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Loving the Mountains, Leaving the Mountains: The Appalachian Dilemma and Jim Wayne Miller's The Brier Poems

Madeline Dawson
East Tennessee State University

Loving the Mountains, Leaving the Mountains: The Appalachian Dilemma and Jim Wayne Miller's *The Brier Poems*

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by

Madeline Dawson

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Dr. Thomas Alan Holmes, Chair

Dr. David M. Jones

Dr. Scott R. Honeycutt

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ABSTRACT

Loving the Mountains, Leaving the Mountains: The Appalachian Dilemma and Jim Wayne Miller's *The Brier Poems*

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For decades now, the Appalachian community has been internally combatting two equally strong feelings—an inherently rich love of the mountains and a conflicting urge to leave the mountains. In recent years, Appalachian writers have produced a new literary tradition of identifying, discussing, and remedying this dilemma. Jim Wayne Miller's 1997 *The Brier Poems* unapologetically explores the Appalachian community's complicated relationship to its region. bell hooks' 2012 *Appalachian Elegy: Poetry and Place* and Savannah Sipple's 2019 *WWJD and Other Poems* then expand Miller's exploration as both hooks and Sipple collectively represent voices that have often been left out of the stereotypical Appalachian narrative; their literature widens the lens of Appalachian experience and repositions the importance of the Appalachian canon. hooks and Sipple are contemporaries in conversation with Miller as all three authors have declared the Appalachian experience to have never been hegemonic—reclaiming, embracing, and uniting a modern Appalachian identity.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to my family. Without your never-ending love and support, I would not be where I am or who I am today. You have taught me incredible patience and perseverance, and for that I am eternally grateful. You have given me the world, and I love you each dearly. Thank you.

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I would like to take a minute to thank my thesis committee. Thank you to my committee chair, Dr. Thomas Alan Holmes, for introducing me to Jim Wayne Miller. Thank you for guiding me every step of the way (and for suffering through hours of thesis edits). Your wisdom and understanding have added a great value to my thesis, constantly shaping my focus and direction. And of course, thank you to Dr. David M. Jones and Dr. Scott R. Honeycutt for providing valuable insights into these Appalachian authors and their works. I truly value your perspectives, and your influence on my thesis has not gone unnoticed. Thank you all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

I was born and raised in Cocke County, Tennessee, and while my small East Tennessee town has always felt like home—full of people I love and places I know—it has also always felt a bit constricting. For as long as I can remember, I have had a complicated relationship with my hometown, so I immediately identified with Jim Wayne Miller's focal character "the Brier" when I first discovered his work *The Brier Poems*. As the Brier acts as a narrator and guide, he unapologetically attempts to navigate through the complex experience of growing up in Appalachia; the Brier recognizes his community's simultaneous love of and apathy for their region, and he never once condemns those conflicting feelings. Ultimately, the Brier encourages his audience to remain steadfast in their Appalachian pride—appreciating their culture's ancestry, history, and traditions—while confidently recognizing their agency to create their own Appalachian identities. As Jim Wayne Miller's *The Brier Poems* acknowledges the fact that the Appalachian experience is not a hegemonic experience—stating it varies from person to person—the Brier helped me understand I could unapologetically love my hometown by defining for myself what it means to "be from Cocke County" and reclaiming my own Appalachian narrative. Suddenly, my hometown didn't feel so claustrophobic.

Moreover, just as the Appalachian narrative varies from person to person, the Appalachian experience also varies drastically from ridge to ridge. In the United States, the Appalachian Mountains span from Maine to Georgia; however, as acknowledged by the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Appalachian Region is made up of multiple counties spanning all the way from New York to Mississippi. Therefore, Appalachian culture and experience from north to south—community to community—inevitably varies. So, it is

important I define exactly who, what, and where I am referring to when use the term "Appalachia" within the context of this thesis.

In one of *The Brier Poems*' final works—"The Country of Conscience"—Jim Wayne Miller symbolically defines the region when he writes, "'A nation is the will to live together,' / an individual will to differ multiplied, / many agreeing to differ in the same way" (lines 125-27). Where Miller states "a nation is the will to live together," Douglas Reichert Powell then elaborates on the definition of region in his essay "There's Something About Mary: The Practice of Critical Regionalism." Powell writes:

> When we talk about a region, we are talking not about a stable, boundaried, autonomous place but about a cultural history, the cumulative, generative effect of the interplay among the various, competing definitions of that region. And in so doing, we are, inevitably, contributing to that cultural history, participating in the ongoing creation of regional identities. . . . [A] region is not a thing so much as a cultural history, an ongoing rhetorical and poetic construction. (5-6)

Therefore, the Appalachia discussed in this thesis is a combination between these two definitions provided by Miller and Powell. As Appalachia is a region heavily defined by its ancestral history, traditions, and values, I will be examining "a nation with the will to live together"—or "to differ in the same way"—because of their "shared cultural history."

Moreover, this thesis also acknowledges our Appalachian region as "cumulative" and "rhetorical," just as Powell states; similar to the way reality is arbitrary, the region is not concrete. It is important to emphasize the fact that Appalachia is a construct; the idea of Appalachia is shaped and defined by varying histories, politics, and societies. The identifying markers and definitions placed on the Appalachian region vary from perspective to perspective,

and this thesis attempts to closely examine that facet of the region by placing a heavy emphasis on the variability of the Appalachian experience. For example, the Appalachian authors I discuss are "participating in the ongoing creation of regional identities" by writing about very specific Appalachian narratives influenced by their personal regional and cultural experiences.

With that being said, as both I and the primary authors I focus on in this thesis—Jim Wayne Miller, Savannah Sipple, and bell hooks—are all from the same Appalachian region, our similar experiences have been shaped by the Appalachian country known by many as "the Mountain South." Susan L. Yarnell more concretely defines region and the Appalachian Mountain South in her article "The Southern Appalachians: The History of a Landscape" when she writes:

> The Southern Appalachian region is defined primarily by mountains. . . . the Southern Appalachians include the State of West Virginia, southwestern Virginia, eastern Kentucky and Tennessee, western North Carolina and South Carolina, northern Georgia, and northeastern Alabama. . . . Although all parts of the Southern Appalachians can alternatively be described as parts of other regions or States, their shared characteristics and identity as a region warrant studying the Southern Appalachians as a whole. In addition to a mountainous landscape, these areas share a common history alternating between cultural exchange and isolation from prehistory through the modern era. The region falls inside the boundaries of the American South and, thus, shares in the South's colonial, antebellum, and Civil War history. At the same time, the Southern Appalachians are distinguishable politically, economically, and socially from the South as a whole. (1)

Appalachians from the Mountain South have lived similar lives because of their communities' overarching shared cultural history. For example, much of the region's culture today still stems

from our ancestors' defining roots in a traditionally religious, agrarian lifestyle, and many of our small towns—whether they are in West Virginia or eastern Alabama—are still reeling from the prolonged isolation that the southern Appalachian Mountains created within our communities. While I grew up in East Tennessee, Jim Wayne Miller is a North Caroline native, and Savannah Sipple and bell hooks are from Kentucky; moreover, these authors' poetry is heavily influenced by their Mountain South experiences which are culturally similar but personally differing. Moreover, their conversations are furthering the aforementioned notion of "the Appalachian region" as a cumulative, rhetorical idea as opposed to a concrete, definitive place. In summary, as I may alternate terms within this thesis, know that I am always referring to the experiences of the southern Appalachian Mountain region discussed in this introduction—the Mountain South.

Furthermore, today's southern Appalachia includes many individuals like me, who are navigating complicated relationships to their hometowns. Oftentimes, we are internally combatting two equally strong feelings—an inherently rich love of the mountains and an intense urge to leave the mountains. For example, in her article "Why I'm Leaving Appalachia," Lauren Frick writes:

> I am proud that I can say I have grown up with my bare hands in the earth. I have labored for my bread and learned the steady determination and adaptability that comes from dependence upon external circumstances for survival. I have learned how to survive in hard places, to make my own light, to blaze a trail where there was none set before me, but now I want more. (*The Odyssey Online*)

Like Lauren Frick, many of us are appreciative of the life the Mountain South has given us—we are thankful for the skills of independence, self-reliance, and perseverance the region has instilled in us as foundational values—but we want more. For many, our small Appalachian

communities are synonymous to family and home, yet our experiences here also feel as if they are no longer enough—often lacking in opportunities for growth or individuality.

In Jim Wayne Miller's *The Brier Poems*, Miller explores the beginning of this complex relationship the Appalachian community has with its southern surroundings. His work explores the history of modernity's effect on Appalachia as it discusses a twentieth-century Appalachia undergoing impressive changes—both positive and negative—that ultimately destabilized a previously isolated, immovable notion of "Appalachian identity." External influences such as the stereotypical portrayal of Appalachia in the mass media, the exploitation and destruction of the Appalachian people and place, and the external pressure to rebel against traditional ideologies caused many Appalachians to question their position, power, and purpose within their small Mountain South communities. Published in 1997, Jim Wayne Miller's *The Brier Poems* compiles almost two decade's worth of Appalachian poetry which unapologetically explore the internal struggle of having to choose between staying home or leaving Appalachia.

To analyze the significance of *The Brier Poems*, this thesis relies heavily on the examination of the cultural history of southern Appalachia. For example, historically, the Mountain South has favored tradition and been a place slow to change; however, advancements within the twentieth century rendered southern Appalachia now incapable of staying completely isolated from or unaffected by modernity. Ronald Eller explores the history of America's development of Appalachia in his book *Uneven Ground: Appalachia since 1945*. Eller writes:

> Appalachian residents had always used the land for survival, and their knowledge of and intimacy with the land were based upon their use of it. . . . [However,] their connection with the place was more often linked to family and community ties rather than recognition of the relationship between their way of life and the landscape around them.

> Like other Americans, most Appalachians were quick to turn to more convenient lifestyles when the products of a modern economy expanded their choices. The growth-based economy, however, forever altered the landscape itself and physically separated families from the old intimacy with the land that had provided sustenance and meaning to life. (6-7)

Southern Appalachian communities have always had an intimacy with their mountainous landscape through their agrarian lifestyle, independent mindset, and familial ancestry. However, when the mountains became a commodity during the twentieth century, the Mountain South began to lose touch with their cultural history and traditions. Jim Wayne Miller's *The Brier Poems* discusses this regional evolution by showcasing the Appalachian community's simultaneous connection to and disconnection from the opposing social forces of tradition and progress.

As Appalachian culture has long been tethered to history, the ever-progressing and ever-encroaching environment of the twentieth century—which uprooted many of the historical metanarratives of southern Appalachia—began to present the community with an abundance of challenges. As the foundations of southern Appalachia began to lose meaning, at the forefront of the community's newfound adversities was its collective struggle with the now-shifting notion of "Appalachian identity"—an identity of independence, pride, and connection. So, this thesis will first explore the rapid influx of influence and its effects on Appalachian values and cultural customs by applying a historical lens to Jim Wayne Miller's *The Brier Poems*. Moreover, as a growing number of Appalachians began to wrestle with an internal dilemma still felt by many within the Mountain South today—"Should I stay home or should I leave this place?"—one of

The Brier Poems' most focal themes explores the experience of individuals beginning to question what it truly meant to label oneself as "Appalachian."

As the southern Appalachian community's struggle with its identity could also blame the outside world's habit of attributing a definitive narrative to them for them, this thesis will also explore the traditional metanarrative of the Mountain South and its cultural values, traditions, and history. I will then discuss how this narrative began to shift when a progressive twentieth-century nation, its politics, and the media began to reference the Appalachian region as an example of the absolute worst conditions—where the area was often represented as an unclean environment stricken with poverty, producing uneducated individuals, lacking in progress, and holding oppressive traditional values. While America said Appalachia must urbanize, must allow help from the outside, and must reassess their values and cultural traditions, the entire community began to experience an identity crisis; people began to ask, "What does it mean to be Appalachian?" and "Should I stay in Appalachia?" as feelings of doubt and shame ran rampant within the region unlike ever before.

However, during this struggle, and in response to these questions, a new era of Appalachian literature arose, encompassing works and writers insistent on reclaiming—and, at times, renaming—Appalachian culture and identity. This period of creativity, spanning from the 1960s to the 1990s, is now referred to as the "Appalachian Renaissance." Jim Wayne Miller's *The Brier Poems* justifiably falls within this categorization as Miller attempts to reshape the ideology of the Mountain South from poem to poem. In *Writing Appalachia,* Jessie Graves, et al. write:

> Much of the poetry published within this era shows the physical, psychological, and spiritual displacement that resulted when industrialism finally supplanted [Appalachia's]

> predominantly rural agricultural economy. Jim Wayne Miller's Brier poems are emblematic of this theme. (297)

Moreover, as Miller's *The Brier Poems* closely explores and exemplifies the complex relationship between Appalachian tradition and modern generations, this thesis will place an emphasize on the true value of the collection—the fact that Miller poses the all-important question (and possible solution): "Why must Appalachia choose between one or the other—tradition or progress? Why can't we have both?" Miller insists Appalachians create their own identity and write their own narrative; he declares every Appalachian has the ability to assign their very own meaning to their Appalachian experience and in turn, embody their own version of Appalachia.

For example, throughout *The Brier Poems*, Jim Wayne Miller combines both traditional and modern themes and vocabulary. Miller carefully appreciates the complicated situation of the twentieth-century Appalachian people who have often felt so torn between the two worlds of tradition and progress. Furthermore, while Jim Wayne Miller's *The Brier Poems* is but a small sample of the political writing happening during the Appalachian Renaissance, the themes of identity, agency, and nonconformity Miller layers within this work are representative of the statements being made throughout the era; Miller's *The Brier Poems* is also successful because of his delivery through his character and narrator of the Brier—who is someone his audience can wholeheartedly identify with.

Through Miller's discussion of southern Appalachian tradition within the context of modern Appalachia, *The Brier Poems* embodies the theme of an exploration of "pride, resilience, and positive values in the Appalachian region" while simultaneously expressing the theme of "grappling with identity and a love and hate of people and place" (Graves et al. 297). Yet, what

is arguably the most important aspect of the collection is the way Jim Wayne Miller attempts to renew the community's once-strong grip on its Appalachian identity by suggesting that the solution to this identity crisis is to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity instead of choosing an "either, or." Miller acknowledges Appalachian agency, solidarity, and resiliency through the creation of a new narrative, and our contemporary Appalachian authors embody the values Jim Wayne Miller's *The Brier Poems* highlights—contributing to the value of Appalachia and its literary canon with new voices and reclaimed experiences.

Today, authors from the Mountain South have enthusiastically embodied Jim Wayne Miller's hope for Appalachia by writing their own narratives and declaring their own Appalachian identities while still proudly embracing many of southern Appalachia's traditions. For example, Savannah Sipple's 2019 collection of poetry, *WWJD and Other Poems*, explores the experience of growing up queer in Appalachia. By discussing community and oppression, declaring a love of and hatred for Appalachia, and writing "I love the mountains, I hate the mountains" over and over ("What We Tell Ourselves" lines 63-69), Sipple reckons with the past and blazes a path for the future. In the same vein, bell hooks' 2012 collection of poetry titled *Appalachian Elegy: Poetry and Place* contrasts and combines the discussion of mountain politics and racism with the imagery of the beauty of the Appalachian community, reclaiming and retelling the Appalachian narrative for African Americans. Sipple and hooks collectively represent identities that have so often been left out of the stereotypical Appalachian narrative—widening the lens of the Appalachian experience with their writing. This thesis intends to explore the relationships between Jim Wayne Miller, Savannah Sipple, and bells hooks' writings, exemplifying how—just as Jim Wayne Miller would have wanted—Appalachian writers belonging to every intersection of Appalachian identity are encouraged and excited to shout their

stories from mountaintops—reclaiming an Appalachia of "both, and" whose roots are deep and limbs are wide.

CHAPTER 2. JIM WAYNE MILLER'S *THE BRIER POEMS*

The region known as the Mountain South of the Appalachian community has been a place historically slow to change. For centuries, southern Appalachia has been isolated due to the adverse geography of the Appalachian Mountains, and because of this regional isolation, Appalachia has had an opportunity to cultivate a strong sense of independence, connection to ancestral history, and appreciation for traditional values. For example, in Loyal Jones *Appalachian Values*, Jones writes:

> We mountain people are the product of our history and the beliefs and outlook of our foreparents. We are traditional people, and in our rural setting we valued things of the past. More than most people, we avoided mainstream life and thus became self-reliant. We sought freedom from entanglements and cherished solitude. All of this was both our strength and our undoing. (13)

Many of Appalachia's earliest settlers sailed from places such as England, Germany, and Scotland, and these groups were often fleeing from overbearing governing bodies, searching for opportunities and freedoms outside of their church and state. The isolation found within the southern Appalachian Mountains made the territory an ideal surrounding for people "seeking freedom from entanglements." For centuries, those within the Mountain South wanted to avoid the outside world, "cherished their solitude," and valued their independence above all things; therefore, this self-isolation created a strong culture of self-reliance, perseverance, and resiliency within southern Appalachia and its people.

It is also important to note that while many of Appalachia's first mountaineers were white immigrants, Native Americans were here thousands of years before European descendants. The African American population was also initially present in Appalachia through slavery. Moreover, similarly to white Appalachians, both the Native American and African American populations

had strong ties to their ancestral history, were overwhelmingly appreciative of the natural landscapes, and foundationally valued freedom and independence as well. Both cultures played an extremely influential role in the development of Appalachian culture—contributing to the region's distinctive music, oral history, and folk art. Therefore, while the stereotype of the predominantly white narrative of Appalachia may be there for a reason—as both removal and oppression play a significant role in the history of the Mountain South—the Appalachian story has always truly been an extremely diverse story encompassing many histories and identities.

With that being said, as Loyal Jones states above, the isolation provided by the mountains was "both their strength and their undoing." As twentieth-century America soon became incessantly obsessed with modern progress, the isolated Appalachian Mountains soon fell behind the rest of the nation—lacking the infrastructure, resources, and funding to industrialize on their own. Soon, the external world of American modernity invaded the southern Appalachian region, and an entirely new set of economic, political, and societal issues developed within the country. A destructive industrialism, an exploitive consumer capitalism, and a divisive urban ideology quickly left many Appalachians feeling lost—many left, migrating north, and others fell victim to division and exploitation. Ronald Eller explores the impact the industrialism ultimately had on Appalachia when he writes:

> At the turn of the century, mountain families had traded the simple but relatively independent life of the family farm for the dependence on a wage income of mines, mill villages, and other forms of public work. When those jobs disappeared, that dependence shifted to the state and federal governments as public welfare programs stepped in to prevent starvation and destitution. Federal relief programs of one kind or another supported almost half of the mountain population during the 1930s, but the deepening

> financial crisis of the 1950s further expanded welfare rolls and altered the fundamental character of dependence. (32)

Consequently, modernity made the Mountain South cripplingly dependent by exploiting their means of sustenance for commodity and financially bankrupting this backcountry. A nation who had remained isolated and independent for decades—reliant on only themselves and providing for only their families—had been stripped of its foundational way of life. As family farms were bought or taken for land and production, Appalachians went to work in factories, mines, and mills. Yet, these jobs quickly came and went as the land and resources began to be depleted, the Great Depression threatened industry, and many Appalachians fled north searching for job opportunities. Moreover, the effects from these public welfare programs who "stepped in to prevent starvation and destitution" are still felt by southern Appalachians today. For example, in 2017, the American Community Survey reported the poverty rate in southern Appalachia to be at 33.7%—meaning on average one out of every three residents living within southern Appalachia live in poverty today (*Welfare Info*).

Yet, while Jim Wayne Miller's *The Brier Poems* thoroughly explores modernity's devastation on Appalachia, Miller also adamantly argues despite the ever-growing threat of a loss of Appalachian culture, values, and traditions, the exploitation of Appalachian people and place, and the pervasive state of poverty modernity has inflicted on southern Appalachia, the Mountain South remains resilient. In *The Brier Poems*, many who left the mountains never truly stopped loving the mountains, and within Miller's work, there is a rebirth and reclamation of Appalachian culture unlike ever before. As the Appalachians in *The Brier Poems* slowly learn they are the ones in control of their own narrative, they declare their community doesn't have to choose between tradition and modernity by creating an experience which honors their past and

fights for their future. As a result of this self-actualization, Miller highlights the possibility of a brand-new southern Appalachia—as independent as ever, yet culturally progressive unlike before. Jim Wayne Miller so plainly states in his poem "Brier Sermon," "It's like going back to what you were before / without losing what you've since become" (lines 409-10).

The Brier Poems focuses on Miller's most famous character, who would become regionally well known as "the Brier." As the Brier is representative of the shifting notion of Appalachian identity, his character is also heavily influenced by Jim Wayne Miller's experiences in the Mountain South. Miller was born in North Carolina in 1936, and he has seen firsthand the debilitating affects modernity inflicted on the Mountain South. Therefore, much of *The Brier Poems* reflects Miller's personal experiences in twentieth-century southern Appalachia. However, it is also important to differentiate between Jim Wayne Miller and our narrator, and Miller helps us do that with his creation of his character the Brier.

Moreover, the collection divides the Brier's journey into three sections. The first section, *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, was initially published in 1980. It was in this original publication where Miller first introduced the Brier as a character and narrator. The second section, *Brier, His Book,* was originally published in 1988, and it is in this section where the Brier is most overtly present. And finally, the third section, titled "The Brier's Last Journey Home," is compiled of conclusionary poems from his 1993 chapbook *Brier Traveling*.

Furthermore, *The Mountains Have Come Closer* is the collection where Miller truly begins to focus on the tensions felt between Appalachian tradition and modern progress and that tension's consequent creation of a deep unrest within the people of the region; for Miller, the Brier is the ultimate emblem of this struggle. In *Writing Appalachia: An Anthology*, Ledford and Lloyd write:

> The Brier—who is simultaneously a spokesperson for Miller; a representative Appalachian person living in the post-World War II era; and anyone dislocated by rapid cultural change—is aware that he and other southern mountain people live in two worlds: no longer isolated subsistence farmers, they have modern lives like other Americans, yet they are rooted in older traditions as well. (326)

Therefore, the Brier represents an entire generation of historic individuals within the Appalachian community—people who have been disconnected from their historical roots, discriminated against by the outside world, and both physically and metaphorically dislocated from their homeland. The Brier speaks to the individuals within the Appalachian community who are experiencing an inherent love of the mountains and an overwhelming urge to leave the mountains. More importantly, the Brier has now become synonymous with southern Appalachians who long to possess Appalachian pride and strong foundational values without compromising the societal and cultural progression the community has made since modernity.

Jim Wayne Miller also contextualizes the Brier when he introduces *The Brier Poems* with a "Note on Brier." Miller writes:

> North of the Ohio River, migrants
> from the southern Appalachians
> are known as Briers. Any of several
> prickly plants, the Brier is in another
> sense the quintessential Appalachian. (lines 1-5)

Anyone familiar with southern Appalachia is also familiar with "brier thickets"—small plants covered in incredibly dense, "prickly" clusters; the harder you struggle to escape a brier thicket, the more difficulty you will have. It is not a far leap to assume the nickname "Brier" is a

derogatory one, insinuating a "backwoods," bothersome individual. Therefore, as both a regional allusion and a synonym to wild difficultly, the nickname "Brier" could easily be read as a testimony to the tensions felt between Appalachia and modernity—ultimately declaring the Brier as "quintessential Appalachian."

Moreover, throughout *The Brier Poems*, there are four major themes which are overwhelmingly present:

The Traditional Narrative of an Isolated Appalachia

The Introduction of Modernity and its Influence

The Lost Community's Disrupted Connection to Appalachia

The Reclamation of Appalachia as Home

In this thesis, each poem in *The Brier Poems* will be analyzed by one of these categorizations, and these four categories intertwine throughout the collection to depict a complicatedly accurate depiction of the Mountain South as a region which is ever-progressing, diverse, and independently its own. Jim Wayne Miller's Appalachian experience is carefully crafted to reveal the community's cultural significance and denounce misconceptions and stereotypes—revealing its truth, embracing its flaws, and reclaiming its narrative.

The Traditional Narrative of an Isolated Appalachia

For centuries, the harsh terrain of the Appalachian Mountains has undeniably kept southern Appalachia almost entirely isolated from the outside world. Few people immigrated, fewer people left, and modern infrastructure and technological advancements were practically an afterthought for the adverse region. As a place historically slow to change, the community's connection to their ancestral traditions and slow-paced, natural way of life was—for a long

time—the only distinct experience the region was aware of. Miller's *The Brier Poems* is overflowing with imagery, analogy, and testimony to the rural peace of the Mountain South as the Brier declares every cove and holler not only a sanctuary, but also an emblem of Appalachia's beauty, dignity, and value.

For example, during "Chopping Wood" Miller writes:

Merciful, hard labor numbs the nerves as it
advances, snuffs out every light
in a steady rain of darkness. Pain goes to sleep
as night falls over any small farm of flesh.
And the resurrection and miracle of rest
after labor: arms awakening, a hundred
tingling lights lit along creeks and ridges;
a rooster crowing in flesh becoming light
with birdsong from the meshed branches of nerves
casting shadows like trees along the river. (lines 12-21)

Here, the poem emphasizes the spiritual relationship between Appalachians and the mountains. The overarching religious connotation within the work depicts the act of "Chopping Wood" as almost ritualistic, or holy. As "hard labor numbs the nerves" and "pain goes to sleep," Miller includes words such as "resurrection" and "miracle." He also constantly refers to the imagery of "the flesh" where his specific use of the word "flesh" alludes to a Christ-like figure—as in the Christian belief, Jesus had to become "the flesh" so he could shed his blood for humanity's sins. Therefore, not only does Miller emphasize the united relationship between Appalachian people and place, but he also sheds a light on the sheer spirituality of the Appalachian people.

In *Appalachian Values*, Loyal Jones writes:

> Mountain people are religious. This does not mean that we always go to church regularly, but we are religious in the sense that most of our values and the meaning we find in life spring from the Bible. To understand mountaineers, one must understand our religion. . . . What such outside observers fail to see is that our religion has helped to sustain us and has made life meaningful in grim situations. Religion has shaped our lives, but at the same time we have shaped our religion, since religion and culture are always intertwined. (39-46)

Mountain life is hard life, and religion has oftentimes helped southern Appalachians survive, cope, and thrive. Christianity provided guidance, purpose, and meaning for many, and in traditional Appalachian communities, where people saw beauty was where they also saw God. So, when Appalachia felt a spiritual connection to the land, it meant that relationship was unlike anything else—going beyond a physical need and completely intertwined into their person and culture.

Furthermore, in "Chopping Wood," as Miller depicts the connection between Appalachian people and place as religious, he also introduces the theme of Appalachian independence. Miller adds another layer to southern Appalachia's connection to the mountains by exploring the community's relationship to "hard, manual labor." In "Chopping Wood," or by the act of chopping wood, hard outdoor labor creates a "merciful calm, peace, and rest," and this imagery emulates another foundationally traditional Appalachian value—self-reliance.

In Loyal Jones's 1994 compilation of essays, *Appalachian Values*, he writes:

> Independence, self-reliance, and pride were perhaps the most obvious characteristics of mountain people. . . .But our belief in independence and self-reliance is still strong

whether or not we are truly independent. We still value solitude, whether or not we can always find a place to be alone. We also value self-reliance, to do things for ourselves, whether or not it is practical to do so. (52-63)

Frontiersmen journeyed to southern Appalachia to escape impending oppression—putting down roots in the mountains because they were seeking a place of ultimate solitude and freedom. Hunting, fishing, and farming quickly became the livelihood of mountaineers; therefore, southern Appalachians' relationship to the mountains was one of respect and gratitude. And centuries later, even as modernity began to creep in, the Mountain South still possessed those firm values of "independence, self-reliance, and pride."

However, Jones states here, "We value self-reliance, to do things for ourselves, whether or not it is practical to do so," and this quote refers to the way Appalachians are often categorized as "stubborn" or "arrogant"—or maybe "prickly" and "bothersome" if you are a Brier. Melissa Range explores this theme in her poem "Ofermod" when she writes:

Old English has a word for our kind
of people: *ofermod*, literally
"overmind," "overheart,"
or "overspirit," often translated
"overproud."
. . . and aren't we like that, high strung
and *ofermod* as our daddy and grandaddies
and everybody else
in our stiff-necked mountain town,
always with something stupid to prove

…

insisting, “Mind must be the harder,

heart the keener, spirit the greater,

as our strength lessens.” (3-59)

When Loyal Jones wrote “All of this was our strength and our undoing” (13), he was talking about our Appalachian pride just as much as he was talking about our isolation. In “Ofermod,” Melissa Range reinforces this claim as she discusses the aspect commonly attributed to Appalachians as being “overproud.” If there is such a thing as being too independent, Appalachians are often that. As the region’s “strength lessens,” Appalachians often dug their teeth in deeper with “something stupid to prove.” As modernity began to encroach on the Mountain South, many were too proud to see the exploitation happening to them and their region—even more were too proud to ask for help.

Miller’s “Chopping Wood” uses the mundane act of chopping wood to depict the layers upon layers of the Mountain South’s relationship to the land, and he explores the complex importance of the community’s deep connection to their Appalachian roots through an overtly commonplace event—adding another nuance to simple yet remarkable experience of southern Appalachia. The traditional narrative of southern Appalachia is one of pride, self-reliance, and religious agrarianism. However, as a twentieth-century America began to witness the effects of the World Wars and the Great Depression, the nation became increasingly obsessed with the notion of progress, and the Appalachian narrative would soon be reshaped forever. For America, a progressive society increases the quality of its citizens’ livelihood, and a progressive society can easily be measured by aspects such as urbanization, education, production, and consumption. Unfortunately, as the Appalachian region lacked the accessibility to this notion of progress, the

area was deemed underdeveloped—and ultimately backward. Due to this ideology, America soon invaded the Mountain South, declaring the region needed to be saved from itself. Thus, an Appalachian environment divided by tradition and modernity—the environment the Brier was born into—was then created.

Ronald's Eller's historical study of Appalachia, *Uneven Ground,* delves into modernity's early impact on the mountain region. For example, Eller writes, "For policy makers in the 1950s and 1960s, convinced of the appropriateness of the American path to development, those backwater places [such as Appalachia] needed to be energized and brought into the supposed mainstream" (1). As the twentieth-century American society rapidly developed this mindset of urbanization being synonymous for progress, the Appalachian region was quickly perceived as being in a detrimental state. This harmful ideology of progress—one that insists the Appalachian community needs a "developed, improved quality of life" and therefore must be saved from themselves—translates into one of the major themes within Jim Wayne Miller's *The Brier Poems*.

The Introduction of Modernity and its Influence

The ever-progressing environment of the twentieth century began to present southern Appalachia with an abundance of distinctly regional challenges as it disrupted the region's connection to its historical and ancestral traditions. Due to the twentieth-century's rapid expansion of industrialism, America's drastic transition from an agrarian society to an urban one inevitably became a more unregulated process than should have ever been allowed. The Appalachian region and Appalachian lives were soon divided and exploited for the sake of production and progress. Moreover, during this time, national politics and the media also began

to reference the Appalachian region as an example of the absolute worst conditions—represented as an environment stricken with poverty, producing uneducated individuals, lacking in progress, and holding "oppressive" traditional values. For example, Ronald Eller writes:

> Americans have enduring faith in the power of development to improve the quality of our lives. At least since the late nineteenth century, we have associated progress toward the attainment of a better society with measures of industrial production, urbanization, consumption, technology, and the adoption of modern education and cultural values. Early in the twentieth century, . . . areas such as Appalachia were deemed to be backward and underdeveloped because they lacked the statistical measures of progress, both material and cultural, that had become the benchmarks of success in a modern world. For policy makers of the 1950s and 1960s, convinced of the appropriateness of the American path to development, those backwater places needed to be energized and brought into the supposed mainstream. (1)

Eller describes the way that a now-urbanized, twentieth-century American society rapidly developed a mindset of faster equals more efficient, and more efficient equals better. Therefore, as the Appalachian region lacked the means for "efficient production"—due to a lesser access to resources such as electricity, capital, technology, and mass transportation—the area quickly fell behind in every other aspect as well, from technological to cultural.

Jim Wayne Miller writes about modernity's earliest impression on the Appalachian community in his poem "How America Came to the Mountains." Miller writes:

> The way the Brier remembers it, folks weren't sure
> at first what was coming. The air felt strange,
> and smelled of blasting powder, carbide, diesel fumes.

A hen crowed and a witty prophesied

eight lanes of fogged-in asphalt filled with headlights.

Most people hadn't gone to bed that evening,

believing an awful storm was coming to the mountains.

And come it did. (lines 1-8)

Here, Miller mixed rural imagery and language of Appalachia—such as hens crowing, the use of the word "folk," and the reference to a "witty"—with the stark imagery of urban America, such as "blasting powder, carbide, diesel fumes" and "asphalt." These contrasting depictions emphasize the early tension and unfamiliarity between tradition and modernity felt by the Appalachian community. Moreover, Miller compares industrialism to a brooding storm, reemphasizing the community's close relationship to their environment. Throughout the poem, Miller also describes the destruction of the Appalachian isolation and sanctity by depicting the ground shaking, hearing factory whistles, houses being destroyed, and trash being discarded everywhere.

Miller then concludes the poem by writing:

That's how the Brier remembers America coming

to the mountains.

…

They left the mountains fast

And lived in Is, Illinois, for a while

but found it dull country and moved back.

The Brier has lived in As If, Kentucky, ever since. (lines 45-56)

This final stanza is emblematic of what twentieth-century America did to many Appalachian families. Outsiders came in to "industrialize" the region, and many Appalachians left. They migrated to cities like "Is, Illinois"—progressive towns America approved of; however, they eventually realized, or maybe they always knew, "As If, Kentucky"—their holler America was trying to improve—will always be home.

Miller also focuses on modernity's physical impacts on the Appalachian landscape in his work "The Brier's Pictorial History of the Mountains" when he writes:

> Cut up and bleeding, the land lies breathing hard,
> in places torn and gouged beyond all healing,
> in others beautiful and blessed as ever.
> Already scouts from east and west, in search
> of water, have looked over the rim of the hills.
> Like long hunters, they have stayed and seen,
> and sent word back to cities, turning the eyes
> of millions out in the world toward the mountains. (lines 49-56)

Here, Jim Wayne Miller describes the horrific exploitation of the southern Appalachian Mountains—more specifically, Miller is alluding to the destructive outcomes coal mining has on the Appalachian environment. He depicts an image of a mountain destroyed by "hunters" greed who will do it a "million" time over again if there is still a profit to be had. He also refers to the flesh imagery once more when he writes "cut up and bleeding"—personifying the landscape and emphasizing again the relationship between southern Appalachia and their landscape.

It soon becomes clear the common theme within the project of "the progression of Appalachia" is exploitation. Twentieth-century America claims to be saving the Appalachian

community from poverty and education; however, while this early version of progress may have introduced electricity and telephones, the majority of the benefits seem to be making the lives of many Appalachians harder and making capitalist America wealthier. In *Uneven Ground*, Eller writes:

> The thick seams of coal, copper, mica, and other minerals has been sucked from the hills and shipped to the furnaces and factories of the urban Northeast…Thousands of families left their farms and migrated to the new industrial camps or to textile towns in the foothills of the region. The wealth generated by growth and by what mountain people called "public work" largely flowed out of the region, leaving much of the land devastated and many of its inhabitants dependent and poor. (9-10)

Day by day, modernity was stripping the Appalachian community of its independence and, consequently, its identity. The Appalachian people have always had a close relationship to both the land and its people, but now the land was being destroyed and people were moving away from their homes. The region was being told these sacrifices were for the progression of their community, but the majority of the wealth was never seen by the Mountain South.

On a more individual scale, Miller further explores the theme of exploitation in his poems "Small Farms Disappearing in Tennessee" and "The Brier Losing Touch with His Traditions." In "Small Farms Disappearing in Tennessee," Miller depicts family farms that have been taken over by factories, bankrupted by businesses, used for research, and sold to land developers. Miller implies small family farms are going extinct and can no longer survive in this modern climate. Furthermore, in "The Brier Losing Touch with His Traditions" tells the story of "an authentic mountain craftsman" (line 3) who tries to keep up with modernity by moving his growing business to Cincinnati with the people and using electric tools to keep up with the pace of his

orders; however, when the public finds out he "has lost touch with his traditions" (line 15), he loses most of his business. Here, Miller brings attention to the facet of modernity being gatekept—where the external world is dictating which aspects of southern Appalachia are acceptable for progress. However, this exploitation did not stop with land and labor—modernity soon began to exploit Appalachian culture and tradition as well.

For example, as Appalachia is a place heavily tied to its ancestral history, Appalachian ballads and hill songs are traditional that have been handed down for generations. Jim Wayne Miller touches on this theme in his work "He Sings Ballads." Miller writes:

> He guessed he knew a hundred of the old songs
> his people sang when they came from across the waters:
> *The Knight in the Road, The Turkish Lady,* and such like.
> He couldn't recall a time when he didn't know them.
> His grandfather sang them, and his father, too.
> …
> But when he'd leave the homeplace down in Madison,
> . . . his neck turned red.
> When he drank in the bars down on Lexington Avenue
> and sang the country songs right off the jukebox,
> the big mirror running behind the bar
> saw nothing but white trash,
> And five hundred third-rate novels claimed him. (lines 1-17)

In Appalachia, these "old songs" are praised as valuable and even scholarly; yet, elsewhere, the songs are seen as the anthem of a "white trash redneck" because "five hundred third-rate novels

have claimed Appalachia." The mass media and popular culture has now created their own narrative of the poor, uneducated Brier from backwater southern Appalachia, and this stereotype has begun to inflict a pervasive shame on the Appalachian people and an embarrassment of the culture they once had so much pride in. In her essay, "Industrialization and the Attribution of Mountain Characteristics: A Fiction Study," Charlotte Ross explores the exploitation of mountain culture when she writes:

> Thus, the mountaineer had become a stock figure on a set stage; his world seemed timeless, changeless. He had come to the forefront of public attention because he and his homeland were anachronous, and there were very few who foresaw they might not always remain so. (*Appalachia Inside Out* 204)

America was so quick to exploit the experiences, histories, and ancestries of the mountaineers; yet no one seemed to consider the how these portrayals would influence southern Appalachia. Ross says, "very few foresaw they might not always remain anachronous," as no one bothered to acknowledge the sheer destruction and devastation occurring "for the sake of progress."

Miller goes on to heavily reiterate this theme in his poem "Brier Sermon" when he writes:

> But I know a man
> he had a song from his foreparents.
> It got carried off to New York City
> and when he heard it played on the tv one night
> by three fellers who clowned and hip-swinged
> he said he began to feel sick,
> like he'd lost a loved one.

Tears came in his eyes

and he went out on the ridge and bawled

and said, “Lord, couldn’t they leave me the good memories?”

Now that man wasn’t lost

but he knew what he had lost. (lines 91-102)

Here, Miller describes the all-too-common occurrence of the media’s appropriation of Appalachian culture. The aforementioned “they” has taken a traditional Appalachian song that has been passed down orally from family member to family member for generations and turned it into a skit for their own profit and pleasure. To make things worse, they have accompanied this song with performers who are perpetuating an exaggerated stereotype of the simple-minded Appalachian—“clowning and hip-swinging.” The media never once stopped to ask about the cultural significance or historical and personal sentimentality attached to the song—“they” did not care; therefore, they have forced great agony onto the man begging God to leave him at least one good memory, untarnished by modernity’s greed.

It is important to remember that while the story the Brier tells here is the story of a single character within “Brier Sermon,” this character also represents generations of Appalachian people that have experienced painful prejudices because of uninformed individuals buying into the narrative of stereotypes about the region and its people; these stereotypes reinforce prejudices, inflict pain, and only push the Appalachian people further away from their roots.

A Lost Community’s Disrupted Connection to Appalachia

As stated earlier, American modernity disrupted the Appalachian community’s deep ancestral connection to the land it has depended on and confided in for generations. As more and

more individuals were being fooled by the narrative of fast-paced urban living and all it had to offer, the culture began to lose its meaning—foundational values were being disregarded, individuals stopped appreciating tradition, and many southern Appalachians forgot their way of life. Modernity's allure caused many Appalachians to leave, migrating north, and many others were blind to—or too proud to see—the exploitation overwhelming the communities they have lived in their whole lives. This disrupted connection became a major theme in Jim Wayne Miller's *The Brier Poems.*

For example, in multiple poems, Miller describes the Brier's experience outside of Appalachia, exploring the ever-present tension between modernity and tradition. In one of the collection's early poems, "Brier Riddle," Miller writes:

> For a long time he lived
> like a frog in my pocket.
> In a black forest
> a lost girl came and kissed
> him into a handsome prince.
> Since then he has been
> living off a generous patrimony,
> a one-eyed king
> in a country of blind fingers. (lines 1-9)

This poem is symbolic for the Brier living in the foreign world outside of Appalachia. Modernity's promise is to turn a backwoods Brier into a "handsome prince;" however, the price the Brier has paid is to live off "generous patrimony"—where he is utterly dependent, and nothing is truly his. Leaving southern Appalachia, or staying and buying into the promise of

modernity, is equivalent to being a frog-turned-prince—someone who knows they do not really belong, and do not truly own their narrative.

Ronald Eller explores this displacement in *Uneven Ground* when he writes:

> Often people from one community or hollow migrated to the same town in the North. … Northern employees utilized the kinship networks to recruit additional workers, establishing a steady pipeline of labor between particular mountain communities and specific northern cities. (21)

Therefore, the Appalachians being drawn to the North for job opportunities were often being lured out by northern factory owners. Moreover, the same "public work" system established in the coal fields in the south was in place in these northern factories as well, and Appalachia is still being exploited by the same greed. Under American modernity, the Appalachian narrative never changed—only the scenery did.

Miller dives a bit further into the consequent reality of leaving Appalachia in his poems "Turn Your Radio On" and "Going to Sleep by a Trout Stream," where these two poems' themes and imagery can easily be compared side by side. Miller writes:

TURN YOUR RADIO ON

> He couldn't hear his own thoughts in the city that never slept.
> . . . The city's rush and roar
> even poured through his dreams, boiling up like a waterfall.
> Asleep or awake, he tried to keep a sense of direction south.
> Lying awake in the smoky carbon darkness of northern nights,
> facing east, he kept knowledge, like a book under his pillow,
> that the mountains lay to his right, beyond the mills and

warehouses. (lines 1-9)

GOING TO SLEEP BY A TROUT STREAM

From where he lay the steady crash of water

down over rocks

a hundred yards upstream

…

Then, letting go, he drifted

backwards in the flow

and came to rest

where the light of the stars grew down

like bone-white roots

under a bank of wet leaves, rotten wood,

darkness. (lines 1-21)

These two poems compare what it is like for the Brier to fall asleep in a northern city or in rural Appalachia. In "Turn Your Radio On," the poem is filled with restlessness and anxiety as Miller writes about the "rush and roar" of the "city that never slept" which is "invading his dreams" and preventing the Brier from "hearing his own thoughts." Miller writes the Brier is conscious of "keeping a sense of direction south" as a coping mechanism or sense of comfort. Here, Miller implies the Brier knows the mountains are his home.

Moreover, "Turn Your Radio On" is starkly contrasted by the poem "Going to Sleep by a Trout Stream." Here, the imagery is calm and cool. The Brier feels safe in his sanctuary of Appalachia as he "flows backwards and comes to rest." With these two poems, Miller begins to play with the idea of *lost* Appalachians subconsciously knowing their home will always be

Appalachia. Throughout the majority of *The Brier Poems*, Miller hints at this experience. Miller is careful to depict the Brier as an Appalachian who has been caught between tradition and modernity, who has left Appalachia, who may have lost his way for a while, but who has always *known* Appalachia, and eventually returns with a "Born Again" appreciation of a uniquely distinct Appalachian reality than before.

Furthermore, after those who chose to leave the Mountain South, there is another prominent group present in *The Brier Poems*—those who have stayed but have fallen victim to division and exploitation. The most overbearing representation of this theme is in the poem "The Brier Plans a Mountain Vision Center" when Miller writes:

> When an optometrist announced the opening of a practice
> in the county seat, the Brier considered opening
> his own Mountain Vision Center.
> He knew there was a need.
> Love is blind.
> …
> If they became visible to themselves, the things they saw
> and said every day, without surprise, would astonish them.
> . . . Then everyone could see it and could say it.
> They'd see the hand that was supposed to guide every-
> one's self-interest, invisibly, was tipping over mountains,
> scooping up land, and reaching into their
> pockets.
> …

They'd see the future had entered them a long time ago,

and all this time had been transforming them. (lines 1-81)

Here, Miller is implying that southern Appalachia has been blinded by pride and their love of the mountains to see what is truly happening to their community. They have been oblivious to the true exploitation—the "tipping over of mountains, / scooping up of land, and reaching into their / pockets"—because they bought into the narrative of modernity. Miller writes if they could step outside of their perspective and become "visible to themselves," then they would be shocked by the hypocrisy surrounding them every single say. The sad truth of modernity's effect on Appalachia is even those who did not migrate have still, in many ways, "settled north of themselves" ("Down Home" line 19) by allowing external influence to push them toward losing touch with their true values, traditions, and way of life.

One of Jim Wayne Miller's most powerful poems in *The Brier Poems* is "The Country of Conscience"—a work which proposes the solution to this Appalachian identity crisis is to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity and write your own narrative. Miller writes:

There are two of every country.

There are two histories.

…

What's really there, rooted deep, keeps coming back.

…

A land and people finds its voice, discovers a tongue to say itself.

…

There are two of every country.

There are two histories.

There are two of every man.

The man born into the state is only half himself.

…

The other half is his expression. (lines 14-157)

Miller is implying to the external America which has imposed its narrative on southern Appalachia and exploited the region for all it could as one history—"the state." However, Miller writes, "What's really there, rooted deep, will keep coming back," just as the Brier always knew his home was Appalachia. Most importantly, someone who never decides to write their own narrative, to use their "expression," will never be able to live their honest truth. Miller is overtly encouraging his fellow Appalachians to define their own Appalachia—to appreciate its past, acknowledge its flaws, and embrace its future.

The Reclamation of Appalachia as Home

As the journey of the Brier is emblematic of generations of Appalachians, The Brier is someone who has lost their way for a little while, longing for something greater than what they thought Appalachia could offer. The Brier is someone who may have become completely disconnected with their foundational values by chasing after a temporary commodity or false promise, but most importantly, the Brier is someone who understands the fact that they write their own narrative and can appreciate their past while looking forward to their future. While Jim Wayne Miller may take his audience on an uncertain journey into the North, the overarching theme of knowing Appalachia and Appalachian pride is emblematic throughout the entirety of *The Brier Poems*.

For example, in "Brier Sermon" Jim Wayne Miller writes:

But you do not have to live in the past.

You can't, even if you try.

You don't have to talk old-fashioned,

dress old-fashioned.

You don't have to live the way your foreparents lived.

But if you don't know about them

if you don't love them

if you don't respect them

you're not going anywhere.

You don't have to thing ridge-to-ridge,

the way they did.

You can think ocean-to-ocean. (lines 111-122)

Here, The Brier is overtly aware that the world has gotten so much bigger since the old, pre-industrialized ways of the southern Appalachia. Our narrative is no long one of isolation and overly-proud-self-reliance. He knows one cannot possibly say isolated any longer when he says, "you can't, even if you try." The only way for a strong Appalachian identity to be recovered and the Appalachian soul to be healed is through "knowing about," "loving," and "respecting" Appalachian tradition. We must acknowledge our past mistakes, own our failures, and rebuild our futures. Once modern generations have done that, they can then carry their Appalachian identity and influence proudly anywhere they want—"ocean-to-ocean"— so much farther than their ancestors could ever dream.

While at first glance it may seem as though Miller is completely against modernity's impact on the southern Appalachian Mountain region, when one digs a little deeper, it is evident

that the end of *The Brier Poems* indicates Jim Wayne Miller believes Appalachia does not have to be, and realistically should never be, a community that strictly relies on methodologies of either isolated tradition or unencumbered modernity. In fact, Miller insists the solution to solidifying a strong new Appalachian identity is combining the two narratives. Brilliantly, Miller has filled his *The Brier Poems* with the harmful language of binaries all throughout the work—tradition versus modernity, urban versus rural, past versus present—to emphasize the damages that they present.

Jim Wayne Miller presents a broad, relative Appalachian experience—one that everyone from the Mountain South can relate to. Miller tells us it is okay to have mixed feelings about your hometown, but it's also up to you to do something about it. Today's Appalachian writers are doing something about it. Writers like Savannah Sipple and bell hooks are reclaiming their Appalachian narratives by honestly and unapologetically exploring their complicated relationships to their heritage, their past, and their community. Every contemporary Appalachian author is in conversation with Jim Wayne Miller's *The Brier Poems*, whether they mean to be or not.

CHAPTER 3. CONTEMPORARIES IN CONVERSATION WITH MILLER

Both as an author and an Appalachian, Jim Wayne Miller truly embraced southern Appalachia's complicated experiences as an exemplary narrative of resilience and reclamation. Miller's work did not only recognize the value in a diverse Appalachia, but it also openly advocated for unconventional Appalachian narratives and the reclamation of the Mountain South as an ever-growing, ever-changing entity. Today, Appalachian literature has never been more diverse as the expanding canon embodies the experiences of the community and encompasses voices from every stratum of identification. Our contemporary Appalachian writers today are not confined to any specific religion, sexuality, race, or gender; the only defining characteristic for twenty-first century Appalachian authors is the region in which they identify with—Appalachia. In other words, in her essay "On Reflection and Lamentation," bell hooks writes:

> Living by [Appalachian] values, living with integrity, I am able to return to my native place, to an Appalachia that is no longer silent about its diversity or about the broad sweep of its influence. While I do not claim an identity as Appalachian, I do claim a solidarity, a sense of belonging, that makes me one with the Appalachian past of my ancestors: black, Native American, white, all "people of one blood" who made homeplace an isolated landscape where they could invent themselves, where they could savor a taste of freedom. (*Appalachian Elegy* 4)

As hooks states, the unity felt between Appalachians as a "people of one blood" has been created by their common values of integrity, resilience, and independence—resulting in the common denominator of the community's identity to be Appalachian solidarity.

The Brier Poems makes it clear that Jim Wayne Miller's hope for southern Appalachia was for the community to feel they possessed the freedom and capability to creating their own

narrative while simultaneously acknowledging and appreciating their community's historical roots. In "Brier Sermon," Miller wrote:

> Lord, help us to see ourselves—and no more.
>
> Or maybe: Help us to see ourselves,
>
> help us to be ourselves,
>
> help us to free ourselves,
>
> from seeing ourselves
>
> as other see ourselves. (lines 327-332)

Miller envisioned an Appalachia proud of its heritage and unapologetically free from any metanarrative imposed on the region by an outside world; today, Appalachian writers embrace this future as their present. Kentucky natives Savannah Sipple and (the aforementioned) bell hooks are two prominent examples of contemporary Appalachian writers who are bold, unwavering individuals breaking free from any box the world has ever tried to force them into.

Savannah Sipple grew up queer in Appalachia, and in her 2019 collection of poetry titled *WWJD and Other Poems*, Sipple prominently explores a very personal experience in and relationship with Appalachia. The work reckons with her past—of having come of age in both a place and body our narrator has forever begged to escape—Sipple honestly and vulnerably discusses shame, self-hatred, violence, love, and forgiveness. *WWJD and Other Poems* is ultimately a triumphant story of self-actualization and self-acceptance, and as the work concludes, the text emerges comfortable in queer desire, unapologetically unconventional, and proud to be an independent version of Appalachian. *WWJD and Other Poems* is a true testament to not only human resilience, but also Appalachian reclamation.

Furthermore, bell hooks' 2012 collection of poetry titled *Appalachian Elegy: Poetry and Place* mixes the discussion of mountain politics and historical oppression with the beauty of the Appalachian Mountains and the unity of the region's community; hooks boldly embarks on a journey to reclaim and retell the Appalachian narrative for African Americans. Throughout the work, hooks intertwines the historical experience of Appalachia with the historical experience of Black Appalachians as she discusses exploitation, destruction, and relocation. Yet *Appalachian Elegy*'s prominent themes of resilience, perseverance, and independence become the work's true testimony to the Appalachian narrative.

Jim Wayne Miller had an intense talent for embracing modernity's changes and recognizing the value in a diverse Appalachia. While *The Brier Poems* expresses a concern for the community's growing loss of their sense of self, our narrator—the Brier—possesses an unwavering notion of Appalachian identity and remains hopeful the region will once again reclaim its Appalachian pride, even though that pride may look different than it did before. Decades later, the Appalachian cannon is now full of diverse, independent authors—such as Savannah Sipple and bell hooks—who unapologetically embrace their Appalachian narratives as different, yet resilient and full of integrity.

Savannah Sipple's WWJD and Other Poems

Growing up queer in Appalachia and having lived in eastern Kentucky her entire life, Savannah Sipple has often expressed a devout love for her hometown while simultaneously rejecting the self-hatred her community instilled in her from an early age. For example, in a 2019 interview with Frontier Poetry, Sipple states:

> I needed distance from Appalachia. I feel like we never talk enough about the ways communities can eat their own. I have a deep and abiding love for the region, but I also can't ignore its struggles and the ways the culture there has caused damage. This isn't true for everyone, but I knew I couldn't come out or live the life I wanted there. I moved so I could try to find a way to live honestly, but even then it took me a couple of years to process before I felt like I was removed enough to accept myself and come out. ("How It's Made: Savannah Sipple's WWJD & Other Poems")

As our narrator in *WWJD and Other Poems* also possesses a "deep and abiding love for the region" while acknowledging "the ways the culture there has caused damage," Sipple's personal experience is heavily echoed throughout her work. It is practically impossible not to notice the autobiographical aspects of *WWJD and Other Poems*; however, it is important to be able to separate Sipple from our narrator as well. While the collection's narrator may be representative of Sipple, our narrator here is also representative of a new generation of Appalachians working toward self-acceptance, reclamation, and pride—much like Miller's Brier in *The Brier Poems*.

Moreover, *The Brier Poems* and *WWJD and Other Poems* share many of the same recurring themes such as the immediate connection between Appalachian people and place—land and body; the acknowledgement of and reckoning with Appalachia's past; the internal struggle between loving Appalachia and hating Appalachia; the resiliency, independency, and pride within the Appalachian community; and the reclamation of the Appalachian narrative. However, where Sipple notably diverges from *The Brier Poems* is in her unapologetic depiction of the queer Appalachian experience.

The collection's title alone—*WWJD and Other Poems*—instantly introduces a religious connotation into the work as "WWJD" is a common acronym for "What would Jesus do?".

Sipple's audience is then immediately introduced to the collection's actual narrative when the final sentence in the opening poem—"I Wanted You to Fuck Me"—says, "I'd have screamed your name eyes shut wide open like I meant it, begging you *please* bang me straight" (lines 7-8). Here, there is a harsh juxtaposition between the work's expected narrative and its *true* narrative—which, brilliantly, is Sipple's entire point. Through this queer theme, Sipple forces an honest reclamation of the primary, Appalachian narrative, and *WWJD and Other Poems* challenges the region's traditionally oppressive ideology of Christianity and its historic power over the queer community.

From start to finish, the content within *WWJD and Other Poems* is deeply rooted in the context of Appalachian culture and its language of tradition. As the isolation provided by the Appalachian Mountains has allowed for a preservation of traditional ideals to last much longer in this southern region than other areas of the nation, there is, most presently, a heavy tie between Appalachian identity and traditional Christianity. For example, we explored religion in Miller's work earlier when we discussed *Appalachian Values* and Loyal Jones' quote, "Mountain people are religious. . . . [M]ost of our values and the meaning we find in life spring from the Bible. To understand mountaineers, one must understand our religion" (39). Traditionally, to be Appalachian is to be religious. However, the religious fervor that has provided so many Appalachians with a purpose, meaning, and identity has also created a pervasive metanarrative that has been responsible, both directly and indirectly, for the oppression of the queer community for the better part of the region's timeline.

In the 2019 article, "Home Grown: Critical Queer Activism in Appalachia and the South," Heather Byrdie Harris writes:

> Exploitation of natural resources—both derived from the earth and from human labor, and the diverse ethnoscapes that have taken shape both from human migration, and from gross human abuses, including enslavement, have informed activist strategies in these regions [of the south and Appalachia]. These conditions have created a social justice culture that is at once vibrant, radical, and robust, as well as side-lined from the hegemonic memory and present awareness. (*The Activist History Review*)

Here, Harris is referring to Sipple and hooks' generation of Appalachians; this generation's ancestors have been exploited and abused by an oppressive history of Appalachia (but remember, as we learned from Miller, this is only one Appalachian history). Yet, while this generation still directly feels the impact of that oppression, the community is also more educated from those experiences and has "created a social justice culture" now equipped to combat it as well. Our twenty-first century Appalachian cannon is overflowing with contemporary writers fighting alongside Sipple and hooks for an Appalachia everyone can not only be proud of—but more importantly thrive in.

As Sipple's narrator in *WWJD and Other Poems* is constantly struggling with a queer self-acceptance and bravely challenging Appalachian stereotypes, consequently, the work is also persistently exploring a love-hate relationship with Appalachia as home. From work to work, *WWJD and Other Poems* ultimately depicts a thematic journey from shame, violence, and hatred to self-acceptance, forgiveness, and love. Therefore, imminent struggle of feeling out of place is especially echoed in the beginning of the collection. One of the most prominent examples throughout Sipple's work is when she writes, 'I love the mountains, I hate the mountains" (lines 63-69) over and over again in one of the work's earliest poems, "What We Tell Ourselves." Sipple writes:

I never wanted to stay, I never wanted to

leave I never wanted to come back to gravel dust

I could not wait to leave I could not breathe

in the shadows

…

I know I will never meet people

as honeysuckle good as home

I know city neighbors won't never love me

as much as I know what the good country

people say I know the good curvy road

I know how my skin tightens

when I have to go home I don't want to

go home I don't know where

home is I don't know if I love

the mountains I don't know if I hate

the mountains I love to drown

the mountains I hate the crooked

mountains I love the mountains I hate

the mountains I love the mountains I hate

the mountains I love. (lines 47-69)

The very first impression this section of the poem forces onto its audience is a sense of urgency. The poem's overt repetition coupled with its obvious lack of punctuation is emblematic of a spiraling internal conflict. The overall tone of desperation within this poem is mixed with the

contrasting vocabulary of freedom and oppression, home and prison—and for many real Appalachians, the reality of the region is representative of both a hope and a dread. By blatantly juxtaposing these two themes, Sipple highlights the idea of inherently loving Appalachia while simultaneously longing to improve aspects of the region's narrative, reality, and influence.

Moreover, here, "What We Tell Ourselves" is almost in conversation with the Brier in Miller's "Brier Sermon." Where the Brier remains a constant—unwavering in his Appalachian pride—Sipple' narrator represents the "invisible crowd" ("Brier Sermon" line 439) the Brier is speaking to—unsure of their place in Appalachia. The Brier says:

> You can get off your back
> you can have a new view
> you can get behind the wheel of America.
> You can listen sit in the smooth upholstered seats of power
> and listen to the music playing.
> But first you've got to come home
> and live in your father's house
> and step out your own front door.
> There's a road back, buddy. (lines 204-12)

Here, the Brier is telling his audience you can appreciate your Appalachian ancestry without feeling oppressed by it or enslaved to it. Miller is writing to a generation of Sipples who "could not wait to leave I could not breathe in the shadows," and he is telling them to embrace a "new view" by "getting behind the wheel of America." Everyone's true "power" against oppression is having the courage and self-awareness to write their own narrative. Yet, in order to control your future in this way—or "step out your own front door"—you must first truly learn to acknowledge

your historical roots—or "live in your father's home." Just as Harris wrote about Appalachia's oppressive history being the thing that provided a unique environment for new generations of "social justice culture," Miller insists you must look inside yourself before looking outside yourself.

Furthermore, as Savannah Sipple further embarks her audience on a journey toward self-acceptance and reclamation, the concluding poem in *WWJD and Other Poems* directly reflects the Brier's advice about "getting behind the wheel of America." The final poem is titled "[Jesus rides shotgun]" as Sipple writes:

> I used to be afraid. Sometimes
>
> I still am. Maybe.
>
> *Don't hit the brakes*, Jesus says.
>
> *Turn the wheel. That's how you know*
>
> *the way you want to go.* (lines 10-14)

This conclusion is emblematic of so many themes within *WWJD and other Poems*. Our narrator recaps the fear felt within, caused by the oppression of traditional Appalachian stereotypes. Yet, the audience can clearly recognize the growth our narrator has experienced as this fear is acknowledged, but no longer crippling. Moreover, as Jesus is written to be the one telling our narrator, "*Don't hit the brakes, . . . / Turn the wheel. That's how you know / the way you want to go*," there is a clear reclamation of the relationship between our narrator's queer identity and Christian identity. Sipple has created an independent narrative of Appalachian Christianity here—where there is no exclusion or oppression, only love and acceptance. As *WWJD and Other Poems*' narrator crafts a new relationship with religion, she also crafts a new relationship with Appalachia—"turning the wheel" and deciding her fate.

As Savannah Sipple's *WWJD and Other Poems* is a story of trauma and healing, shame and reclamation, hatred and love, Sipple addresses the difficult conversations about Appalachia and its history. Where Miller encourages his *The Brier Poems* audience to embrace their Appalachian heritage and reclaim their personal identities, Sipple goes a step further to implore her audience to undoubtedly *love* their Appalachian home, yet never hesitate to acknowledge toxicity and work toward improving their Appalachian narrative. Sipple unapologetically reclaims the queer Appalachian narrative and comfortable lives within the liminal spaces embodying both a proud Appalachian and a proud member of the queer community. Ultimately much like Jim Wayne Miller's *The Brier Poems*, *WWJD and Other Poems* is a true testament to Appalachian resilience.

bell hooks' Appalachian Elegy: Poetry and Place

Just as the queer community has faced ostracization and oppression within historical Appalachia, the African American community has faced exploitation, violence, and slavery. bell hooks' 2012 collection of poetry titled *Appalachian Elegy: Poetry and Place* explores Black Appalachians' relationship to the region as both their home and their oppressor. bell hooks possesses a talent of reclamation as she beautifully depicts the independence and freedom found within the Appalachian Mountains while simultaneously highlighting the aspects of the region which have been harmful, violent, and damaging to the African American community.

> For example, in her introductory essay, "On Reflection and Lamentation," hooks writes:
>
> Ironically, the segregated world of my Kentucky childhood was the place where I lived beyond race. Living my early childhood in the isolated hills of Kentucky, I made a place for myself in nature there—roaming the hills, walking the fields hidden in hollows where

> my sharecropper grandfather Daddy Gus planted neat rows of growing crops. Without evoking a naïve naturalism that would suggest a world of innocence, I deem it an act of counterhegemonic resistance for black folks to talk openly of our experiences growing up in a southern world where we felt ourselves living in harmony with the natural world. (4-5)

This quote embodies a summary of the effect bell hooks' *Appalachian Elegy* consequently has on its audience. The collection has the unique capability to paint Appalachia as beautifully free yet historically oppressed and oppressive. Through this collection, hooks plainly and bravely discusses the complicated reality of Black Appalachians—highlighting the ways in which the Appalachian experience has been ultimately freeing while also unapologetically damning the region's culture of racism and oppression.

This quote also signifies how the themes in *Appalachian Elegy* draw from hooks' personal experience growing up black in Kentucky—similar to the way Miller's *The Brier Poems* and Sipple's *WWJD and Other Poems* are also semi-autobiographical. However, it is also important to acknowledge our narrator in *Appalachian Elegy* to be representative of generations of Appalachians and, even more so, representative of generations of Black Appalachians. Furthermore, *Appalachian Elegy* is in conversation with *The Brier Poems* through its reclamation of the Appalachian narrative by voicing the Black experience historically excluded from the Appalachian canon. In addition, Miller and hooks both carefully depict Appalachia to constitute a multitude of narratives, realities, and representatives—in both works, the country is never painted to have a hegemonic history, and both Miller and hooks acknowledge the complexities and controversies and within Appalachia.

Moreover, Miller and hooks are also both in agreement of Appalachia being a nation of "a people of one blood." For example, this overarching theme is blatantly present in Miller's "The Country of Conscience" when he writes, "'A nation is the will to live together,' an individual will to differ multiplied, many agreeing to differ in the same way' (lines 125-127). Earlier in this chapter, I discussed how hooks' "On Reflection and Lamentation" discusses Appalachia through the solidarity of Appalachian values such as integrity; moreover, in Chapter One, I have discussed how Loyal Jones' *Appalachian Values* states Appalachia is emblematic of independence and pride. hooks then adds another layer and furthers this important theme of Appalachian solidarity when she writes, "In small cities and towns, the life of a black coal miner in western Kentucky was more similar to the life of its Eastern counterpart than different" ("On Reflection and Lamentation" 3). Here, not only does hooks highlight the unity felt between the Appalachian community, but she also introduces the idea that Black Appalachians have more in common with white Appalachians than they do differences—she implies these two groups may even have more in common than black Appalachians and black northerners.

It is important to make this distinction before reading *Appalachian Elegy* since hooks' interchanges the pronouns "we" and "our" to sometimes mean "Appalachians" and sometimes mean "Black Appalachians." From poem to poem, the distinction is not always clear, which adds another layer to the point hooks' is trying to make—the Appalachian story *is* the story of Black southerners. hooks is reclaiming the narrative of Black Appalachians by both subtly and overtly declaring the region's individuals' similarities regardless of race. This approach familiarizes the narrative of Black Appalachia, forcing *Appalachian Elegy*'s audience to use another lens and approach history from a different perspective. hooks' reclamation of the Appalachian narrative then only begins here.

hooks also approaches her poetry through the unique perspective of the body of Black Appalachians being synonymous with the Appalachian land—representing beauty, autonomy, freedom, and unity, while also depicting the violent exploitation and destruction of people and place. When hooks wrote she never wanted to "evoke a naïve naturalism that would suggest a world of innocence," she achieves that goal here by portraying the narrative of the Appalachian landscape to be the same narrative of the reality of black Appalachians—this way, there is no romanticization of history, there is only a duality that is both remarkable and unbearable. For example, in hooks' poem titled "57," hooks writes:

fierce grief shadows me
I hold to the memory
of ongoing loss
land stolen bodies shamed
everywhere the stench of
death and retribution
all around me
nature demands amends
spirit guides me
to take back the land
make amends
silence the cries of the lost
the lamentations
let them sleep forever sublime
knowing that we

have made a place

that can sustain us

a place of certainty

and sanctuary. (lines 1-19)

Here, hooks tells the story of "stolen land and bodies shamed." This story is identical as the Appalachian place has been ravaged by war, exploited for its resources, and destroyed by industry and the Black Appalachian people have been violated by racism, abused by exploitation, and broken-down by oppression. A devastation on this scale is still evident in today's Appalachia as racism still exists and Appalachia is still exploited for its coal, timber, and mineral resources. Yet, hooks also ends this poem by "silencing the cries of the lost" through a reclamation of Appalachia—through making Appalachia a "place of certainty / and sanctuary."

hooks is reclaiming the Appalachian narrative by shouting the story of Black Appalachia—which has been excluded from history books and literature for decades. hooks is giving a voice to the loss and suffering experienced by generations and still felt today. Through this remembrance comes an ultimate reclamation as equality and representation is acknowledged and advocated for throughout *Appalachian Elegy*. In one of hooks concluding poems, numbered "65," the poet writes:

my world is green

wild green

green with no limits

big bold green

growing changing

celebrates the

green in things

all green goodness. (lines 1-8)

Here, hooks is in conversation with Miller's hope for an ever-presently "growing, changing" Appalachia. When hooks consciously chooses to "celebrate the green in things" amidst the generational trauma felt by Black Appalachians today, she is declaring her Appalachian narrative to have no limits. *Appalachian Elegy* is ultimately emblematic of the resilience of the Appalachian people—acknowledging Miller's vision for Appalachia and taking that vision few steps forward though forgiveness, lamentation, and inclusion.

CHAPTER 4. IN CONCLUSION

Jim Wayne Miller's *The Brier Poems* tells a story which combines the traditional values of Appalachia with the diverse impacts of modernity. Miller encourages his audience not to lose touch with their ancestral history, to embrace their Appalachian pride, and let their foundational Appalachian values guide their identity; however, Miller also advocates for Appalachia's independent narratives, telling his community to create their own future and control their own realities. For example, in "His Mother's Story," Miller writes:

> When the Brier was misunderstood, falsely
> accused, he remembered his mother's story,
> remembered the level lying under the steps
> for thirty-five years—and gathered patience
> to live his life at a tilt,
> alone with a little truth. (lines 23-28)

Miller implores his Appalachian audience to "gather patience / to live their life at a tilt, / alone with a little truth." In other words, *The Brier Poems*' hope for the Appalachian community is to know themselves enough to be able to ignore harmful stereotypes, write their own Appalachian narratives, and be unapologetically proud of where they have come from. Miller argues Appalachia can appreciate and acknowledge its history—all aspects: both positive and negative, harmful and beautiful—while refusing to feel imprisoned by it and advocating for a better, more independently diverse, Appalachia. Through this approach, the Appalachian community can stand firm in its values, beliefs, and identity while creating a positively influential narrative of the Appalachia.

Today, Appalachian literature is more diverse than ever as writers advocate for the value of Appalachian culture. Our contemporary canon is full of writers such as Savannah Sipple and bell hooks who embrace Jim Wayne Miller's hope for Appalachia to once again become a proud identity and culture while they also take Miller's themes a few steps further—truly reclaiming the Appalachian narrative as never having been hegemonic. Sipple and hooks highlight the historical oppression different genders, races, and sexualities, have faced in Appalachia while simultaneously declaring their devout love for the region.

Writers like Miller, Sipple, and hooks highlight the duality of Appalachia as a narrative of trauma and healing, exploitation and resilience, tradition and modernity. As the metanarrative of Appalachia has often been defined by a singular portrayal of history—an oppressively poor, white, uneducated, and religious history—the voices within the contemporary Appalachian cannon are more now important than ever. Our contemporary authors address the narrow stereotype of the white, heterosexual Appalachian, rendering this narrative now meaningless. Moreover, this readily available exposure to positive depictions of Appalachia and its inhabitants is unlike any decade has ever before seen. Today it is probable even those who are leaving Appalachia are still feeling Appalachian—now capable of taking their Appalachian values with them without shame—and may one day return. As Miller writes, "I reckon we're the root and they're the stem" ("Bud Sizemore" line 6), Appalachia simply is a proud home for many. As the scholarship of Appalachian Studies continues to steadily grow, hopefully so will the region's proud community, and I am excited to see what independent, resilient voices scream next.

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VITA

MADELINE DAWSON

Education:	M.A. English, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2022
	B.A. English, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2020
	Cosby High School, Cosby, Tennessee
Professional Experience:	Graduate Assistant, East Tennessee State University, College of Arts and Sciences, 2020-2022
Presentations:	Dawson, Maddy. “For Edna: The Historical Oppression of Women in Kate Chopin’s The Awakening (1899).” Tennessee Philological Association Annual Conference. February 19, 2021.