conditions in Detroit, however, soon gives way to deeper concerns when the realities of life do not match perceptions. The children's school, for example, has portable classrooms, a prison-like fence, a broken window, a loose gutter, and even its own industrial factory-like humming. There is no lunch room and no place to play basketball as the children had hoped (194 – 195; 200 – 203). Similarly, the state of the school children is contrary to expectations: Gertie "saw here and there a child shivering in an old coat or ragged overalls. There were red mittenless hands and unbooted feet in low shoes that were not new. She gave a slow headshake of wonderment. There couldn't be any poor people, not real poor in Detroit…" (193). Yet, Gertie and her family learn all too soon that hard times are easy to come by in Detroit for workers dependent upon an hourly wage. Goods and groceries bought on credit make the threat of union strikes and post-war layoffs even more frightening. When Clovis is out of work Gertie tellingly wonders "What [does] a body do when the grocer cut(s) off credit?" (570). Although she is able to use her whittling to make dolls and crucifixes for a small profit, Gertie characterizes selling them as "[spewing] ugliness into the world"; she states, "whittling for money" is a "lonesome work" (485; 323).

Oppressed like nature amidst rows of manmade housing units, factories, trains and their pollutants because she is nearly powerless to provide for her family, Gertie returns to rural Kentucky in her mind. She creates for herself the land and life she knows, contrasting the freedom she felt there with the prison of her present circumstances. Looking down at dirty, stinking dishwater, for example, she wishes "just for one minute she could walk outside, go to the barn, the spring somewhere – walk, see her father, get away from the gas smell, the water smell, the steamy heat, the hard white light beating into her eyeballs…hemmed in, shut down, by all this – and debts" (183). At night when she is "lonesome" Gertie

> [remembers] the warm feel of a cow's teats or the hardness of the churn handle, or better beyond all things, the early morning trip in starlight, moonlight, rain or snow, to the spring – the taste of spring water, the smell of good air, clean air, earth under her feet. Her feet remembered the soft earth when they took the few steps over the ice and cement for a bucket of coal. (204)

Gertie's thoughts of Kentucky become even more pronounced after her young daughter Cassie is killed by an oncoming train while playing in her own fictional world. Gertie literally wills herself into dreaming. Waking from a grief-stricken stupor, she realizes it is raining and mentally "[puts] all herself into the rain, [holding] herself there…soon she could hear creek water, the creek below the Tipton Place" (421).

Many of Gertie's visions are reminiscent of the Tipton Place farm, the "safe and sheltered place…close to her father," she was in the process of purchasing before moving to Detroit (70). She imagines what it would have been like: "She was all moved in now, her corn and fodder were in the barn, for she had rived [split apart] shakes and mended the roof. The hens had learned to lay eggs in the nests she had made and lined with fresh hay…Up at the house, in the

big middle room on the hearth, was her red cedar churn filled with clabbered cream" (216). This land was to be "her land," saved for over years of selling eggs, walnut kernels, and molasses (35). It was a "piece of heaven on earth," a "Promised Land," more real to Gertie than God because she knows that "only your own place on your own land [brings] free will" (319). Far from crowds, cramped rooms, grocery bills, dilapidated school buildings, murderous machines, and erratic wages, the lifestyle Gertie planned for and longingly remembers would have empowered her, in connection with the natural world, to provide for her family in a position revered for traditional southern Appalachian women like Corie Cal and Milly Ballew.

Since Gertie's present reality in modern era Detroit does not allow for her former desires through an intimate subsistence-based relationship with the land, she eventually lets go of dreams and reaches for what tangible connections she can. As indicated at the beginning of the chapter, Gertie "returns" to Kentucky. Since she cannot literally go back to the place and culture in which she remains invested, she reconnects to the identity she derives from her Kentucky experiences through the land as refuge. As she creates an unlikely flower garden outside her urban housing unit, Gertie's physical interaction with the earth reminds her that even though she is far from her home and her preferred way of life, she still "[has] the earth…dark and rich…and smelling even more like the clean earth back home" (446). Building the fence for her garden also reminds her of her former labors: "She took the hammer; the feel of it, the same old hammer she had used back home, was good in her hand" (453). Even though she cannot return to Kentucky, she can bring something of Kentucky to bear on who she is in Detroit. In other words, Gertie becomes more fully herself in this moment when she realizes that her present identity can be informed by her past experience. Both she and the small patch of land outside her housing

unit profit: woman and land gain the potential to "bloom," so to speak, against the overbearing, unnatural backdrop of Detroit.

Ecofeminist literary criticism helps readers further understand how the relationship is depicted as mutually beneficial and liberating for both woman and environment. Clearly depicted through the small size of Gertie's yard versus the enormity of the housing complex, as well as the nearby factory, train, and rundown school, nature is unimportant and unrecognized in Arnow's urban Detroit setting. Neither nature nor Gertie really fits in here; both stand out as strange anomalies. Viewed together, however, when the smell of the earth connects and comforts Gertie in a way that dreams cannot, both the patch of land and the displaced woman from eastern Kentucky are acknowledged as significant; together they benefit from bringing Gertie's past experience into her present reality. The narrator states, "the crimson light grayed up for dawn, and in the shaving-littered room she slept, but wakened soon, half dreaming still of earth and trees and hills and running water. Dreams, she told herself, and got up and dressed, and then remembered. Not all of this was dreaming; she had the earth" (446). Gertie's gardening is not a matter of resisting the changes in her circumstances but of embracing the possibilities inherent in the earth, which remain accessible to her even in an urban setting and in the face of loss. Detroit's soil provides her a means of defining herself when her identity is threatened.

Furthermore, Arnow illustrates the shift from new regionalism to rhetorical regionalism in Gertie's realization of herself. Her dreams, though a helpful coping mechanism for a time, are, in effect, a new regionalist response to her displacement. If she cannot literally be in Kentucky, then she can imagine it and experience it rhetorically within her visions. It will be created and maintained in her mind. Engaging the land as a refuge additionally provides a way for Gertie to more fully assert her desired identity as a displaced rural Kentuckian in Detroit. Although Gertie

can no longer engage the land in the same ways Corie and Milly do or she once did, she can merge memory and current reality to preserve and validate the sense of identity she shares with them through her Detroit flower garden. Thus, Gertie's reconciliation of her identity is increasingly possible; she asserts who she is where she is without fully assimilating to Detroit. Through her depiction of Gertie, Arnow invites readers to do the same. Like Gertie, readers who value past experience in rural places can access their truth of themselves in present urban settings through the land as a refuge – in particular through a small flower garden.

Arnow confirms that Gertie's garden provides reparation for the loss of her rural life so that she can move forward in her present one when she reclaims her whittling from the marketplace. In the last scene of the novel Gertie confirms what has been alluded to all along. The figure is indeed a supplicant Christ, but a faceless one because there are so many faces Gertie might choose from. She tells the "scrap-wood man," who has just tentatively sawed her fine work into boards as if destroying a cherished religious object, "They was so many [faces] would ha done; they's millions an millions a faces plenty fine enough – fer him" (600). In a thoughtful moment of wonder and pain she continues, "Why, some a my neighbors down there in th alley – they would ha done" (600). Thus, Gertie's Christ figure ultimately takes the form of the people she has come to know in Detroit. Despite her struggles, Gertie's ability to reconcile her own identity through the land as a refuge allows her to find the good in the people and place immediately around her. She determines that "the alley and the people in it [are] bigger than Detroit" (436). They have all sacrificed, perceivably giving up more desirable prospects, to work and live in an uncertain setting, much as they might if living off the land for the first time. As a community, they embody the hardiness of the human spirit.

***The Weedkiller's Daughter* (1970)**

Arnow's Kentucky Trilogy establishes the needed background for a clearer understanding of *The Weedkiller's Daughter* (1970), a novel Arnow set in 1960s Detroit while observing the effects of encroaching development on her adopted homeland. In this text Susan (Susie) Schnitzer wishes to flee her father's domineering personality as manifested in his desire to control his environment; as the "weedkiller," he kills any nature around him in the ironically named subdivision of Eden Hills. Equally disconcerting is her mother's passive acceptance of suburban culture. She "becomes a nonperson in her effort to keep up with appearances" (Haines 223). Susan, isolated and alienated from "the establishment" like other teens of her generation, would instead find it "nice to be a Canada goose," leaving behind the "human-being part" of her life in favor of the natural world (204; Ballard "The Central Importance" 148). Yet, Susan is never quite able to connect to either nature or herself; she instead shrouds herself in deception, a mirroring of the nation's cold-war climate, unable to express her opinions on civil rights, Vietnam, or the loss of rural land for housing developments. Ultimately fooling a social worker by reading about acceptable behavior for girls her age, Susan believes she has preserved her identity when in fact she has never really asserted who she is or where she stands on modern issues (Haines 223 – 226).

Thus, the significance of *The Weedkiller's Daughter* becomes increasingly clear when read against the Kentucky Trilogy. As Charlotte Haines observes, Gertie Nevels' very real agony in Detroit becomes a "farce" in Susie (226). Although Gertie shrouds herself in dreams for a time, she eventually establishes her identity by engaging the land as a refuge through her small garden; she asserts, or reasserts, who she is in her current circumstances based on her Kentucky experiences, including the knowledge she shares with Corie Cal of *Mountain Path* and

Milly Ballew of *Hunter's Horn*. As if to underscore Gertie's success in light of Susie's failure, Arnow briefly brings the two characters into contact in *The Weedkiller's Daughter* when Susie comes to congratulate Gertie on a recent legal victory.

As "The Primitive," Gertie protects her land from development. She embraces herself as a "hillbilly," complete with bonnet and shotgun: "she represents defiance… against encroaching 'progress'" (Haines 226). It is only on Gertie's land that Susie finds some measure of truth, equating the barn with a "favorite church" (303; Haines 226). Arnow seems to indicate here that when there is land to connect to, nature to commune with, there is hope for personal revelation; simultaneously, the reverse is true: as development continues its march, it destroys both nature and the potential for personal fulfillment, especially for women. Arnow reinforces this idea through Susie, as Haines indicates, because she cannot "imagine a protagonist in the arid environment of suburbia capable of risking the self-disclosure necessary for personal growth, social connection, and political activism" (227). Whether in Kentucky, Detroit, or anywhere else for that matter, a woman's ability to engage the land as a refuge in response to modern concerns is essential to knowing who she is.

Not surprisingly, Arnow's admonition that protecting the natural world against modern encroachment is especially important for women's understanding of themselves also informed her identity as a displaced Kentuckian in the North. In a lecture given to the Historical Society of Michigan in 1968 Arnow describes the changes she was seeing near her land in Ann Arbor. The widening of a highway to accommodate increased traffic left a "barren, ugly place," she states, that destroyed trees, flowers, shrubs, and vines and pushed out wildlife such as ducks, great blue herons, fish, and loons. Arnow also expresses a feeling of "panic" when she notices an

old weathered barn being torn down because she knew such barns were being lost not due to age, but for development. She asks, "Would such barns ever be built again?" (8 – 9).

Arnow knew all too well the indelible marks man's modern manipulation could leave on rural communities. In 1950 Wolf Creek Dam significantly altered her homeplace in Kentucky, turning the Cumberland River into Lake Cumberland. In fact, the introduction to her memoir expresses frustration at her inability to accurately identify landmarks in Burnside when she returns to show her children the site of her childhood (Prologue vii – xii). Like many TVA dams, the project sacrificed homes and businesses to alleviate floods and threats of floods by burying the area under water. In the epilogue to *Old Burnside* Arnow describes the exploitation she personally feels and that southern Appalachian communities like hers have faced:

> Burnside, once Point Isabel, and further away in time a nameless piece of land at the meeting of the rivers, had long been giving the outside world what it needed or wanted; first the skins of beaver and deer, then farm produce, and at last timber. Now the world wanted electricity and recreation. This time the world took what it wanted. (128)

The river that marked much of Arnow's childhood now seemed to her a thing stolen, taken without permission and used without benefit to the local people. In fact, the Army Corps of Engineers took thirty-six acres of the Arnows' land in Pulaski County during the war; even after suing for just compensation, the loss by force added insult to injury when wealthy families began building summer homes along the lake (Haines 220).

Ultimately, Arnow's Kentucky Trilogy, for all the heartache of transition it chronicles, is Arnow's love letter to southern Appalachia, for it is there that she continually places "richness of human life and dignity" (*Mountain Path* Introduction 4). Despite her own wishes not to be

"pigeonholed" as a Kentucky writer, a southern Appalachian writer, a regionalist, or labeled in any way, Arnow strayed from writing novels set, at least in part, in Kentucky only once in *The Weedkiller's Daughter*, even while living in Cincinnati and Detroit. The hills of eastern Kentucky in Pulaski County would always be Arnow's "voiceplace": the site of her rootedness as a writer, her source of sustenance, and the place she would depict best and most. According to Sandra L. Ballard, Cora Lucas, a college friend of Arnow's at the University of Louisville, noted that Arnow was "already showing her strong sense of identification with Kentucky hill people" while other members of their writers' society produced 'semi-myths, sad love poems full of Weltschmerz [world pain], and parodies of Edgar Lee Masters' poetic biographies' ("Life as a Writer" 21; Lucas qtd. in Ballard 21).

Ballard praises Arnow's sense of place this way: "Harriette followed one of the first rules of writing: she wrote about what she knew" (21). Thus, when Arnow asks "who can excavate a fiddle tune, the coolness of a cave now choked with the water of Lake Cumberland, or the creakings or sighings of an old log house?" she has already answered her own question (Introduction 8). Ballard indicates that even as a young woman "Harriette Simpson knew very well that she could preserve this place and time with words" ("Life as a Writer" 20). In doing so, Arnow recognizes the power of rhetorical regionalism to create, maintain, preserve, and validate the places and cultures with which readers wish to identify. She is thus an important literary foremother for the next generation of Kentucky women writers who do the same in increasingly modern contexts. As the next chapter shows, Bobbie Ann Mason and Barbara Kingsolver even more fully translate the land as refuge into the latter part of the twentieth century and into the present day.

Chapter Four

Leaving Home, Finding Fulfillment:

Bobbie Ann Mason, Barbara Kingsolver, & The Search for "More"

"It has been a long journey from our little house into the wide world, and after that a long journey back home. Now I am beginning to see more clearly what I was looking for."

Bobbie Ann Mason,
Clear Springs

Two of the most well-known and beloved characters to appear in the works of Bobbie Ann Mason and Barbara Kingsolver – Samantha "Sam" Hughes of Mason's *In Country* (1986) and Taylor Greer of Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees* (1988) – share one overarching fear: young motherhood and early marriage in rural Kentucky. In Sam's small town of Hopewell, the popular driving route between the Burger Boy and the McDonald's is identified as "the mating range" (75). When her best friend Dawn becomes pregnant, Sam, who "wants to live anywhere but Hopewell," "th(inks) about how it used to be that getting pregnant when you weren't married ruined your life because of the disgrace; now it just ruined your life, and nobody cared enough for it to be a disgrace" (7; 103). Likewise, Taylor, familiar with the backseat of a Chevrolet on "Steam-It-Up Road," or Greenup Road, in Pittman County, finds nothing there to inspire her – including the "pecker" she has seen – "to get hogtied to a future as a tobacco farmer's wife" (3). Even Taylor's "mama" knows that "barefoot and pregnant [is] not [her] style"; instead, she has a "plan" to "drive out of Pittman County one day and never look back…" (3; 11). Thus begins her great adventure to the Southwest. Sam's desire to leave home transports her to Vietnam and takes her north to visit the war's memorial in Washington, D.C.

Set in the 1980s, both *bildungsromans* feature an important atmosphere for young women. As discussed in chapter two, the strides made nationally for and by women in the 1960s

and 70s had begun to arouse an expectation of something different, something "more." Even in rural areas, the educations, careers, and adventures that had once been desirable, but widely unattainable for many women, were becoming increasingly accepted. Although Southern and southern Appalachian social mores would continue their influence, many young women in these regions could foresee, quite literally through television and film, life paths more in keeping with their personal wants and talents. Thus, avoiding early pregnancies – "some mischance, some stupid surprise" – that would tie them to their hometowns and alter their prospects is paramount in both novels. Sam knows that Dawn will now "live and die in Hopewell"; she no longer has a "chance" (*In Country* 184; 142; 158). As Sam and Taylor respond to expectations, opportunities, and resulting concerns, they highlight the role land continues to play for women from rural backgrounds in the modern era.

In these and other works, Bobbie Ann Mason and Barbara Kingsolver build upon Harriette Simpson Arnow's depiction of Gertie Nevels in *The Dollmaker*. Like Arnow, they offer examples of women who engage the land as a refuge in response to modern concerns so that lessons derived from their upbringings, once perceived as oppressive, provide an avenue to autonomy and fulfillment. Rather than economic displacement, however, their fiction brings into focus concerns more prominently affecting young rural women in the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. As Mason and Kingsolver depict, many women found themselves drawn to the promises of the modern world only to more fully recognize their indissoluble connectedness to the land. The groundwork laid by the feminist movement coupled with the allure of television and film images, popular radio, books about women's lives, educational opportunities, and automobile ownership greatly influenced women to seek change.

Attaining a new life meant, of course, dispensing with the old; most were all too happy to leave behind rural living. Indeed, the "valuables" Kingsolver describes as being "casually left behind" when she left Kentucky to pursue her goals never left her. Instead, when she and women like her needed the landed wisdom learned from rural upbringings as a refuge in times of change or crisis, they established it from within themselves – as part of their identity – by engaging the earth wherever their lives had taken them physically or imaginatively or both. To illustrate the influence of the modern era on rural women's lives and their subsequent choices to reestablish rural connections Mason and Kingsolver, like Arnow, rely on rhetorical regionalism; they depict an array of women whose varying circumstances lead them to similar outcomes.

Growing Up On the Land & Looking For a Way Out:
Rural Discontent & Modern Possibilities

In Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*, Sam and Dawn's desires to break free from Hopewell, Kentucky, show the stifling nature of small town life in the latter part of the twentieth century; perceived another way, they offer a glimpse of popular culture's role in helping create that discontent. Rural teens privy to the contemporary music and television shows of the 1980s, Sam and Dawn fantasize about new, more exciting lives. Even though both women are "removed from the mainstream," according to Leslie White, "they are nevertheless affected by its trends and policies and tempted by its images of affluence and prosperity" (72). Sam wishes, for example, that she and Dawn "could do something real wild" like run off to Florida, get jobs at Disney World, and go to the beach daily (89). Since they are unable to break free from family and cultural expectations, however, Sam and Dawn see themselves as the "baddest girls in Hopewell": they have multiple ear piercings, are sexually active (Sam is on the pill), curse freely, and find a measure of independence living in homes without mothers. Dawn jokingly suggests that she and Sam go to Paducah in their sexiest outfits to meet traveling businessmen. Less

drastic, both young women feel so secluded that they would settle for the liveliness of a local mall, and Sam especially, for a car (55; 43; 49).

Critics have often considered the role of popular culture in Mason's work and Mason herself has expressed a sort of obsession with what is going on around her in modern society. She explains:

> … nowadays there are so many of us, and so many feel left out and are in no position to reject society and light out for the territories, that the focus has shifted away from the romantic hero to the ordinary person's struggle to get by in mass society… The new arena for fiction is the mainstream. Instead of the hero going outside society, we have people carrying on their daily lives within it, in spite of it, and we have marginal folks trying to get in, to get some basic advantages they've been denied. In the past we weren't willing to take sales clerks, for instance, seriously in fiction – especially black female sales clerks. But now we are. And that's important, I think" (qtd. in Magee 309).

Thus, the presence of pop music radio, MTV, HBO, television shows, fast food joints, Disney World, and shopping centers is of serious consequence in Mason's work. Popular culture helps to establish realism, certainly, but it also emphasizes the ordinary, mainstream, daily appeal of her characters and the hope each has for a life better than his or her reality. Mason explains, "I think it's very close to people and it reflects what they feel and believe…I'm not so interested in what it means ultimately…I'm just after the quality of experience in everyday life" (qtd. in White 70).

What some scholars have unfairly dismissed as "Kmart Realism" or "Grit Lit" instead helps to pinpoint many of the values, myths, and even feelings of community, family, and time

derived from a common interest in rock and roll musicians and television programming (Hobson 12). In "The Function of Popular Culture in Bobbie Ann Mason's *Shiloh and Other Stories* and *In Country*" White finds that the quality of those everyday experiences can be formative, a point Mason herself has made: "the surface *is* the reality" (70; qtd. in Smith, M. 61, emphasis Mason). Furthermore, Mason's regional setting in rural western Kentucky gains in collective allure as a result. David Booth aptly points out, "the action [also] occurs in a universal American geography" (99). And insofar as our popular culture defines us to the world, that American geography offers a global comparison. Yet, Mason's western Kentucky does not become merely "incidental" as Booth goes on to surmise. Instead, her underscoring of popular culture in a specific location emphasizes the dramatic shifts occurring in rural places in a particular time period, especially for women.

Set in the summer of 1984 to the tune of Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run," – a song that firmly places the novel in its contemporary context – *In Country* chronicles Sam's search for direction following her high school graduation. She has the opportunity to attend college at the University of Kentucky or Murray State, and her mother tries to impress upon her that education is the means to a better life. Irene states, "Sam, how many times do I have to tell you that if you want to spend the rest of your life waiting on somebody, then go right ahead. You'll be sorry if you don't go to school (55). Her high school boyfriend Lonnie, wants to marry her and her Uncle Emmett, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, depends on her for help and companionship, but Sam "can't figure out what to do." Although Sam wants to leave, she feels as "in country" in Hopewell, Kentucky, as her father and uncle were in Vietnam: stuck and miserable. As stated in chapter two, finding freedom from traditional roles would be particularly difficult for women from small rural Southern communities. Even though Sam does not face the

pressure of upholding the lineage of farm women on family land, she feels intently her role as her uncle's caretaker and the seemingly logical progression of becoming her high school sweetheart's mate.

In fact, Sam's misery stems from her intense sense of responsibility for the people around her even more than the contrast between her small town life and the popular images on television. The narrator states, "She was at the center of all of these impossible dramas, and somehow she was feeling that it was all up to her. But she didn't really know where she was, or who she would be if all those people left town and walked into the sunset to live happily ever after. If she got all of them straightened out, what would she do?" (178). To avoid making decisions about her own life, Sam overly invests herself in others while dreaming of running away. Their hold on her significantly stifles her ability to decipher who she is and what she wants.

Kingsolver's Taylor Greer, whose given name is Marietta or "Missy," also finds much to be desired in rural Kentucky in the 1980s. A poor, fatherless girl from the country, who dresses "memorably" since she cannot afford elegance, Taylor sees herself as a "dirty-kneed ki(d) scrapping to beat hell and trying to land on [her] feet" (5; 2). Unlike Jolene Shanks, who fulfills local expectations when she gets "in trouble," marries Newt Hardbine, and drops out of high school, Taylor knows that working hard in school is the first step to getting out. Rather than following a more traditional pattern of young marriage and motherhood, Taylor plans to graduate from high school above all else. She maintains,

> I was not the smartest or even particularly outstanding but I was there and staying out of trouble and I intended to finish…it was in this frame of mind that I made it to my last year of high school without event. Believe me in those days the girls

> were dropping by the wayside like seeds off a poppyseed bun and you learned to look at every day as a prize. You'd made it that far. By senior year there were maybe two boys to every one of us…(3)

Not only does Taylor stay in school, she takes a job at the local hospital. Although Taylor "learn(s) things" like counting platelets, the job is too limiting; it is not enough to keep her in Pittman County.

Both Sam and Taylor recognize that a car is an essential component of their flight from their rural hometowns; the desire alone is not enough. To take advantage of the modern era's possibilities, they need mobility. By the 1980s, according to Deborah Clarke, women "had recognized a place in car culture" predicted to follow World War II: after decades of being viewed as secondary drivers, or merely as passengers, they had become subjects of automotive marketing studies (105). While Clarke goes on to discuss the "problematic nature" of women's travel in automobiles that themselves become "homes," she concedes that depictions of women out on the road unsettle domesticity and appropriate the male-dominated road novel (103 – 105).

Road trips and the cars that make them possible symbolize freedom, especially for women. They evoke the long relationship between cars and feminism; used as "public platform(s), object(s) for ritual decoration, and emblem(s) for the cause of women's emancipation," cars helped advance the women's movement as early as 1910 (Scharff qtd. in Clarke 106). Not only driving a car, but also owning it stirs the feminist impulse. Lesley Hazelton states, "while men take for granted the independence that cars bring, women do not. Our own car means freedom. It means control of our own lives." Even if a car is a home away from home, so to speak, it may also be a woman's "castle": "the car is where she is her own person, the place that is hers and her alone. Where she can just be herself" (qtd. in Clarke 106).

Not only can a car be her space, it can take her to the places she wants to go. Accessing and maintaining a car depends upon knowledge and economics, certainly, but as Kingsolver and Mason show, working to overcome constraints is worthwhile if it means attaining the tangible hope of a new life.

After five and a half years, Taylor saves enough extra money for a 1955 Volkswagen bug "with no windows to speak of, and no back seat, and no starter" that could be push started with the wrong foot on the clutch and the other hanging out the door (10). Yet, the car's inconveniences pale in comparison to its function: it is Taylor's ticket to adventure and autonomy in the modern era. Sam, too, defies expectations and acquires a Volkswagen – a 1973 with a rebuilt engine. In her hometown cars are not given to girls: "Boys got cars for graduation, but girls usually had to buy their own cars because they were expected to get married – to guys with cars" (58). Sam had received a dictionary.

It is no surprise, then, that Sam, like Taylor, is proud of, even "love(s)" the vehicle even though it is not in mint condition: "It is off-white, with bright orange patches where Tom fixed the spots of rust" and its faulty clutch has to be held in place (6 – 7; 10). Still, in her new car on the interstate, Sam feels like she could "glide all the way across America" (3 - 4). She wishes she could "wake up and not know where (she) was" (6). The feeling of control car ownership provides deeply pleases Sam even though it seems foreign to her because of the hold her traditional role as caretaker has on her life: it is a "strange exhilaration, as if she were free to do anything she wanted." In order to break free from her obligations, to do what she wants, however, Sam must refocus her efforts on her own life (176; 178; 187).

As teens spending their formative years on farms – Bobbie Ann Mason on her parents' dairy farm outside Mayfield near Paducah, Kentucky, and Barbara Kingsolver on her parents'

farm near Carlisle in Nicholas County, Kentucky – both authors felt strongly the possibilities of the modern era and hoped to escape lives tied to the land. Mason describes her family as bound to the land. She states, "The dairy farm held us back with invisible fences as confining as the real barbed wire bordering our pastures": "endless hoeing, fences to fix, hay to bale, and cows to milk, come rain or come shine" (*Clear Springs* 17; 11). Mason wished instead for the freedom she saw just across the road from her house. Her junior high classmate, Marlene, lived at the new motel on the highway. Mason describes the "allure of rootlessness – strangers passing through, stopping there to sleep – [as] a cliché," but an important one: "if you live within sight of trains and a highway, the cliché holds power" (6). Mason's wanderlust was piqued, as was Arnow's some forty years before, by the activity on roads and railroads near her family's farm. She wanted more than to "hul(l) beans in a hot kitchen when [she] was fifty years old. [She] wanted to be somebody, maybe an airline stewardess" (83). As her grandmother saw it, young Bobbie Ann had "notions" that questioned a "woman's duties" (141 – 142).

Mason did indeed have notions to avoid a life like her grandmother's or her mother's. After a mental breakdown and the loss of her husband in 1965, Mason's "Granny" found herself at the mercy of her son and his wife. She often left the family home to escape the sounds of Beatles' records by sitting in her husband's car: "Granny stayed there for hours, in her bonnet, head lowered, studying her plight. She had never learned to drive. She had not learned the areas Grandaddy had handled – the finances, the livestock trading – just as he had not learned to patch pants or put up preserves. Now Daddy was in charge of the manly jobs" (*Clear Springs* 141). Distinctly skilled in her role as a farm wife two generations removed, Granny was helpless in the modern era. Ironically, her retreat to the car, a significant symbol of women's autonomy in the modern era, only reinforces her powerless position. After six months, Mason's mother gave up

her own home, put her furniture in storage, and moved with her husband and the two children still living at home, into her mother-in-law's house. Mason imagines her mother "felt she was drying up, disappearing like a pea vine in the fall" (141 – 142). Also a farm wife on her husband's family land, Mason's mother had no choice but to defer her desires to her mother-in-law's.

With only her mother and grandmother's traditional roles as immediate models, Mason turned to books, movies, and music for "the 'happy illusions' [akin to those in *In Country*] that brightened her childhood" (Smith, M. 58). A drive in theater was built near Mason's home when she was ten years old. On summer nights she watched movies such as *Singing in the Rain, Key Largo, Oklahoma*, and "every" Ronald Reagan picture. She also listened to WLAC in Nashville, "an early rhythm and blues radio station that featured a popular after-midnight program hosted by the legendary disc jockey, John R." Mason's parents often shared the experience with her – she reports that they "loved" Elvis. It is widely known that Mason enjoyed reading young adult books featuring female heroines. Her book *The Girl Sleuth*, which offers a feminist homage to the fictional series that stirred her imagination, such as Nancy Drew and the Bobbsey Twins, was published in 1975. Not surprisingly, Mason and her sisters did not want to marry farmers: they preferred the traveling salesmen Dawn jokes about (*Clear Springs* 11). Michal Smith finds that even Mason's writing technique exhibits her desire to flee: "The style and the subject matter of her sparing, minimalist prose break from a literary tradition that is in many ways as limiting as farm life" (56). Most evident in her short stories, Mason's straightforward, concise sentences produce a rapid pacing reflective of the profound changes taking place in rural areas in the latter part of the twentieth century (Wilhelm 151). Her rhetorical regionalism is found in the very fabric of her writing.

Although Kingsolver traveled internationally with her parents to the African Congo and Caribbean St. Lucia on medical missions, she too felt fenced in on the farm. She disliked the isolated location of her house in an alfalfa field, the bus ride to and from school, hand-me-down clothes rather than new clothes, and being left out of after-school snacks and soft drinks. According to Linda Wagner-Martin, Kingsolver's diary entries as a youth reveal her self-pity: "she wished for a more glamorous life – or if not glamorous, more 'normal.' Above all, she wanted roller skates and for them, sidewalks" (Wagner-Martin 9). Kingsolver's maternal grandparents had the things she wanted; they lived in suburban Lexington with sidewalks, a television, and a manicured lawn.

Mason also professes a desire for sidewalks, especially after visiting her great-aunt Mary in Detroit. She declares, I "loved the North" for its sidewalks, nearby playmates, televisions, swimming pools, lovely houses, and "magic towers" (*Clear Springs* 21). Both Mason and Kingsolver perceived sidewalks as markers of inclusion, linking young people to activities unavailable or limited on the farm. Mason would later capture such longings in "Detroit Skyline, 1949," through narrator Peggy Jo. Much like a young Bobbie Ann, Peggy Jo hopes to live in a neighborhood – including friends, television, a modern kitchen, and stores – when she grows up, rather than on a farm in western Kentucky (36). After a visit to see relatives in Detroit, she worries that "life in Kentucky [will] be unbearable without a television" (45)

For Mason and Kingsolver, as with Sam and Taylor, high school was the ultimate marker of the rural upbringings that held them captive. Kingsolver primarily saw herself as a "misfit" among her peers. Growing up more like a child in the 1930s or 40s rather than the 50s, she was "somewhat isolated in her rural home, dependent on entertaining herself (outside, in the garden, woods, and fields; inside with books, family games and reading, and her music), and brighter –

even more questioning – than most children she knew" (Wagner-Martin 11). Kingsolver's diary reveals that she felt her mother was "ruining her life" because she would not allow nail polish or make-up. Like many young women facing peer pressure and at odds with their mothers, Kingsolver asks, "Why do you want to ruin my life? Why can't you believe I know how to make my own decisions? Why do you treat me like a child? No makeup or nail polish allowed in this house – you must think I am a baby or a nun…" (*Small Wonder* 164 – 165). At the same time she was desirous of feminine practices, Kingsolver was perceptively aware that gender determined women's lives in Nicholas County. Boys could find jobs with decent wages, but girls did menial work. By age thirteen Kingsolver was questioning the limited life choices women in her hometown faced, making it clear that she would not be content within such boundaries (Wagner-Martin 25 – 26).

Kingsolver describes her school years as "rocky." Even though she was deeply involved in school clubs and graduated valedictorian of her class, Nicholas County High School was too small in a too small town. Kingsolver downplayed her intelligence while her teachers attempted to keep her interested with extra projects and responsibilities. One of Kingsolver's high school projects, for example, was to recatalogue the library using the Dewey Decimal system. Through this project, Kingsolver was exposed to new worlds and new ideas through reading. Many of the writers she grew interested in wrote about gender and women's lives: Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer, Margaret Drabble, Marilyn French, and Virginia Woolf. They voiced many of the same emotions she was feeling: "These writers put names to the kind of pain I'd been feeling for so long, the ways I felt useless in a culture in which women could be stewardesses but the pilots were all men. They helped me understand why I'd been so driven by the opinions of men." Furthermore, in their work she found that "women's stories could be art: they could fascinate

readers if, somehow, they were told well enough" (Wagner-Martin 26 – 28; qtd. in Wagner-Martin 27). In many ways, the new works Kingsolver was exposed to changed her life, even causing some tension in her home as her ideas evolved separately from her parents (Wagner-Martin 26 – 28). Like Mason, Kingsolver's exposure to new images and ideas was revealing discontent with her life.

Despite the kinship she found on the written page, Kingsolver remained a tall, skinny teen at war with her small town and appearance. Kingsolver was deeply affected by the lack of public services, economic disparity, and segregation she witnessed in Nicholas County. Although those living in Carlisle perceived their community as "tight knit," class distinctions between farmer and merchant and racial distinctions between black and white were clear. For example, popularity at school was defined by wealth, privileging the children of businessmen and attorneys. The nice clothing they wore to elementary school and junior high would later become nice cars in high school. Most farm kids, like the Kingsolvers, did not have the luxury of fashion. Feeling like an outsider herself, Kingsolver felt great empathy for the African American students who joined her school during her second grade year. She states, "I remember thinking, 'They must be so scared,' and wanting to ask, but being afraid. Marilyn and Karen were the two African-American kids in my class. I wanted to be friends with them, but didn't know how…I knew they came from a different world, and I knew that they were outnumbered" (qtd. in Wagner-Martin 12).

Later, in retrospect, Kingsolver offered this assessment: "I am a young woman sliced in two, half of me claiming to know everything and the other half just as sure I will never know anything at all. I am too awkward and quiet behind my curtain of waist-length hair, a girl unnoticed, a straight-A schoolmouse who can't pass for dumb and cute in a small town, marry

young market – as far as I can see – no other type" (*Small Wonder* 164 – 165). Mason also failed to find a foothold in an environment where clothing, cars, and position determined one's popularity. She felt "acutely conscious of being country" living close to Mayfield. Whereas people in town bought clothes and food, her farming family grew food and made clothes. She states, "Although we were self-sufficient and resourceful and held clear title to our land, we lived in a state of psychological poverty." Mason even wondered at times if "down deep she might be worthless" (*Clear Springs* 83). She continues, "At heart was the inferiority country people felt because they worked the soil. Making my small forays out from the farm, I began to feel the centuries of shame, the legacy from Adam and Eve, who had listened to the snake and lost their paradise – their capacity for childlike wonder" (97). She remembers "that sense of being swept along in a current and wanting so much to attain something better" – a feeling she would recall after becoming disenchanted with New York and leaving the city for graduate school (124).

To safeguard their chances of seeking livelihoods elsewhere, both authors carefully guarded themselves against the backseat car culture of their high schools in the 1960s and 70s – a real concern not missed in their debut novels. Once pregnant, girls' access to the possibilities the of modern era, like college or professional school, evaporated. As young, uneducated wives and mothers, cleaning houses or waitressing was more likely their destiny (Wagner-Martin 21 – 25). In *Clear Springs* (1999) Mason echoes Kingsolver's apprehension. She "saw marriage as a trap, especially in Kentucky." Even more harrowing than a life spent scrubbing toilets or serving food, Mason tellingly "wondered" as a teen: "which would be worse, marriage or the insane asylum" (129). Like their characters, neither author would stay in her hometown long enough to find out.

Leaving Home, Searching for "More":
Facing the Vietnam War

Mason's novel of development concentrates on the modern concern of war and the need for a young, rural woman to understand it so she can let go of expectations and strike out on her own. Sam Hughes believes she is "feeling the delayed stress of the Vietnam War…her inheritance" (89). To find answers, Sam reads history books, talks to her uncle's friends, and asks direct questions, but is unsatisfied. The details veterans offer, like "it was hot," or "they had palm trees," are not enough to make Vietnam seem any more "real" to Sam than "picture postcards" (95). Others tell her just to "forget it" because there is "no way" she will ever understand (136). Undaunted, Sam wants to know what it was like to be "at war over there" (48; 55). The effects that she sees – the stunted growth of men who returned and feel nostalgic about killing – become her curse, the after effects of a "great mystery" (White 77; Wilhelm 30). Sam tells Lonnie, "Nobody understands the vets….they're different. People expect them to behave like everybody else, but they can't" (87).

Indeed, much has been made of Mason's depictions of veterans in the novel, even as reflected in the title. Owen Gilman Jr. sees "a provocative twist to the combat soldiers' terminology for actually arriving in Vietnam, turning the situation around completely" and "bringing the Vietnam aftermath fully into the open in America" (qtd. in Wilhelm "Searching for Home" 162). Albert E. Wilhelm also finds that the slang of the Vietnam era "echoes the title of another well-known war story – Hemingway's 'In Another Country.' There, too, the focus is on soldiers whose wounds make it difficult for them to return to the ordinary world" (162). Peter Freese explains the relationship of Mason's work to the resurgence of Vietnam discussions:

> More than any other book, Mason's slim tale confirmed that 'in the 1980s Vietnam emerged in [American] culture as a legitimate and compelling topic for

> discussion, rather than something to be hidden in shame,' and it helped make the long suppressed task of healing collective scars of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, dedicated only three years before the novel appeared, as its central symbol. (229)

A novel like *In Country*, therefore, "examines instead the effects of the War upon the home front and depicts…both the severe adjustment problems of returned veterans…and the complex fates of war widows and children who cope with the death of their husbands and fathers" (Freese 229).

While Freese's assessment is certainly true, concentration on the war and its effects have led scholars to view *In Country* primarily through a historical lens. Focus on Sam's connections to the veterans, especially her father and Emmett, and their plight has aided our understanding of trauma's long-term effects for soldiers and their families. Often overlooked in existing criticism, however, is Sam's focus on herself in connection with Vietnam, which warrants closer attention: for a young woman whose self-proclaimed indecisiveness is bound up in others' lives, it is unusual. Irene tells Sam, "Don't fret too much over this Vietnam thing, Sam. You shouldn't feel bad about any of it. It had nothing to do with you" (57). However, Sam feels strongly that the war and what has happened to Emmett has "everything" to do with her; it is hers. Like the veterans who returned, she is guilty of being alive while someone close to her died. She must somehow prove to herself, therefore, that she is worthy of directing her own life through the lens of Vietnam. Engaging the land as a refuge will cause Sam to experience Vietnam for herself; as a solution to the modern concern of war will allow her to make Vietnam part of her identity, not just a conflict she learns about through books and veterans' stories.

If she can gain knowledge of the Vietnam War like her father's, she can move forward with the life his loss blessed her with, or in Mason's words, "face the problem and get it out"

(Wilhelm 33). A soldier of sorts in her own right, Sam is held as hostage by the war as she is by the indecision that heightens the modern concerns in her life. Understanding Vietnam, truly experiencing it, and thereby connecting to her father and herself, becomes Sam's primary quest, - a term Mason and critics alike have used in describing the novel – one for which she must assert herself for herself, not for anyone else's benefit. Mason points to the complexity of her novel through allusions to Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run." Not only does the song help establish context as aforementioned, emphasizing the betrayal of Vietnam veterans, but it also, in Mason's words, indicates that "there are some people who would just never leave home, because that's where they're meant to be; and others, [like Sam] are, well, born to run" (Wilhelm 32; White 76; Mason qtd. in White 71). Before she can run, leaving Hopewell to take advantage of modern opportunities like education and travel, Sam must first reconcile her Vietnam experience with her small town background to figure out who she is and what she wants.

A substitute for her father, or at least "like a brother," her "messed up," live-in Uncle Emmett is her closest link to the conflict and therefore her best source of information (23 – 24). Often unwilling to talk about the war and what he experienced, Emmett's obsession with the egrets he observed in Vietnam intrigues and influences Sam. At Cawood's Pond, the most likely natural environment for an egret in western Kentucky, - a "snake-infested swamp with sinkholes" – Emmett reveals his appreciation for the bird. He tells Sam:

> It was so pretty. It was the prettiest bird I ever saw, all white and long-legged…Sometimes you'd see these water buffalo and every one of them would have one of these birds sitting beside it, like a little pet…The bird would eat things the buffalo turned up, and it would pick ticks off the buffalo's head. Sometimes you'd see the bird setting on the buffalo's back. He didn't care. (36)

The bird's grandeur and its seemingly symbiotic relationship with the buffalo offered Emmett a means of transcending his immediate situation. He continues, "That was a good memory. The only fucking one. That beautiful bird just going about its business with all that crazy stuff going on around it." (36). This same tactic helps him cope back at home in Hopewell: "If he concentrated on something fascinating and thrilling, like birds soaring, the pain of his memories wouldn't come through. His mind would be full of birds. Just birds and no memories. Flight" (139). When he can "get outside of [him]self" mentally in this way, the past "doesn't hurt as much" (226). If Sam can do likewise, her father's memory or present circumstances may not forever bind her to a life she does not want.

It is at Cawood's Pond that Sam chooses to subsume herself in nature, engaging it as a refuge, in order to experience Vietnam after reconnecting to the farm where her father grew up, where her roots are, and reading his war journal (199 – 200; 201 – 205). Dwayne's descriptions of death, rotting corpses, Vietcong he killed, and surprise ambushes, contrasted with the "small and predictable" elements of farm life – "Jesus bugs, blue mold, hound dogs, fence posts" – finally awaken Sam's understanding: "Now everything seemed suddenly so real it enveloped her, like something rotten she had fallen into, like a skunk smell, but she felt she had to live with it for a long time before she could take a bath" (200; 206). To know viscerally just how jarring combat would have been for a young man from the country, Sam grabs gear similar to the soldiers', imagines the flea-bomb smell in the house is Agent Orange, and heads to Cawood's pond to camp. The narrator tells us, "It was the last place in western Kentucky where a person could really face the wild. That was what she wanted to do" (208).

In the "wild," in "Vietnam," Sam mentally converts trees to tanks in the jungle and tigers under bushes until she is "humping the boonies": "out in some god forsaken wilderness and doing what [she] ha(s) to do to survive" (136). A soldier now, Sam moves slowly:

> With the space blanket and her backpack and the picnic cooler, she followed a path through the jungle. The cypress knees, little humps of the roots sticking up, studded the swamp, and some of them even jutted up on the path. She had to walk carefully. She was walking point. The thread stretched across the path to trigger the mine. She waded through elephant grass, and in the distance there was a rice paddy. (211)

Sam sets up camp, finding a flat spot free of mosquitoes surrounded by moss and ferns. Oddly calm and at peace in an environment even the Boy Scouts avoid, Sam eats, believing she is well-hidden from "snipers" until she hears something unexpected: "It started with a chirping sound, and then some scrapes. She could see movement through some weeds…she saw a face, a face with beady eyes. It scared her. It was a V.C.[Viet Cong]" (213).

Although her would-be enemy is a raccoon, Sam is fully engaged in the experience; her fear puts her on high alert (214). She momentarily feels a "curious pleasure" when she realizes that "this terror was what the soldiers had felt every minute" (217). Sam's immersion in nature, though not soothing, produces the delight of satisfaction. The wild surroundings at the pond allow her to establish a connection to her father's experience, alleviating her guilt. The movement of time like the land itself is "portrayed as organic" – it is a living entity that Sam can compress through imagination. The reader sees in this moment the immediate connectedness of past and present and of rural Kentucky and Vietnam: "how the lives of these family members

connect, intertwine, [and] have consequences for the lives of all the other family members" (Dixson 12).

The full impact of Sam's Vietnam experience is best understood through Mason's use of rhetorical regionalism. Like Gertie Nevels, Sam takes her identity as regional with her to a new location, but unlike Gertie, that location is itself a rhetorical one: her vision of Vietnam. Sam's Vietnam, of course, lacks the aural and visual intensity of rockets, flares, bullets, searchlights, choppers, jets, bombs, and explosions: "the rock-and-roll sounds of war" (214). Plus, her car is nearby. Mark S. Graybill argues, "If Sam never learns what life was 'really' like for her father in Vietnam, she also never locates her own 'real' identity" (244). It is quite clear, however, that Sam knows her Vietnam is not exactly the same as her father's. As terrified as she is, she realizes, "in a few moments everything [will] be clear and fine" (218). The key here is that Sam's experience at the pond brings her to the same feeling of terror she believes her father and other combat soldiers experienced. Whether or not all of the elements are fully replicated is inconsequential.

What matters is Sam's mindset, her ability to "g(o) out into the dark night" and have that "journey culminat(e) in an experience of healing" (Wilhelm 30 - 34). As long as she believes in the reality of the moment through her mental vision and visceral feelings, she can indeed locate her real identity as both a Vietnam War and Hopewell, Kentucky, survivor who is free to choose her own life's path. In fact, Sam's determination to put herself in the position to have the experience shows her asserting herself – she is finally doing something "scandalous." Moving between thoughts of Kentucky and Vietnam, Sam watches dawn breaking, the sun's rays illuminating her path, and realizes "she ha(s) survived" (215 - 216). Overwhelmed by her experience, Sam finds herself "strung out and dazed" like a vet returning from war; she no longer

"fit(s) into the landscape" of her hometown. Suddenly, she "belong(s) nowhere," not really knowing where she is, just as she had wished (230 - 231).

Additionally, assertions like Graybill's unnecessarily lead critics to denounce Mason's adherence to the characteristics of the *bildungsroman*. It is more relevant, as Barbara Ryan suggests, to see *In Country* as a novel that employs the genre - a genre Southern women writers have often used to comment upon identity- in ways that decenter authority and coherence - since "neither exist in the way we had supposed" (199; Graybill 239). Mason's own commentary seems to support such a reading. She had planned to "write about a girl, someone who's not sensitive" and "have her not grow up… [She] was trying to violate the form, the conventions, but it didn't work" (Smith, M. 59). Beverly Foshee more aptly suggests that Mason "secures a place for *In Country* in our current and future literary canon" precisely because she offers an archetypal journey of a search for the father structured around a *bildungsroman* that unites readers with other generations (21). That Sam's journey is also informed by rhetorical regionalism only helps to solidify its place as an influential regional work in the body of American literature.

Emmett's unexpected determination to visit the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., pushes Sam into new experiences – experiences that force her to consider where she wants to belong, who she wants to be. The narrator tells us:

> She has never been this far away from home before. She is nearly eighteen years old and out to see the world. She would like to move somewhere far away – Miami or San Francisco maybe…On the road, everything seems more real than it has ever been. It's as though nothing has really registered on her until just recently – since the night last week when she ran off to the swamp…the new

> feeling is like: you know something as well as you can and then you squeeze one layer deeper and something more is there. (7)

Sam's encounter with nature at the pond has allowed her to deal with her concerns about Vietnam. Having confronted her "inheritance" she is beginning to see she is free to roam if she wishes; she does not have to let her father's memory or her uncle's condition or even her community's expectations leave her stranded in Hopewell.

Although Mason's novel ends at the Vietnam Memorial, it is clear that Sam will pursue a new life; perhaps she will go to Lexington as Emmett suggests, perhaps not. Graybill suggests that Sam "decides a short time later to move from Paducah to Lexington, where she will attend college and live with Irene" (245). As readers, we do not actually know that for certain. Emmett tells her she will go to Lexington, but to our knowledge she does not agree or disagree. Mason leaves Sam's future untold so that our focus is on the freedom of choice itself and the way in which it is achieved through the land as refuge. Whereas Graybill "gets the sense that [Sam's] revelations…will be short lived," her ability to assert herself, by choosing to subsume herself in nature is radical in and of itself (248). When Sam locates her own name on the wall of the Vietnam Memorial, - the name she shares with a deceased soldier - one chapter of her life ends so that another may begin (244).

Leaving Home, Searching for "More":
The Lure of Adventure

Sam Hughes' new life, one in which she invests herself in herself rather than in others, may indeed take her "glid(ing) all the way across America," as she had hoped at the novel's inception (3 – 4). Exploring the open road would further liken Sam to Taylor Greer in Barbara Kingsolver's *Bean Trees*. Kingsolver's novel emphasizes the adventure of the road and relocation as a modern concern – a possible next step for a character like Sam Hughes. In fact,

Taylor Greer departs from her mother's driveway and leaves Pittman County almost immediately into the narrative. She renames herself and drives west until her car breaks down. Out on the Great Plains in central Oklahoma, "in the middle of a great emptiness," Taylor knows she has not gone far enough: the flatness of the landscape, especially in contrast to the mountains she knows in Kentucky, is too depressing: "Oklahoma made me feel there was nothing left to hope for"(13). Taylor ultimately lands in Arizona where rock formations grab her attention and her car demands it. Taylor's recognition of how the varying landscapes make her feel foreshadows the connection to nature as a refuge she will need in order to fully see herself as a mother.

Kingsolver's drastic shift in the location of the narrative highlights the settings themselves. Like Mason's use of popular culture, Kingsolver's Pittman, Kentucky, and Grace, Arizona, as well as other settings have garnered a great deal of attention. Her "imagined geographies" as Kristin J. Jacobson calls them, are often criticized for failing to fully represent place-based cultural realities. Often focused on her depictions of indigenous ways of life, critics have called her representations "ahistorical," "deracinated," and "deregionalized" (Comer 136 - 142). Jacobson, however, recognizes the importance of Kingsolver's invention. Although the locales are "imperfect," she argues, Kingsolver's "fictional locations grounded in present realities still provide important guides to finding approaches, if not solutions, to current social inequities" (175). Rather than overshadowing important issues, invented spaces like Pittman, Kentucky, emphasize context – the social, cultural, and historical qualities of a place – while also challenging readers to "envision alternative realities" as characters navigate their environment (178). Kingsolver's locales thereby function much like Mason's; as regional authors writing from a rootedness in place, they simultaneously convey the local and the universal while promoting rhetorical regionalist identities. Whether through a pointed infusion of popular culture

and/or imagined geographies, both writers establish a realistic sense of place wherein common human experiences occur. As readers become acquainted with representations of 1980s small town "Kentucky," in *In Country* and *The Bean Trees*, for example, they more fully understand a young woman's feelings of oppression and desire to leave.

Not only does Taylor find the western landscape jarringly different and her mode of transportation challenging, her first significant stop also saddles her with a baby girl – the exact fate she worked so hard to escape. She tells the woman imploring her to take her dead sister's child: "If I wanted a baby I would have stayed in Kentucky…I could have had babies coming out my ears by now" (18). Bound together as sojourners without a home, Taylor and "Turtle" – so nicknamed for her extraordinary grip – are refugees seeking a better life (22). Even though Taylor appears confident in her decision to strike out on her own, "the original tough cookie in jeans and a red sweater," she feels like a "visitor from another planet" in the Southwest (186; 38). Thus, Kingsolver's rhetorical regionalism allows us to easily pinpoint the merging of one regional identity with another as Taylor recreates much of what she knew back home in Kentucky to inform her present reality: she establishes strong female relationships with a fellow Kentuckian and a mother-figure and raises an adopted daughter. The positive influence of Taylor's new family reflects Kingsolver's desire to celebrate "nonnuclear, fragmented, socially unacceptable, or illegal relationships that converge, necessarily or by choice, to raise healthy, adaptive humans" (Kentoff 57). Much of that health is reflected in Mattie and her unlikely vegetable garden.

The relationship Mattie has with her garden is reminiscent of Gertie's. Just as Gertie and her garden bloom in the midst of their industrial Detroit surroundings, the literal intertwining of organic material and static machine parts join Matttie's modern life with nature. Taylor is

immediately impressed with Mattie's independence: "I had never seen a woman with this kind of know-how. It made me feel proud, somehow. In Pittman if a woman had tried to have her own tire store she would have been run out of business. That, or the talk would have made your ears curl up like those dried apricot things" (45). Thus, Taylor finds in Tucson one significant aspect of life lacking in rural Kentucky – appreciation for independent women in the modern era. On the contrary, Mattie's garden sets Tucson apart from Taylor's preconceived notions. Reciting her "peculiar resume," which includes "picking bugs off bean vines," Taylor is astonished to learn that bean vines – even purple ones – exist right in Mattie's backyard. She describes the scene:

> Outside was a bright, wild wonderland of flowers and vegetables and auto parts. Heads of cabbage and lettuce sprouted out of old tires. An entire rusted-out Thunderbird, minus the wheels, had nasturtiums blooming out the windows like Mama's hen-and-chicks pot on the front porch at home. A kind of teepee frame made of CB antennas was all overgrown with cherry-tomato vines. (47)

Working in Mattie's garden allows Taylor to consider what she left behind: "While the water glugged out over the sweet peas I noticed Mattie looking at me with her arms crossed. Just watching. I missed Mama so much my chest hurt" (85). Mattie's garden connects Taylor to home, to her mother, and to her previous experience through rhetorical regionalism: who she was in Kentucky still significantly informs her identity in Tucson; who she is in Tucson has the potential to give her the independence she seeks.

To establish a real and lasting connection with Turtle, Taylor engages the one entity common to both parts of her identity – the land – as a refuge. When Taylor shows dismay over the demise of bean vines in winter's first frost, Mattie teaches her about the natural cycle of life. She states: "the old has to pass on before the new can come around" (80). Certainly symbolic of

Taylor's life, since she has let go of her disdain for young motherhood based on her Pittman County experience to establish a new existence for herself in a new place, the idea that this new life is a cycle complicates what might be read only as a young woman's adventure. Taylor must also confront her feelings about motherhood; she must decide if she wants to truly be a mother to Turtle or simply a caretaker. While "everybody [else] behave(s) as if Turtle (is) [Taylor's] own flesh and blood daughter," Taylor sees their attentions as a "conspiracy"; they are forcing her to become the young mother she never wanted to be (115).

Once abused and catatonic, the child begins to heal through her attentiveness to the growing vegetables. Turtle says her first word, "bean," while watching Lou Ann and Taylor help Mattie plant in the summer. Taylor explains to Turtle that there are beans to play with, beans to eat, and beans to plant: "Honest to God, I believe she understood that…Finally she buried them there on the spot, where they were forgotten by all until quite a while later when a ferocious thicket of beans came plowing up through the squashes" (102). Like the squashes, the more she is exposed to the garden, the more Turtle's lucidity grows. She loves seed catalogs and naming vegetables. Her favorite book, *Old MacDonald Had an Apartment House*, "show(s) pictures of Old MacDonald growing celery in windowboxes and broccoli in the bathtub and carrots under the living room rug" (85). Turtle's whole vocabulary revolves around vegetables (116). Taylor states, "She knew the names of more vegetables than many a greengrocer, I'd bet. Her favorite book was a Burpee's catalogue from Mattie's, which was now required reading every night before she would go to bed. The plot got old in my opinion, but she was crazy about all the characters" (120). In the doctor's office, Turtle looks for vegetables in magazines (126). At the zoo she is more interested in the apples the turtles are eating than the turtles themselves (131).

Turtle's awareness of the natural world deeply affects Taylor; she becomes more attentive to both the beauty she sees and the meaning behind it, and what it might signify in her own life. In a local park nicknamed for excessive amounts of dog feces, Taylor finds a "miracle" in blooming wisteria. The narrator states,

> All winter Lou Ann had been telling me that they were wisteria vines….And she was right. Toward the end of March they had sprouted a fine, shivery coat of pale leaves and now they were getting ready to bloom. Here and there a purplish lip of petal stuck out like a pout from a fat green bud. Every so often a bee would hang humming in the air for a few seconds, checking on how the flowers were coming along. You just couldn't imagine where all this life was coming from. It reminded me of that Bible story where somebody or other struck a rock and the water poured out. Only this was better, flowers out of bare dirt. The Miracle of Dog Doo Park. (119)

The life Taylor witnesses in an unlikely place parallels Turtle's ability to bloom despite her stark beginning. Indeed, Taylor first describes Turtle as attached to her with "hands like roots sucking on dry dirt" (29). Grasping at anything she can to survive, Turtle goes from being "just somebody [Taylor] got stuck with" to an amazingly resilient child Taylor permanently adopts. The awe Taylor feels for the blooming wisteria matches her awe for Turtle.

Together in the Oklahoma City Library while waiting for the adoption papers to be finalized, Taylor and Turtle peruse the *Horticultural Encyclopedia*. In it they learn that wisteria is a member of the bean family, a legume that thrives in poor soil due to bugs called rhizobia. Working together in an "invisible system" like people who care about one another, bugs and plant produce beauty in spite of expectations. For Taylor, this realization identifies the ultimate

miracle: human relationships like those found in nature, regardless of any societal expectations, make ordinary lives extraordinary (241). Turtle and Taylor's connection comes through the land as refuge.

Like Taylor, Kingsolver felt the need to go somewhere, to explore new cultural possibilities, to move away from rural Kentucky as a young adult: at twenty-two – following time overseas and undergraduate graduation at DePauw University in 1977 – she "donned the shell of a tiny yellow Renault and drove with all [she] owned to Tucson." She saw herself as "a typical young American, striking out" ("High Tide in Tucson" 6). She was drawn to the Southwest for its "haunting qualities…native cultures, stark beauty, unusual plants and flowers" (Wagner-Martin 40). According to Linda Wagner-Martin, Kingsolver's impulse to move far from the familiar made her "more like her father than she had realized, the simple act of moving to new terrain, surrounding herself with unknown people and then making a place for herself, became a definition of the power of self" (38).

Indeed, Kingsolver discovered much to enjoy in Tucson: she found a group of well-educated, curious people like herself who shared her interests, connected herself to the intellectual climate of the University of Arizona through a job at the medical school, shopped at the farmers' market, went to dances, worked as an organizer for the Tucson Committee for Human Rights in Latin America, and engaged in ecological activism against nuclear sites. Happy with her life, Kingsolver enjoyed her rented stucco house, vegetable garden, and the wealth of culture around her. Yet she did not leave her regional rural identity completely behind. Kingsolver had always been a gardener. Largely influenced by her paternal grandparents, as well as her parents, she saw the value of both producing food and working cooperatively with nature's own processes. Kingsolver seems to have continually maintained a connection to the

earth, connecting herself, consciously or not, with her rural upbringing. Kingsolver would become increasingly identified with the Southwest as her writing career grew thanks to the positive critical reception of her early novels like *Animal Dreams, Pigs in Heaven,* and *The Bean Trees*, but her roots in rural Kentucky would continue to inform her life and her fiction.

Mason too would leave or "clear out," as she put it in *Clear Springs*, after earning an undergraduate degree at the University of Kentucky. As Sam Hughes might do, Mason headed to New York. She punctuates her escape from Kentucky with a sense of naïveté: she states, "trundling my innocence before me like a shopping cart, I headed for New York…" (89). Rather than the Detroit of her childhood longings, Mason chose "the big apple" at the behest of the television, radio, and one of her U.K. professors:

> I craved change and excitement – and all the tourist attractions. Going to the big city did not seem bold or brave to me. It merely seemed inevitable. New York had burned its authority into my brain long ago, when I watched Elvis Presley on The Ed Sullivan Show and listened to Martin Block's Make-Believe Ballroom from WABC, broadcast on an affiliate station. I had been to New York once, on a school trip my sophomore year at U.K. Our group toured the United Nations, the Bowery, and Broadway, and we heard Beatnik poetry at a coffeehouse, the Gaslight. My college creative-writing teacher, Robert Hazel, insisted on New York. He booted his students right out of the provinces. "Get out of this backwater Podunk," he urged. "Go get some experience. You can't be a writer unless you've lived intensely." New York was the place. (116).

In New York Mason set out to earn her stripes as a writer. She states, "gritty street life, colorful characters…I knew I wanted to be a writer, but I thought I didn't have much to write about yet"

(116). Although New York would provide an opportunity for Mason through her first writing job at fan magazine *TV Star Parade,* it would not inspire her fiction. The gritty life and colorful characters she was looking for would eventually turn up in a more well-known but unexpected place: back home on the land in rural Kentucky.

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Finding Fulfillment:
The Value of Natural Lessons Inherent in the Land as Refuge

While Taylor Greer and Sam Hughes primarily exhibit Kingsolver and Mason's desire to leave home, their propensity to turn to nature as a refuge, especially as a means of resolving concerns in a modern context, also reveals an appreciation for and knowledge gained from rural upbringings. While "mind-numbing, back-breaking labor and crippling isolation" were certainly a part of Mason and Kingsolver's childhoods, so were the "independence, stability, [and] authenticity" born out of lives lived close to the land (Mason Preface ix). Both authors participated in their families' subsistence and delighted in the pleasures of the natural world.

For Mason, life on a dairy farm was more about food production than milk: "We planted it, grew it, harvested it, peeled it, cooked it, served it, consumed it - This was life on a farm – as it had been time out of mind" (*Clear Springs* 81). Her observations of her mother underscore women's roles in food production. Having once expressed her frustration that her mother and grandmother only seemed to discuss food, her grandmother replied, "What else is there?" Michal Smith articulates the meaning of this exchange: "For her mother and grandmother, women whose lives were rounded by the tasks of preparing and preserving food, it was purpose, its preparation an act of creativity, its giving an affirmation of life. Though the men who farmed the land were also completely occupied by the work of raising crops, food for them was seldom

invested with the same spiritual dimension" – "it was simply fuel." In either regard, food "was precious because of the labor involved" and on the Mason farm, it was abundant (57).

Kingsolver too was familiar with "planting, growing, harvesting, [and] raising animals" despite her father's occupation as a doctor (Wagner-Martin 9). "Admired and respected for his medical services to the poor," Dr. Kingsolver was often paid through means other than money, causing the family to rely heavily on their garden. The ever-lurking uncertainty inherent in livelihoods dependent upon "forces outside [their] control" taught Mason and Kingsolver a great respect for nature, its influence, and its capabilities (Mason *Clear Springs* 83). They knew from an early age the kind of responsible interaction necessary to maintain a productive relationship between humans and the land.

In fact, Mason recalls a "dawning of moral consciousness" in her relationship with nature. When breaking a twig as a young girl she realized, "I was neither performing a useful task nor exhibiting thrift. I was mutilating a bush simply for the joy of the tactile. I didn't even need to be bored or mean or purposeful. I just did it. For the first time, the possibility of depravity occurred to me" (96 – 97). Mason's upbringing instilled a vital ethic involved in human – nature relationships: treating nature poorly portends disaster (DeMarr 2). Even though they felt constrained at times, both authors witnessed, again and again, what the land could provide. They knew intimately "the slow enduring pace of regular toil and the habit of mind that goes with it, the habit of knowing what is lasting and of noting every nuance of the soil and water and season" (Mason qtd. in Wilhelm "Cultivators" 48).

Furthermore, the natural world of the farm stirred their imaginations. Sleeping outdoors in the summer Mason would listen to owls, frogs, and cicadas. Like Arnow's murmuring trees, these life-affirming sounds allowed Mason to see "from a new angle, a sidling glance that

charged everything with new meaning"; she "sought and cherished such moments" (52 – 53). She recalls "bursts of joy over daisy chains and bird feathers and butterflies and cats." These simple pleasures "were the textures of bliss" (89). Kingsolver also recalls the delights of the farm. She and her siblings roamed "wooded hollows," catching crawfish, gathering pawpaw fruit, watching birds, and witnessing the unfurling of leaves in the spring. To them, springtime was better than Christmas because, Kingsolver states, "its gifts were more abundant, needed no batteries, and somehow seemed more exclusively ours" ("Memory Place" 171). A future biologist, Kingsolver's interest in nature would eventually become her "religion"; she fell in love with "understanding the processes of the natural world and how all living things are related" - the sentiment Mattie echoes in *The Bean Trees* (qtd. in Wagner-Martin 35).

Kingsolver not only infuses her fiction with an intimate knowledge of the natural world, she also ties responsibility to one's sense of place. In *Animal Dreams* (1990) Codi Noline returns home to Grace, Arizona, to care for her ailing father and teach high school biology. Along with her students, Codi finds that the Black Mountain Mining Company has polluted the river in Grace, killing microscopic organisms and orchards, a fact the company plans to cover up with a dam: the affected areas will simply be flooded and forgotten. Although she has long felt like an outsider in Grace, Codi's desire to educate her students regarding the company's negligent actions and participation in the campaign to save the town not only show her desire to defend the natural world, but also help her feel connected to the place and its people. Kingsolver primarily highlights women in the novel – including Codi, her friend Emelina Domingos, her sister Hallie, who is killed while teaching agricultural practices in Central America, and the older women of the Stitch and Bitch Club – clearly joining women's experiences and environmentalism (DeMarr 69 – 77; 88 – 92). To do so convincingly, Kingsolver draws on

stories she collected in *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983*. She "demonstrate(s) how simple people can stand up against a powerful company and how they can find in the skills of their daily lives the tools to fight against injustice" (71).

Searching for "More" & Finding Fulfillment:

Education, The Land, & "Kentucky"

While Kingsolver explored the role women can play in protecting the environment, Mason faced one's personal need to interact with the environment. The detachment she felt from nature while living in New York City was too great. In fact, Mason realized within a year of leaving Kentucky that she "missed trees," that "it was trees [she] needed" (*Clear Springs* 137; 138). She remembers, "I yearned for the long, languorous springtime of Kentucky. I craved the mellow air that seemed to caress every pore. I wanted tulips and redbud and dogwood blossoms" (145). The city, even with its museums, department stores, libraries, movies, and bars, was not fulfilling. Mason states, "I knew I didn't belong in New York. And I knew I shouldn't be building a career based on TV stars" (137). She had to change course: "I had to take my life in hand. I had to ask myself what I really wanted. I knew I wanted sanity and clarity, and I knew I didn't want to waste my life" (138). Graduate school in upstate New York seemed to be the answer, especially if Mason's appreciation for trees was any indication: "In Binghamton, the trees were blazing autumn colors on forested mountainsides. I had never seen trees perform so brilliantly. Back home, the predominant oak trees made the autumn brown and gold. But this Northern landscape was full of fire; the trees were flames" (138).

Yet, graduate school, like New York, was not exactly what Mason had hoped despite its beautiful setting. Her confidence "shattered in that Northern intellectual climate" (145). Feeling simultaneously invisible and exposed as a southerner from the country, Mason felt she "was in

alien territory and there was a war on" (145). She transferred to the University of Connecticut and, as Kingsolver did during her time at DePauw, worked on losing her accent. Mason describes her uneasiness this way: "I teeter-tottered between two worlds. As I struggled to become sophisticated, my folks and their country culture were always present in the deepest part of my being. Yet I was estranged from them, just as I was a stranger there in the North. I was an exile in both places" (Preface xi). In retrospect, Mason has said of her advanced education: "I just don't identify with the academic world. I went to school and love to study, but I was never any good at talking their language. Often they seem to treat me as one of them, but I'm not. Academic life is a bit foreign to me. It makes me want to use bad grammar" (qtd. in Smith, M. 61).

In order to establish a clearer view of her own identity, one that merged her rural upbringing and her modern pursuit of academic life, Mason reconnected to the earth and her rural upbringing through gardening both metaphorically and physically. Her dissertation project "focused on the literary significance of gardens in Nabokov's *Ada*." She was keenly aware of their worth. Mason explains, "idealized gardens have traditionally been the literary locations of human paradises, the premier example of which, for our own culture, is the Garden of Eden. In that paradise, everything, including man, occupies a secure and rightful position in the divine order" (qtd. in Wilhelm "Cultivators" 47).

At the same time, she and her new husband found themselves living in a New England farmhouse "on the cusp of the back-to-nature movement." Mason states that she "was ready to hoe." Although her husband "didn't know a shelly bean from a marigold," they "ambitiously…launched into growing a garden." The couple's movement back to nature soon became Mason's movement toward her rural upbringing – first through her writing. Like a scene

out of an Arnow novel, Mason states, "When I plunged my hands into the black New England soil, I felt I was touching a rich nourishment that I hadn't since I was a small child. It had been years since I helped mama in the garden. Yet the feel of dirt seemed so familiar. This was real. It was true. I wheeled around and faced home" (157). Although Mason does not literally return to Kentucky in this moment, she reconnects to the identity she had derived from her rural upbringing and brings into focus in her modern life. Touching the earth much like Gertie in *The Dollmaker*, Mason find reparation for the loss of her connectedness to the land – an important aspect of her life and identify unavailable in her academic studies.

With a "clear(er) notion of where [she] came from" and less infatuated with her foray into the wider world, Mason became a published writer through short stories collected in *Shiloh and Other Stories* (1982) and the previously discussed novel, *In Country* (Wilhelm 29). She speaks of arriving at this point

> belatedly, after many twists and turns while I looked over my shoulder at my childhood dreams and shook my head to get out the nightmare residue from my journey north. I had discovered that I could draw on my true sources in order to write fiction. How could I have failed to recognize them? They had claimed me all along. So much of the culture that I had thought made me inferior turned out to be my wellspring. (177)

Mason's wellspring is synonymous with voiceplace. Although she had to leave her family's farm to fully appreciate it, she states, "I always knew where my center was – here, on this land. This is my parents' greatest gift – this rootedness, this grounding. It is what has let me roam. I've been like a hawk on a gyre, flying off, ranging as far as I can – yet always spiraling back,

securely tethered to home… (280). Using land in the north as a refuge allows Mason to reconcile her identity through rhetorical regionalism.

Mason first felt herself coming home through voices. Slowly but surely, they brought her back to the life she knew most intimately and could write about most accurately. She states,

> for some time, voices from home had been calling me in clear, beckoning tones – their speech unspoiled by P.R. consultants or professional jargon or the rules of grammar. Through the voices of my family, I heard the voices of my grade-school classmates who formed my first impressions of the world outside the farm. When I began to write stories, their lives were the ones I came back to. (179)

Mason brought to life characters who, in her own words, "were slightly off balance, trying to comprehend their place in a changing world that appeared to have no room for them. But they were hopeful. I identified with their sense of jarring dislocation and also with their sense of possibility. It seemed I had to write their stories in order to try to find my way back to my own place" (180).

Indeed, critical analyses of Mason's short stories often focus on her honest, compassionate depictions of rural people facing the loss of traditional culture in the modern world. Edwin Arnold states, "Her characters live in the world of K-Marts and cable TV [like Sam Hughes], but they come from another world all together" – most often, the family farm life Sam's father grew up in and she is glad to have avoided. Consequently, "They are beset by a change that is too rapid and all-encompassing, caught between the culture of their heritage, which no longer holds in memory or guilt, and that of the present which has effectively displaced, transformed, and cheapened the traditional" (136). For Mason the clearest confirmation that she was genuinely telling the stories of people from her homeplace and the

transition they were facing came from her father – himself a farmer facing the loss of his way of life since none of his children were able to or wanted to continue it. Up at four a.m., he would read her short stories as the sun came up. He read them "over and over because they meant so much to him" (194).

The depictions of female characters in Mason's *Shiloh and Other Stories* emphasize the influence of the modern era on rural women's lives in order to show women's deep need women will have for the land as a refuge as traditional rural culture continues to give way in the modern era. She positively represents several progressive types including divorcees, single mothers, a discontented pastor's wife, and a first generation college student. Although these women find varying degrees of happiness, we see them asserting some autonomy in their lives – many for the first time. Such assertions clearly contrast with accepted women's roles in their communities; Mason's stories show us the tensions that arise as ripples of change reach southern communities following World War II even if her characters do not fully engage the land as a refuge.

In "The Retreat" Mason presents women whose personal pursuits cause them to be viewed as out of step with cultural expectations. In "The Retreat" Georgeann surprisingly asks in a workshop on Christian marriage: "What do you do if the man you're married to – say he's the cream of creation and all, and he's sweet as can be, but he turns out to be the wrong one for you? What do you do if you're simply mismatched?" (143). The dawning realization that she is indeed incompatible with her spouse, a peculiar position for a pastor's wife, causes Georgeann to try some things on her own, like video games, for which her husband treats her like a "mental case." When she reveals that she does not want to move with him to his new church in Deep Springs, that she wants to stay in the house "alone" so she can "think straight," he believes she has "gone crazy" and begins to "compose a sermon directed at her" (147). Mason's positioning

of Georgeann on the losing end of a religious discourse after expressing her desire to become autonomous highlights the difficulty in breaking free from traditional roles.

As Edwin Arnold proposes, stories like "The Retreat" indicate that family dynamics are shifting significantly as women pursue personal desires; instead of "losing meaning," however, the family is evolving (136). Single mother Waldeen in "Graveyard Day," for example, chooses not to pursue a dating relationship that is not fulfilling. Ruby in "Third Monday," attends a baby shower for Linda, an unmarried thirty-seven year old expecting a child; she admires Linda for refusing to marry the baby's father (232). Ruby herself "runs around" with a man she is not married to and whom she only sees once a month. Barbara Dixson finds that images of family in Southern women's writing in the 1980s offer a "dizzying array of …configurations" (6). Replete with confusion and anguish and hope, as well as new structures and roles, writers like Mason present a new vitality within the family, one that raises questions relevant to a post-1950s America: "Does the family still matter? Just what changes are taking place? Where do we go from here? And what will these changes mean to us?" (Dixson 6). Mason especially presents women who "are or ought to be breaking out of repressive families" (10). While their choices to leave marriages or pursue personal desires and interests often clash with convention, they support the health of the individual.

In "Old Things," for example, Cleo Watkins takes in her daughter Linda and her grandchildren when Linda decides to leave her husband (76). Although Linda's choice is a very modern one, Cleo finds it "embarrassing"; the neighbors can see her daughter's car in the driveway. The children's clothing and toys are strewn all over the house. Cleo confesses to her friend Rita Jean, "I told her wasn't no use carrying all that over here, they'd be going back before long, but she wouldn't listen" (75 – 76). Linda explains her marital discontent when Cleo

suggests that "these children need a daddy around": "You're full of prunes if you think I'm going back to Bob!…I don't feel like hanging around the same house with somebody that can go for three hours without saying a word. He might as well not be there" (79).

Rather than attempting to understand her daughter's need for real companionship, a more modern conception of marriage than one based on gender-assigned labor roles, Cleo cannot grasp the idea that Linda has been mistreated. Cleo values Bob's ability to provide monetarily for her daughter and their children, defending him and suggesting that her daughter pay him more attention – she believes Linda should "go back home where [she] belong(s)" (80; 83; 87). Linda tries to explain the freedom she feels to make her own decisions: "people don't have to do what they don't want to as much now as they used to" (88). Linda's suggestion that Cleo do something for herself, "make a nurse or something," is met with scoffing sarcasm (88). In Cleo's mind Bob dutifully plays the role of bread-winner and therefore Linda should focus on taking care of him. Cleo fails to see that her daughter would rather and likely should, take care of herself.

Women who discover or reclaim an important part of themselves in the absence of their husbands provide compelling depictions of the differences between expectations and reality in the modern era. In "Still Life with Watermelons," for example, Louise begins a "crazy adventure" painting watermelons after her husband's impulsive move to work on a Texas ranch. Although such an activity might not seem revolutionary, it allows her to rekindle her childhood talent for drawing – a talent her husband never knew she had. His sudden return, however, quickly smothers the "glow" of her independence (73). Norma Jean in Mason's most famous, most anthologized story, "Shiloh," tries out new opportunities during her husband's absences as a long-haul trucker. The narrator states, "Something is happening. Norma Jean is going to night school. She has graduated from her six-week body-building course and now she is taking an

adult-education course in composition at Paducah Community College. She spends her evenings outlining paragraphs" (11).

Norma Jean becomes so accustomed to life on her terms that she "prefers a man who wanders" (15). Away from her usual environment at the Shiloh battleground, Norma Jean is emboldened to ask for a divorce (14 - 16). Albert Wilhelm inaccurately finds that Louise and Norma Jean are "steady female characters [who] tend to hearth and home while their confused mates wander" ("Cultivators" 48). Wilhelm simply places these women in their expected domestic sphere and sees their husbands as fleeing marital commitment. He does not account for or even seem to notice the ways these women are asserting themselves by pursuing their own interests. That Norma Jean grows to prefer a wandering man and asks for a divorce significantly challenges Wilhelm's assessment.

Even as Mason's short stories highlight the clash between traditional expectations placed upon women and their desires for themselves in the modern era, several also show the continued relevance of the land for women in rural areas. "Shiloh" shows a brief turn toward nature. Though Norma Jean has been pursuing her own interests, she does not deal with her overarching concern – the desire to be "left alone" – until she and Leroy sit in the silence of the Union cemetery among trees. Nature is secondary at the popular tourist site. Children run and play; campers are parked nearby. As the story closes, Norma Jean observes the Tennessee River, motioning to Leroy to stay away. If only briefly, she has chosen the solace of the water to help her process their conversation.

In "Offerings" Mason presents another woman who turns toward nature; akin to Georgeann, Sandra Lee wants to be "left alone." Rather than taking classes in composition or bodybuilding or developing a passion for video games, Sandra Lee stays home on her terms – land. Recently separated from her husband, Sandra happily relinquishes the expectations of

housework and home maintenance. She no longer dusts, her plates do not match, dinner is served late, she has yet to replenish the woodpile, she does not mow, and the attic and basement both need her attention. Sandra feels a "perverse delight" when a housefly stirs up cat hair and dust (54). Instead of performing the household tasks expected during her marriage, Sandra takes refuge in her rural property.

She keeps company with cats, ducks, and a dog. She observes a raccoon and listens for foxes and a wildcat. She becomes more attentive to the natural cycle of life, alternately savage and beautiful, much like a farmer – a lifestyle she asks her grandmother to recall. Her cats savor mole delicacies, but may themselves be shot. She lovingly tends to her ducks, but "offers" them to the wildcat. She imagines blood in bowls of tomato sauce. A bird dies in her hands. Still, Sandra finds delights on the farm she may not have previously noticed or taken the time for: "The night is peaceful, and Sandra thinks of the thousands of large golden garden spiders hidden in the field. In the early morning the dew shines on their trampolines, and she can imagine bouncing with an excited spring from web to web, all the way up the hill to the woods" (59). Alone and free, Sandra sees herself through the joyful movement of a spider.

Often an astute scholar of Mason's work and duly quoted here, Albert Wilhelm's analysis of "Offerings" reads well beyond Mason's text. We do not know, for example, if Sandra has "abandoned the city," only that she "stayed behind" when her husband left for the city. Jerry has taken his boots, but not his gun – an indication that he will return at least briefly (48; Mason 53). More problematic, Wilhelm argues, "in trying to ground herself in the basics, she becomes atavistic. In her isolation Sandra moves beyond the pastoral and approaches the feral" (48). That Sandra notices more about her natural surroundings, lets her farm become more of a

"wilderness," and chooses not to dust her house does not indicate that she is returning to a wild, primitive state.

Sandra makes a key statement helpful in more accurately evaluating the story. When her mother asks if she has spoken to her estranged husband she replies: "He'd better not waltz back in here. I'm through waiting on him" (57). Sandra's statement indicates that much was demanded of her during her marriage that she did not appreciate. Her determination to let things go is not necessarily a "return to the basics," or a search for some "prelapsarian order," but rather evidence that Sandra is now able to assert herself and live as she desires. Although he praises Mason for depicting women as more than "decorative flower(s) in the garden," Wilhelm unfairly attempts to reassociate Sandra as woman with a wilderness to be conquered, significantly overlooking the choices she has made: first, to stay on the land and second, to live more in harmony with it rather than exert control over her domestic sphere (57). Especially when read in light of Mason's other female characters, it seems clear that Sandra finds a solace in nature that she need not justify, even to her own grandmother; she is engaging nature on her own terms as a refuge. Wilhelm does at least recognize that "Sandra may eventually discover…rejuvenation" (51).

Like Sandra Lee, Joann Swann in "Hunktown" chooses to stay connected to the land while her husband invests himself in the city, spending his time in smoky bars. An aspiring country singer, Cody's connection to country is much different from Joann's. The story concentrates on the differences between the real, tangible country Joann is invested in and the faux, flashy "country" of Cody's music scene. Although Joann accompanies Cody to Nashville for a couple of "gigs" and finds the atmosphere of the Bluebird Lounge "pleasant," - "as innocent as someone's kitchen…old lanterns, gingham curtains, and a wagon wheel on the

ceiling" – she is never completely comfortable in "music city." She remains "firmly rooted in the soil of her homeplace" (Wilhelm "Cultivators" 53)

Albert Wilhelm states, "the oxymoronic name of the Bluebird Lounge never deceives her. Although the ornithological reference may suggest sylvan felicity, Joann clearly sees the place as just a bar with fake country décor" (53). The contrast between Joann's intimate knowledge of the land, of the country and its provisions, and her daughter's absolute lack of that knowledge is also apparent: Patty does not know how to pick turnip greens, cannot recognize mustard leaves, and refuses a serving of lima beans because her kids only eat the jelly variety (36; 43). Indeed, Patty's high heels stand out significantly in the dirt of a "truck patch" garden, making her appear awkward (36). Even as these contradictions highlight family farming and gardening as a waning enterprise in the modern era, Mason's positive representation of Joann shows respect for the land and laments the co-opting of country.

As the story progresses, Joann's groundedness places her in the position of sole provider while Cody becomes childlike, out to follow a ridiculous dream for an older man with a beer gut – even if he is still a "hunk" – who depends on his wife. Joann states, "If he's suffering, it's because I'm bringing in the paycheck…But instead of looking for work, he's singing songs" (45). The resulting irritation Joann feels and shares with Debbie continues to place the modern era front and center, especially as it pertains to women's expectations. Both women feel the pressure associated with "doing it all": working, keeping house, raising children, cooking, etc. Debbie admits to having her tubes tied so as not to add children to her responsibilities:

> You know why I got my tubes tied? Because I hate to be categorized. My ex-husband thought I had to have supper on the table at six on the dot, when he came home. I was working too, and I got home about five-thirty. I had to do all the

> shopping and cleaning and cooking. I hate it when people *assume* things like that – that I'm the one to make supper because I've got reproductive organs….I was going to add kids to those responsibilities? Like hell. (emphasis Mason, 45)

Rather than butchering herself to express her discontent, Joann works intently in her garden, feeling a "sense of urgency" for the coming fall weather. She "trie(s) to take out her anger on the dying plants that she pull(s) from the soil" (42). A refuge from the artificial, the land allows Joann to "fee(l) the bright dizziness of the Indian-summer day, and … remembe(r) many times when nothing had seemed important except picking turnip greens" (37). Even after Cody apologizes for taking advantage of her, Joann refuses to sell her family farm, leave her job, and move with him to Nashville – it is "too extreme." She states, "Things can't be all one way or the other. There has to be some of both. That's what life is, when it's any good" (49). Joann understands the importance of balance, a quality inherent in rhetorical regionalism's ability to merge dual aspects of identity.

More than any other short story, Mason's "Bumblebees" shows women intentionally engaging the land as a refuge in response to modern concerns. After the trauma of divorce and death middle-aged friends Barbara and Ruth purchase a small farm together, ignoring the sardonic comments of the owner. The narrator states,

> Barbara is still bitter about her divorce, and Ruth is still recovering from the shock of the car accident three years before, when both her husband and daughter were killed. Barbara and Ruth, both teachers at the new consolidated county high school, have been rebuilding their lives. Barbara took the initiative, saying Ruth needed the challenge of fixing up an old farmhouse. Together they were able to afford the place. (19)

Although the restorative work they do repairing the dilapidated farmhouse is in many ways symbolic of their recovery, especially for Ruth whose eyes are sparkling again, of particular interest is the work they do in the garden and orchard (Mason 22; Wilhelm "Cultivators" 55). They begin planting trees before the sale of the farm is even final; Barbara recognizes, "It had been so long since she had planted things" (18). Barbara's eagerness to work the land reconnects her to her rural upbringing: "[She] was in love with the fields and the hillside of wild apples, and she couldn't wait to have a garden. All her married life she had lived in town, in a space too small for a garden. Once she got the farm, she envisioned perennials, a berry patch, a tall row of nodding, top-heavy sunflowers" (20). Barbara comes to know the farm intimately. It has become so familiar that she can "close her eyes and see clearly any place on the farm" (33). In a sense, she is married to it, only missing a man's company when she is cooped up in the house by the rain (28).

Not only do the women "last long enough to see [the] trees bear," they find the idea of meeting men rather than "hanging around a remote old farm" laughable in its absurdity (19). While working compost around the fruit trees, Ruth also finds humor in the idea that her daughter and husband met death amidst turnips. As Wilhelm suggests, "pastoral bounty subsumes the horror of death. Ruth is now able to appreciate God's beauties and, to an extent, his strange jokes" (Wilhelm 57). Even Barbara's daughter Allison, who is home from college for the summer, grows more cheerful and "centered" on the farm: "[She] used to be impatient, but now she will often go out at midday with the dog and sit in the sun and stare for hours at a patch of weeds" (22). Allison works with her mother in the garden, astonished at her mother's knowledge, and collects items from around the property. The narrator tells us, "Every day Allison brings in some treasure: the cracked shell of a freckled sparrow egg, a butterfly wing

with yellow dust on it, a cocoon on a twig…Barbara has the feeling that her daughter, deprived of so much of the natural world during her childhood in town, is going through a delayed phase of discovery now, at the same time she is learning about cigarettes and sex" (23). Allison makes some decisions about her life, opting to take a break from college and break up with her boyfriend. Dismayed over her daughter's intent to leave school, Barbara immediately retreats to her garden to dig trenches in the rain. All three women find that "…a well-tended garden becomes a refuge from pain and a possible antidote against future hurt" (Wilhelm 56).

Although Mason's short stories do not boast particularly happy endings, they illustrate both the complicated choices women face as they pursue new paths for themselves and the role land can continue to play for them as they work through those complications. Dixson states, "The changes shown in the fiction are not polemical but rather a heartfelt response to the pressures of modern life" (11). Indeed, as Mason said in 1988, "I'm not worried about the women in my stories. They'll be all right." Although the change they face is "particularly acute," they "are more accepting of change, more willing to move with it, to explore, and to become" (Smith, M. 59).

Unbeknownst to Mason, Barbara Kingsolver was reading and finding great meaning in her stories as well. Like Mason, Kingsolver had not found graduate school – at the University of Arizona in biology and ecology – to be quite as fulfilling as she hoped. Finding graduate study to be unnecessarily "ultracompetitive," and doctoral research too narrow, she left the program before completing her project. Kingsolver wanted to be free of graduate study so intently that she invented a family emergency: "I made up a terrible lie involving a car accident and a permanent disability, and said I needed to take another job to support my unnamed, maimed relative" (qtd. in Snodgrass 14). Making her own progression from graduate student to working writer,

Kingsolver audited Francine Prose's fiction-writing workshop. Prose introduced Kingsolver to Bobbie Ann Mason's *Shiloh and Other Stories,* and encouraged her to refocus her own prose from plot-dominated stories to studies in character (Wagner-Martin 46 – 47).

Kingsolver has called her first encounter with Mason's short stories "a life-changing moment": she stayed up all night to finish the collection. A Kentuckian like herself, Mason was writing characters that she recognized and giving them a great sense of dignity. Indeed, Kingsolver has revealed that what "moves [her] most" about Mason's work "is that when her characters speak, [she] hear(s) them exactly": "I'm hearing exact inflections and it makes me homesick" (Beattie 157; Wagner-Martin 48). In her *Conversations with Kentucky Writers* interview Kingsolver reveals the profound impression Mason's work made on her,

> I suddenly understood that what moved me about those stories was not so much the style or the execution: it was the respect that she has for her people – her characters who are her people – and the simple fact that she deemed them worthy of serious literature. My jaw sort of dropped open, and I just walked around for weeks thinking, "I almost threw that away." I have this wonderful thing, this place I come from, this life of mine, that I've been trying to ignore, that I've been trying to pretend never existed. (Beattie 157; Wagner-Martin 48)

After the jarring realization that her experiences in Kentucky, including the place, the people, and her own upbringing should be more than just a biographical footnote in her writing career, Kingsolver wrote and published "Rose-Johnny" in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. A story "true to the place and characters of its being," set in the southern small town of Walnut Knobs, the less than thirty page story caused Kingsolver to truly see herself as a writer for the first time (Wagner-Martin 48; Snodgrass 14).

Not surprisingly, Kingsolver's *Homeland and Other Stories* (1989) shows indebtedness to Mason's *Shiloh and Other Stories* insofar as her characters are respectfully depicted with dignity and realism. Although Kingsolver's settings are more widely varied than Mason's, she also offers female characters contending with modern influences such as capable single mothers and smart, working women. Kingsolver's stories also resonate with broader concerns of the modern era including the loss of traditional culture, a woman's ability to out-earn her husband, and the long influence of small town expectations.

Gloria St. Clair or Waterbug in "Homeland," for instance, recounts differences between her great-grandmother's traditional Cherokee culture and the mid-twentieth century culture in which she was raised. The family's trip to Cherokee, North Carolina, particularly shows the stark contrast between the two. The image of a Native American that Chief Many Feathers presents – feather war bonnet, bright orange clothing with fringe – along with his wife and welcome dancers is foreign to Great Mam. Not only does she state that Cherokee do not wear such bonnets, she also refuses to get out of the truck and declares "I've never been here before" (18). The commodification of Native American culture renders it unrecognizable to Great Mam.

In "Blueprints" Lydia and Whitman also struggle to understand the modern desire for cheap imitation. After moving from a large house in Sacramento, California, to a small cabin in Blind Gap, both are surprised that his works, created without the use of power tools, do not sell well in the mountains; according to the narrator, "in Blind Gap, people's tastes run more along the lines of velveteen and Formica" bought "in places like the Bargain Heaven Direct 2-U Warehouse" (25). What they believed would be a romantic adventure instead posits her teaching career against his woodworking. She brings in the primary income, fostering resentment between them for her late hours and his inability to sell furniture pieces.

In contrast to these critiques of modern culture, Diana, a complacent eye surgeon's wife in "Stone Dreams," considers the long influence of expectations for women in her small Kentucky hometown. Aside from obtaining birth control pills and becoming sexually active at sixteen, she has never acted boldly or decisively in her own life. She states, "I've never quite gotten over my hometown's limited expectations of me – of any girl, really. 'Marry a millionaire' was the best they could come up with, 'or teach school.' I expected to settle for the latter, there seeming to be too much competition for the former" (81). Now unfaithful to her husband and concerned about her own daughter's sexual activity, Diana is shocked by a note from her daughter legitimizing her affair (99; 81). Mother-daughter interactions also cause Roberta in "Survival Zones" to reflect on her own opportunities. While offering marriage advice to her daughter, Roberta recalls "exactly the way her arms felt, steady and knowing, on the cutting and pressing machines" and the camaraderie she felt with her coworkers while working at Hampton Mill prior to her own marriage (109). As a longtime housewife she wonders if "she is somehow replacing herself" with modern kitchen appliances: "A kangaroo could do my job, Roberta thinks, amused by the picture in her mind" (110). Yet her daughter reassures her that she has not "been doing nothing" with her life, "chasing her tail" in the same small town near Cincinnati where she was born: "Maybe it's not like a job that, well, like the jobs people have, you know. But it's something. To me it is" (116).

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Searching for "More" & Finding Fulfillment:

Rhetorical Reconnection through Regionalism

While Kingsolver was beginning to reconnect to Kentucky through her writing, investing her work with the details of place and character, even if many of her settings were widely varied, Mason was physically moving back to Kentucky. Reconnected to the land through gardening Mason pinpoints the moment she knew she needed "to return to Kentucky for good." Walking along Park Avenue in New York she was unable to see the stars or find any interesting insects (179). Again in her memoir, Mason equates a major move in her life with a desire for nature:

> I had unfinished business there. I had mercifully escaped the hardship of the old ways – no lye soap or washboards, no hog-killing. I wouldn't have to carry water. I wanted blackberries, but not the cruel, thorny ones; botanists had developed better ones now. I had grandiose visions of an asparagus bed. I was optimistic, just as I had been when I moved to New York years before. Now I could rediscover and celebrate the Kentucky springtime. Thomas Wolfe said you can't go home again, and I was wary of contradicting his wisdom. *I wanted to return, but not relapse*…Finally, I thought, I could live there now on my own terms. (182, emphasis mine)

Mason's terms brought together her appreciation for rural living with her desire for modern opportunities and conveniences. Not wishing to be a farmer, Mason readily saw her limitations:

> Mama always knows where the moon is, and when to plant seed potatoes, and what potion to paint on a sick child's chest. She knows how to read the sky. My father knew when to expect birds to arrive or cows to calve; he knew how to fix almost anything without spending a cent. He could tell time in his head. He

> claimed he could approach any dog without fear. I can't sew up a chicken's injured craw. I can't drive a tractor or cook worth beans. I can't put in a zipper. I tat words and save hummingbirds and come home to pick berries. Then I get eager to leap outwards again (282).

Still, Mason's connection was clear, reflected in "an anxious, bittersweet thought." She realized, "maybe this would be the place where I would die" (183). Following her father's funeral especially, Mason started seeing Kentucky anew. She explains:

> I drove along the Western Kentucky Parkway, drinking the landscape; every detail was fresh and remarkable. The lines of cedar trees growing like weeds out of rock crevices. The icicles hugging the faces of the limestone cutaways along the roadbed. The hazy winter pastures. The sprinklings of cattle – an all white herd scattered on moon-color ground. Frost on dead grass. Leftover hay bales like giant shredded wheat rolls. The winter landscape was a husk, a silhouette, a promise. Everything I saw compelled my attention, yanked me out of myself. It was a survival mechanism, this strange buoyancy. Some archaic words came to me to describe it, words I might have read in Granny's speller: a queer lightsomeness. I was lightsome, floating. I wondered if this was the way I was supposed to feel when I dedicated my life to Christ at the church altar when I was fifteen – charged with a new responsibility to celebrate life… I had not realized the geography of Kentucky was so varied and so beautiful. When I battled my way out in my youth, I felt fenced in by cornfields, uninspired by landscape (182).

Here Mason equates her return to Kentucky with a religious experience. The nature that once bound her was now her salvation. Mason began to "'dig' at her roots": "I could see the landscape more clearly than I had since I was a child" (202; 200).

Furthermore, Mason retained a strong connection to her mother as *Clear Springs* reflects again and again: "Knowing her background makes me care…She's a real earth mother who gives and gives and gives, a farm woman who is strong and able to take what comes – a real source of inspiration" (qtd. in Smith, M. 62). Mason returned to Kentucky in 1990, choosing to buy land in Anderson County, near Lawrenceburg, some 230 miles to the east of her family's farm. She finds that while her family's land [is close to her heart], she would not want to live there. She states, "[it] has an industrial sewer pipe running beneath its fields like the bowels of a monster that has settled from outer space. I'm content to live – within driving distance – on my own piece of ground with my husband and pets" (278). Mason finds that she has finished the journey from her parents' small house, out into the world, and back to Kentucky again: "I've come full circle – that is, far enough to know where I've been" (278). Ultimately, Mason declares, "*I am a product of this ground*," indicating that the core of her identity will always be measured against her rural upbringing; like the vegetables that grow in the garden, this is where she finds sustenance (6, emphasis mine).

It is through the recurring character of Nancy Culpepper that Mason most clearly shows the land as a refuge in response to modern concerns. Most representative of Mason's own "sensibility," Nancy moves to the northeast, but continually searches for connections to her family and homeplace in Kentucky. Developed in a series of short stories and the novella *Spence and Lila* (1988) from 1980 to 2005 and collected in *Nancy Culpepper* (2007), Nancy's journey takes her from Kentucky to the country outside Philadelphia to Boston to London and

the Lake District. Through Nancy, Mason offers her readers existing "in a culture leveled to homogeneity by the diffusive, seductive tendencies of democracy," especially those displaced from their rural birthright, "something…that can give them sustenance, that can comment on their lives in such a way that they may have a chance to feel at home, and find out who they are" (White 75). Kentucky doesn't equal the land, but Nancy's regional experienced tied to the land is in Kentucky. Nancy's early realization that "Kentucky wouldn't release her… She wouldn't let it," becomes a positive "sense of the past, of family, [and] of heritage [as] a means of self-identification…" when she comes to understand that she can honor her heritage on her own terms (Mason 217; Arnold 138).

"Nancy does not want to escape *into* the past" as Edwin Arnold accurately states, "she hopes to take strength from it in order to deal with the present" (emphasis his 138). Wilhelm finds that "Mason's works develop contrapuntal patterns by playing the old pastoral ideal against antipastoral skepticism about the continued feasibility of that ideal. At some points her characters may indeed reduce their problems to green thoughts within a green shade, but this pastoral solution obtains in only a few cases" (Wilhelm "Cultivators" 48). In my assessment characters like Nancy Culpepper do not merely reduce their problems to thoughts in a green shade, they overcome them. What Mason accomplishes, then, in compiling *Nancy Culpepper,* is an extended narrative that reveals the applicability of the land for women in the modern world. As a result, she defies critics like Elizabeth Jane Harrison who find that her stories fall short of depicting such empowerment (133 – 134).

To illustrate the shift in Nancy's connection to her rural homeplace, Mason chronicles Nancy's journey through a modern identity crisis. After growing up on a farm in Kentucky and leaving to seek a better life through education and marriage in the north, Nancy finds herself

longing for a connection to, but not necessarily a return to, her rural roots. Indeed, Nancy's first appearance in Mason's work as a character in *Shiloh and Other Stories* highlights her estrangement from Kentucky, a place she has been "vaguely wanting to move to" and frequently visits with some reluctance (3; 36). Nancy's ambivalence marks the tension between her current lifestyle and her desire to maintain a connection to her rural southern heritage.

On one hand, Nancy finds her present reality preferable; she has escaped the manual labor of her childhood. As a teen she would "com(e) up with schemes for mechanical inventions to eliminate her job" while helping her father plant corn; in college she "persuade(d) [her parents] to move to town and open a grocery store" (126; 129). As a newlywed she grew vegetables out of "a moral obligation to grow something if there was good ground" only reminding herself that "she had left home in Kentucky to get away from the hard labor that had enslaved her parents. She was meant to use her mind" (217). Her husband Jack's vision of the farm in Kentucky as more romantic than real belies the cultural separation between Nancy's upbringing and her adult life: "As they walked through the fields, Nancy felt that he was seeing peaceful landscapes – arrangements of picturesque cows, an old red barn. She had never thought of the place this way before; it reminded her of prints in a dime store" (8). To Jack, the farm appears serene and restful. For Nancy, it is the site of the laborious life she has left behind.

Nancy's northeastern lifestyle with Jack is preferable because it is more modern, more urbane, - they live in a rural area, but do not work the land; the countryside provides a beautiful backdrop against which Nancy measures her evolution. According to the narrator, "She is too sophisticated now to eat fried foods and rich pies and cakes, indulging in them only when she goes to Kentucky. She uses makeup now – so sparingly that Jack does not notice. Her cool reserve, her shyness, has changed to cool assurance, with only the slightest shift. Inwardly she

has reorganized" (38). Nancy's personal change, however, is as indicative of Jack's influence as it is Nancy's own revelations. She tells her husband, "You educated me. I was so out of it when I met you. One day I was listening to Hank Williams and shelling corn for the chickens and the next day I was expected to know what wines went with what. Talk about weird" (44).

Even Nancy's mother recognizes her transformation: "When Nancy moved up north she stopped wearing lipstick and curling her hair, and for a while she didn't even wear a brassiere" (42). While these outward changes do reflect the ideas of Women's Liberation, they also show her husband's criticism of her and her past: "He told Nancy she was uptight, that no one ever knew what she thought, that she should be more expressive. He said she 'played games' with people, hiding her feelings behind her coy Southern smile… He used to criticize her for drinking Cokes and eating pastries. He didn't like her lipstick, and she stopped wearing it" (Price 89; Mason 38). It is not surprising that Nancy is confused about her identity. Despite her desire to leave home, much of her willingness to alter her outlook and appearance is not intrinsic.

As a result, Nancy's thoughts are never too far from western Kentucky. Even in the midst of her wedding party, she wonders what her parents ate for supper – "Possibly fried steak, two kinds of peas, biscuits, blackberry pie." She loses herself: "Nancy was thinking of the blackberry bushes at the farm in Kentucky, which spread so wildly they had to be burned down every few years. They grew on the banks of the creek, which in summer shrank to still, small occasional pools. After a while Nancy realized that Jack was talking to her" (6). The persistence of Nancy's memories cause her to spend much of her adult life searching for connections to home that will validate her. For instance, she is so excited when she learns of an ancestor also named Nancy Culpepper that she goes back to using her maiden name to underscore their kinship (4; Arnold 138).

After her grandmother confirms the former Nancy Culpepper's likeness in a wedding photograph, Nancy studies it. She is impressed by the "deep-set eyes [that] sparkle like shards of glass" and the husband who "seems bewildered, as if he did not know what to expect, marrying a woman who has her eyes fixed on something so far away" (18). The expression on the woman's face, like her name, offers a kindred spirit to Nancy; she too set her sights on something far away. A trained historian, she intently preserves the past through her grandmother's pictures, a task she feels no one else cares about (4). They are "reminders." She dutifully records the names of the deceased – "Aunt Sass, Uncle Joe, Dove and Pear Culpepper, Hortense Culpepper" (17). As Nancy searches the past, she is really looking for herself, for who she is as a woman with both rural and cosmopolitan sensibilities (Arnold 138).

The eventual loss of her parents and inevitable sale of their farm, however, exacerbates Nancy's duality. Faced with selling a property that has defined her, for good or ill, for most of her life, Nancy recalls the intensity of her connection to the land:

> Whenever she returned to the farm, she always felt intimate with it, filled with an *overpowering love* for the familiar contours of the fields and the thick fencerows and the meandering creeks. The farm had shaped the family for generations, as if each individual had been carved by the wash of the creek and the breeze of the heavy oaks. It was the place she had always called her real home, and it had endured. Yet it had changed over time, just as she had herself, and now the farm would pass from her life. She wanted to approach the impending sale to a development consortium with some detachment. She could not live here. Her parents were dead. And the greatest old oak trees had fallen, split by lightning. The barn had burned. The other house, the small wood frame where she had

> grown up, had been razed. The smokehouse, the corncrib, and the henhouse disappeared years ago" (179, emphasis mine).

Even though the physical farm itself has not been at the center of her existence for some time and will no longer be a part of her life, Nancy knows the empowerment she can derive from it. Although she cannot live there, it does not mean that she must let go of a sensibility that has supported her and her family.

In fact, Nancy's revelatory moment occurs far away from Kentucky or the Northeast for that matter. Once her parents' farm is sold and she is cut off from the physical land her parents worked, and "that hard way of rural life that had endured for centuries [has] passed away," Nancy is "comforted by the thought of continuity"; the memories and images she holds with her will always link her to her homeplace even if she must seek her refuge in nature elsewhere (211; 202). Indeed, it pleases Nancy that she is beginning to look like her mother (222). Using her mind instead of her back, however, Nancy travels to England's famed Lake District where she follows the "footsteps" of Wordsworth and Coleridge (205; 207). Nancy sees her upbringing in the context of Wordsworth's poetry.

The narrator states, "Wordsworth wrote about the eloquence of rustic people, who didn't use proper English and who toiled with bent bodies, people like those from Nancy's past" (213). More self-aware than before, more herself, carrying her confidence and poise "as effortlessly as wheeling ultralight luggage," she walks miles every day like a poet seeking the sublime (205; 209; 213). The narrator tells us, "Now Nancy stood in Dorothy's garden and gazed at the yew tree beside the house, a tree that had been there two centuries ago. Her parents were gone. Their farm was gone. She was herself. It was the twenty-first century" (217 – 218). She finds a refuge in nature on her own terms, aligning her sensibilities with the Romantics she has long admired,

but neglected during her marriage. Indeed, Nancy's relationship with nature can be read as akin to Wordsworth's in "Tintern Abbey" in so far as her position reflects a qualified longing born of experience.

Later, as Nancy tours the Lakes with Jack and contemplates reconciliation, she educates him about the value nature now holds for her, a legacy derived from her parents but revisioned through her own interests. It allows her to move outside of herself so that she can renew: "As she gazed at the waterfall, she thought she glimpsed her own image, outsized, with a halo, in the mist above the water. She felt she was in one of Coleridge's 'luminous clouds. '" (218). "It's accidental," she tells Jack, "not something that can be forced. It just swoops in, like a bright-feathered bird landing inside your head" (218 – 219). Nancy's previous attempts to "integrate the past with the present" find a more fitting match here, showing Mason's ability to reconceptualize the land in such a way that honors Nancy's rural heritage while taking into account her modern life (Price 41). As the story closes, it is clear that Nancy and Jack have reconciled, but do not know where they'll live (224). It no longer matters for Nancy; she can take her connectedness to Kentucky with her. Because that's where her connection to the land and her identity and her heritage are

Nancy's ability to connect with her heritage on her own terms honors her parents, their labor and culture, without compromising her own desires. She establishes a sense of continuity with them. On the dividing line between what was and what will be, Nancy's visit to her ancestor's, Nancy Culpepper's, grave startles her: "It was like time-lapse photography…I mean, I was standing there looking into the past and the future at the same time. It was weird" (10). The present Nancy is the link between the rural farming lifestyle of previous generations and the modern world that will absorb her family's farm into an industrial park (202). When she and her

siblings inherit the land after the death of their parents profits are made by selling rather than farming. Even though she has made peace with her rural upbringing, having told her father she is "sad" that she and her brother and sister "can't carry [the farm] on," she knows the way of life itself is dying – her father chooses not to teach her brother how to farm because he can earn higher wages at a local factory (129). When "the weight of her heritage" hits her like a brick, Nancy feels "a shadow of raw grief descen(d), wrapping scarecrow arms around her, and she we(eps) for the loss of her parents (201). They are gone, their way of life is gone, and the farm is being sold. The words of Nancy's father ring true: "There are no significant choices most of the time. You always have to do what has to be done. It's like milking cows. When their bags are full, they have to be milked" (80). When the world changes, people have to adapt. As Mason shows us through Nancy's experiences in the Lake District, choosing the land as an imaginative refuge establishes a valid link to rural heritage.

Edwin Arnold notes, "In order to [fully] understand her own sense of failure and regret, [however, Nancy] has to recapture a sense of her parents, their personal disappointments and fears" (138). Firmly placed in the middle section of *Nancy Culpepper* and encompassing the longest portion, *Spence and Lila* functions as a divide between a young Nancy searching for her identity and a Nancy who comes to terms with who she is. The previously published novella brings to light much about Nancy's mother, Lila, through her bout with breast cancer and indicates the deep influence Lila has had on Nancy. Although the background of this novella like the majority of Mason's short stories is "the bustling boom times of the 1980s when new housing developments and shopping centers transfigured the land and the lives of its people," Mason also "creates an enduring sense of timelessness and continuity that surrounds her principal characters and that buffers them from the changes and crises visited upon their lives. Against this backdrop,

Lila's body and maternal experiences are cast." A practical farmwife, Lila also has "mythic earth-mother qualities" (Eckard 101; 105). According to Virginia Smith, Lila is a "female figure of suffering and regeneration" associated with "healing and growing, continuity and creativity" (qtd. in Eckard 105). For Lila, bearing children is akin to raising crops (Mason 29).

When facing cancer, Nancy's mother Lila processes her fear and worry through her garden. As she enters the hospital for a mastectomy, Lila instructs her husband regarding its care. He must "supervise" it because their daughters, Cat and Nancy, "won't know how to take care of it." When he offers to just mow it down instead because she works too hard on it and it produces too much food for just two people, she cries out at his unconscionable suggestion (56). Even as Lila wakes from her mastectomy, it is her garden she thinks about first, not the loved ones whose blurred faces are anxiously attending her: "Her eyes close and she sees green beans setting on blooms again and okra poking up like hitchhikers' thumbs. A volunteer sunflower has sprung up amidst the peppers" (80). The healing power of the land, of the earth itself, provides more than just mental relief or physical sustenance. "Lila remembers when they used to rub dirt in wounds; dirt was pure, what grew things. Good dirt was precious" (85). Dirt offered life; it sustained and revived; it was part of one's being. It could not be taken for granted or pushed aside.

To emphasize the land's value, Lila is suddenly out the door after returning home and walking to her garden despite her husband's protests. She "just want(s) to see" her garden, to "check on" it. The narrator tells us she "*plunges* into the garden, between the okra and the peppers, and leans over to check a pepper" (173, emphasis mine). As Lila begins to work with her vegetables, cradling them and failing to heed her doctor's warnings about handling dirt, she is reinvigorated:

> Spence stands there, while the sweat on her forehead changes from drops to a moist, smooth layer. Her face is rosy, all the furrows and marks thrusting upward with her smile the way the okra on the stalk reach upward to the sun. Her face is as pretty as freshly plowed ground, and the scar on her neck is like a gully washed out but filling now…Her cough catches her finally and slows her down, but her face is dancing like pond water in the rain, all unsettled and stirring with aroused possibility. (160)

When Lila returns to the land, to her garden, her health begins to return. Seeking refuge in it helps her pull through the initial stages of her illness; her life is being renewed. Just as Lila is renewed in the garden on the family farm in Kentucky so is Nancy in England's Lake District.

Kingsolver, too, would find her way back to the land, back to the Southeast. Although she did not return to Kentucky like Mason, she chose a similar place. In the first chapter of *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (2007) Kingsolver describes her family's move from just outside the city of Tucson, Arizona, to a farm in rural southwestern Virginia. Although her second husband Steven Hopp had owned the property for twenty years, they returned only in the summer:

> We held on to the farm by renting the farmhouse to another family, and maintained marital happiness by migrating like birds: for the school year we lived in Tucson, but every summer headed back to our rich foraging grounds, the farm. For three months a year we lived in a tiny, extremely crooked log cabin in the woods behind the farmhouse, listening to wood thrushes, growing our own food. The girls loved playing in the creek, catching turtles, experiencing real mud. I liked working the land, and increasingly came to think of this place as my home too. When all of us were ready, we decided, we'd go there for keeps" (2 – 3).

While relocating to the farm was desirable and familiar, it was also practical. On one hand, it brought Kingsolver closer to relatives:

> My Kingsolver ancestors came from that county in Virginia; I'd grown up only a few hours away, over the Kentucky line. Returning now would allow my kids more than just a hit-and-run, holiday acquaintance with grandparents and cousins. In my adult life I'd hardly shared a phone book with anyone else using my last name. Now I could spend Memorial Day decorating my ancestors' graves with peonies from my backyard. Tucson had opened my eyes to the world and given me a writing career, legions of friends, and a taste for the sensory extravagance of red hot chiles and five-alarm sunsets. But after twenty-five years in the desert, I'd been called home. (3)

Going "home" would also allow Kingsolver's family to "live in a place that could feed [them]: where rain falls, crops grow, and drinking water bubbles right up out of the ground" (3). Kingsolver's extensive knowledge as a trained biologist and active ecologist, as well as her rural upbringing and life-long skill as a gardener, would be of great benefit as the family became more dependent on the land.

The role land plays as a revitalizing power is best expressed in Kingsolver's fiction in the novel *Prodigal Summer* (2000). Set in southern Appalachia, in a place akin to her adopted hometown of Meadowview in southwest Virginia, and dedicated to "wilderness," the interconnected stories of Nannie Rawley, Deanna Wolfe, and Lusa Maluf Landowski, show "ecologically enlightened" women who turn to the land as a refuge in response to death and divorce in a modern context (Kingsolver; Jones 90). Each turns to the natural world to deal with her concerns and promote her livelihood when other choices are readily available. To emphasize

this fact, each is easily identified with her primary interest: Nannie with apple trees, Lusa with moths, and Deanna with coyotes. The narrator places importance on such intimate human relationships with nature on the first and last pages: "solitude is only a human presumption. Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot; every choice is a world made new for the chosen. All secrets are witnessed." Nature is a constant presence for these women – one they choose to recognize and live with cooperatively.

No one understands the importance of human-nature relationships better than Nannie Rawley, an organic apple farmer in Zebulon County and the environmental matriarch of the novel (82 - 86). That neighbor Garnett Walker finds her progressive ways unnerving, finding that she had been "put on this earth to try his soul and tempt his faith into doubt," further highlights the work's environmental ethic and feminist leanings (83). Appreciating the interconnectedness of the natural world is the moral Nannie lives by and the moral imperative of Kingsolver's narrative. In her "ecofeminist exploration" of *Prodigal Summer* Christine M. Battista confirms such an assessment. She points out that this book is "crucial" because it and others like it "prompt us to reconsider our ecological constitution so that we may inhabit the earth in more sustainable and ethical ways" (54). Battista then uses ecofeminism to explore each woman's contribution to "Appalachia's bioregional development" – the "how" of her experience – rather than the question of why they choose to engage nature as explored in this work.

Nannie Rawley, for example, has faced terrible tragedy. Deanna explains,

> [Her father] had a friend, [Nannie,] but that was years later. They never moved in together, they both had their farms to run, but she was good to me. She's an amazing lady. I didn't even realize until just lately how she'd been through hell and back with us. My dad was a mess on her hands at the end. And she had a little

girl, too, with Down's syndrome and a hole in her heart that couldn't be fixed. My half-sister. (171)

Nannie's immeasurable losses through illness and death, however, do not overcome her with bitterness. Instead, she invests herself in her apple orchard; she is independent, outspoken, and dearly loved in the community. What others appreciate about Nannie, Garnett sees as her moral and agricultural failings: years ago she openly carried a child out of wedlock and now she protests the pesticides that protect his chestnut trees. Garnett also farms, but his lack of an environmental ethic is reflected in his animosity toward anyone and anything not in keeping with his limited cultural expectations. If the contrast between his ways and hers is not enough to elicit the reader's attention, Nannie's name, like Lusa's, firmly identifies her position: she is Nannie "Land" Rawley (217). In a letter to Garnett she reinforces the narrative remarks that encapsulate the novel. She tells him, "Everything alive is connected to every other by fine, invisible threads. Things you don't see can help you plenty, and things you try to control will often rear back and bite you, and that's the moral of the story" (216).

Nannie's belief in the threads that bind is evidenced by her keen interest in Lusa at Cole's wake. Out of a sea of people who can barely nod to Lusa, Nannie kneels in front of her, firmly grasps her knees, and looks directly into her eyes. She explains, "I lost a child…I thought I wouldn't live through it. But you do. You learn to love the place somebody leaves behind for you" (73). Lusa seems to intuit Nannie's meaning; she never considers the encounter again, but it is Nannie's sentiment exactly that comes to fruition in her own life. Lusa subsequently falls in love with and marries the land on her husband's farm, working with it to process her grief.

Cole's sudden death puts Lusa in an interesting position: she can simply pack up and go back to Lexington with no strings attached, to her city and career, leaving the homeplace for her

sisters-in-law, or she can stay on as the legal inheritor of the property and attempt to support herself amidst prying eyes. What the community expects of her is clear. At her husband's wake she can hear bits of conversation: "*No, no bid'ness of hers. That's Widener land everybody knows it, you-all's family place, what does she have to do with it? No, she won't stay on it. Don't hardly see how she could*" (71, emphasis Kingsolver). Leaving is also Lusa's initial response: "She felt a strange lightness: Yes! She could walk away from Zebulon County…she could leave this place, be anybody she wanted, anywhere at all" (71). In the midst of her grief, leaving promises instant relief from her concerns.

Despite their cultural differences, Lusa understands the Widener sisters' connection to the property: "I know. I'm an outsider in their family home. They want their farm back, and I really don't blame them. Most mornings I get out of bed thinking I should pack my car and drive away without even saying good-bye" (162). Unbeknownst to her husband's family, Lusa is descended from farmers. Her mother's people, the Malufs, had olive groves along the Jordan and her father's people, the Landowskis had a sugar beet farm in Poland (162). She also knows what it is like to lose family land. She tells her nephew, "Families lose their land for a million reasons. My dad's parents had this wonderful farm in Poland, which they lost for being Jewish. And my mother's people got run off their land for *not* being Jewish. Go figure" (162, emphasis Kingsolver).

Lusa's ecological enlightenment heretofore has been primarily of the textbook variety. Her environmental sensibilities as an entomologist who specializes in "moth love" are counterintuitive to a farmer like Cole. The honeysuckle she loves, for example, is a nuisance to him. She loves its scent, but it is a threat to his fencerows, much like Deanna's desire for coyote preservation contrasts with Eddie's desire to protect his sheep (32). Their disagreements pit her

extensive education against his personal farming experience. Lusa knows that she is the one out of place culturally even though living in the country and farming has been a life-long desire of hers (121):

> Cole was the youngest of six children, with five sisters who'd traveled no farther than the bottom of the hollow, where Dad Widener had deeded each daughter an acre on which to build a house when she married, meanwhile saving back the remainder of the sixty-acre farm for his only son, Cole. The family cemetery was up behind the orchard. The Wideners' destiny was to occupy this same plot of land for their lives and eternity, evidently…Lusa was a dire outsider from the other side of the mountains, from Lexington – a place in the preposterous distance. And now she was marooned behind five sisters-in-law who flanked her gravel right-of-way to the mailbox" (33).

The Widener family's long heritage of living in the same place for generations is a formidable force to contend with, especially since Lusa's parents are immigrants. Even though the family might share some commonalities with her, neither Lusa nor her sisters-in-law are able to establish a connection.

Living as a stranger in a new community, reminiscent of Arnow's Louisa Sheridan, Lusa feels targeted by her husband's family: "Since she'd become mistress of their family home last June, they'd had little to say to her and everything to say about her. Before Lusa herself ever set foot in the Kroger's or the hardware store, she was already known as a Lexington girl who got down on all fours to name the insects in the parlor rather than squashing them" (39). Lusa's resulting loneliness exacerbates the developing tension in her marriage. Disconnected from a

reciprocally healthy relationship to the land like Garnett Walker, she finds that she is growing bitter:

> *I am too young to feel this way*, she thought, trudging upstairs to collect the rest of the laundry while he headed out to till the bottom field. How would it be in ten years? Had she really wanted so badly all her life to live on a farm? A bird in the hand loses its mystery in no time flat. Now she felt like a frontier mail-order bride, hardly past her wedding and already wondering how she could have left her city and beloved career for the narrow place a rural county holds open for a farmer's wife. (46, emphasis Kingsolver)

In less than a year Lusa's life has been turned upside down. The modern, independent life she had carved out for herself through education seems increasingly distant. If there is a silver lining in Cole's death, it is the promise of an instantaneous new start, or restart in Lexington.

While the decision to return to her former life seems easier after Cole's death, especially in light of her unpleasant history with his family and their community, Lusa unexpectedly chooses to stay. In her heartbreak and confusion, she seeks refuge in the land – the place – Cole has left her: "What she'd loved was here, and still might be, if she could find her way to it" (80). To find her way Lusa increasingly invests herself in the land around her; her connection to it is not necessarily the most practical, but it is the most beneficial: "For the hundredth time Lusa tried and failed to imagine how she was going to stay here, or why. When she tried to describe her life in words, there was nothing at all to hold her in this place…But there were so many other things besides words. There were the odors of honeysuckle and freshly turned earth, and ancient songs played out on the roof by the rain. Moths tracing spirals in the moonlight. Ghosts" (239).

Lusa is viscerally connected to the farm; losing herself in sustaining it allows her to process her grief and pushes her forward so that she ultimately finds herself.

Lusa uses her background and ingenuity to maintain the farm and herself; according to Suzanne W. Jones Kingsolver uses Lusa to represent the variety necessary for sustaining small family farms in the modern era (85 – 86). Her Arab-Polish heritage reminds her that major holidays call for goat meat and that the right kind of meat – free of hormones – is expensive in large cities like New York where her mother's cousin, Abdel Sahadi, is a butcher (164). She recalls goat dishes eaten for holidays like Id-al-Fitr, Id-al-Adha, and Orthodox Easter and Passover (155; 160). Lusa sets her mind on raising goats, a seemingly foolhardy project in Zebulon County where tobacco is king. Goats are not only considered a bad investment, they are a nuisance others willingly give to Lusa for free. As she works with her livestock, "figuring out how to farm by doing all the wrong things" Lusa works through the loss of her husband. She states, "I'm having this retrospective marriage, starting at the end and moving backward, getting acquainted with Cole through all the different ages he was before I met him" (163). In addition to raising goats, Lusa grows a beautiful garden that stands out as a "woman's garden" due to the beauty of its peculiar plants: five-color Swiss chard instead of collard greens, and several rows of fava beans to dry for falafel meal. She'd grown four different kinds of eggplants from seed, including the pink-and-white streaked 'Rosa Bianca' for her beloved *imam bayildi* and *baba ganouj*" (375). Lusa has more vegetables than she can can for a year's worth of food.

Lusa's personal investment in the farm causes her to feel "married to a piece of land named Widener" (383). As the farm itself begins to stand in for Cole, Lusa sees more clearly "the history of a family that had stayed on its land" and recognizes "that story was hers now as well" (437). She now believes "she had been called here" (437). As she has sustained the farm, it

has sustained her. By the end of the summer, Lusa's worst days of grief seem to have been "a hundred and ten years ago" (401). She states,

> I was born into such a different life, with these scholarly parents, and I did the best I could with it. I raised caterpillars in shoeboxes and I studied bugs and agriculture in school for as many years as they'll let you. And then one day Cole Widener walked into my little house and blew the roof off and here I am…I was mad at him for dying and leaving me here, at first. Pissed off like you wouldn't believe. But now I'm starting to think he wasn't supposed to be my whole life, he was just this doorway to *me*. I'm so grateful to him for that. (411 – 42, emphasis Kingsolver)

The more rooted, more whole Lusa moves forward in her own life and the life of Cole's family by ensuring that the farm will stay with relatives. Sister-in-law Hannie-Mavis reveals to Lusa the family's true worry about her staying on the farm. The land will one day leave the family when she remarries: "Well, a few years down the line you'll marry somebody around here. Then this farm will be *his*…it'll pass on to his children. It won't be our homeplace anymore. It won't be the *Widener* place" (307, emphasis Kingsolver). She cares for and plans to adopt her sister-in-law Jewel's two children, Crystal and Lowell, when their mother succumbs to cancer. Lusa tells Jewel, "I'd like to be able to put their names on the deed to this farm" (382). Not only will the children inherit the farm, Lusa will also change their last name – as well as her own – to Widener. Whereas she could not fathom letting go of her own name when Cole was alive, taking his now solidifies her union with the land.

After the same thunderstorm that signifies Deanna's return to modern life, Lusa wakes anew: "This morning after her terrible night Lusa had awakened feeling shucked out and

changed altogether, shaken but sound. As if she'd passed through some door into a place where she could walk surely on the ground of her life." She feels "resurrected" and has "a deep desire to put the place in order" (439). "In the first confident act of her new life" she hires Little Rickie as her part-time farm manager to fix the hay baler, mow hay and put it in the barn, and clear out the multiflora roses her goats cannot reach – without weed killer. Lusa keeps the yard work for herself and spends the day pushing nature back. She concludes her trimming and weeding by "tearing out the honeysuckle that had overgrown the garage…she now saw it for what it was, an introduced garden vine coiling itself tightly around all the green places where humans and wilder creatures conceded to share their lives" (440). Lusa now thinks like a farmer, one who is true to her environmental sensibilities while more fully understanding the delicate balance of life and death in rural places (322 – 323).

Such balance is more than an understanding to Zebulon County native Deanna Wolfe; it is an obsession. As the sole park ranger living in the Zebulon National Forest charged with keeping hunters off protected land, maintaining trails, keeping a lookout for fires, and generally "watching the woods," Deanna has subsumed herself in nature to such a degree that she no longer considers her appearance or the proper tones used in conversation (5; 11). An experienced outdoorswoman and educated biologist, we are first introduced to her while she is tracking an animal, one she has been seeking for "two years and more. This lifetime" – the coyote (2). Her environmental impact is minimal; she lives in a small cabin with only her bare necessities (27). She even washes without soap so as not to offend the senses of animals or make them think she is a predator (6).

Yet, Deanna once lived a modern life as a middle school math and science teacher in a modern place, "in a brick house, neatly pressed between a husband and neighbors" (263; 5).

Since her divorce, however, Deanna has stripped her life of others' expectations and sought refuge in nature. It is clear that she is still processing the change from the role that she thought would fulfill her to the role that truly brings her joy. She recalls her husband's criticisms over her lack of femininity – "a test like some witch trial she was preordained to fail" – including her naturally swift gate and his lack of sexual desire for her (14; 21). She is also unsure of what to call herself since her married name "is nothing to [her] now," but still "stuck all over [her] life, on [her] driver's license and everything" (25). In effect, her husband "put his territorial mark on everything [she] owned, and then walked away" (25).

Still, Deanna clearly understands why her marriage failed and what she is doing on the mountain:

> The divorce hadn't been her choice, unless it was true what he said, that her skills and preference for the outdoors were choices a man had to leave. An older husband facing his own age badly and suddenly critical of a wife past forty, that was nothing she could have helped. But this assignment way up on Zebulon, where she'd lived in perfect isolation for twenty-five months – yes. That was her doing. Her proof, in case anyone was watching, that she'd never needed the marriage to begin with. (19)

Even though her knowledge, passion, and accomplishments were too much for her husband to contend with, they make Deanna who she is (26). Choosing to subsume herself in the park – a place where she can be "the only kind of woman there [is]. The kind without a man" – allows her to enjoy her independence and engage her interests fully without judgment (55).

Deanna studies carnivores – bobcats, bear, fox, coyote – because they reveal the health of the food chain. She states, "if they're good, then their prey is good, and its food is good. If not,

then something's missing from the chain…Keeping tabs on the predators tells you what you need to know about the herbivores, like deer, and the vegetation, the detritovores, the insect populations, small predators like shrews and voles. All of it" (10 – 11). Reconnected to her true animalistic self, she is immediately drawn to interloper Eddie Bondo; she blushes, laughs, observes, thirsts, and fanaticizes until they mate like the birds, the bees, and the plants (6; 13; 15; 21). The narrator tells us, "everywhere you looked, something was fighting for time, for light, the kiss of pollen, a connection of sperm and egg and another chance"; "the pursuit of eternity" (9; 24).

It is only after their initial coupling in spring's "randy moment" that Deanna realizes Eddie's presence in the woods is antithetical to hers. A fourth generation sheep rancher, he has likely traveled from Wyoming to participate in the Mountain Empire Bounty Hunt: an event organized "for the celebrated purpose of killing [the] coyotes," she hopes to protect (29). Not only do Eddie's sensibilities differ from Deanna's, his very presence disrupts her sanctuary: "Now the spell was gone, the magic of this place that had been hers alone, unknown to any man" (100). Although the loss of her solitude is jarring, the magic Deanna has found in the forest has greatly benefited her. In the wake of her divorce she chose a place that would allow her to reconnect to herself through nature tied to her personal and professional interests.

Deanna's pregnancy, however, - the result of her most natural act – pushes her out of her refuge. She knows readjusting to the modern world will be difficult:

> It had been a long time since she'd heard anything other than bird music. Music was something she'd have to relearn, she decided, like learning to speak again after a stroke. There were so many things to bewilder her lying ahead. Electricity

> with all those little noises it made inside a house. And people, too, with all the noises *they* made. Labor and childbirth would be the least of her worries. (430)

Despite the discomfort she will face, Deanna's mothering instincts tell her the baby will need a human community; indeed, she begins to feel vulnerable alone in the woods. As Priscilla Leder finds, Deanna is "no longer just a student of biology, she is now subject to its laws" (240). During a thunderstorm Deanna craves human speech and light:

> She got up and walked around the room, trying to find spots where the [radio] reception improved…to keep the sound of human speech in her ear. She'd gone two years without news but now couldn't bear another minute without it…The world was coming back to her…[She] jumped up and went inside to make sure she had candles where she could find them and the kerosene lamp trimmed and ready to light. Why? …It was going to be dark, storm or no storm, like every night of the year. Why did she suddenly need four candles laid out side by side with matches at the ready? …What had changed when she used to be so fearless? But she knew what had changed. This was what it cost to commit oneself to the living. There was so much to lose. (431)

Deanna's desire to leave her refuge show her moving forward in her life after subsuming herself in nature. She will commit herself to "the living" – to other humans – even though what should have been her closest relationship, her marriage, failed. More fully herself after her respite, she is willing to take another risk on human companionship.

Rather than search for Eddie Bondo, however, Deanna will join Nannie Rawley down the mountain in Egg Fork, creating a non-traditional family much like Taylor Greer does in *The*

Bean Trees. Deanna's connection to Nannie runs deep: she is "the nearest thing to a mother [Deanna] had." It is fitting that Deanna turn to Nannie for help with her child (390 – 391). A willing and delighted grandmother-to-be, Nannie believes she has come into an "embarrassment of riches" (424). After the loss of her daughter and lover, and years of investing herself in the health of apple trees, she has a second chance at creating a family. Nannie's ability to work through and move beyond her painful experiences provides a model of the land as refuge for both of the younger women, Deanna and Lusa. Priscilla Leder goes a step further to suggest hopefully that Deanna's pregnancy symbolically "raise(s) the possibility that future generations might grow to be good gardeners" – humans who recognize the "inescapable reality" of their presence in nature (240; 237).

Whether cultivating apples in Virginia, examining plant life in Arizona, visiting "Vietnam," or walking through the Lake District, the characters Bobbie Ann Mason and Barbara Kingsolver have created clearly illustrate the role land continues to play for women. Much like the authors, reclaiming and maintaining a connection to the earth permits their female characters to find a fulfillment otherwise unattainable. The women's lives they offer, therefore, combine the lessons derived from rural backgrounds and personal pursuits to inform inform their existence in the modern era.

Conclusion

Of this Ground:

Land as Refuge in the Works of Three Kentucky Women Writers

"So, yes, Virginia, there is a Pittman, Kentucky. It exists in your heart and your imagination. So long as its truth sustains you from one page to the next, while a new way of looking at the world settles in beside your own, it's true enough."

- Barbara Kingsolver,
"Dialogue"

In the forward to the 1982 University Press of Kentucky reprinting of Bobbie Ann Mason's *Shiloh and Other Stories* George Ella Lyon assesses the profound changes Mason's characters face in the latter twentieth century. She maintains, "Mason's people are reaching for authentic, connected life. We wish them luck. We share their confusion. Only yesterday, the parking lot was a pasture and families witnessed the drama of life and death not on a screen but at home, under their hands" (xii). Unsettling for many, seemingly instantaneous changes in rural areas dramatize the jarring shifts from agrarian pasts to industrialized futures, placing authors, readers, and characters alike in a precarious space where personal desires, cultural heritage, and modern pressures intersect. While an authentic, connected life such as Lyon posits appears impossible, regional authors Harriette Simpson Arnow, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Barbara Kingsolver reconceptualize the land in order to illustrate the role it continues to play for women in the modern era.

As a refuge female characters distinctively choose in response to modern concerns, land offers a sense of satisfaction, a source of therapy, and a place of solace from which they gain empowerment. Although such a choice may at first appear adverse, especially for women who willingly fled rural backgrounds, it creates continuity between past and present without negating progress away from traditional expectations. In other words, as Mason indicates through her

own decision to return to Kentucky, women engage the land on their own terms; like her, they "return but not relapse" (*Clear Springs* 182). Women connect to their knowledge of the land gained from rural upbringings to inform their interactions with it not because they have to but because it makes sense within the context of their modern lives.

As the fiction analyzed in this study indicates, female characters in the works of Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver grow gardens, subsume themselves in nature, and make choices to live cooperatively with their environment when other options are easier and more readily available. Engaging the land physically and ideologically in order to process a modern concern highlights the ways in which their place-based narratives explore and respond to contemporary issues, especially economic displacement and women's opportunities. As they present a common response to a myriad of situations they negotiate the local, the regional, the national, and the global, building upon a long tradition of women's regional discourse that "embod(ies) cultural conflict and reflect(s) social tension" (Inness and Royer 2 – 3).

Furthermore, the choice to respond to concerns by engaging the land reveals a distinctively feminist act. Contrary to inveterate Western modes of thought, women and land are simultaneously revalued as active, **v**aluable participants in a mutually beneficial relationship in such instances. The emphasis these three Kentucky women writers place on historical and political forces of the modern era, personal knowledge that facilitates interactions with the environment, and the locatedness of human subjects reflects "emancipatory strategies" tied to ecofeminist literary criticism. As they write women and nature out of passivity, they reveal their own connections to place (Legler 230 – 233).

Certainly, a writer's personal affinity with place is the hallmark of regional writing. Recognized in the nineteenth century by Hamlin Garland and termed voiceplace by George Ella

Lyon in the twentieth, rooted familiarity with a place and its culture nourishes, sustains, and induces Harriette Simpson Arnow, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Barbara Kingsolver to reproduce it faithfully in fiction. Although they do maintain one aspect of the local color tradition – depicting the local and unique – they do not offer an image of a community for exploitation. Instead, they perpetuate communities from an insider's perspective, actively creating living places by inhabiting them and writing about them. Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver thereby create and recreate regions and the places within them through rhetorical regionalism. Even as a region changes it is maintained.

More specifically, regional writers offer readers a recognizable space wherein they can locate their own experiences through depictions of people and culture. For example, Barbara Kingsolver says of Pittman, Kentucky, the opening setting of *Bean Trees*:

> [it] is a very real place of the kind that can't be found on a map. Its character and people are consistent with what you'd find in any number of small towns in the east-central part of Kentucky, including the one where I grew up…So yes, Virginia, there is a Pittman, Kentucky. It exists in your heart and your imagination. So long as its truth sustains you from one page to the next, while a new way of looking at the world settles in beside your own, it's true enough. ("Dialogue")

Kingsolver's Pittman is actually "truer than true"; it is a fictional space based on the writer's real personal experience of a place (Smith *Oral History* 37). As readers interpret the depictions presented, they negotiate how to view themselves and others. Readers thereby sustain desired identifications with similar places represented in literature that speak to their own experience.

They can connect rhetorically to the places regional authors create and maintain for them through stories even as a literal place changes or they lose physical connection to it.

Writing in the generation prior to Mason and Kingsolver, Harriette Simpson Arnow offers an important legacy through imaginative spaces. Her Kentucky trilogy leads to the realization that a mutually affirming relationship with the land can take place anywhere from the rolling hills of eastern Kentucky to a small patch of earth outside a wartime housing unit. Although Arnow's depictions also reveal much about the difficulty of maintaining cultural connections to the land in a rapidly developing landscape, they are not without hope. As her famed heroine shows, as long as women connect choice and knowledge with nature they can find personal revelation no matter how oppressive the circumstances.

Both rooted in the land of western Kentucky and realistic about its evolution, Mason understands that the survival of actual rural places, especially family farms, is perilous at best. She knows that her own memories of her family's dairy farm will "be loosened from any tangible connection to [the] land" (13). More poignantly, the oil painting she owns of her family's home "in its prime" will be all she has to hold on to (14). For a moment captured in *Clear Springs*, the Mason farm illuminates the juncture between past and present. From one view it is the site where humans and nature commune in productive ways. From the other, marred by human domination, it is a place antiquated and lost, misplaced in time:

> From the pond, in the green lushness of early summer, in three directions you see only fields of soybeans and corn, with thick fencerows and washed skies. A movie could be filmed here, a historical drama set in 1825, and it would seem authentic – except for the soundtrack: the noises of the highway, the air, the feed mill; the blare and thud of music from cars whizzing past. If you turned the

> camera in the other direction, toward the road, you'd get all the visual cues of the present day – the wires and poles, the asphalt, the Detroit metal, the discarded junk-food wrappers and beer cans thrown from cars that have "twentieth century" written all over them. (*Clear Springs* 8 – 9)

Faced with this contrast after her father's death, she states, "what to do with the farm has become an ongoing dilemma, which prolongs itself into a basic state of being founded on inertia" (Mason, L.; Mason 209 - 210). Symbolic of the dilemma itself, the inability to move when faced with a simultaneously unconscionable and inevitable loss represents well the paralyzing effects of losing a place intimately tied to the identity of generations. The Mason farm is their "homeplace," according to Mason; its "fierce hold" on the family confirms its "value and meaning." And yet, she states, "no one in the family is ready to take up farming or to build a house in the shadow of the chicken tower" (213).

In many ways Nancy Culpepper is a guide for readers who, like Mason, are faced with the loss of a tangible homeplace but not its value and meaning. Caught within her dual identity as a southern country girl and a northern sophisticate, Nancy finds that the loss of her parents and the sale of the family farm pointedly refocus her attention on the land that defined and nourished her for much of her life. Although she has "an overpowering love" for the farm, which heightens the reader's sense of her loss, Nancy realizes both she and the property have changed over time (179). Instead of dwelling on what has passed, she establishes a sense of continuity with her rural identity through the land as refuge. No longer physically attached to her homeplace, she instead celebrates it through the contemplation and memory spurred by the natural setting of another place far from Kentucky: England's famed Lake District. More clearly herself in this instance, Nancy connects her past and present in a way that honors both her rural heritage and her modern

life. Thus, Mason offers readers a valid method for holding onto their own rural ties through visions born of a rootedness in rural places. Just as Mason's rhetorical regional literature creates and maintains regions for her readers, they can also maintain a sense of place for themselves.

Although Mason's depiction of Nancy speaks from the local, the loss of traditional ways of life in the modern era identifies a shift occurring regionally, nationally, and even globally. Contemplating her own family's situation, she states, "I'm aware that something larger than myself, larger than our family is ending here. A way of life with a long continuity, tracking back to the beginnings of this country, coming to an end" (212). The jobs provided by the businesses being built on rural farmland offer wages and benefits that family farms simply cannot match. Mason wonders what her Grandmother would have thought of such jarring transition:

> I think about Granny sitting in her rocking chair, twisting her hands in her apron and staring at the floor. Could she have imagined that her home would be abandoned by the family, rented out to strangers? Did she grasp the certainty that the hectic, high-tech world growing around her like pondweed – the foreshadowing of urban sprawl – was going to mean the death of the family farm?" (249) Occurring so fast it is at times barely noticed, Mason identifies "the tension between holding on to a way of life and letting in a new way – under the banners of Wal-Marts and chicken processors – [as] the central dynamic of [the] area. (14)

This dynamic, filtered through the lens of regional literature, pinpoints universal human concerns regarding family ties, land use, and the meaning of progress.

If attention to the land has always been a defining characteristic of Southern and southern Appalachian literature, and that land is being lost, then Arnow, Mason, and Kingsolver offer

compelling reparation for that loss. As regional writers who incorporate characteristics long associated with regionalism and then move beyond them to rhetorically create the places where desirable characteristics exist, they offer readers a protected space where they can shelter identity. Engaging the land as a refuge thus promotes rather than detracts from identity in a globalized world. Further, if the skill these three Kentucky women writers show in creating such a space is any indication of the health of the field, then regionalism not only remains a vital feature of American literature, but it also takes on an even greater role through its ability to establish and maintain sites of identification. In the twenty-first century, then, regional identities are inextricably linked to regional narratives, giving regional writers the ability to speak with remarkable authority. In truth, they become community advocates because they validate experience for their readers both within the community and as compared to the larger region, the nation, and the world.

In a 2010 interview with *The Guardian* Barbara Kingsolver emphasizes fiction's real-world ability to engage empathy and action:

> I don't understand how any good art could fail to be political…Good fiction creates empathy. A novel takes you somewhere and asks you to look through the eyes of another person, to live another life. Literature sucks you into another psyche. So the creation of empathy necessarily influences how you'll behave to other people. How can that not affect you politically? It is…a powerful craft; there's alchemy. So we have an obligation to take it seriously – and I do. Perhaps that's why I'm marked. I'm not pretending to be ingenuous; I know what I'm doing. (qtd. in Jaggi)

Beyond fiction political action prompted by serious attention to an engagement with the land as a refuge may be found in programs that negotiate human relationships through gardening. For example, the Garden Resource Program Collaborative in Detroit, Michigan uses the soil of the city to grow fresh produce. Developed by a woman who found an opportunity for community good in empty patches of dirt, the program "provide(s) resources, support and community connections to families, schools and community gardens throughout Detroit, Hamtramck and Highland Park. In 2003, we started off with 80 total gardens – 41 family gardens and 39 community and school gardens – and this year we broke 800 gardens, just six years later" (Atkinson qtd. in DeVries). Especially in an economically depressed urban city, fresh food reminds those involved that care of the earth promotes care of one another.

Kingsolver herself shows the political in action through her memoir *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*. While returning to a rural existence brings back into focus the undesirable labor of rural foremothers, as a personal choice it allows for empowerment. Kingsolver and her family, for instance, chose to move permanently from suburban Tucson, Arizona, to their farm in southwestern Virginia for the express purpose of living in a place that could feed them on their terms: "one carload of us paddled against the tide, heading for the Promised Land where water falls from the sky and green stuff grows all around" (6). With the express purpose of "realigning [their] lives with [their] food chain," Kingsolver's family spent a "year of food life" growing vegetables, raising livestock, and purchasing goods close to home. As a response to modern concerns not limited to women, their "local-food experiment" brings into focus issues regarding mass food production and a national reemphasis on "slow food" (281).

Farming for sustenance, concurrently in vogue and outmoded, in no way diminishes Kingsolver's literary career or her daughters' prospects for the future. In fact, it does just the

opposite. In a telling anecdote wherein she is unexpectedly complimented for her cheese making skills as a "real housewife," Kingsolver reveals much about her own journey from her parents' farm in Kentucky to Indiana, to Europe, to Arizona, and finally to her own farm in Virginia. She states, "It has taken decades to get here, but I took that as a compliment" (156). Being appreciated for the skills she uses to provide for her family, even when expressed in language loaded with contextual meaning, now speaks to her own desires and knowledge rather than a gender role imposed upon her: once again, the land liberates.

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