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The Gastonia Novels and Ecofeminism: Rereading the Works of Fielding Burke, Grace

Lumpkin, and Myra Page

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Liberal Studies

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

by

Amanda L. Aubrey

December 2011

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Keywords: Gastonia, Ecofeminism, Fielding Burke, Grace Lumpkin, Myra Page, Women's

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ABSTRACT

The Gastonia Novels and Ecofeminism: Rereading the Works of Fielding Burke, Grace Lumpkin, and Myra Page

by

Amanda L. Aubrey

This thesis examines Fielding Burke's *Call Home the Heart*, Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread*, and Myra Page's *Gathering Storm* through the lens of ecofeminism, an interdisciplinary theory that contributes the necessary insight into the link between the abuse of power on personal, political, and economic levels that underlies the human oppression and environmental exploitation experienced by the novels' characters and communities. A resurrection of the Gastonia novels through the framework of ecofeminism will contribute to the scholarly discourse regarding this maturing theory as well as intensify the critical body of work concerning the Gastonia novels themselves.

This thesis, in conjunction with the works of instrumental Appalachian scholars, literary critics, and historians as well as major landmark texts in the field of ecofeminism such as Kathy Warren's *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* and Greta Gaard's *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, purposes to advance the critical standing of the Gastonia novels.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my supportive husband who has always encouraged, always hoped, and always persevered. Thank you for enduring.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Genuine gratitude is extended to the members of my Graduate Thesis Committee for their vital contributions toward the completion of this project. Dr. Jill LeRoy-Frazier, thank you for directing this research, teaching challenging classes, and imparting patience. Dr. Tess Lloyd, thank you for making your students read so many inspiring novels and poems. Dr. Marie Tedesco, thank you for your help as an academic advisor and for offering encouraging words as a runner.

CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	2
DEDICATION	4
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	5
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	7
2. THE EMERGENCE OF MILL WOMEN: GASTONIA AND ITS LITERATURE...	10
3. ECOFEMINISM.....	30
4. A FEMINIST STATEMENT: CLASS, GENDER, AND THE ENVIRONMENT....	34
5. EXTENDING THE ARGUMENT: WOMEN AND RACE.....	69
6. REGIONALISM AND THE GASTONIA NOVELS.....	85
7. CONCLUSION.....	106
BIBLIOGRAPHY	109
VITA.....	114

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The radical fiction produced by women in the 1930s offers a ripe harvest for interdisciplinary endeavors in the field of ecofeminism. The bloody strike that erupted at the Loray textile mill in Gastonia, North Carolina, in 1929 compelled Fielding Burke, Grace Lumpkin, and Myra Page to make literary contributions to the workers' struggle. Largely forgotten by academe, the Gastonia novels serve as casualties of change in literary fashion and political ideologies. John Salmond asserts, "The Gastonia novels were not very widely read and were soon forgotten, especially after 'third period' communism gave way to the Popular Front and cooperation with the New Deal."¹ In fact, despite nominal attention from historians in the 1970s and 1980s and a handful of literary studies from the 1990s, the critical body of work concerning the radical fiction of Fielding Burke, Myra Page, and Grace Lumpkin remains slim at best. Such an omission marginalizes important voices in the collective female literary experience. Burke, Page, and Lumpkin reflect a deep concern for history and culture and a woman's experience of these forces. The complexity of their work challenges traditional representations and stereotypes of Appalachian women and effectively demonstrates how time and place come together in compelling ways to show how literature encompasses nonhuman as well as human contexts, nature as well as culture.

In order to appreciate the relevance of the Gastonia novels, an interdisciplinary re-examination is necessary, particularly in regard to the authors' treatments of gender, race, class, nature, and regionalism, with special attention to the ways these issues intersect in the southern

¹ John Salmond, *Gastonia 1929: The Story of the Loray Mill Strike* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 189.

Appalachian region. Through the interdisciplinary framework of ecofeminism, this thesis demonstrates how the Gastonia novelists reveal the inextricable link between the oppression of women and the environment. An ecofeminist perspective notes that the Gastonia novels serve as regional as well as proletarian novels, and the two genres complement each other since the economic oppression of the region is the reason the female protagonists must leave the mountains, only to discover that conditions are worse in the southern mill towns. Indeed, an ecofeminist reading of the Gastonia novels illustrates the interconnectedness between the oppression of women and the domination of nature by a patriarchal society. Read together, Burke, Lumpkin, and Page offer tremendous insight into the human significance of the economic and social revolutions in the South.

The year 1932 saw the publication of six Gastonia novels, the remaining three texts being Mary Heaton Vorse's *Strike*, Sherwood Anderson's *Beyond Desire*, and William Rollins's *Shadow Before*. For the purpose of this study, the work of Anderson and Rollins did not receive critical attention since the authors do not possess a female perspective, nor do their books offer female protagonists. Although Mary Heaton Vorse participated extensively in women's issues both as a journalist and novelist, her work is omitted here because *Strike* does not enjoy a female protagonist, and unlike the other female Gastonia novelists, she was not a native writer of the South. As future chapters evidence, the primary objective of this study is to analyze how gender, race, class, and nature intersect in the Appalachian region through the framework of ecofeminism. It is imperative that the novels present female protagonists so that the thesis may explore how environmental exploitation mirrors gender oppression.

The organization of the thesis is as follows. The paper opens with a historical discussion documenting the events of Loray Mill strike in Gastonia, North Carolina in order to

contextualize the novels and their respective authors. This chapter draws extensively from John Salmond's *Gastonia 1929* because it is the most comprehensive and recent book written about the events of the Loray Mill strike. Various editors from the Feminist Press have been chosen to contribute to the biographical information about the authors for the reason that the Feminist Press is responsible for resurrecting and reprinting these "lost" novels. The thesis then proceeds to a short chapter that introduces ecofeminism, its definition, major tenets, an explanation of the sources used, and how the theory will be applied to the Gastonia novels. Following the explication of ecofeminism are the subsequent chapters that delve specifically into the novels' treatment of gender, class, race, and the environment, noting how ecofeminism offers new insights on these previously researched issues. In addition to the novels themselves, the chapters use research from various feminist theorists, literary critics, historians, and ecofeminists. Finally, chapter six deals with how the social and economic struggles of the characters come together in Appalachia. The chapter explores relationships of power in the region and draws on the work of Douglass Powell, Paul Salstrom, and John Gaventa, all of whom have written extensively on the Appalachian region.

CHAPTER 2

THE EMERGENCE OF MILL WOMEN: GASTONIA AND ITS LITERATURE

In order to analyze the themes of the Gastonia novels and their larger connections to the environment, society, and Appalachia, a historical documentation of the actual event is paramount. Besides recording the events of the Loray Mill Strike, with special attention given to the role of women, this chapter describes how the novelists chose to reflect the workers' plight in their fiction. The chapter also addresses the critical reception of the novels, their place within the proletarian genre, and the lives of the novelists themselves.

Located in the center of the southern Piedmont is Gastonia, North Carolina. According to historian John Salmond, by 1929 Gaston County contained "more textile plants than any other county in the world, and some Gastonians proudly claimed that there were more looms and spindles within its hundred-mile radius than in that of any other southern city."¹ The 1920s saw a boom in population and industrial and residential construction in the city that helped the County as a whole transition from a farming community into a textile center.² Salmond asserts:

Gaston County had both natural and human resources, in its abundance of water and its large potential labor force.... Working the land had always been hard there, and thousands of unsuccessful farmers were only too ready to furnish the manpower for the mills. Though in 1929 there were still some forests to be found in Gaston County's gently rolling landscape, and its most fertile land was still being farmed, the dominant feature of its flattish topography were cotton mills and industrial villages.³

The Loray Mill in Gastonia, by far the largest mill in Gaston County, attracted thousands of such struggling farmers who made the difficult transition from farm to factory.⁴ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall,

¹ Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, xi.

² *Ibid.*, xi.

³ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

Robert Korstad, and James Leloudis substantiate Salmond's observations and claim that,

"Textile mills built the new South."⁵ They write:

Impoverishment of farmers was industrialization's driving force. The post-Civil War rise of sharecropping, tenantry, and the crop lien ensnared freedom, then eroded yeoman society.... By the end of the Great Depression, the Southeast replaced New England as the world's leading producer of cotton cloth, and the industrializing Piedmont replaced the rural Coastal Plain a pacesetter for the region."⁶

All three of the Gastonia novels, especially Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread* and Burke's *Call Home the Heart*, depict mountaineers who reluctantly sell their deteriorating farms. While Lumpkin and Burke devote nearly half of their novels to documenting farm life in the mountains and Piedmont, Page allots two short chapters before plunging her characters into mill life. Opting for fictional names for Gastonia, Burke sends Ishma Waycaster to Winbury, Lumpkin's Bonnie McClure works in Leesville, and Page's Marge Crenshaw struggles in Greenville.

While the novelists imply that a decline in agriculture precipitated the diaspora of mountain farmers, they overtly blame the mill recruiters for duping the people into selling their lands for modern luxuries and work in the factories. For example, Page's Old Marge and Henry do not entertain thoughts of moving until "the stranger got to tellin' [them] about the cotton mills, 'n what a fine chance thar was thar for folks like [them]."⁷ Similarly, Lumpkin's Emma and Granpap fall prey to a recruiter's claims that "hit's a land flowing with milk and honey, and gold growing on trees."⁸ Burke describes Ishma's encounter with the idea of mill life as "so enticing in comfort, so engaging in form, so ravishing in color, that is seemed nothing short of

⁵ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Robert Korstad, and James Leloudis, "Cotton Mill People: Work, Community, and Protest in the Textile South, 1880-1940," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 2 (Apr. 1986): 245, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1858134> (accessed Sept. 27, 2010).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁷ Page, *Gathering Storm*, 14.

⁸ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 136.

celestial to [her].”⁹ As part of their aesthetic, the Gastonia novelists create scenarios that immediately establish the mills as powerful, successful antagonists bent on the exploitation of poor people. What historians such as Salmond and Hall have noted is that while the mills did eventually exploit their workforces, their recruiting efforts were not the primary reason the mountain people left their farms. The people left because their way of life, farming, had been dying since the Civil War.

Two key institutions for the success of the new industrial order, or the assimilation of the rural farmers, included the mill villages or “hills” and the family labor system that promoted the hiring of family units rather than individuals and required the labor of at least one worker per room as a condition for residence in a mill-owned house.¹⁰ This phenomenon can be observed in all the Gastonia novels. Lumpkin describes the McClure family’s initial meeting with mill management and Emma’s predicament of having to reside with her relatives instead of renting her own house. Lumpkin writes, “And, Emma, he said you must board with us, unless you want the young ones t’ work. You must have two elders t’ work if you get a house, two elders or four young ones working.”¹¹ Page’s entire Crenshaw family worked in the mill as well, even “lil Becky, though she warn’t turned but six year at the time.”¹² Although Burke’s protagonist, Ishma, does not experience the family work system, her neighbor, Kansie, must endure the news that since she could no longer work in the mills because of her ailing health, her daughter must fill her place and drop out of school.¹³

⁹ Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 11.

¹⁰ Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 3.

¹¹ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 157.

¹² Page, *Gathering Storm*, 21.

¹³ Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 216.

Initially in the mill hills workers experienced a relatively relaxed work pace with high wages and modest living conditions, but by 1920, wartime overexpansion meant fewer wage gains, worsening living conditions, and industrial strife in the form of labor surplus.¹⁴ Women were particularly hard hit. Salmond maintains, “As a result of job reorganization or consolidation [women] often found themselves transferred from wage rates to piecework rates, with a resultant drop in income. Furthermore, as mills began to run on a round-the-clock schedule, it was women, increasingly, who worked the night shift, because they had to be home during the day to care for their children.”¹⁵ While all three Gastonia novelists document the insecure and unequal employment situation for women, Page’s *Gathering Storm* addresses it most emphatically. Old Marge tells her granddaughter, Young Marge:

Wal, they paid the mens two dollar and fifty cent a week, ‘n they paid wimmen folks a dollar and seventy-five, ‘n the chillen, they got tin cints; so all tole we had four dollar ‘n fifty-five cints. At furst that seemed like a lotta money, ‘cause up in the hills, month around we ain’t had our hands on so much cash. But when we come to pay the company the rent, ‘n buy groceries at the company store, that money jes’ natchally melted through your fingers. Look like at the end of each week, we owed the company stead of it owin’ us.¹⁶

In the same vein, Burke notes the mill boss’s devaluation of Ishma as he describes her as property. She writes, “[Ishma] looked as if she would hold out for ten years at least, under the stiffest speed-up, before they would have to scrap her. After she’d been broken in she would be a good pace-maker, and that’s what they needed now to get the workers settled down in this new rationalized system. Pace-makers.”¹⁷ As later chapters evidence, the particularly tenuous situation of women workers remains a key issue for both the novelists and their feminist visions.

¹⁴ Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁶ Page, *Gathering Storm*, 22.

¹⁷ Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 271.

Subsequent chapters will explore this phenomenon more closely, noting how the oppression of gender, class, race, and environment share common roots in a patriarchal society.

By 1927, after years of unrest in the mills across the Piedmont in the form of unsuccessful, short-term strikes that were relatively quick-settled and soon forgotten, a new phenomenon arrived at the Loray Mill, the stretch-out.¹⁸ The introduction of new technologies such as the automated, multiple-weave loom meant that employers needed fewer skilled workers; the “stretch-out” was a management practice that dramatically increased the workload for employees while simultaneously cutting their wages.¹⁹ Salmond notes that workers went from making \$30 to \$35 a week and running six to eight looms, to earning \$15 to \$18 a week and maintaining ten to twelve looms.²⁰ Page documents the stretch-out in a conversation between Marge Crenshaw, Jem Brown, and other disgruntled factory workers. Jem bemoans, “This stretch-out is sure bad. Used to be a mill-hand was good for fifteen or twenty years at his place, but now they drop most of us off around thirty-five years old.... I used to run twenty-five cards, now got to do forty for the same ten dollars. ‘N ev’ry third man of us been lopped off.”²¹

Lumpkin includes the stretch-out as well. She writes:

The wages went down further.... The mill took off all helpers, which meant that boys and girls were left without work.... Card hands were forced to run forty cards instead of twenty-one and were given less pay for the double work. Automatic spoolers were put in, and when this was done thirty-five people were used where one hundred and sixty had been used before. Weavers who had tended eight to twenty looms now had nearly one hundred each.... Most of the women had to give up weaving.²²

Similarly, Burke explains, “The mill-owners were adopting a process of management called ‘rationalization.’ It meant fewer workers and greater production. A ‘drive to the limit.’ The

¹⁸ Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

²¹ Page, *Gathering Storm*, 255.

²² Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 329.

workers called it the ‘speed-up’ and ‘stretch-out.’ And the ‘hands’ began to fall by the way.’”²³

In all three cases the novelists use the stretch-out as a threshold for their protagonists. Not long after the process begins, the women decidedly join the ranks of the developing unions, and the novelists’ Marxist ideologies find their loudest voice.

Tensions continued to mount between the workers and the mill, and the year 1928 witnessed several spontaneous, unorganized strikes that rarely lasted more than a few days.²⁴ In 1929, Fred Beal, a young red-haired organizer from the National Textile Workers Union, traveled from New England in hopes of creating a union in the Charlotte area.²⁵ As he slowly began to build contacts, union member O.D. Martins pointed Beal in the direction of the Loray Mill.²⁶ Salmond explains, “At the Loray Mill, [Beal] found conditions even worse than those he had encountered in Charlotte, plus a disaffected workforce that was itching for action. He launched a secret union then and there.”²⁷ The Gastonia novelists again opt for fictionalized names for their narratives, and one can infer from the men’s roles and descriptions that the novelists model their union organizers after the actual Fred Beal. Burke describes the redheaded Amos Freer who comes from the North to organize the people.²⁸ Lumpkin refers to a Tom Moore, who is brought to the mill under the advice of union member named John Stevens, a character most likely modeled after O.D. Martins.²⁹ Page portrays a young Joe Mattheson who comes from the North to organize the workers.³⁰ As Beal’s efforts continued to gain momentum, the NTWU sent reinforcements, and Nellie Dawson, variously described as a “wee bit of a girl”

²³ Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 219.

²⁴ Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁸ Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 314.

²⁹ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 331.

³⁰ Page, *Gathering Storm*, 184.

or “the little orphan of the strikers,” joined Beal in assuming a leadership role as a public speaker.³¹ Here, Page and Burke include characters who seem to fit Nellie’s description as well. Page describes Edith Grady, a “small, Irish type of young woman” who “clattered on the improvised stand” at one of the union meetings during the early stages of the strike.³² Burke creates an Eva Blaine who was “one of the group who had come into the community with Amos Freer as aids and speakers in the work of organization. Her small body was packed with efficiency.”³³ By contrast, Lumpkin omits the inclusion of any such character and instead focuses more on the efforts of her mountain women such as Ora and Bonnie.

On April 1, 1929, after five workers had been dismissed for attending a union meeting, Beal and Dawson led the crowds of workers on a march to the mill gate where the strikers were successful in persuading most of the night shift to stay out of the factory.³⁴ In response to the strikers’ demands of equal pay for equal work for women and children, the abolition of the stretch-out, the reduction of rent in the mill village, and an increase in pay, the management stretched steel cables across the street in front of the mill and ignored the cries of the picketers.³⁵ *The Gastonia Daily Gazette*, the mouthpiece for the Gaston County mill owners, escalated tensions when it reported that the peaceful strikers were a “belligerent, threatening mob.”³⁶

In regard to the picket lines, Lumpkin includes descriptions of a “thick, doubled rope” that “was strung from one side of the street to the other.”³⁷ She also describes the success the strikers experienced as they persuaded their fellow workers to leave their shifts at the factory.

³¹ Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 20.

³² Page, *Gathering Storm*, 185, 190.

³³ Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 311.

³⁴ Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁷ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 348.

Page also describes the success of the marchers and the fact that the company “had stretched ropes across the streets, blocking off the passageways.”³⁸ Although Burke omits the details of the cable, she includes references to the picket lines, the success of the night-shift walk-out, and the role of the mill’s newspaper, the *Winbury Comet*, to agitate public opinion about the strikers and their union organizers.³⁹

By April 3, the Loray management called in five units of North Carolina’s National Guard, who immediately surrounded the mill and proposed additional threats to the strikers.⁴⁰ After three women were arrested by the Guard for breaking their lines, Beal ordered the crowd to keep at least a block away from the steel cable barriers so that peaceful protest could continue.⁴¹ Not only did women march at the front of the picket lines, they also constituted the majority of the strike’s demographics. Salmond asserts, “Cora Harris, writing in the *Charlotte Observer*, first drew attention to this phenomenon. ‘If Gastonia has never realized that militant women were within its bounds, it certainly knows it now.’ Commenting on the previous day’s mass meeting of strikers, she stated that most of those present were women.”⁴² Hall and her colleagues also note women’s involvement, as well as the prominence of young people in the strike. They write:

Young people who had led the protests of the 1920s had come of age in a society very different from the one their parents had known.... They did not see themselves as temporary sojourners, ready to beat a retreat to the land, or as destitute farmers for whom it was hard to draw a paycheck, however small. Their identities had been formed in the mill village; they had cast their fate with the mills.⁴³

³⁸ Page, *Gathering Storm*, 289.

³⁹ Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 310, 314.

⁴⁰ Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 24.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴³ Hall, et al. *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 122.

Salmond adds that such young people were “becoming part of a national, even global culture, a world of radio, Ford cars, and fast-changing value systems. They quickly assimilated the speeded-up rhythms, the fashions, the popular culture of their generation’s changing times.”⁴⁴

All the Gastonia novelists depict young, enthusiastic, even militant protestors, and give women a prominent place in the picket lines in the face of the National Guard. Lumpkin’s portrayal offers perhaps the best illustration of the courage of the women, and she gives Ora, one of her key strikers, the lead voice in speaking up to the militia. Ora thunders, “Why don’t you go home and stop fighting against women and children? Air we not your people? Don’t you have mothers that have worked themselves to the bone for ye, and fathers that have slaved? And don’t you slave in mills and other places for low wages? Go home, and don’t fight your own people any more.”⁴⁵

According to Salmond, after the strike’s second week, Beal’s union headquarters, filled with supplies and food relief, was demolished by a mob of men between fifty and two hundred strong.⁴⁶ Salmond asserts, “using axes and sledgehammers, [the mob] literally hacked the structure to pieces.... They destroyed everything they found there, scattering flour in the street and grinding eggs and vegetables under their feet until nothing useable was left.”⁴⁷ This is another event that the Gastonia novels meticulously document. For example, Burke describes the raid by the mob, or “Committee of One Hundred,” as over a hundred masked men that “had broken the union headquarters into splinters and raided the relief store.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 30-31.

⁴⁵ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 351-352.

⁴⁶ Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 41.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁸ Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 316.

Also within weeks of the initial strike came the mill's decision to evict families associated with the event, and a tent colony was established for the strikers by union organizers. Salmond observes, "The tent colony was erected on a vacant lot on North Loray Street, owned by Henry Myers, one of the few local citizens who publicly supported the National Textile Workers Union."⁴⁹ Like her contemporaries, Lumpkin records the presence of the tent colony near the northern end of Company property. She describes, "Down in the hollow they put up the tents, and people who had been evicted—and many more had been put out since the first day—moved in all the furniture they could."⁵⁰

In some form or another, the Gastonia novelists re-create the actual balladeer, Ella May Wiggins, and stress her important role in unifying and uplifting the spirit of the people during their difficult times in the colony. Salmond notes the poignancy of Wiggins's most famous ballad, "Mill Mother's Lament" and explains the power her music possessed for "reviving the strikers' spirits, of sustaining community: music was an essential component of them, and it was the women who provided it."⁵¹ In addition to her musical talent, Wiggins was an ardent supporter of the union and was one of first workers to strike and attend union leadership classes taught by Beal.⁵² Her life before the strike consisted of years spent working in the textile mills of the Piedmont, losing four children to various ailments such as Pellagra, and enduring the abandonment of her husband after the birth of their eighth child.⁵³ Chapter four examines in greater depth how the novelists incorporate the personage of Wiggins. In essence, Lumpkin's Bonnie Calhoun, Burke's Ella Ramsey, and Page's Ella May most likely represent the balladeer.

⁴⁹ Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 60.

⁵⁰ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 358.

⁵¹ Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 62.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 51.

All of these characters remain steadfast in their devotion to the union, raise large families as single mothers, and possess musical skills that unite the workers.

On June 7, the situation at Gastonia took a turn for the worse, and a chain of contestable events marked the dissolution of the union, several deaths, and a series of dramatic trials. Salmond notes that on this day mill police used violence to disperse the marching protesters, and while the people returned to union headquarters “in straggling groups,” an altercation between Gastonia chief of police Orville Aderholt and union member Joseph Harrison resulted in the wounding of five men, including Harrison and Aderholt.⁵⁴ Aderholt died the following day and in the wake of more police violence, strikers and union organizers tried to escape arrest; however, by the end of the night, more than sixty men and women were in jail.⁵⁵ Over the ensuing weeks and months union organizers faced jail time and a lengthy trial. On September 14, in hopes of demoralizing the remaining union sympathizers, a few members of the Committee of One Hundred forced a truck full of union members, including Ella May Wiggins, off the road.⁵⁶ While some of the workers were thrown off the bed of the truck, Ella May stood her ground and was shot by a single bullet.⁵⁷ In the end, the jury quickly found the union defendants, including Beal, guilty of conspiracy to murder chief Aderholt.⁵⁸ A jury also decided that “there was insufficient evidence to indict anyone for the slaying” of Ella May Wiggins.⁵⁹ And so, the strike was broken, in Gaston Country as elsewhere, by the power of the state.

Interestingly enough, here Burke’s novel deviates drastically from the actual historical events; she omits all references to the ambiguous confrontation concerning Chief Aderholt and

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 72-73.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 148, 155.

the tragic murder of Ella May Wiggins. Instead, Burke focuses on her heroine, Ishma, and her return to Cloudy Knob. Lumpkin documents these important events but not without making substantial changes. For example, in representation of her Chief Aderholt, Lumpkin uses Sam McEachern and she places his death *after* the death of Bonnie. McEachern is an ex-mountaineer turned sheriff, not mill management, and this detail makes his betrayal of the mountain millhands all the more brutal. Also, instead of depicting Bonnie's murder in the bed of a truck, Lumpkin has mill thugs shoot Bonnie as she speaks of racial unity at a union meeting. Lumpkin writes, "At that moment, a shot broke up the stillness. Another followed it. [Tom Moore] heard a sound as if rocks had been thrown against the plank wall behind Bonnie.... She had stopped speaking.... She turned a little to one side as if she was ashamed and hurt, then fell to the floor of the platform."⁶⁰ Page offers the most accurate portrayal of the tragic events. Her Chief Anderson takes a bullet in a confusing scene in the union headquarters, much like the story that Salmond reports. Countless numbers of strikers find themselves in jail awaiting trial, and Ella May meets her death in the bed of a truck after a mob of angry men ambush her trip to Charlotte.⁶¹

None of the Gastonia novelists include details of the trial; instead, the authors choose to end their novels with optimistic talk of a coming Marxist revolution. In fact, the final lines of the novels reflect Marxist sentiment as espoused by Fred Beal. He contends, "We who consider ourselves class-conscious workers, look forward to and advocate a system of society without classes, a society in which those who produce shall be the sole rulers."⁶² Similarly, Burke pens, "They shall not put out our light. Their sword of power shall be taken away, and as beasts they shall lie down in the darkness they have made. For Man must march, and his heart is a lamp

⁶⁰ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 372.

⁶¹ Page, *Gathering Storm*, 360.

⁶² Fred Beal, *Proletarian Journey* (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1937), 345.

forever.”⁶³ Page echoes, “Our Riverton strike was a li'l cloud burst to what's ahead! By golly, let 'er come!... Marge could feel the lash of the wet wind, the tremor of rushing bodies.... She was riding the gale! Not swept along, but deliberately, joyously a fore-runner, a marshaller of the gathering storm.”⁶⁴ Lumpkin concludes with John Stevens encouraging his comrades. She writes, “This on your arm, he touched the red band on John's sleeve, ‘stands for blood that has been shed, and that will be shed before we reach that which we are fighting for’....’This is just the beginning.”⁶⁵

Given the novelists' overall painstaking attention to historical details, their objective of documenting the struggle of the working class and advocating a Marxist ideology, it is no wonder that historians and literary critics termed them “proletarian.” As the rest of this chapter notes, however, the novels offer more than narratives that compel their readers to fight against capitalism. In fact, it is the feminist visions of the novels that endow the stories with power, and this vision is explored extensively throughout subsequent chapters.

David Madden suggests that “proletarian” was the most important critical term among radical literary groups of the early 1930s.⁶⁶ He notes, “Michael Gold (a young Marxist critic) was the first to make ‘proletarian literature’ synonymous with ‘radical literature’.... He planted the term in 1921, it flowered in the early 30's, and as disenchantment with communism created an ideological wasteland, went to seed in the 40's.”⁶⁷ Later, in 1934, E.A. Schachner made a distinction between the revolutionary novel, which “consciously supports the movement for the revolutionary deconstruction of capitalism,” and the proletarian novel, which “merely reflects the

⁶³ Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 431.

⁶⁴ Page, *Gathering Storm*, 373-374.

⁶⁵ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 383-384.

⁶⁶ David Madden, *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1968), xvii.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, xvii-xviii.

life of any typical cross section of the proletariat and need not be more revolutionary than the proletariat itself is at the time the novel is written.”⁶⁸ In the 1950s, Walter Rideout suggested a third distinction, a merger of the two classifications, since “the revolutionary novel and the proletarian novel tend to lose their respective identities as a revolutionary situation approaches.”⁶⁹ In other words, because proletarian fiction explores the world of the working class and radical fiction argues for revolution, the two forms merge together quite seamlessly when an author wishes to construct a situation where workers fight for better pay or conditions.

Historians and literary critics alike have categorized *Call Home the Heart*, *Gathering Storm*, and *To Make My Bread* as both proletarian and revolutionary. Walter Rideout, for example, describes the novels as, in effect, “local-color fiction performed with a radical purpose.”⁷⁰ Furthermore, he suggests that novels of the disputed proletarian genre can be fitted easily into four main groups on the basis of content or subject matter: (1) Those centered around a strike; (2) those concerned with the development of an individual’s class-consciousness and his conversion to Communism; (3) those dealing with the “bottom dogs,” the lowest layers of society; and (4) those describing the decay of the middle class.⁷¹

The Gastonia novels most certainly fit best under the umbrella of Rideout’s conversion novel, or group two where an individual converts to communism, but this title imposes acute limitations. David Madden summarizes the conversion novel as portraying a hero who follows a developmental process, from “being out” to “being in.”⁷² Madden posits, “[the hero] is alerted to some ideological understanding of his predicament and becomes acquainted informally with

⁶⁸ Ibid., xviii.

⁶⁹ Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States*, 167.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 174.

⁷¹ Ibid., 171.

⁷² Madden, *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties*, 190.

Marxism. He does not go the full way at the novel's end, but there are indications that he will."⁷³

The "conversion novel" distinction does not adequately or appropriately clothe the Gastonia novels because the definition implies that the hero is a man, whereas the Gastonia novels champion their female heroines. Defining the hero as masculine undermines or even omits the feminism present in the novels. A masculine perspective does not leave room for feminist issues such as the knowledge and availability of birth control, marriage, or motherhood. A decidedly masculine hero of the controversial phenomena of the thirties—proletarian literature—supports Carol Manning's argument that women and blacks have been excluded from most descriptions of a post-World War I literary flowering.⁷⁴ Women and minorities certainly participated in America's great tradition of social protest. Readers should hear their voices in the literature that reflects this tradition and not, as Joan Hall suggests, "be drowned out by a domineering bass."⁷⁵

The Gastonia novels represent what Alice Kessler-Harris and Paul Lauter argue is the potential of fiction "to reflect most closely the unfettered consciousness of women in the decade."⁷⁶ Kessler-Harris and Lauter note that the books written by women about working-class people "do not sit comfortably inside most accounts of that tradition, nor do they conform precisely to theories of 'proletarian fiction' produced in the thirties.... Women writers of the Left chose to flout male convention and to write about themes that fell outside the frameworks of their male peers."⁷⁷ Such themes included marriage, motherhood, birth control, and race issues.

⁷³ Ibid., 190.

⁷⁴ Carol Manning, *The Female Tradition in Southern Literature* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 2.

⁷⁵ Joan Hall, "Review: The Female Tradition in Southern Literature," *South Atlantic Review* 59, no. 2 (May 1994): 135, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3200803> (accessed Sept. 27, 2009).

⁷⁶ Alice Kessler-Harris, and Paul Lauter, introduction to *Call Home the Heart*, by Fielding Burke (New York: The Feminist Press, 1983), x.

⁷⁷ Ibid., x-xi.

In fact, in addition to their characters, the personal lives of Burke, Lumpkin, and Page all reflect the “new woman” emerging in the 1890s. Kathy Ackerman notes:

Decades before the Jazz Age flapper became the familiar symbol of the rejection of middle-class propriety, the new woman had been challenging the foundations of a patriarchal society both in the United States and abroad. The new woman rejected such ‘truths’ as the maternal instinct and the role of child-rearing as the highest duty of women; instead of seeking fulfillment through marriage, she sought it through work outside the home.⁷⁸

Indeed, work outside the home characterized the lives of the Gastonia novelists, as well as their attempts to recognize and implement social justice. Similarly, the heroines of *Call Home the Heart*, *Gathering Storm*, and *To Make My Bread* exhibit qualities of the “new woman” as they find purpose in work outside the home, question their roles as wives and mothers, and later participate in union strikes.

John Salmond suggests that of the three Gastonia novelists considered in this study, Myra Page was the most distinctly Marxist and so “ideologically correct that she was ignored by reviewers to the right of the *New Masses*.”⁷⁹ Salmond’s observation seems fairly adequate considering the lack of critical scholarship that exists about the fiction of Myra Page. Unlike the work of her contemporaries, Burke and Lumpkin, *Gathering Storm* did not receive favorable reviews. Salmond notes Sylvia Cook’s assertion that, “novels as dialectically obtrusive as *Strike* or *Gathering Storm* quickly became relics of another time.”⁸⁰

Born in Newport News, Virginia, in 1897, Dorothy Markey (Myra Page) was a writer, union activist, and communist. Page maintained a romantic personal life that stands in contrast to

⁷⁸ Kathy Ackerman, *The Heart of Revolution* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 3-4.

⁷⁹ Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 188.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 189.

Burke and Lumpkin in that she married her first lover and managed a family. Page raised two children with John Markey, her husband of sixty-six years.⁸¹

Page became an official Communist Party member in 1925, and throughout the thirties she traveled as a journalist in the southern United States, Europe, the Soviet Union, and Mexico, reporting for leftist newspapers and journals such as the *Daily Worker* (the official paper of the CP of the USA), the *Sunday Worker*, the *New Masses* (a prominent journal), *Working Woman*, the *Southern Worker*, and *Soviet Russia Today*.⁸² Christina Baker notes that, “like [Page’s] activism, her writings reflected a passionate belief that people have within themselves the resources to create a better world.”⁸³ Such passion for self-efficacy is evident in Page’s own battle with cancer until her death in 1993.⁸⁴ Baker also documents that Page’s material for *Gathering Storm* came from her sociological research on North and South Carolina mill communities in *Southern Cotton Mills and Labor*.⁸⁵

Grace Lumpkin was born in 1892 in Milledgeville, Georgia, to an Episcopalian and aristocratic family.⁸⁶ She lived as a schoolteacher, YWCA director, and later as a staff member for *The World Tomorrow* and *The New Masses*.⁸⁷ She counted Myra Page and Mary Heaton Vorse among her acquaintances.⁸⁸ Suzanne Sowinska notes:

In 1929 she was sent south by the CP to organize among black sharecroppers and to observe and participate in the Communist-led Gastonia textile strikes. This trip provided Lumpkin with much of the material for her first novel. In writing about Gastonia, she saw

⁸¹ Christina Baker, *In a Generous Spirit: A First-Person Biography of Myra Page* (Champaign: Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois, 1996), xix.

⁸² *Ibid.*, xviii.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, xviii.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, xxi.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, xviii.

⁸⁶ Suzanne Sowinska, introduction to *To Make My Bread*, by Grace Lumpkin (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), viii.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, x-xi.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, xiv.

a way to connect her nascent awareness of radical political agenda and her prerogative to create art that would serve the proletariat with the landscape of her youth.⁸⁹

Although she was adamantly pro-communist in the 1920s, Lumpkin never became an official party member. After nearly a decade-long relationship with her lover Michael Intrator, a painful abortion, and later, stressed relations with the CP, she dropped all ties with the party in 1939.⁹⁰ Before her death in 1980, Lumpkin retired to Columbia, South Carolina, where she joined the Christian Freedom Foundation, an interfaith council of anti-Communist Christians, and never again spoke positively about her first novel, *To Make My Bread*.⁹¹ John Salmond maintains that Lumpkin's work, "whose ideological impetus was much less obvious [than Page's,] was nevertheless so well thought of in party circles, that it was awarded the 1932 Maxim Gorky Prize, while at the same time it received a favorable review in the *New York Times*."⁹²

Like Page, Fielding Burke (Olive Tilford Dargan) wrote under a pen name during the tumultuous Thirties. Burke was born in 1869 in Grayson County, Kentucky, the same year in which Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony formed the National Woman Suffrage Association.⁹³ Burke taught public school at the age of fourteen and at twenty-four, attended Radcliffe.⁹⁴ After working as a stenographer and private secretary for a rubber manufacturer, Burke wrote extensively, publishing poems, plays, novels, and articles for *Atlantic Monthly* and *Scribner's*.⁹⁵ After postponing marriage for several years with Pegram Dargan, the couple

⁸⁹ Ibid., xii-xiii.

⁹⁰ Ibid., xii, xv, xviii.

⁹¹ Ibid., xxi.

⁹² Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 188.

⁹³ Ackerman, *The Heart of Revolution*, 1.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 2-3.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 4-5.

eventually wed and maintained a somewhat estranged relationship, including a three-year separation during which Burke traveled to England.⁹⁶

After a disappointing miscarriage at age 38 and the death of Pegram, Burke settled in Asheville, North Carolina, and wrote until her death in 1968.⁹⁷ Unlike the journalistic careers of Page and Lumpkin, Burke's activism manifested itself primarily in her fiction. Although she espoused leftist beliefs and associated with prominent Communist Party members such as Rose Pastor Stokes, Burke did not officially become a member of the party.⁹⁸

John Salmond observes that most critics, then and now, tend to agree that Burke is by far the best of the Gastonia novelists in terms of literary merit.⁹⁹ He writes, "*The New Masses* considered her work among the pioneer novels in the literature of the American working class. Of all the Gastonia novels it most successfully transcends issues of ideology and class to deal with problems of a universal nature."¹⁰⁰ Her interest in the strike certainly possesses a unique intensity since it involved the people with whom she lived and worked and her attention to regional dialect and customs, as well as her character development contribute to her accomplishments as a writer. More than the other Gastonia novels considered here, Burke delves into the complexities of woman and worker, and *Call Home the Heart* offers readers a most realistic representation of work and struggle.

Paula Rabinowitz emphasizes that recent feminist attempts to recover lost women writers have, for the most part, ignored the 1930s as a fertile era of literary production. She argues, "women's writing in the 1930s indicates a desire to explore the complex relationships among

⁹⁶ Ibid., 5-11.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 7-17.

⁹⁸ Anna Shannon, biographical afterword to *Call Home the Heart*, by Fielding Burke (New York: The Feminist Press, 1983), 433.

⁹⁹ Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 188.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 188.

sexual, gender, racial, and class oppressions, a project that should resonate for many feminist scholars today.”¹⁰¹ A resurrection of *Call Home the Heart*, *To Make My Bread*, and *Gathering Storm* reveals the richness of the decade and shed light on the literary feminist activity between the struggle for female suffrage and the women’s rights movement of the 1960s. It is imperative that students and scholars alike explore women’s experience between the two movements. For one, the voices of Burke, Lumpkin, and Page indicate that women have struggled continually throughout time, that their experiences do not exist as isolated developments recorded in textbooks. There exists richness between Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Betty Friedan, and that vibrancy and opulence deserves our attention.

¹⁰¹ Paula Rabinowitz, *Writing Red* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1987), 2.

CHAPTER 3

ECOFEMINISM

Ecofeminism is a theory that has evolved from various fields of feminist inquiry and activism. Also branded a third-wave feminist movement by scholars such as Noel Sturgeon, ecofeminism has grown rapidly since the 1980s and encompasses various disciplines such as religious studies, philosophy, political science, art, biology, literature, and women's studies.¹ Heather Eaton and Lois Lorentzen understand ecofeminism as a third wave feminism as well and note the movement's response to ecological crises and gender concerns, while promoting antimilitarism and peace.² Greta Gaard posits, "Drawing on the insights of ecology, feminism, and socialism, ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature."³ In other words, essential to ecofeminist thought is the notion that all oppressions share common roots. These roots stem from patriarchal and hierarchal structures that stress duality, or dominance of one over the other.

According to Karen Warren, "important connections exist between how one treats women, people of color, and the underclass on one hand, and how one treats the nonhuman natural environment on the other."⁴ She argues that a major project of ecofeminist philosophy is establishing the nature of these social connections and determining which ones are potentially

¹ Noel Sturgeon, "The Nature of Race: Discourses of Racial Difference in Ecofeminism," in *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, ed. Karen J. Warren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 260, 262.

² Heather Eaton and Lois Lorentzen, eds., *Ecofeminism and Globalization: Exploring Culture, Context, and Religion* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 5.

³ Greta Gaard, "Living Interconnections with Animals and Nature," in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, ed. Greta Gaard (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 1.

⁴ Karen Warren, "Taking Empirical Data Seriously: An Ecofeminist Philosophical Perspective," in Warren, 3.

liberating for both women and nonhuman nature.⁵ Warren also suggests that there is not one ecofeminist philosophy, but many. She notes, “Ecofeminism has roots in the wide variety of feminisms (e.g., liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, radical and social feminisms, black and Third World feminisms).”⁶ Regardless of their differing theoretical frameworks, ecofeminists share a common praxis of challenging all forms of oppression, and practitioners stress the interconnectedness of humans and the natural environment. Ecofeminists understand that the consequences of human behaviors are circular, not linear, and as a result of myopic perspectives and policies concerning the environment, women are disproportionately affected in terms of being dispossessed, overlooked, and overworked.

This thesis examines the Gastonia novels through the lens of ecofeminism and draws on the philosophical and theoretical research in Karen Warren’s *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, Greta Gaard’s *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, and Heather Eaton and Lois Lorentzen’s *Ecofeminism and Globalization: Exploring Culture, Context, and Religion*. The thesis operates from Gretchen Legler’s definition of ecofeminist literary criticism which “offers a unique combination of literary and philosophical perspectives that gives literary and cultural critics a special lens through which they can investigate the ways nature is represented in literature and the ways representations of nature are linked with representations of gender, race, class, and sexuality.”⁷ A rereading of the Gastonia novels through the insights of ecofeminist literary criticism will demonstrate their continued significance as part of America’s literary heritage.

⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁷ Gretchen Legler, “Ecofeminist Literary Criticism,” in Warren, 227.

Some of the major tenets of ecofeminism this thesis addresses include feminizing nature and animals, exploiting the female body, romanticizing nature, and how maintaining human/nature dualism creates relationships of power. Karen Warren maintains, “The exploitation of nature and animals is justified by feminizing them; the exploitation of women is justified by naturalizing them.”⁸ In other words, exploitation is justified when nature and animals are given female characteristics or qualities. At the same time, women are exploited because they are described as being close to nature. The Gastonia novels reveal this principle through the difficult lives of their women characters, and Lumpkin’s “she-bear” in *To Make My Bread* reveals how sexist-naturist language creates and justifies sexual dominance. In regard to the exploitation of the female body, the Gastonia novels reveal how environmental destruction and patriarchal structures restrict many women’s lives to poverty and powerlessness. This thesis demonstrates this concept through a discussion of the novels’ treatment of marriage, motherhood, birth control, and health concerns that the women characters must endure. Also included in this study is an analysis of the sentimentalizing of women and nature, particularly in Burke’s *Call Home the Heart*, and how the idealization of nature ignores the parallel devaluation of women. The paper addresses the human/nature dualism that has remained a starting point for ecofeminist theory and how the separation of human from nature contributes to the oppression of women characters, their homes, and their communities.

The Gastonia novels offer a unique space for interdisciplinary study. Ecofeminism contributes the necessary insight into the link between the abuse of power on personal, political, and economic levels that underlies the human oppression and environmental exploitation experienced by the novels’ characters and communities. A resurrection of the Gastonia novels

⁸ Karen Warren, “Taking Empirical Data Seriously,” in Warren, 12.

through the framework of ecofeminism will contribute to the scholarly discourse regarding this maturing theory as well as intensify the critical body of work concerning the Gastonia novels themselves.

CHAPTER 4

A FEMINIST STATEMENT: CLASS, GENDER, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

When speaking about the labor struggles of the 1930s, and in particular the swelling ranks of industrial unions, Mary Heaton Vorse proclaimed, “A women’s movement has arisen which is the most vigorous expression that the working women of this country have ever known.”¹ The works of Burke, Lumpkin, and Page reflect such a movement, and their fiction certainly displays an artistic and “vigorous expression.” Although modern readers initially may strain to uncover the feminist perspectives of the Gastonia novelists, the feminist visions of these authors remain present. In fact, a distinctly feminist agenda fuels the novels’ themes, especially when one reads the novels together and not in isolation from one another. In her own way, each author tackles crucial aspects of the female experience including religion, marriage, and motherhood. Read together, the Gastonia novelists also articulate a strong ecofeminist expression that demonstrates a unique correlation between the state of the natural environment and a woman’s experience of oppression.

In an effort to explain the importance of the material written by women such as the Gastonia novelists and their profound influence on acclaimed writers such as Tillie Olsen, Deborah Rosenfelt points to the socialist-feminist literary tradition. She argues for the tradition’s “informing consciousness, its profound understanding of class and sex and race as shaping influences on people’s lives.”² She maintains:

¹ Mary Heaton Vorse, *Labor’s New Millions* (New York: Arno & The New York Times, 1969), 17.

² Deborah Rosenfelt, “From the Thirties: Tillie Olsen and the Radical Tradition,” in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*, ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York: Methuen, 1985), 218.

Literary historians like Walter Rideout and Daniel Aaron have traced the outlines of a radical literary tradition in America, composed of two waves of twentieth-century writers influenced by socialism in the early years, by communism in the thirties, who had in common an attempt to express a predominantly Marxist view toward society. At the intersections of these larger traditions is a line of women writers, associated with the American left, who unite a class consciousness with a feminist consciousness in their lives and creative work, who are concerned with the material circumstances of people's lives, who articulate the experiences and grievances of women and of other oppressed groups—workers, national minorities, the colonized and the exploited—and who speak out of a defining commitment of social change.³

Sadly, Rosenfelt omits the names of Fielding Burke and Myra Page throughout her discussion, but she does include the contributions of Grace Lumpkin. Rosenfelt astutely observes that the very assemblages of class, race, and sex constitute the fabric of reality as people live it.⁴ Indeed, it is their feminist content that makes the Gastonia novels truly a form of subversive fiction rooted in social realism. In addition to their feminist expressions, ecocriticism helps articulate reasons why the Gastonia novels have universal significance and demonstrates ways in which that significance could be understood and applied to the lives of readers.

The work of the Gastonia novelists demonstrates that literature has an obligation to deepen consciousness and facilitate social change. Rosenfelt deems this consciousness part of “our inheritance from the radical tradition.”⁵ Proponents of ecocriticism such as Glen Love extend this obligation to environmental subjects and concerns, the challenge being for such studies to explore rural and urban, social-justice, and minority and gender concerns from an “ecologically conscious point of view.”⁶ In other words, Love argues how social concerns directly relate to the environment, and how, in fact, one cannot separate social issues from ecological ones. This interdisciplinary intersection of social concerns in the form of gender,

³ Ibid., 218.

⁴ Ibid., 245.

⁵ Ibid., 245.

⁶ Glen Love, *Practical Ecocriticism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 29.

class, and race with environmental concerns such as pollution, mining, mountain top removal, or deforestation, resonates well with the themes of the Gastonia novels and their shared link of place in Appalachia. A strong link exists between the environmental concerns of Appalachia and the feminist visions of the women novelists, a link that has remained distinguishable throughout time in the works of other writers as well, such as Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Edith Summers Kelley, Wilma Dykeman, Harriette Arnow, Denise Giardina, and now, Lee Smith, Barbara Kingsolver, Ann Pancake, and Bobbie Ann Mason.

As part of their feminist statement, Burke, Lumpkin, and Page employ the objective correlative, a literary device that allows nature to reflect and intensify the character's moods and experiences. The natural environment mirrors the plights of the women as the mills destroy their surrounding landscapes through excessive deforestation. The mills pillage the Earth for her natural resources, leaving her withered and unable to sustain herself. In the name of God, mill preachers use the power of the church to rob women of their physical and emotional well being, leaving them shriveled and barren as well. In his autobiographical work *Proletarian Journey*, CP member and organizer of the Loray Mill Strike Fred Beal even professes that in order to save the mill company the expense of furnishing bathtubs for the company houses, ministers preached that God was opposed to taking baths.⁷ Burke, Page, and Lumpkin infuse their novels with fanatic preachers and mill administrators that claim, "The Lord chasteneth those whom He loveth" as an excuse for their exploitive practices.⁸ The connection between the women and their environment (both natural and man-made places) serves a dual purpose. On one hand, the objective correlative and ecofeminist theory demonstrate how human beings find themselves imbedded in the natural world and how literature reveals this relationship. On the other hand,

⁷ Fred Beal, *Proletarian Journey*, 127.

⁸ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 119.

ecofeminism strives to participate actively in solving current environmental issues. The Gastonia novels show that ecocriticism and feminist criticism need to inform personal and political actions. The authors specifically attack the local church because it suppresses feminist arguments and it shows how culture can effect a separation from nature. Ecofeminist Ivone Gebara argues:

Who decides on women's sin and proposed salvation? Who determines their authority, or lack of the same, within churches? It must be recognized that women in our churches and theology have been treated as ethical nonsubjects, incapable of making important decisions in their lives or the lives of their communities. Women's religious experience and way of perceiving the mystery of life have never been taken seriously by religious or clerical institutions dominated by male power.⁹

Gebara's argument resonates with the Gastonia novels because it highlights a key aspect of women's experience both then and now—how patriarchal institutions impose standards to control women's behavior.

Burke, Lumpkin, and Page weave together the intricate and often suffocating threads of the church's role in determining the fate of women in mill communities. Employing extensive historical evidence, each author demonstrates how the dominant paternalistic society placed tremendous burdens on the females of the household, specifically in regard to marriage and childbirth. In 1942, Gastonia historian Liston Pope maintained, "At nearly all points the relation between religions and economic institutions has been symbiotic, or reciprocal in character, whether in processes of institutional growth, social control, or cultural defense."¹⁰ The mill bosses needed an ever-abundant supply of labor; unregulated pregnancy assured them of a continuous stream of workers. The lives of Ishma, Bonnie, and Marge confirm this notion of "social control" because the characters find themselves the victims of numerous unwanted

⁹ Ivone Gebara, "Ecofeminism: An Ethics of Life," in Eaton and Lorentzen, 165.

¹⁰ Liston Pope, *Millhands & Preachers: A Study of Gastonia* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1942), 331.

pregnancies and long working hours without equal financial compensation, all of which were endorsed by the clergy who were owned and salaried by the mill company.

Throughout the novels, mill bosses view their workers, especially women, as commodities akin to the textiles their mills produce and the natural resources they expend to sustain their factories. Paula Eckhard notes that, “Religion, art, medicine, psychoanalysis, and other bastions of patriarchal power have objectified the maternal and disregarded female subjectivity.”¹¹ Likewise, Rita Felski notes feminist attempts to challenge dominant ways of thinking about sexuality, motherhood, and “other aspects of gendered subjectivity.”¹²

Unfortunately, but perhaps most realistically, it is not only the voices of domineering males that objectify women in the Gastonia novels but some of the voices from the female sex as well. As part of their aesthetic, the Gastonia novelists portray women of all levels of consciousness, the most impaired women being those most isolated by an environment that cuts them off from the intellectual and artistic activity of a broader feminist community. Joseph Urgo notes, “In creating the mimetic worlds of their novels, the novelists demonstrate that sexism and female subjugation are normative parts of their universe, in tune with the unnatural order of things in a patriarchal world.”¹³

Much like their notable contemporary Ellen Glasgow and her remarkable piece *Barren Ground*, *Call Home the Heart*, *To Make My Bread*, and *Gathering Storm* feature protagonists with religious mothers who border on the fanatic. These mothers succumbed to the oppressive

¹¹ Paula Eckard, *Maternal Body and Voice in Toni Morrison, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Lee Smith* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 1.

¹² Rita Felski, “Does the Concept of Feminist Aesthetics Facilitate or Inhibit Cultural Activism?” in *Styles of Cultural Activism: From Theory and Pedagogy, to Women, Indians, and Communism*, ed. Philip Goldstein (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1994), 209.

¹³ Joseph Urgo, “Proletarian Literature and Feminism: The Gastonia Novels and Feminist Protest,” *Minnesota Review* 24 (1985): 83.

views and policies of the local church, which advocated for typical conservative traditions of womanhood. Laviny, Emma, and Sal spent most of their lives scraping to get by in the Appalachian Mountains. They did not experience the benefits of education, and when their husbands died, the women became indebted to the graces of the local church and community store.

Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread* demonstrates the paternalism of the local church most effectively. Because the Swain family owns the local store, they also contribute the most financial assets to the local church. The Swains' wealth entitles them to make decisions regarding the church and its female members that would otherwise seem inappropriate. For example, before Eve McDonald's baptism, Sally Swain intercepts the girl's mother in her preparations to clothe her child for the ritual. In order to adjust the baptismal gown, made from "unbleached cloth sold at Swain's store," Sally rudely disrobes the girl, leaving her naked before the others, but the women find themselves unable to confront Sally because "all of them owed money at Swain's."¹⁴ Lumpkin writes, "[Eve] was not afraid of being naked. Only Sally Swain's pudgy hands tearing the robe off seemed to violate her, and she wanted to hide herself from the others."¹⁵ Interestingly enough, Lumpkin calls the girl Eve, a name that signifies all women, and her violation in the beautiful landscape that surrounds her seems reminiscent of the Garden of Eden. Like the mythical serpent, and with perfect alliteration of the double "s," Sally Swain deceives Eve in more ways than one. Besides the humiliation in the garden, Eve and the other women fall prey to the Swain's promise of protection of their lands. The Swains agreed to purchase farms from the starving families, promising the people that they could remain on the land. However, as soon as the Swains could make a profit, they sold the family farms to the

¹⁴ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 60.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

timber companies. Scenes such as the one described illustrate the tragedies endured by mountain women, especially those dispossessed and deluded by the local church. Assuredly, those with the most power in the church operated with the least sense of environmental stewardship. In their desire for profit, the local elite exploits the land and its people, leaving in their wake environmental and human systems that cannot sustain themselves. The Swain's decision to act entirely out of self-interest despite the negative impact on members of the lower class and the environment, underscores Lynn White's claim that, "Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen."¹⁶ Of course, the Swain family does not represent all Christians, but their pious attitudes and high rank in the church certainly highlight a religion that privileges human conditions over environmental ones, an absurd assumption given the fact that human beings exist as a component of, not something distinct from, the rest of the environment. Lumpkin's baptism scene and subsequent sale of important family farmland in Swain's *Crossing* simultaneously illustrates the oppression of women, the lower class, and the environment, a key component of ecofeminism—the devaluing of whatever is associated with women, emotion, animals, nature, and the body.

Through their protagonists, however, the Gastonia novelists articulate a feminist perspective, even an ecofeminist one, that reflects the "new woman," or an empowered woman that lives and dreams beyond the vices that stunt her mother. Without contestation, implicit in the plots of all three novels is an identifiable feminist protest. This protest speaks to a woman's need and right to control her own spirituality, body, and process of reproduction. The heroines of the Gastonia novels find a voice, just like the silenced Earth must find a voice against the institutions that threaten it. While the feminism of the Gastonia novels points to the marginalization of

¹⁶ Lynn White, "Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 9.

women and minorities, it also underscores Christopher Manes's notion of how the lack of environmental ethics "marginalizes nature, mutes it, pushes it back to a hazy backdrop against which the rational human subject struts upon the epistemological stage."¹⁷

Through the lives of the protagonists, readers clearly see how place continues to shape the lives of the women. While the rural communities and wilderness settings impress their own limitations on women, the bustling industrial towns impose their heavy yokes as well. While the protagonists seek to better their lives, the transition is not without its physical or emotional obstacles. Throughout all stages of the Gastonia novels, the heroines continually search for ecofeminist principles such as the right to be ethical subjects who think and act for themselves and the right to make choices about their bodies.

A casting off of the traditions of the mother was not an easy task for the Gastonia heroines. Lee Smith states, "Guilt is the great disease of Southern women."¹⁸ Paula Eckard furthers this notion. She writes, "The expectations imposed by patriarchal culture and the guilt internalized by female characters form complex layers of oppression that silence the maternal and limit self-actualization for women."¹⁹ Although the mothers of Ishma, Bonnie, and Marge exist as anything but silent, their voices adamantly serve as heavy, guilt-laden yokes for their daughters. Ishma, Bonnie and Marge certainly emerge as women whose traditional upbringings complicate their search for emotional and financial independence.

¹⁷ Christopher Manes, "Nature and Silence," in Glotfelty and Fromm, 16.

¹⁸ Quoted in Dannye Romine Powell, *Parting the Curtains: Interviews with Southern Writers* (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, 1994), 294.

¹⁹ Paula Gallant Eckard, *Maternal Body and Voice* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 5.

The treatment of motherhood in the Gastonia novels is more complex than the simple burden of it. The mothers of the heroines, for instance, do not fare well at all. Joseph Urgo argues:

Ishma's mother is condemnatory, Marge's mother is no more than a shadow, and Emma has little to do with her daughter, Bonnie. Perhaps the uniform protest against motherhood expressed by the heroines is rooted in their personal conception of the failures of their own mothers. Grandmothers, however, are idolized when they are present... Seeing motherhood as a threat to her own freedom, yet recognizing its fundamental purpose in getting herself born, the female novelist finds herself confronting what is often considered by men an obvious positive force with a stinging ambiguity and conflicting motivation.²⁰

For the novels' heroines, identifying childbearing as the chief threat to personal freedom is a direct challenge to mainstream and traditional religious ideology that idolizes that female function.

Fortunately, Burke's Ishma Waycaster partially matured under the direct supervision of Granny Starkweather, a robust and intelligent woman who taught Ishma how to read her Bible but how to skip those passages that did not conform to the old woman's views.²¹ However, by age thirteen, Ishma toils under the continual demands of her repressed mother, Laviny. In regard to her daughter's struggles, Laviny scolds, "Takes you a long time to larn you're nothin' but a woman," and "A gal she must marry, an' a wife she must carry."²² When Ishma struggles with navigating roles as wife and mother, Laviny prompts Ishma's husband Britt, "Ef you'd take a stick to Ishmalee onct or twict she'd soon be so's a body could do something with her."²³ After Ishma's departure from the family farm at Cloudy Knob, the locals gather to excommunicate her.

²⁰ Joseph Urgo, "Proletarian Literature and Feminism," 82.

²¹ Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 66.

²² *Ibid.*, 17, 20.

²³ *Ibid.*, 132.

Uncle Hewy asks, “Ain’t they churchin’ Ishmer today? Ain’t they readin’ her out?”²⁴ In similar vein, Laviny condemns Ishma’s decisions to run away, and upon Ishma’s return, Laviny charges her daughter, “You fergot this wuz an honest woman’s house...Didn’t I say it? What goes over the devil’s back will crawl under his belly, come time.”²⁵ Laviny, like so many other women stricken by poverty and husbandless households, holds up the oppressive, conservative traditions of the church—traditions that seem to indicate that marriage and childbearing are the only avenues afforded to honorable women.

Burke also shows how the church imposed upon Ishma’s freedom and creativity by attempting to govern her behavior on Sundays. Instead of spending her single, labor-free Sabbath sitting passively in the church house, Ishma combed her secret trails in the hills or read books in the barn loft, careful to replenish her “fount.”²⁶ Later, when Ishma lives and works in Spindle Hill, she notices the commonplace predicament that men and women work twelve hours a day, yet find themselves unable to feed and clothe their young. Burke asserts that this common problem was “upheld by the church and defended by the law. If a worker came out of his daze between law and church, and questioned it, he was a bad influence.”²⁷ Unlike her mother who crumbed underneath the church’s oppressive hand, Ishma refuses to accept its teachings and thus possesses more self-efficacy.

Reminiscent of Granny Starkweather is Old Marge, young Marge’s grandmother and mother of Sal in Page’s *Gathering Storm*. While Old Marge wields considerable influence over young Marge’s childhood years, she dies early in the novel, leaving Sal as the dominant female voice for young Marge. When young Marge questions, “Ma, why is it, mill folks has it so hard?

²⁴ Ibid., 159-160.

²⁵ Ibid., 392.

²⁶ Ibid., 14.

²⁷ Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 216.

Does God plan it thataway, or what?" Sal responds, "Everything's God's Will, Marge. It's hard, but we'll understand it bettah by 'n by. Parson Brown saws we gotta bear our cross in patience, 'n resign ourselves to God's mysterious Plan."²⁸ Sal's message to her daughter to "Stop fightin' and pray" stands in direct opposition to the message communicated by Old Marge, a message that challenged her granddaughter to "Fight 'em, chile, fight 'em."²⁹ The mixed messages cause Young Marge considerable grief and she labors under Lee Smith's "southern disease" of guilt. Page writes, "But did she, Marge Crenshaw, have faith? Not like Ma. Terrible doubts once more assailed her. She was wicked."³⁰ Like Ishma, Marge is made to feel despair for seeking her own vision, one that lies beyond the doctrines of the church. Unlike Ishma, Marge carries more guilt because of the conflicting voices from her maternal caregivers. Ishma retains more independence because she spent her formative years with Granny Starkweather and refused to attend church on Sunday mornings.

More deliberately than the other novelists, Page shows the corruption of the church. Despite Marge's desperate attempts to find peace and solace in her mother's religion, she alone notices that the preacher "made a practice of bringing comfort to the young girls."³¹ In other words, Marge realizes the preacher's inappropriate conduct towards young women, his patronizing attitude, and physical fondling of their bodies. She also questions the monetary collections forced upon the millhands. Page writes, "Why should mill folks, who have so little, deny their little ones to make presents to that huggin' pastor? He and his family were lots better off than anybody on Row Hill ever would be."³²

²⁸ Page, *Gathering Storm*, 56-57.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

³² *Ibid.*, 107.

On the other hand, Bonnie's mother Emma in *To Make My Bread* does take a stand against oppressive church practices when she follows her father out of the church house after he receives condemnation for playing musical instruments and dancing. Sadly, Emma makes her case in the shadow of a man rather than standing up for herself, but her rebellion, however minor, deserves attention. Lumpkin explains:

Everyone was looking at the place where Granpap had gone out of the door. Their heads were turned one way — away from the preacher. Then the heads came slowly around and neighbor was looking into neighbor's eyes. Emma was not looking at anyone. She wanted to follow Granpap. Must she get up and go with everyone watching? She clasped her hands together and unclasped them, twisting the shawl in her fingers. Her indecision lasted only a second. Almost as soon as Granpap was out of the door she was on her feet.³³

Yet Emma's independence from oppressive traditions seems to end with this scene, for she does not celebrate Bonnie's independence and creativity. Rather, Emma tries to conform Bonnie to conservative gender roles. Lumpkin certainly articulates an awareness that women often exist as the losers in a society where roles are rigidly sex-determined.

Emma seems to understand the burden pregnancy places upon poor women, yet she continues to live out traditional roles of mother and wife and impresses these upon her daughter. She laments of her own situation, "For the last two days she had almost hated [the children], because she could do nothing to help them in their misery."³⁴ Lumpkin expounds, "There was not a woman around that county who did not have one child or more in the ground. When a woman was ripe she gave birth, and if the child died, it did not help much, after the first days of sorrow, to weep. What was done was done."³⁵ Nonetheless, Emma reproaches Bonnie for seeking

³³ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 47.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

entertainment and meaning outside the domestic sphere and criticizes her “chicken tracks” sewing stitches and “always wanting to run around like boys instead of helping [her] Ma.”³⁶

Akin to Dorinda in *Barren Ground*, or to Judith in Edith Summers Kelley’s novel *Weeds*, Bonnie does not receive treatment equal to her brothers. While the floundering Basil and Kirk abandon the family or increase its burden, Emma rebukes Bonnie for her lack of attention to household chores. Lumpkin writes, “[Emma] almost had to smack [Bonnie] because she got in the way with her begging.”³⁷ While Kirk wastes time doting on the local beauty, Minnie, Emma reproaches Bonnie for not working hard enough. While the family talks of Kirk’s absence while planting gourd seed, Emma showers her anger on Bonnie rather than on her idle son. Lumpkin writes, “And suddenly, [Emma] left the gourd place and spoke sharply to Bonnie. ‘Now, Bonnie, you come on in. It’s about time we made supper.’”³⁸

Even though Emma admits that good men exist, she does not counter Ora’s proclamation that, “A man is a danger to every good woman and she’s got to know it...A danger to every woman good or bad. I tell my Sally to look on men that they’re deadly as rattlesnakes.”³⁹ While Ora apparently understands the dangers of unwanted pregnancy (at least in the unwed sense because she herself suffers from innumerable mouths to feed) and the need for birth control, Emma gives the impression that pregnancy remains an inevitable part of a woman’s fate.

Later in the novel, Emma and Bonnie encounter a Mrs. Phillips, whose personal doctor might help Bonnie achieve knowledge of birth control, but who “was turned off the Board of Health for not believing in God, and for other things.”⁴⁰ Instead of receiving such important and

³⁶ Ibid., 24.

³⁷ Ibid., 94.

³⁸ Ibid., 34.

³⁹ Ibid., 94.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 255.

life-altering information, Bonnie hears the words of the mill superintendent and four mill preachers. These men suggest that bearing children and enduring hard times are parts of their God-ordained lives. The preachers argue, “some day the rich will see your goodness: and bow before your spiritual wealth, that is greater than their material wealth, so that in the end they will endeavor to become like you, simple and good.”⁴¹ Unlike many of the mill hands, Bonnie does not believe these lies from the preachers. Both Ishma and Bonnie reject the condescending message of the mill preachers that “The Lord chasteneth those whom he loveth.”⁴²

After her mother dies and Bonnie herself becomes a mother, she declines to acquiesce to the popular notion that women must attend church and refrain from completing household chores on Sundays. For Bonnie, the Sabbath is the one day a week she has to spend with her children, and the only day for her to catch-up on urgent household chores like washing and mending clothes. Unlike Ishma, who uses the day to restore her own creativity and privacy, Bonnie must use the time for more work because she finds herself burdened with many children and an absent husband.

Each novelist symbolically begins and ends her novel with a birth and a death, and a strong voice speaks to the fact that the heroines desire control over their reproductive abilities. Because the women lack financial and educational resources, they display a limited understanding of the workings of birth control. Like the natural environment, the women are unable to choose how often a domineering force will impose its will upon them, leaving them with one more mouth to feed, one more person to care for in a landscape that already lacks enough resources for those residing in its midst. The Gastonia novels portray the frightening and perilous circumstance that pregnancy posits for these young protagonists. Burke and Page

⁴¹ Ibid., 269.

⁴² Ibid., 119, Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 173.

address the issue of birth control and abortion most openly and emphatically, while Lumpkin approaches the topic more discretely.

Rather than having her heroine directly raise the question of birth control or abortion, Lumpkin employs violent, symbolic imagery to illustrate the unfair burdens unplanned pregnancy places on women. For example, Emma must deliver her son with the aid of her father and must endure Kirk's judgment, which only adds to her humiliation and subservient position. Later, while Minnie is giving birth to a baby boy of dubious paternity, the men are outside the cabin cutting up and dividing the body of a "she-bear."⁴³ This grotesque dismembering of a female animal by men while women remain in the background also appears in Lee Smith's *Oral History* and Edith Summers Kelley's *Weeds* as a sort of trope for the oppression and parceling out of women. Regardless, death and desertion by their men leaves Emma, Minnie, and later Bonnie the sole providers for their children, an overwhelming and despondent task given their lack of resources and isolation in the mountains or entrapment in the mills. Men receive the fruit of the women's burdens—just as they divide up the carcass of the she-bear—and assume none of the responsibilities. The parceling out of the woman's body by domineering males exists as part of Lumpkin's symbolic argument for the rights of women to exert power over their own bodies and reproductive organs.

The colonization of the female body for both humans and animals is another key aspect of ecofeminism. Lori Gruen notes:

The categories "woman" and "animal" serve the same symbolic function in patriarchal society. Their construction as dominated, submissive "other" in theoretical discourse has sustained human male dominance. The role of women and animals in postindustrial society is to serve/be served up; women and animals are the used. Whether created as ideological icons to justify and preserve the superiority of men or captured as servants to

⁴³ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 97.

provide for and comfort, the connection women and animals share is present in both theory and practice.⁴⁴

The creation of a history in which man is separate from nature and superior to animals further establishes the domination and oppression of women. The fact that the women remain in the background during the mutilation of the she-bear also shows how the woman's body (being smaller, weaker, and reproductive) prevents her from participating in the hunt, or in other words, prevents her from being in the relevant, dynamic culture. She is inferior, the static backdrop to male activity. Gruen writes, "Her reproductive capacity and life-bearing activities stand in sharp contrast to the death-bringing activities that underlie culture."⁴⁵ Such a contrast establishes and maintains the subservient status of women and animals. Even the sexist-naturist language, "she-bear," creates, reinforces, and justifies sexual dominance.

It is also significant that the animal is a consumable body. Lumpkin writes, "Kirk's eyes were dreamy with thinking about the hunt and being at the end of it ready for a fine supper in front of the fire."⁴⁶ In fact, Kirk barely remembers that his mistress remains at home birthing his child while he stalks the mountains for meat. Carol Adams argues:

Meat's recognizable message includes association with the male role; its meaning recurs within a fixed gender system; the coherence it achieves as a meaningful item of food arises from patriarchal attitudes including the idea that the end justifies the means, that the objectification of other beings is a necessary part of life, and that violence can and should be masked. These are all a part of the sexual politics of meat.⁴⁷

Because the oppression of women and animals is interdependent, Adams recognizes the gender issues embedded in the eating of animals.

⁴⁴ Lori Gruen, "Dismantling Oppression: An Analysis of the Connection Between Women and Animals," in Gaard. 61.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 62.

⁴⁶ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 98.

⁴⁷ Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 14.

The disfigurement of the she-bear also sheds light on man and his relationship to his environment. Like their treatment of women, the men view nature as the object and themselves as the subject or themselves as user and the environment or women as what is used. Neil Evernden suggests, “one who looks on the world as simply a set of resources to be utilized is not thinking of it as an environment at all. Such a man is blind to all the aspects that make it an environment. The whole world is simply fodder and feces to the consumer.”⁴⁸ There seems to exist a distinct connection between the men’s understanding of their environment and the future for their families. The more a man views nature as “other” or “object,” the more likely he will exploit the very landscape that gives him autonomy. While the she-bear certainly provides sustenance for the starving families, a necessary evil of sorts, the scene also foreshadows how the mill machine will exhaust its natural and human “fodder” through unnatural and inhumane working conditions.

Another example of the nature/culture or human/nature dualisms present in patriarchal thought is Jim Wishart’s treatment of Ishma’s beloved Jersey cow and the family farm on Cloudy Knob in Burke’s *Call Home the Heart*. Rather than recognizing his role within nature, Jim asserts his superiority over the farmland and then ultimately over the women. Burke writes, “[Jim] felt that his supreme service [plowing] established him as master of the place and controller of its output. Such trivial work as grubbing, planting, hoeing and harvesting, gave Ishma no special rights as he could see.”⁴⁹ In fact, Jim’s management of the farm reduces it to a muddy, dilapidated mess and even his own children suffer from poor nutrition, lice, and bad hygiene.⁵⁰ Interestingly enough, Jim’s work consists of plowing, an activity symbolic of a

⁴⁸ Neil Evernden, “Beyond Ecology,” in Glotfelty and Fromm, 99.

⁴⁹ Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 15.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 16-19.

penetrating phallus that controls and marks the land. Jim deems Ishma's task of grubbing, hoeing, and harvesting as trivial, feminine, and weak. After his accident during the forest fire from which he suffers a broken back, Jim's attitudes toward family and farm spell further catastrophe for the women of Cloudy Knob. Burke pens, "Jim, true to his natural pace, recovered very leisurely, his disablement absorbing everything on the farm that could be turned into money. Jersey Belle went first."⁵¹ Jim views himself as master over the land and women. The ruin of the farm parallels his treatment of the women, and his decision to sell Jersey Belle, Ishma's favorite pet and hope for an independent future, further demonstrates Jim's devaluation of women. Jim treats both animals and Ishma as commodities, or items of property that can be bought and sold at his convenience.

Page tackles similar themes in *Gathering Storm*. Long before Page's Marge navigates the difficult terrain of marriage and childbearing, Page foreshadows the dangers that Marge will certainly face. She writes, "When Back Row returned home from work that evening, they found that Julie Perkins and her infant son were dead. What made it most bitter, all felt her death unnecessary. If a doctor had come in time, Earl wouldn't be there now in his shack, by two still bodies."⁵² The tragic story of Julie Perkins shows the precarious nature of childbirth for women of a marginalized lower class that depended upon the graces of a company physician. The tragedy also reveals how particularly debilitating and life-threatening pregnancy was for black women. Since Julie was a black woman living in the segregated "Back Row" quarters, her friends and family hope against all odds that "maybe this once, one of the four white doctors would come."⁵³

⁵¹ Ibid., 63.

⁵² Page, *Gathering Storm*, 67.

⁵³ Ibid., 66.

At an early age, Marge realizes the connections between an unwanted pregnancy and the poor house. Page writes, “[Marge] would never marry, she vowed to herself. She’d not be like Ma and the other women. Life was bad enough without a string of lil’uns coming along as regular as the seasons, weighing you down and sucking your spirit.”⁵⁴ Marge understands that unwanted pregnancy would keep her in poverty and indebted to the mill, the “hungry, wild beast.”⁵⁵ In fact, Marge initially loathes even the idea of sex and she views it as “a forbidden, evil thing that got you in the corner, and cursed you with extra mouths to feed.”⁵⁶ Rather than live like the other women in her community, Marge opts for the freedom she sees in solitude. Page writes, “While others walked arm in arm across the fields or spooned beneath the moonlight, Marge pored over a book, or struck out across the fields, alone.”⁵⁷

However, time, boredom, and hormones take their toll on Marge, and Page asserts that, “Marge’s pride in her independence was destined for a mighty fall.”⁵⁸ Bob, a young handsome stranger woos her, tossing her into a world of confusion. After their first kiss, Marge reacts as if he stole her spirit. Page writes, “One hand across her eyes, she started blindly across the fields, then, tripping, she slid to her knees and sat crouched, motionless, on the hard earth...huddled up like an old woman.”⁵⁹ Marge tries to convey her overwhelming feelings to Bob. Page describes, “Gladness, desire struggled against tormenting fear. Oh, how could she ever make him understand?”⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Ibid., 101.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 64.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 102.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 102.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 110.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 114-115.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 115.

Through scenes such as the ones previously described, Page reveals how endless poverty robs women of romance, even sexuality. Because Marge does not have knowledge of birth control, sexual relations ultimately mean further exploitation from the mill. A brood of children ultimately means no time for herself or her books, but it does mean that the mill bosses will have new workers to exploit and that the mother of the future new workers will be dependent on the mill. Marriage may mean submission to her husband, regardless of his future treatment of her. Since Bob earns more at the mill than Marge, the inevitability of a family means that Marge will remain financially dependent on him. Page shows that Marge's poverty forces her to choose between unfair decisions.

The notion of having to choose between inequitable decisions resonates with the other Gastonia novels and with many a novel written from an environmentally conscious, Appalachian perspective. For example, in *Call Home the Heart*, the Waycaster farm faces certain bankruptcy without Britt's dangerous job building roads for the timber company.⁶¹ While the temporary job provides extra cash for alleviating debt and purchasing seed, the timber company ultimately destroys the farmlands around Cloudy Knob, devastating most families' chances of remaining on their family plots. Similarly, Lumpkin's Swain's Crossing in *To Make My Bread* serves as an example of a defeated mountain town. Slowly but surely, countless men leave their farms for seasonal jobs at the lumber company.⁶² While the additional income helps the men feed their families, in the long run, the extractive industries destroy the only asset the people possess: their land. Without their farms, the mountain people must seek employment in the mills, places that promise almost certain injury, illness, even death.

⁶¹ Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 111.

⁶² Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 68.

Contemporary authors such as Bobbie Ann Mason continue to address similar concerns today. In Mason's collection of writings about mountain top removal, Ann Bates notes, "Since roughly half of the mining jobs are in mountain top removal operations, young people are forced to choose work that requires them to destroy their own land."⁶³ The Gastonia novels show that such tragedies burden women the most. While many men spend their time away from home, perhaps even drinking or squandering their hard earned money, the women remain behind with the difficult tasks of raising children, tending the farm, and avoiding starvation.

Nonetheless, Page's Marge and Bob eventually marry and soon after Marge finds herself pregnant and without a husband, since Bob must travel overseas to fight in the war. Page notes, "As [Marge] felt the child's kick against her side, a fierce resentment of this added burden went through her."⁶⁴ With a deceased mother and grandmother and a sister resigned to her lot in life as endless child-bearer, Marge hardly knows where to turn for aid. Marge seeks alternatives, and Page's sentiment merits the full quotation:

[Marge] had heard whispering among the women of how Miz Briggs had got rid of hers with a long carrot, shaved down at one end to a sharp point. But she'd come nigh to dying that time and had never got her strength back, since. Then Sara Hendricks, who'd used a hairpin straightened out to full length—they'd took her to the hospital and she'd died there of blood poisoning. The older women shook their heads, telling the younger ones, 'that's what you get for tryin' to interfere with God's laws.' Everybody knew how the rich city women kept from having kids. And if it came to the worst, there were doctors who'd operate, if you were influential and had money. But for those on the hill, there was nobody.⁶⁵

Here Page illustrates how class and feminism resonate. Marge understands that the upper class women possess the ability to control more of their destinies, whereas her lower class status

⁶³ Ann Bates, "Red Raspberries," in *Missing Mountains: We Went to the Mountaintop But It Wasn't There*, ed. Kristen Johannsen, Bobbie Ann Mason and Mary Ann Taylor-Hall (Nicholasville: Wind Publications, 2005), 36.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 175-176.

limits her choices, even her self-efficacy. While upper class women can afford doctors, privacy, and dignity in their choices, Marge's own people must suffer horrific pain from primitive techniques and instruments and possibly face death itself. By connecting Marge's struggle with the larger social milieu of her day, Page articulates a feminist criticism as defined by Paula Eckard, who maintains that "feminist criticism incorporates ideas about woman's body, language, and psyche, but interprets them in relation to the social contexts in which they occur."⁶⁶

In the end, Marge tries to abort her baby. Page writes, "Locking herself in the smell-laden toilet, Marge tried to bring on an abortion, like Miz Briggs had done, but her only results were loss of blood and a fever that reddened her pale cheeks and brightened her eyes."⁶⁷ Despite her efforts, Marge delivers a baby girl whose red hair and facial features resemble her father Bob. Like Ishma's Vennie, the unwanted sickly baby is a girl, an obvious symbol of the women's struggle with their own bodies, and the fact that their destinies are determined by their physiologies. While Page and Burke bestow health and vigor on baby boys and assign illness and death to baby girls, only male babies are born in Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread*. The tragic fate of the baby girls underscores the women's inability to make decisions regarding their own bodies. Lumpkin's exclusion of baby girls emphasizes the invisibility of women in a patriarchal society.

Unsurprisingly, Marge's baby lives a short, miserable life before dying of pellagra, essentially a disease of malnutrition, yet commonly diagnosed among women and children in mill towns. All three of the Gastonia novels depict women and children dying of pellagra, a curable and preventable disease. Because men traditionally made more money in the mills and

⁶⁶ Eckard, *Maternal Body and Voice*, 5.

⁶⁷ Page, *Gathering Storm*, 176.

were thus perceived as the hardest working bread winners, women tended to feed their husbands first, leaving themselves a diet lacking in protein, fruits, and vegetables. Carol Adams notes the phenomenon that sex-role assignments determine the distribution of meat. She contends, “When meat supply is limited, men will receive it.... Meat is a constant for men, intermittent for women, a pattern painfully observed in famine situations today. Women are starving at a rate disproportionate to men.”⁶⁸ If pregnancy or dangerous working conditions did not take the lives of mill women, malnutrition in the form of pellagra did. Because the women must live in mill villages with little, if any, fertile land available to them for cultivating plots for vegetable gardens, they cannot attempt to remedy their conditions. As the women’s health deteriorates, so do their surrounding landscapes. The dusty, ugly, infertile streets of the villages mirror the diseased women and children. The male-dominated industries that attempt to subdue and conquer the environment rob the women of their chance to reap a sustaining harvest from the Earth’s soil.

Like Marge, Burke’s Ishma Waycaster struggles to reconcile her independence with a desire for romance. After her eighteenth birthday, Rad Bailey and Britt Hensley pursue Ishma, but “Neither of the lovers saw much of her. She had never shared her high trail with anyone.”⁶⁹ Ishma tells her mother and sister that she will never have children of her own, yet Bainie declares, “Come ten year you’ll have four er five o’ yer own to clean up. You won’t be so sugar-mouthed then.”⁷⁰ Ishma responds, “Ten years? Ten thousand is more like it!”⁷¹

But like young Marge, Ishma’s pride eventually gives way to Britt Hensley, an Orpheus of sorts whose musical talents on the “frensharp” gather him fame across Cloudy Knob. Burke

⁶⁸ Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat*, 26.

⁶⁹ Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 15.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

describes, “Women wept over him till he longed to get away and go fishing. But he wouldn’t have his father to go with him, and this thought twisted his mouth again and set the women weeping anew over his bright head.”⁷² Perhaps it is worth noting that the love interests for Marge and Ishma (and even for Glasgow’s Dorinda) share the common characteristic of red hair. In all probability the symbolic color reflects desire and not the Communist Party, because Bob and Britt (or Jason Greylock, for that matter) do not sympathize with party objectives.

However, the Gastonia novelists certainly employ the color with high frequency, suggesting other connections with the Communist Party. For instance, Fielding Burke specifically mentions Laviny’s red handkerchief, Sarah Starkweather’s red tomatoes, Ishma’s table with its red berries, the forest fire’s red blaze, and Amos’s red hair (the organizer from the National Textile Union). Lumpkin describes a red bird feather, a red silk waist with glass buttons, a red fascinator, a string of red beads, red calico, a red handkerchief, a red ribbon, and John’s red arm band which signifies his membership in the CP. Page gives red hair to Jake Martin, a union man and mentor to Tom, and assigns the name Red to one of the organizers from the National Textile Workers Union.

Regardless of Britt’s handsome traits and his color a symbol of desire, Ishma first denies his advances. When Brit proposes, Ishma responds, “No, Britt. That is one thing that will *never* happen... You think I’m going into that with Bainie and her kids right before my eyes?”⁷³ In essence, Ishma believes that marriage ultimately dooms her to the life of her sister, Bainie, who bore “seven children before she was thirty, and [lived] a life that had never known a single enthusiasm.”⁷⁴ When pressured by her suitors, Ishma inquires, “Why does everybody think a

⁷² Ibid., 33.

⁷³ Ibid., 37.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 16-17.

girl's got to marry? I'm going to have something else...[Life] oughtn't to be all work and dirt and younguns."⁷⁵ Ishma feels certain that marriage will force her and Britt into suffocating roles like Jim and Bainie. Here Burke shows the dismal choice marriage offers a woman when she does not have access to birth control. Ishma knows that her "something else" will be the first thing placed on the altar of sacrifice when the inevitable brood arrives.

Nevertheless, Ishma finally decides to wed Britt after a triumphant scene where Britt rescues Ishma's Jersey Belle from the clutches of Jim and Alec. Interestingly enough, Burke describes this scene immediately after Ishma falls asleep with the determination to leave the mountain in the morning. Britt wins Ishma's favor because he returns her prized possession, a symbolic peace offering that demonstrates he is not the same man as Jim Wishart. Although Ishma agrees to marry Britt, her acquiescence remains hesitant. Burke describes Ishma's "I do," as "Oh—well."⁷⁶ And when Ishma peruses the catalogue for her wedding dress, she looks with "fearful joy" at the lace gown.⁷⁷

Ishma finds herself pregnant soon after her marriage and she experiences a miserable delivery because of intense physical pain and lack of privacy from her extended family and Bainie's brats. When Britt promises her that "next time we'll be to ourselves," Ishma responds with a "vehemence that bewildered him...There'll be no next time!"⁷⁸ Within a month of her son's birth, Ishma detaches herself from Ned's existence. Burke writes, "Life, the future, [Ishma's] plans, were not so clear as they had been. She felt mentally clamped down, in the way that she had felt physically cramped the night Ned was born. How she had wanted room for her

⁷⁵ Ibid., 49.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 57.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 59.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 78.

body! The walls had pressed in against her, the presence of the people, taking up good space, smothered her.”⁷⁹

Not long after Ned’s birth, Ishma delivers sickly twins that die in their infancy, and Ishma tries to understand why she and Britt still eke out a debt-ridden existence in the same rustic cabin with Bainie’s family. After countless attempts to improve their situation and to her own horror, Ishma realizes she is with child again. Burke writes, “Ishma shivered, and a paralyzing pall settled down upon her when she discovered that there was to be another child on the mountain, not Bainie’s but her own.”⁸⁰

Ishma’s final pregnancy drains her of energy and cements the idea that she must leave Cloudy Knob. In a desperate effort to convince her brother Steve to take her with him, Ishma declares, “My way is down the mountain, not up.”⁸¹ Again, Burke shows how unwanted pregnancy robs poor women of their choices and opportunities. Steve responds, “Nobody wants a woman in your fix, Ish.... A woman’s a woman. She’s bound to carry the baggage in this life. They’s no gittin’ out of it for her. A man can walk off any time, but a woman kain’t. God, or Nature, or something we kain’t buck against, has fixed it that way.”⁸²

Because Ishma has no money and her condition impairs her ability to work a job, she must flee the mountain with Rad, a man she does not love. In fact, Ishma must engage in a prostitution of sorts. Burke explains, “The wall has a gate. Here was a way to open it. At that moment Rad was hardly a human being to her. He was a friendly force who would help her turn

⁷⁹ Ibid., 78.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 114.

⁸¹ Ibid., 151.

⁸² Ibid., 149.

the lock and let her pass out. She had forgotten her own body; and if she could have remembered it, she would have held insignificant anything that could be done to it.”⁸³

Ishma lives “numbly and almost mute” until her child is born.⁸⁴ Like Edith Summers Kelley’s Judith, Ishma lives as a slave and prisoner to her sickly daughter Vennie, and declares that knowledge of birth control “may mean whether I’m going to live or die.”⁸⁵ Unfortunately, Burke shows that Ishma and Genie must learn about birth control from a man, Derry Unthank, and that Pace, Genie’s husband, must be the one to convince Rad that Ishma deserves the right to decide if she will become pregnant again. Rad thunders, “A man’s got to have his rights.”⁸⁶ Although Pace persuades Rad to change his practices, no discussion abounds as to Ishma’s rights as a woman.

In a poignant scene preceding Vennie’s death and consequently, Ishma’s liberation, Ishma wrestles with the concept of motherhood. Burke writes:

What did Vennie matter? Was [Ishma’s] life to be forever bound up in a child’s? Was her horizon always to be Vennie’s horizon? Was she never to reach the world?...She had heard people say that they were fulfilled in their children, but for her the mother’s sacrificial gesture could have no meaning. She would never find the slightest sense of self-completion in Vennie. Her intelligence was too steady on the job for such an illusion.⁸⁷

Burke’s decision to probe Ishma’s raw emotions and her construction of Ishma’s struggle for her own freedom certainly makes *Call Home the Heart* the superior Gastonia novel. Ishma’s confrontation with motherhood itself differs from Marge’s experience in *Gathering Storm*. While Page emphatically argues the importance for poor women to exercise the right to birth control and abortion, she does not imply that perhaps for some women, motherhood itself exists as an

⁸³ Ibid., 155-156.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 178.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 194.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 196.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 231.

empty avenue. Instead, Page seems to suggest that motherhood is rewarding as long as one has the time and financial means to afford a child. Page does not delve deeper into notions of motherhood's ability or inability to offer self-completion or fulfillment.

Although Ishma returns to Britt and her home on Cloudy Knob and Marge and Bonnie do not seek divorces from their defeated husbands, the Gastonia novels certainly reveal how marriage often subjugated women. The feminist perspectives that emerge from the novels are at odds with Walter Rideout's general conclusion about proletarian novels and human relations. Rideout maintains, "The number of successful marriages is extremely large in this fiction, and the workers' sexuality is almost always considered in a matter-of-fact way as evidence of healthy vigor."⁸⁸ Obviously, Rideout entertains this faulty assumption because he did not consider feminist approaches to the genre.

Lumpkin's Bonnie in *To Make My Bread* experiences a coming of age story quite dissimilar to Marge and Ishma. Lumpkin's feminist vision does not reveal itself until after Bonnie marries and delivers children. In fact, Lumpkin appears to articulate the weakest feminist voice until the reader reaches the conclusion of the novel and realizes that Bonnie represents the actual woman striker, Ella May Wiggins. Instead of depicting the struggle of a girl turned woman and her attempts to reconcile personal independence with romance, Lumpkin uses a single event, the Christmas boxed-lunch social, to plunge Bonnie into romance and womanhood. Like Marge, Bonnie falls in love with a strange boy, one she has never seen before, but he does not share the characteristic red hair akin to Bob or Britt. Instead, his "brown silky" hair and charming compliments capture Bonnie's heart.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Rideout, *Radical Novel*, 219.

⁸⁹ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 271.

Sadly, Lumpkin describes Bonnie's immediate attraction to and acceptance of Jim Calhoun's advances despite her knowledge of the oppressed women in her community and family. While Marge and Ishma perceive the unfair and miserable circumstances of their mothers, sisters, and friends and subsequently plan differently for themselves, Bonnie does not entertain such dilemma. In fact, a rather distasteful scene occurs where Jim "buys" Bonnie via bidding on her boxed lunch, and Lumpkin describes them as happily married and "fine lovers" within the first six months of their encounter.⁹⁰

Lumpkin weaves a cautionary tale of sorts in that she uses the naïve optimism of Bonnie and Jim to show the power the mill still possessed over the people, for the couple believe that their diligent industry will help them achieve a better life than the ones led by their parents, indeed, that they "could do anything."⁹¹ Here, Lumpkin's feminist vision seems weak at best, for the quickly impregnated Bonnie makes plans to become "indispensable to the management" by learning each machine so that bosses will grant her leave of absence when her child arrives.⁹² Bonnie's simple trust in the men who victimize and systematically kill her Granpap and mother exists as anything but empowering.

On the other hand, since the war has robbed her of Jim's contributions, Lumpkin shows that in some ways, Bonnie does not have a choice. Lumpkin writes:

Even when Jim left for the war along with many other men of the village, [Bonnie] was sorrowful, but not discouraged. Her baby was coming and with John's help they could keep Emma and Granpap. She could work in the mill, if she kept well enough until the last minute. Most of the women did this, and though some of them died, Bonnie never thought of death as her part. She was to live and do great things before death came to her in a fine old age, a time too far off for her to imagine.⁹³

⁹⁰ Ibid., 274-275.

⁹¹ Ibid., 275.

⁹² Ibid., 277.

⁹³ Ibid., 275-276.

Although Lumpkin does not overtly address birth control or abortion, she does indicate the burden pregnancy places on women. Ora and Bonnie continually find themselves pregnant; each pregnancy means another mouth to feed, which means that the women must remain that much more dependent on the textile mill for their livelihood. Even the women's sexuality is under the firm hand of the mill superintendents.

Lumpkin and Page connect the plights of Bonnie and Marge, indeed all the textile workers and Appalachia itself, to national and global matters as well. Jim and Bob, the women's husbands respectively, must leave for the World War. Their departures coincide with the births of their children, events that leave the women even more dependent on the mill company. First and foremost for Bonnie, this means a shift in her physical environment. Instead of residing in her small farmhouse on the outskirts of town where she maintained a certain amount of privacy and autonomy, Bonnie must relocate to the mill village where she accrues more debt in the form of installment plans for furniture and medicine. Lumpkin writes, "Wages were higher than they had been. People said it was because of the war. But the war also took money from them, for rich people from the town were continually coming to the mill to make what they called drives for money, and all in the mill were expected to give their part toward saving the nation from the enemy."⁹⁴ Through her anti-war sentiment, Lumpkin reveals how patriotism in the form of capitalistic ventures continued to perpetuate the plight of the workers. She also shows how the men returned from war restless and disillusioned, even angry that "women who were paid lower wages had been given their places."⁹⁵

After Bob's departure, Page's Marge loses her baby to pellagra because she cannot earn enough money to feed the infant adequately. She also loses privacy and autonomy because she

⁹⁴ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 276-277.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 283.

must take on boarders in her already small company house on Row Hill. Like Lumpkin, Page shows how members of the upper class, as well as mill superintendents, used patriotism as a tool against the working class. Page describes a scene where a mill informant berates the workers: “To hell with you. Ain’t you got no patriotism? Doan you know your country’s fightin’ a war for democracy, ‘n you ain’t right to strike now?”⁹⁶ Akin to Jim, Bob returns injured and disillusioned. Neither the government nor the company will compensate the couple for the injuries he sustains on the job and on the battlefield, leaving the couple few options and a bleak chance for survival. Lumpkin and Page surely echo Sartre’s sentiment that “When the rich wage war it’s the poor who die.”⁹⁷

Both novelists reveal how war destroys civil relations between men and women. Male demands (physical and sexual) thus upset the natural relation between a woman and her body. Although the men return home virtually useless to their wives, they manage to impregnate them before dying. Again, the act of childbearing signifies a wasted potential for women like Marge and Bonnie. In this sense, the women resemble what Joseph Urgo argues as “potential leaders stifled by sex-role typification.”⁹⁸ Rather than acting as leaders, the women take their cues from the actions of their brothers or husbands. They spend most of their time at home or in the mill, continually fretting over how to feed their children. The strike is important for them, but it never receives their full attention. Petra Kelly argues, “There is a clear and profound relationship between militarism, environmental degradation, and sexism.”⁹⁹ The Gastonia novels reflect this notion because as the men leave for war, life in the villages becomes more difficult for the

⁹⁶ Page, *Gathering Storm*, 191.

⁹⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Devil and the Good Lord*, 1951, act 1.

⁹⁸ Urgo, “Proletarian Literature and Feminism,” 75.

⁹⁹ Petra Kelly, “Women and Power,” in Warren, 114.

women who must struggle against poverty in the form of malnutrition and poor living conditions in a wasted, dirty landscape.

To her credit, Lumpkin models her ballad composer Bonnie after the genuine Ella May Wiggins, an Appalachian grassroots music composer who combined traditional balladry with leftwing politics to contribute to a remarkable young song genre just prior to and during the upheaval of the Great Depression. Her work with the Communist-led labor uprising in Gastonia, then the textile manufacturing capital of the American South and, perhaps, the entire world, places her alongside other notable figures in the struggle for social change in the American South. According to Patrick Huber:

Before her ringing Appalachian alto could be captured on a phonograph record, she was gone. Ella May Wiggins, the ‘poet laureate’ of the Gastonia Textile Strike of 1929, peer of southern folk-music giants as Harlan coal-mining singer Aunt Molly Jackson, Arkansas sharecropper poet John Handcox, and Okie balladeer Woody Guthrie, was silenced by a mill thug’s bullet on September 14, 1929. She was only twenty-nine years old, but she left in her wake an extraordinary legacy of protest songs and union activism.¹⁰⁰

Lumpkin remains unique in her decision to model her protagonist after an authentic woman activist. Although Page includes the character Ella May, most obviously representative of Ella May Wiggins, Burke opts for a more fictionalized character, Ella Ramsey. While the authors did not overtly acknowledge that they used Ella May Wiggins as a model, a reader is able to make the inference because characters like Bonnie reflect numerous similarities to the real woman. Some of the similarities include Bonnie’s affinity for protest ballads, her large family, her work in organizing among the races, the location of her house, and her untimely death.

¹⁰⁰ Patrick Huber, “Mill Mother’s Lament: Ella May Wiggins and the Gastonia Textile Strike of 1929,” *Southern Cultures* 15, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 82, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/scu/summary/v015/15.3.huber.html> (accessed Jan. 22, 2011).

Unlike her contemporaries, Lumpkin ends her novel with the tragic death of her heroine, whereas Burke and Page place their heroines in the front lines of the coming revolutions. Sadly, Lumpkin closes her novel with male energy instead of female energy. The final chapter of *To Make My Bread* features a discussion by John McClure and John Stevens in which they hope that their efforts “[are] just the beginning.”¹⁰¹ While the men ponder hope for the future, Ora and Zinie remain in the background, fretting over the care of the late Bonnie’s children. Laura Hapke observes, “the focus quickly shifts to the male-propelled events of the strike...it is the experience of martyrdom that defines [Lumpkin’s] female Gastonia.”¹⁰² Similarly, Joseph Urgo contends, “Women are presented as stronger and more durable than men, but politically less important. The book is tragic in the sense that it depicts women as potential reformers who are handicapped by their fecundity. By demonstration rather than exposition, *To Make My Bread* presents this female contradiction as inhibiting social progress.”¹⁰³

Fielding Burke offers the greatest Gastonia heroine. For one, *Call Home the Heart* predominantly features Ishma’s point of view and it is through her efforts and struggles that the reader learns about the trials of the mill workers. She exists as a whole character who demonstrates the importance of a woman’s self-knowledge as reflected by the powerful forest fires that ignite her imagination and passion. Ishma acts on her own initiative and her voice speaks most loudly. Ishma begins a process of self-definition, which the reader understands will continue past the novel’s conclusion. Lumpkin and Page, however, include competing male voices such as Bonnie’s brother John and Marge’s brother Tom. Unlike Ishma, who investigates the mill predicaments herself, albeit with additional guidance from Derry Unthank, Bonnie and

¹⁰¹ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 384.

¹⁰² Laura Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 162.

¹⁰³ Urgo, “Proletarian Literature and Feminism,” 73.

Marge join in the struggle *after* their brothers experience the benefits of travel and education. While it is unfortunate that Ishma receives her education from a man, Burke needed a way to communicate her novel's Marxist message, and Derry Unthank's tutelage of Ishma enabled Burke to deliver her didactic message. Ishma places herself in the arena, whereas Bonnie and Marge almost seem to follow their brothers' leads by default. Lumpkin and Page also allot entire chapters specifically to the brothers, portraying their struggles outside the mills in large cities, even networking with labor unions from the north. Burke remains the most steadfast in articulating the experiences of women, through women.

The Gastonia novels exist as more than journalistic mirrors of their time. While they certainly document the significant transitions of mountain life to life inside mill villages, and the subsequent Loray Mill Strike, they offer profound feminist insights concerning how class and gender issues relate to the exploited environment. The novelists certainly portray the dichotomy between nature, which is so often characterized as female, versus machine, which is generally characterized in masculine terms. An ecofeminist interpretation of this opposition might posit the subjugation of nature by man-made machinery as yet another means of patriarchal oppression.

The Gastonia novels portray complex women who desire financial and emotional independence and sexual equality and who must overcome oppression in the form of traditional religious dogma, sexism, and prejudice against their lower social class. These women work outside the home, seek education, question antiquated roles of wife and mother, and experience their own enlightenment about social conditions, particularly in regards to race. Ishma, Bonnie, and Marge contradict stereotypes of the Appalachian woman who experiences a simple, naïve relationship with nature, what Danny Miller suggests as their most defining quality. Miller

writes, “The first and most obvious attribute of women in Appalachian fiction is undoubtedly their close, almost mythic relationship to the natural world.”¹⁰⁴

While the women enjoy nature and find comfort in its beauty, they do not act as heroines of Mother Earth and their interests go beyond wandering the mountains for beauty’s sake. In fact, the women do not take steps to preserve the environment for their chief concern is the plight of their own families and the working class at large. Rather, the struggles of Ishma, Bonnie, and Marge exist so that readers can see how the brainless competition within a patriarchal society simultaneously oppresses women and the environment. The kind of continual struggles presented in the novels—weather, hunger, fire, marauding cattle, exhausting working hours under poor conditions—creates a vicious cycle in which the knowledge people need to find better ways to coexist with nature is never obtained because there is no time to learn. Without learning, the worker, the woman, the community as a whole, ceases to evolve. Ishma, Bonnie, and Marge undoubtedly reflect lives dedicated to learning, and their revelations empower them to affect change.

¹⁰⁴ Danny Miller, *Wingless Flights: Appalachian Women in Fiction*, (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1996), 3.

CHAPTER 5

EXTENDING THE ARGUMENT: WOMEN AND RACE

The Gastonia novelists treat race and gender as complexly interrelated issues. Susan Meisenhelder notes, “Gender inequality is not only grounded in racial inequality, it also operates in strikingly parallel ways...When black men draw their self-concepts from white people and make themselves feel like men by slipping their halters onto black women, the black community becomes another world of mules and men.”¹ Indeed, Burke, Page, and Lumpkin reveal how social inequalities pose a significant burden on black women, forcing them to serve even as the black man’s mule. Zora Neale Hurston introduces and illustrates this notion in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She writes, “So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He picks it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see.”² Despite the miserable circumstances in which Ishma, Bonnie, or Marge find themselves, their black neighbors always experience worse. The Gastonia novelists certainly stress the importance of fighting racism among white workers, but they portray this struggle in different ways and to varying degrees. Regardless of each novelist’s treatment of the race question, each book insists on the need for worker solidarity between both whites and blacks, and read together they offer a significant argument concerning the interconnectedness of place, gender, class, and race.

The Gastonia novelists undoubtedly experienced what Elizabeth Meese describes as the women writers’ position in relation to the literary establishment of their day: “an overriding

¹ Susan Meisenhelder, “Conflict and Resistance in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 109, no. 433 (1996): 284.

² Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998), 14.

condition of invisibility resulting from sexual politics, exacerbated by attitudes toward region and race.”³ In other words, regardless of their levels of accomplishment, Burke, Lumpkin, and Page often found themselves skirting the edges of groups of artistic and intellectual men. Because these women chose to incorporate black characters and address the race question of their day, the dominant patriarchal society further devalued and marginalized their work. Despite the lack of attention given to race issues by their radical male peers, and in like spirit with the CP’s egalitarian stance regarding African Americans, the Gastonia novelists recognize the need for their white characters to ally with the plight of black mill women. Through their heroines, the novelists portray poor white women assuaging, rather than collaborating, in black women’s oppression. Suzanne Sowinska notes the unique position the Gastonia novelists undertook to critique white sexism and racism. She maintains:

Women writers were in the forefront of demonstrating that literary texts could be successfully used to combine important discussions of race with the class analysis that intellectual and political agendas in the 1930’s had instituted as a virtual prerequisite to good writing. They also brought a perspective on gender issues to their work and insisted that the emerging radical political program maintain some relevance to its female membership.⁴

Of all the Gastonia novelists considered here, Page gives the most attention to the race question. Instead of presenting the concept of racial inequality as something her protagonist must understand or confront in a single scene, she interweaves the stories of several black families alongside that of her protagonist, Marge Crenshaw. Not long into the novel, Page immediately shows how segregation at the mill worsens relations for all its workers, especially those of women. She names the black quarters “Back Row” and describes the physical and psychological

³ Elizabeth Meese, *Crossing the Double-Cross: The Practice of Feminist Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 5.

⁴ Suzanne Sowinska, “Writing Across the Color Line: White Women Writers and the ‘Negro Question’ in the Gastonia Novels,” in *Radical Revisions: Rereading 1930s Culture*, ed. Bill Mullen and Sherry Linkon (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 123.

gap between its location and the living quarters of the poor whites. Page writes, "'Back Row' and 'niggertown' was barely two hundred yards from where the Crenshaws lived, in space as measured by the feet. But if the distance had been two thousand miles instead, Marge and the people on her side of the village and those on this could scarcely have known less about one another."⁵ The squalor of the shacks in Back Row far exceeds the poverty of Marge's Row Hill, and muddy spots plague the landscape that surrounds the single water pump sustaining fifteen families where two sets of outhouses swarm with flies and hornets.⁶

Because of segregation and limited resources, black families find themselves in similar circumstances as the whites, with millwork or sharecropping as their only alternatives for providing a livelihood for their families. For blacks, however, discrimination and unequal pay also accompany the harsh working conditions. Like Ishma, Bonnie, and Marge, the black workers must choose between inequitable decisions. The mill offers them a scanty income from the most deplorable tasks in the factory, but sharecropping exists as little better than a volunteer form of slavery, or as in most cases, the only option available to poor people. In a heated debate at the Morgan's house, members of the family bemoan their current status and future at Back Row. Jim asserts, "This workin' fer a white man ain't no good. We ain't humans to Po Whites. We's jest black faces 'n hands...It's purty risky business, share-cropin' with white mens, 'n white laws. Fer the nigger, it's 'heads I win, 'n tails you lose, ev'ry time."⁷ Sadly, Page shows how the lower classes fall prey to the tactics of the elite. Instead of banding together to fight a common enemy, the lower classes allow themselves to squabble over race. This phenomenon

⁵ Page, *Gathering Storm*, 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

becomes particularly evident as the novel progresses and the concept of unionization emerges as a viable option for the people of the village.

Page also reveals the different approaches the generations of family members advocate for their advancement. The young, passionate, even militant, Jim, George, and Martha try to persuade their elders to rise up in protest while Aunt Polly and Uncle Johnson invoke what Zora Neale Hurston termed a “feather-bed resistance.”⁸ Page writes, “The only way to git along with the white mens is to let ‘em have their way. Leastways, to let ‘em *think* they’s havin’ it.”⁹ The dissimilar philosophies are significant because they portray the black workers as composite rather than homogeneous in emotional and political matters, much like the differences that exist between the novels’ heroines and their mothers, or other competing voices. The dissenting perspectives also complicate the black workers’ ability to unionize—a key step for their survival and evolution as a group.

For black women, however, the situation is even more convoluted. Like their white counterparts, women are the ones left behind to care for the children and maintain the home. They endure innumerable pregnancies and work long hours with minimal compensation, often at jobs that require more labor and pay less than jobs available to poor whites. For example, the mill bosses allowed white women to maintain the machines in the spinning rooms while black women found employment only at the lowest levels—sweeping floors, washing clothes, or acting as maids to the elite. Taking his cue from white men, Martha’s fiancé Jim worries more about his ability to act as a man through conquering land than helping Martha attain autonomy. Instead of seeking the limited education available to her, Martha finds herself pressured into marrying at a young age, and her only escape from the horrors of her job is marriage to Jim. Martha must

⁸ Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 2.

⁹ Page, *Gathering Storm*, 56.

worry about Jim's safety, because if she chooses to disclose the truth about her precarious employment situation, she knows that Jim will react impulsively and possibly increase her burdens. Indeed, Martha bears the weight of the family trials, and she must labor under the constraints of her sex and race like a mule toting its heavy load up a steep hill.

Martha's case illustrates the black woman's unique dilemma in regard to white males as well. She finds herself harassed by young Haines, the son of the mill boss, and although she does her best to avoid his advances, she knows that ultimately her fate resides in his hands. Page writes, "A white rich man's son making up to a colored gal; no good had ever come of that. But she'd not tell Jim or Ma, neither; for they'd make her quit her job and that'd mean Mister Haines'd turn the whole family offa the hill."¹⁰ Her predicament exemplifies how gender, race, and class resonate. As a woman, she has few job opportunities, so she must agree to work as a housemaid for the mill boss. As a black woman, she must endure the abuse from the men in the household and must not speak against them. Of course, even if she did expose her molesters, Page argues that Martha's testimony would not be taken seriously, and the white elite controlling the local law enforcement and judicial system would not convict the white men regardless of solid evidence of their guilt. Martha's gender and race predispose her to violence and subjugation and while walking home in the woods one night, Martha meets her tragic fate. In the forest behind Back Row, Young Haines and his buddy Gross brutally rape and murder Martha.

Other than Bonnie's murder by mill thugs, Martha is the only character in the Gastonia novels to experience such brutal treatment and she remains the only victim of rape. Martha's desperate attempt to escape in the woods and subsequent mangling is certainly reminiscent of Lumpkin's she-bear. Like all the women in the Gastonia novels, her sexuality is coextensive with

¹⁰ Ibid., 54.

existence; her biology does, in fact, equal her destiny. Martha's beauty and status make her an easy target for Haines and Gross, and her attempts to protect her own sexuality prove futile in a world that objectifies her. Elizabeth Meese argues:

Control, or the illusion of control over one's sexual expression is analogous to control over one's existence—a desire more complex for women as an appropriated class, and even further complicated for the multiply oppressed lesbian, black, and Third World women. In contrast with men, women are sex; they do not possess it, rather they are possessed as sex.¹¹

Meese's assertion seems to offer two important insights: that women do not have sex, but rather they are sex, defined for the use of men, and that women are nothing but sexual objects unless defined otherwise by men. Martha certainly exists as a sexual object for the men who hunt her. In fact, as soon as Haines and Gross satisfy themselves, they discard her body like the hunters tossing about the carcass of the she-bear, heavy and fulfilled from a meal. To the white elite males, indeed the mill-owner's son and symbolically the mill itself, Martha's gender, skin color, and social disenfranchisement cement her status as an object for their private use.

Deborah Gray White contributes tremendous insight concerning Martha's situation as an African American and a woman. White points to the "peculiarly American mythology" of race and sex ideology that characterized "blacks and women" as "infantile, irresponsible, submissive, and promiscuous," thus making it acceptable to treat both groups as "outsiders or inferiors," while simultaneously making it virtually impossible for black women to escape "the nexus of America's sex and race mythology."¹² White notes that such mythology produced two opposing images of the black woman, the "Jezebel" and the "Mammy." She writes, "On one hand, there was the woman obsessed with the matters of the flesh; on the other was the asexual woman. One

¹¹ Meese, *Crossing the Double-Cross*, 117.

¹² Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985), 28.

was carnal, the other maternal. One was at heart a slut, the other was deeply religious.”¹³ Because Martha is attractive, an object for the personal use of Haines and Gross, the men view her as a “Jezebel.” White notes, “The image of Jezebel excused miscegenation, the sexual exploitation of black women, and mulatto population.”¹⁴ Martha’s “Jezebel” image allows the young men to rape and murder the “bitch” and “dirty wench” without guilt or remorse as seen in their nonchalant drive back to the dance at the Country Club.¹⁵

Interestingly enough, Page chooses to place the rape scene in one of her few descriptions of the natural landscape. One cannot help but read the tragedy as symbolic of both the destruction of woman and destruction of environment. Nature mimics Martha’s desperate attempt to flee her pursuers. Page writes, “The moon looked down through the treetops from a darkening sky. The birds, roused by the tumult of breaking branches and rushing bodies chattered excitedly to one another. Squirrels raced to the tree-tops, and a hoot-owl blinking slowly sent out his warning cry into the gathering night.”¹⁶ The forest behind Back Row serves as a protective barrier between the black community, even the poor white community, and the oppressive mill. While Page portrays the hill villages as dusty or muddy, she describes the forest as a sort of oasis. It is here where the honeysuckle and Sweet William grow. Even as mosquitoes, flies, and hornets plague the mill houses, the forest teems with the sounds of birds rather than the buzzing of insects. Poor environmental stewardship and ethics created the sordid, unhygienic living conditions in the mill villages. Martha’s demise in the forest suggests that before long, the mill will rape and demolish all its human and natural resources in the name of supremacy and profit, beginning with the people and places most objectified by those in power.

¹³ Ibid., 46.

¹⁴ Ibid., 61.

¹⁵ Page, *Gathering Storm*, 124.

¹⁶ Ibid., 123.

Page titles the chapter in which Martha dies as “Lynch Terror.” The title is suggestive of Martha’s fiancé Jim, and his death as a result of seeking revenge for Martha’s undoing. Page’s feminist vision continues here because she chooses to conclude the chapter with Jim as tragic hero, a man who passionately and recklessly confronts his lover’s murderers and puts a bullet in himself rather than die the humiliating and painful death of public lynching. Jim exercises power over his body in a heroic, albeit sentimental manner, while Martha simply dies as victim. Jim stands in front of his enemies and proclaims, “You’ll never hang this nigger;” conversely, Martha lies on the forest floor, “choked” and “silenced.”¹⁷ Page shows that Martha’s story begins and ends with a man, for Martha’s entrance into the novel marked her engagement to Jim and her exit foregrounds Jim’s voice. Martha’s silence and Jim’s interjection further evidences a world in which black manhood is entangled with black female subjugation.

However, Martha’s situation does serve as an important epiphany for the novel’s heroine, Marge Crenshaw, who realizes fairly early on in the novel that “her lot’s worser’n mine.”¹⁸ In fact, along with her brother Tom and Fred Morgan, a relative of Martha, Marge quickly espouses the philosophy that “once a southern worker, white or black, gets it straight, he’ll go the limit—once he sees how it’s held us back.”¹⁹ The realization that racism prevents her socioeconomic class from progressing is crucial for Marge, who later plays a role working for the cause of unionization for both whites and blacks, and braving her turn on the picket line during the strike. Page explains, “[Marge’s] face crimson, but step firm, she dropped back until she stood next to Nancy. Everyone stared. A white woman marching with...what’d happen

¹⁷ Page, *Gathering Storm*, 134, 124.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

next!”²⁰ Despite her enlightenment regarding social class, Marge fails to connect her class oppression to the oppression she experiences as a woman, for she does not argue for women’s rights but the working classes’ rights. She seems to understand that the races need to unite, but she does not realize that the same institution that oppresses the races is the power that killed her baby, forced her to undergo a dangerous abortion, and shipped off her husband to war. Marge’s epiphany, although significant, remains limited in its scope.

All the Gastonia novels studied here demonstrate that racism existed as one of the chief obstacles for oppressed workers. Michael Honey notes how the segregation of the late 1800s to the mid-1960s divided black and white southerners into separate and unequal worlds. He maintains:

While based on skin color, the segregation system had an economic as well as racial purpose. Serving as a replacement for slavery, the laws and practices of the segregation era ensured that most black workers could not rise above minimal levels in wages, skills, or status; by holding down blacks the racial system depressed the labor market for unskilled white workers and drove down their wages as well. In addition, the disfranchisement of poor whites and blacks through poll taxes and undemocratic election laws virtually destroyed the possibility of interracial, class-based political and economic alliances among working people. The system thus ensured the political and economic dominance of white landowners, bankers, real estate investors, and manufacturers. Under this system, like the slave masters before them, the indigenous upper classes in cooperation with northern investors ran the South with little interference from working people for much of the twentieth century.²¹

The segregation system played a major role in keeping white workers powerless and poor.

Honey notes that most workers had difficulty identifying segregation as their enemy. He writes, “Instead, they accepted the belief that keeping all African Americans down elevated whites, even if ever so slightly.... Everyone believed that in the zero sum game of capitalism someone had to

²⁰ Ibid., 288-289.

²¹ Michael Honey, “Black Workers Remember Industrial Unionism in the Era of Jim Crow,” in *Race, Class, and Community in Southern Labor History*, ed. Gary Fink and Merl Reed (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 121.

be a loser in order for someone else to be a winner.”²² Segregation made unionization difficult in the South because it divided natural allies in the factories where the working classes labored.

The Gastonia novelists point out how plentiful, cheap, and unorganized labor served as stumbling blocks for the lower classes. Additional oppression in the form of sexism and racism further complicated the workers’ plight. Unfortunately, while the novelists overtly suggest that racism undermines class solidarity, they do not overtly state how it undermines gender inequalities as well. It is only through a careful reading of all three novels that a reader finds herself able to piece together how the varying forms of discrimination resonate. Regardless of the lack of overt statements concerning how race issues also connect to gender issues, the Gastonia novelists demonstrate that women workers recognize the importance of the race issue most clearly and are the first to bridge the difference between the black and white communities. Suzanne Sowinska notes, “Women workers, whose wages are considerably lower than their male counterparts and who traditionally represent the last hired, first fired category of workers at the textile mills, more quickly grasp the danger to their livelihood that the mill’s potential threat of hiring black men and women as scabs will bring.”²³ In fact, it is the act of organizing black workers that ultimately means the most trouble for the Gastonia heroines. Most of the “Negro work” exists as significantly women’s work, and it is the women workers who are depicted as the first to mingle with blacks on the picket lines.

In *To Make My Bread*, Lumpkin’s Bonnie is slower to understand her own prejudice than was Marge. While Page seems to present racial solidarity as a fairly easy obstacle for her characters to overcome, Lumpkin chooses to make her characters struggle with the concept. For

²² Ibid., 120.

²³ Sowinska, “Writing Across the Color Line: White Women Writers and the ‘Negro Question’ in the Gastonia Novels,” in Mullen and Linkon, 133.

example, when Bonnie agonizes over how to care for her children, a black co-worker offers her daughter's assistance, yet receives Bonnie's initial disdain. Only later does Bonnie realize her fault in assuming superiority over the woman. Lumpkin writes, "Bonnie remembered with shame the thought that was behind the look she had given Mary. For she was thinking of what people said—that colored people were all shiftless and no account; and had believed what they said in face of the fact that Mary Allen did her work in the mill quietly and as if she was willing to do her best."²⁴

Bonnie does not wrestle with questions regarding racial inequality until the novel's conclusion, where she confronts her sister-in-law about the black community's role in the union strike. Lumpkin writes, "'The colored people work alongside of us,' Bonnie spoke up. 'And I can't see why they shouldn't fight alongside of us, and we by them.'"²⁵ Lumpkin shows how the mill bosses perceived Bonnie as a double threat. In addition to her popular protest ballads and work within the organized strike colony, Bonnie persuades the black community not to scab on the white workers. Interestingly enough, it is her work between the races that attracts the most vehemence from the mill company. Dewey Fayon threatens, "We'll get you for this, Bonnie Calhoun" and soon after, a mill bullet silences her.²⁶

Fielding Burke portrays a much different scenario from Lumpkin and Page. Ishma Waycaster does not fully accept the black community, nor does she help organize them in any way. Her struggle with the race issue does not play out as seamlessly but perhaps more complexly than the experiences of Bonnie or Marge. Although she espouses a philosophy that coincides with the beliefs of the National Textile Workers Union, she ultimately rejects the

²⁴ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 321.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 350.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 372.

embrace of Gaffie Wells. With the initial zest of her newly acquired Marxist knowledge, Ishma maintains, “We’re going to get together till there’s not a working man left out, white, black, yellow or brown, the world over.”²⁷ However, when Derry Unthank relays the good news that “negroes” from the neighboring Whitesville mills signed with the union, Ishma balks and retorts, “They wouldn’t make as good workers” and “mountain people are always *white*.”²⁸ Ishma wonders if uniting races will mean a step in the wrong direction for their cause. Burke writes, “Ishma struggled with her prejudice, but was too honest to deny it. ‘I don’t want to be unfair. But I do wish they were all back where they came from, to go on with their own kind of civilization, whatever it is. We could mend ours faster.’”²⁹ Unlike Bonnie and Marge, Ishma does not adopt an egalitarian stance regarding the black community; however, in the same vein as the other protagonists, she remains unable to grasp the connection between race relations and gender relations. Her conversations with Derry Unthank do not offer space for consideration of how unionism may also offer an avenue for female equality as well.

Despite her misgivings, Ishma does put her life in danger in an attempt to rescue Butch Wells from a lynch mob. Ishma ventures into the forest to confront the white bigots alone and unarmed. Burke writes, “In ten minutes Ishma had left the highway and was chugging along the deep ruts of the logging road that led past the ‘lynching tree.’”³⁰ Like Page does with the rape of Martha, Burke stages the violent act in the natural landscape that surrounds the dirty mill village. Symbolically, Ishma stands her ground at the base of an oak tree and the angry group of white men gathers where the road “had been practically cut to pieces.”³¹ Remarkably, the most terrific

²⁷ Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 307.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 352-353.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 354.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 376.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 376.

violence occurs against the most marginalized and objectified peoples in the most abused and exhausted environments.

Ishma threatens to shoot herself if the men continue to harm Butch Wells, and her warnings ultimately disperse the crowd that fears “the crime far worse than murder, the crime which no southern public can consider without raging.”³² One cannot miss the irony of such a peculiar notion. Apparently, Ishma’s society would seethe at a crime that violates the body of a white woman, yet that same society does not seem to recognize the crimes perpetrated against her each and every day in the form of inequable economics, education, sexuality, marriage, and the unnecessary and preventable disease of pellagra. The scene also illustrates the irony that violence against a black man is not considered a problem at all.

Before Ishma becomes too heroic, however, her prejudice gets the better of her when she meets Butch’s wife, Gaffie. Burke describes the women’s encounter and Gaffie’s grateful embrace of Ishma:

The fleshy embrace, the murky little room, the smoking ashes, the warm stench, too eager faces shining greasily at the top of big, black bodies, filled Ishma with uncontrollable revulsion.... Before she could release herself voluntarily, Ishma had thrust [Gaffie] off with a wild blow, followed by another. The first struck Gaffie’s face; the second fell terrifically on her shoulder, and she went over backwards.³³

Ishma is appalled by her own reaction to the black woman and flees the cabin. Her shame forces her to run from the mill village, leaving her friends and union duties behind. Her guilt causes her to retreat back to Cloudy Knob and the life she once lived with Britt Hensley.

Ishma possesses the ability intellectually to cross the color line, but she cannot accept the physical contact of the too-black Gaffie Wells. Paula Rabinowitz believes the scene expresses a

³² Ibid., 379.

³³ Ibid., 383.

“heavy hint of interracial lesbianism [that] so disturbs Ishma that she reinstates racial stereotypes of black womanhood—as animal, a mammy, a sexual predator.”³⁴ Whether or not Ishma feels sexually preyed upon, one cannot dispute what Kathy Ackerman perceives as Burke’s “shockingly real portrayal of the race issue” that “invokes the most vicious stereotypes” and “does not flatter her protagonist.”³⁵ Either way, Burke clearly wishes to expose the extent to which even the most progressive southern white workers are fatally flawed by their racist attitudes. As Barbara Foley notes, “The radical union and party had enabled Ishma to overcome her racial prejudice on an immediate public level and work collectively for political and economic ends. Her personal reflex, however, is still of the past.”³⁶

Ackerman also notes the importance of Stacy Alaimo’s ecofeminist reading of the disputed episode. Alaimo asserts, “This scene demonstrates how even though ‘the body’ has been persistently coded as female in Western culture, white women have fled from corporeal connections with a debased nature by displacing that nature onto the bodies of African Americans and others.”³⁷

Ackerman suggests that Alaimo’s argument posits the conflict of social Darwinism versus romanticism.³⁸ She writes:

Social Darwinism can be seen as fundamentally racist because it places humans on an anthropocentric, hierarchical scale in which some bodies are closer to nature than others. Darwin toppled ‘man’ from his Adamic role as master of the animals by stressing the kinship between humans and other primates. To ease their anxieties about being related to

³⁴ Paula Rabinowitz, “Margaret Bourke-White’s Red Coat; or Slumming in the Thirties,” in Mullen and Linkon, 192.

³⁵ Ackerman, *The Heart of Revolution*, 101-102.

³⁶ Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 195.

³⁷ Stacy Alaimo, “‘Skin Dreaming:’ The Bodily Transgressions of Fielding Burke, Octavia Butler, and Linda Hogan,” in *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, and Pedagogy*, ed. Patrick Murphy and Greta Gaard (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 124.

³⁸ Ackerman, *The Heart of Revolution*, 106.

nature they assumed they had risen above, whites interposed the 'lower races' to serve as a border zone.³⁹

In other words, when Ishma flees Gaffie's cabin for the open air of Cloudy Knob, she is fleeing to a romantic conception of nature. Ishma desires a cleaner, whiter nature or as Ackerman suggests, "a disembodied space, a place in which the individual can mentally or spiritually find respite."⁴⁰ Lumpkin and Page also illustrate the romanticizing of nature through Bonnie's determination to live outside the mill village in the farm house that reminds her of the family cabin in Swain's Crossing, and the Crenshaw's idyllic trip to Asheville.

Burke differs from her contemporaries in that she opts to illustrate the complexity of race relations. She does not portray an easy paradigm shift for her heroine. Instead, Burke illustrates the deep-seeded roots of racism and the human desire to resist the unknown. Unlike the typical proletarian novel written by domineering patriarchy, *Call Home the Heart* looks deep inside the human condition to ask *how* oppression evolves. Kathy Ackerman suggests, "The battle against oppression must begin from deep within the human spirit in the form of introspection; no external problems can be solved until the soul is satisfied."⁴¹ The Gastonia novelists, and Burke in particular, seem to suggest that interpersonal development is essential before a broader awareness of gender, race, class, and environmental consciousness can emerge.

Ishma, Bonnie, Marge, Mary, Nancy, and other female characters, both white and black, possess the sensibilities of the artist who finds herself stunted and oppressed. Burke, Page, and Lumpkin most certainly point out the inequities of a patriarchal culture that prevents its women, especially black women, from realizing their full human potential. Perhaps that is why the authors chose not to develop their black characters in their own right. By limiting their black

³⁹ Ibid., 106.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 106.

⁴¹ Ibid., 159.

character's roles, the Gastonia novelists underscore the debilitating effects of white prejudice and how it attempted to silence oppressed voices. Barbara Foley suggests:

The preponderant effect of the 1930's left's line on the 'Negro Question' was to give a powerful impetus to the production of an antiracist literature. Even when they were assigned relatively minor roles, black characters usually performed important functions in mapping the terms of a text's political discourse.... In spite of their hesitancy to probe deeply into the consciousness of black characters, then, Burke, Page, and Lumpkin, incidentally, Southern-born white women—produced texts that treated the Communist experience in the South in particularity and depth.⁴²

The antiracist responses that Burke, Lumpkin, and Page made to the cultural moment of the Depression and the radical agendas they advance mark important and distinctive contributions to the literature of the 1930s.

⁴² Foley, *Radical Representations*, 196, 198,

CHAPTER 6

REGIONALISM AND THE GASTONIA NOVELS

The regionalism in the Gastonia novels demonstrates how physical, psychological, and social landscapes pervade the lives of the characters who reside in a particular area. Previous events and present awareness remain inextricably bound. In other words, inner and outer landscapes merge into each other, and even places like Swain's Crossing or Cloudy Knob become as much a state of mind as places on a map. Douglass Powell suggests, "a region is not a thing so much as a cultural history, an ongoing rhetorical and poetic construction" and he approaches the idea of region as "a rich, complicated, and dynamic cultural construct rather than a static, stable geophysical entity."¹ Rather than focusing primarily on the physical descriptions of Appalachia as place, this thesis examines how the novelists depict relationships among the people and their environments. Powell contends, "This deliberate use of region as a way to envision and critique relationships among people and places and envision better alternatives is what I term a 'critical regionalism.'"² In addition to analyzing the novelists' portrayal of place and distinguishing their regionalism from local color, this study aims to operate from Powell's definition of "critical regionalism."

The regional detail in the Gastonia novels does not merely highlight the various areas' picturesqueness but reflects a deep concern with the way setting affects characters' lives. While portraying place, Burke, Lumpkin, and Page also re-create new images that supercede the generally demeaning stereotypes of Appalachian women portrayed as satisfied Earth-mothers.

¹ Douglass Reichert Powell, *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 6.

² *Ibid.*, 10.

Emily Toth observes, “Our most universal—most human—experiences happen at home. Our deepest emotions are associated with and expressed in the private sphere—the sphere of home, women, region.”³ The lives of the Gastonia heroines, both inside and outside the home, reveal what the toil of a difficult life exacts from women.

Glenda Hobbs argues for the merit of regional writing and the importance of distinguishing regionalism from local color. She asserts:

A reason for the negative connotations of the classifier “regional” is its confusion with a more specialized term, “local color.” While local color usually describes a nineteenth-century American literary movement, it can refer to any work whose author points out decorative regional details to add interest to the narrative. “Regional” works may include descriptions of landscape and customs, but they are intrinsic and crucial to an understanding of plot or character.⁴

The Gastonia novelists serve as regional writers rather than local color writers because they employ descriptions of landscape and customs in rural and urban settings to illustrate *how* various forms of oppression contributed to the women’s diaspora from the mountains and subsequent situation in the mills, and *why* Marxism offered these women an avenue of hope for social reform. The Gastonia novelists avoid parochialism and demonstrate how regional writing offers a voice to women and their concerns. Hobbs notes, “It is the use, rather than the accumulation of regional material, that determines literary merit.”⁵ As evidenced by their personal lives and specific connections to the Appalachian South, Burke, Page, and Lumpkin intimately connect to the history and culture of their particular communities. Hobbs observes that writers such as Harriette Arnow “see peculiarities of a region as givens, as points of

³ Emily Toth, ed., introduction to *Regionalism and the Female Imagination: A Collection of Essays* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985), 9.

⁴ Glenda Hobbs, “Beyond Local Color: Harriet Arnow’s Kentucky Novels,” in Toth, 83.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

departure, not as oddities to be explained or ‘expressed.’”⁶ This observation can be extended to the works of the Gastonia novelists as well, considering that they avoid self-consciously pointing out the quaint oddities of the region and do not patronize their characters through excessive documentation of rural idiosyncrasies.

The regionalism of the Gastonia novelists further links them to their noted contemporaries who received praise for their regional qualities and who were not blacklisted because of a distinctly radical or proletarian agenda, such as the agrarian novels of Ellen Glasgow or Elizabeth Maddox Roberts. The young protagonists in *Call Home the Heart*, *To Make My Bread*, and *Gathering Storm* rebel against the strictures imposed by biological, social, and economic factors and they seek wider horizons than life ordinarily allowed to females of their class and culture. In their struggles to preserve or create identity and to achieve some measure of independence, they share a common experience with rural women depicted in Edith Summers Kelley’s *Weeds*, Ellen Glasgow’s *Barren Ground*, and Elizabeth Maddox Roberts’s *The Time of Man*. Although academics and literary critics have “lost” these writers over the years, Kelley and Roberts have, nonetheless, enjoyed praise and a place among Appalachian studies; the Gastonia novelists deserve no less, and their regionalism certainly sheds additional light on what it means to study Appalachia as a prospective site for activism.

Sherrie Inness and Diana Royer argue that regional fiction, “rather than being a conservative genre, as some have argued, is actually a genre that offers a forum for social protest.”⁷ Julia Mickenberg furthers this notion in her arguments concerning Meridel Le Sueur, a prominent feminist and contemporary of the Gastonia novelists. Mickenberg maintains, “Le

⁶ Ibid., 88.

⁷ Sherrie Inness and Diana Royer, eds., introduction to *Breaking Boundaries: New Perspectives on Women’s Regional Writing* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 1.

Sueur has become relatively well known as a feminist with radical political leanings, but her rootedness in the Midwestern landscape has not been read as integral to those commitments.... Le Sueur's class consciousness was firmly grounded in a powerful regional tradition of grass-roots radical protest that she felt compelled to foster and explore as a writer."⁸ Inness, Royer, and Mickenberg articulate the need for more interdisciplinary scholarship. While recent years have witnessed the rediscovery of minority, feminist, radical, or even regional texts, the writers suggest that the single axis constricts the interpretation of Le Sueur and others like her.⁹ Understanding the Gastonia novelists as feminists, radicals, and regionalists certainly complicates existing interpretations and offers new space for raising new questions. New disciplines such as women's studies, ethnic or cultural studies, and new theoretical approaches such as ecocriticism and critical regionalism provide additional lenses through which to read little-known texts.

The Gastonia novels evidence one of many ways that women writers have used regional writing to critique dominant societal norms. Inness and Royer assert:

Regional writing allows its practitioners a decentered perspective on the dominant culture's values. This decentered viewpoint lies at the heart of the power regionalist writing has to critique society's values....regionalism often shifts the center of our perceptions as readers of American literature to questions of disenfranchisement, of voice, and above all, of approach to regional and other differences.¹⁰

Burke, Lumpkin, and Page question the values of the domineering bass of their day through their feminist statements that explore gender, class, and race. Ecofeminism offers a framework for evaluating how their regionalism deals with recurring issues that are of particular interest to

⁸ Julia Mickenberg, "Writing the Midwest: Meridel Le Sueur and the Making of a Radical Regional Tradition," in Inness and Royer, 143-144.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

women even today. Writers of Appalachia concerned about the environment such as Emma Bell Miles, Wilma Dykeman, Effie Walker Smith, Denise Giardina, Lee Smith, Bobbie Ann Mason, Ann Pancake, and Barbara Kingsolver have addressed, and continue to address, ecological and social concerns that deal with relationships of the local community with the larger society, interpersonal relationships of community members, and the position of women both within the community and in larger society. Regionalism sheds lights on the multitude of forces that constitute society. Inness and Royer rightly observe:

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.¹¹

Focusing closely on the lives of people in a particular locale, in this case, particularly Lumpkin's Swain's Crossing and Burke's Cloudy Knob, allows the novelists to create moving portraits of characters affected by their environments, especially women characters who were often poor, disenfranchised, and marginalized in many ways, including by geographical region.

Lumpkin immediately begins *To Make My Bread* with descriptions of place. She situates her characters in a thirty-mile stretch of land between the South Range Mountains and Thunderhead, with Swain's Crossing serving as the focal point for commerce and social activity. Lumpkin emphatically uses snake imagery to describe the landscape, an important symbol she continues to employ throughout the entire novel. She writes, "Seen from the side of Choah Mountain, [Swain's Crossing] is like a huge snake, the largest part just below, its head crawling past Swain's, and the tail somewhere out of sight toward North Range."¹² A light snow begins to fall, and the men of the area gather around the stove at Swain's store while the women remain

¹¹ Ibid., 3.

¹² Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 7.

home in their distant cabins, hoping that their husbands or fathers will return with necessary supplies bought on credit. At once, Lumpkin sets up a complex system of social and ecological relationships that will influence the lives and fates of her characters. By analyzing the relationships in the novel, this study demonstrates Powell's "critical regionalism" that "links individual moments of cultural struggle to larger patterns in history, politics, and culture, by understanding how they are linked not only in time and in the nebulous networks of discourse but also in space, through relationships of power that can be material and cultural."¹³

As part of her regionalism, Lumpkin describes rites of passage including baptism, courtship, and the construction of the family cabin. These important cultural rituals are not simply quaint add-ons of colorful detail to the story; instead, the customs reveal the attitudes and beliefs of the people and how the men and women relate to one another. In fact, Lumpkin posits the men center stage in all the social activities while the women remain in the margins—hoeing in the garden, mending clothes, gossiping over a pone of cornbread, tending innumerable babies. Even Lumpkin's inclusion of mountain arts and crafts serves a significant purpose. Her descriptions of the women's fondness and skill for making coverlets, an enjoyable, creative, and social activity, contrasts with later descriptions of the mindless, solitary hours spent maintaining the looms in the factories. The music played in church, the dance hall, or even around the hearths of homes demonstrates the values and shared history of the people. These songs and traditions later will comfort them in the parlors of their rented mill houses, and much later women such as Bonnie will use them as powerful tools to unite workers in a common cause.

For example, the music played at Fraser McDonald's cabin included banjo tunes such as "Bile Them Cabbage Down" which incorporates rhythmic beats and requires a voice to "call

¹³ Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 20.

out” the steps.¹⁴ Lumpkin writes, “[the musicians] emphasized the rhythm, just as the heels coming down together emphasized the rhythm. And everything was done with dignity.”¹⁵ The square dance social gathering unified the mountain people in more ways than one. In addition to bringing them into a shared space that many had helped build (the family cabin) and unifying their bodies in a shared physical movement, it provided common leisure, a sharing of food goods, the passing on of community lore in the form of story telling.

Songs such as “Come Ye Weary, Heavy Laden” provided a common space for the people to express their grief over their daily toils.¹⁶ The shared theme of suffering is evident later in the novel where John Stevens teaches the mill hands his worker’s ballad set to the rhythm of the looms.¹⁷ Much later, as the novel draws nearer to the strike, Bonnie teaches the crowds her “mill mother’s ballad” because she understands that in order for the people to embrace the union, she and her organizers must “reach people’s hearts as well as their stomachs.”¹⁸ Both Stevens and Bonnie employ mixed meters of iambic and trochaic feet, common patterns found in the dance tunes and hymns to which the mountain people were already accustomed. Lumpkin’s attention to regional customs and music traditions certainly proves vital for the development of her characters and her story’s plot.

Unfortunately, the women of Swain’s Crossing remain dependent on their men, and Lumpkin underscores the women’s inequality during the public dance when she repeatedly refers to the females as “girls” and the males as “men.”¹⁹ The men, however, remain dependent on the land and the paternalism of Swain’s store, while Swain depends on outside markets and vested

¹⁴ Ibid., 131.

¹⁵ Ibid., 131.

¹⁶ Ibid., 45.

¹⁷ Ibid., 259.

¹⁸ Ibid., 343.

¹⁹ Ibid., 133.

interests of the extractive industries to make a larger profit. The intricate web of relationships shows the strong ties among environmental, economic, and social issues that have an impact on the land and thus its inhabitants.

Men such as Granpap must participate in dangerous pursuits like moonshining because they have lost their land to debts and deaths of family members. The physical risk of tending stills or transporting meal jeopardizes the survival of entire families such as the McClures, because without Granpap's income Emma and her children will starve. When the lumber company and saw mill settle in their region, the mountain women lose even more men to illness and injury, which further cements their poverty. In order to pay off their debts, many families sell their farms to Hal Swain, who in turn sells the land back to the saw mill for a greater profit. Without their land, the people have no way of providing for themselves, especially women who are already subjugated as a class and sex. Many people have no other choice but to leave the mountains and seek employment in the mills, or as tenant farmers, while others leave willfully, falling prey to mill recruiters who promise lives of luxury with modern conveniences.

While the mills certainly exploited the situations facing their workers, the industries did not single-handedly cause the out-migration of mountain people. In fact, agriculture was in decline since the Civil War and the average Appalachian family was already growing poorer before the extractive industries laid claim to their lands. Paul Salstrom observes:

Eventually, population expansion, resource depletion, Civil War destruction, and Civil War legislation combined to force living standards down for most Appalachians.... During the third quarter of the nineteenth century, food production per capita fell drastically throughout Appalachia, particularly in the Plateau subregion. This decline may not have completely obliterated Appalachia's food self-sufficiency as a region before the 1880s (when industrialization began its dramatic surge on the Plateau), but clearly it did

reduce living standards for many of the region's people, softening them up, as it turned out, for later industrial exploitation.²⁰

In the same vein, Elizabeth Engelhardt notes Appalachia's worsening economic situation since Reconstruction, but, unlike Salstrom, she includes how Appalachia's economic problems also affected the environment. She maintains:

There is no denying that Appalachia was struggling with environmental questions. Around 1900, the Appalachian situation was a potent mix of logging, mining, poverty, and tourism... Appalachia saw logging reach its peak between 1880 and 1909, which helped bring about an alarming amount of regional wildlife extinction. Additionally, much of Appalachia's valuable acreage was sold off to outside interests during the era, especially corporations bent on resource extraction... Combined, the forces of industry and resource extraction radically reshaped the Appalachian environment.²¹

The lives and communities of the Gastonia heroines reflect the historical, political, economic, environmental, and social issues that merged together to create the problems facing mountain farmers in Appalachia during the early and mid 1900s. The physical, psychological, and social landscapes of their towns pervade the lives of those who live there and evidence a region experiencing multiple layers of transition and oppression.

Lumpkin dedicated half of her novel to her characters' lives in Swain's Crossing and meticulously documents the transition of the mountain people from farm to factory. Before the McClures reach the mill, they encounter indoor plumbing and "negroes," two experiences that illicit extreme emotions of joy and confusion. Lumpkin's description of their destination cements the new notion of place for Emma and Bonnie. Lumpkin writes, "Up from the brick structure rose two huge chimneys, towering into the sky, like two towers of Babel. Smoke poured out of

²⁰ Paul Salstrom, *Appalachia's Path to Dependency: Rethinking A Region's Economic History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 11, 44.

²¹ Elizabeth Engelhardt, *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), 25-26.

them into the wide open heavens.”²² The women experience the city as a material entity, a product of concerns such as geography, labor, land, and capital. The towering descriptions of the textile mill resonate with Joe Moran’s notion of city as textualized place. He asserts:

Some of the world’s tallest buildings are today in the poorest cities: they are designed to bring modernity into being, to proclaim the city as futuristic and forward-looking. These textual configurations within cities are also bound up with relations of power, producing a kind of symbolic geography which decides who should be able to work, live in or even enter particular spaces.²³

All of the Gastonia novelists describe the textile mill as the high-rise building, or powerful focal point of the mill village. The people scurry about in its shadow, enduring their lives by the leave of its whistle. Lumpkin certainly employs Moran’s concept of “symbolic geography,” and Emma notes her new role in this place as animal rather than human. She declares, “It was like a hen with chickens that have come out of the same setting, all of one size.”²⁴

Another significant building of symbolic geography includes the mountain cabin. Here, Lumpkin avoids another Appalachian stereotype: the quixotic log cabin. Nancy Joyner posits, “Today the romantic notion prevails of the cabin in the laurel, the snug, well-built structure set far away from other homesteads, with high-backed rockers on the front porch overlooking a magnificent view. Even the limited space inside the cabin is compensated for by the cozy quality within the four walls and the spaciousness without.”²⁵ In fact, Joyner argues that the idealized cabin stereotype is second only to the stereotype of the white mountaineer in popular culture such as Li’l Abner or Snuffy Smith.²⁶ Because a mountaineer’s place is so important in fiction set

²² Ibid., 147.

²³ Joe Moran, *Interdisciplinarity* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 166.

²⁴ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 147.

²⁵ Nancy Joyner, “The Poetics of the House in Appalachian Fiction,” in *The Poetics of Appalachian Space*, ed. Parks Lanier, Jr. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 11.

²⁶ Ibid., 11.

in Appalachia, attention to the image of the cabin is particularly appropriate in the study of Appalachian literature.

Instead of employing the “cabin in the laurel” imagery, Lumpkin opts for a more realistic portrait of the split-log structure. She writes, “The McClure cabin sat far down between mountains. In fair weather it was like a tiny boat in the trough of huge waves. Since the blizzard began the cabin was obliterated. It had become a part of the blank whiteness from which nothing stood out.”²⁷ Lumpkin’s description is significant because it also resonates with Emma McClure’s identity and status as a woman. Unlike the men who work outside and travel across the valley for trade, Emma’s place is in the home. The first descriptions of the activity inside the cabin include Emma’s delivery of John. The birth is anything but cozy and quaint, and Emma feels shame that her father and adolescent sons must see her naked and vulnerable. Foreshadowing the mutilation of the she-bear is Emma’s final moment of pregnancy. Lumpkin writes, “She was a stranger, a sort of beast.... Granpap bending over the bed was like a man bending over at a slaughtering and Emma’s last cries were the same as those of a pig with a knife at its throat.”²⁸ The cabin does not serve as a refuge for Emma; rather, the walls of the structure barely keep out the “gusts of icy breath” and the lamplight cannot illuminate the “dark corners” of the main room.²⁹ Just as Granpap positions Emma’s body for the delivery, he determines the physical layout of the cabin, if it will contain a window, an additional room, a new roof. The male maintains control over his property, including his woman.

²⁷ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 10.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

Ecofeminist Judith Plant contends, “The closer we get to home, regionally and in our communities, the more real power women—indeed, all of us—have on a day to day basis.”³⁰ While this statement may be accurate for some, it does not ring true for the Gastonia heroines, for Emma stands in the background as Granpap sells her cabin, and Ishma watches as Jim Wishart ruins the Waycaster farm on Cloudy Knob. To be sure, Lumpkin and Burke call their readers’ attention to home and community and craft characters that are deeply rooted to place, but the novelists also seem to warn against the idealization of “home,” because “home” has often been just as oppressive as other negative forces in the women’s lives.

Perhaps what ecofeminism offers here is the notion that “home” needs to be newly understood, revalued, or redefined in order to alleviate the oppression of women and nature. “Home” is more than four walls that are owned and controlled by men, where women experience the load of caring for others with guilt and anxiety with limited power to make decisions and where they find themselves entangled with personal frustrations over feelings of powerlessness. “Home” also signifies more than plots of land with animal and mineral resources for personal use and exploitation. Plant notes that the word ecology comes from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning “home.”³¹ Because Lumpkin and Burke link the fate of their heroines to animals such as the she-bear and jersey cow, even the physical conditions of the farms themselves, the novelists demonstrate an ecological perspective, one that includes the nonhuman world in the definition of home and community. In this light, Engelhardt’s argument concerning ecological feminists such as Emma Bell Miles and Grace Cooke should be extended to Lumpkin and Burke as well, for

³⁰ Judith Plant, “Learning to Live with Differences: The Challenge of Ecofeminist Community,” in Warren, 133.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

they, too, indicate “a movement of women authors writing about gender and nature in Appalachia in such a way that ecological and feminist concerns are intimately interdependent.”³²

In the same way that she avoids generalizing her mountaineers and stereotyping their homesteads, Lumpkin offers complicated descriptions of nature. On one hand, she describes the mountain’s beauty, its lush coves and “hills reaching into the sky.”³³ On the other hand, she contrasts nature’s beauty with its destructive power. Harsh winters, frozen yearlings, fierce storms, and steep trails shatter any conception of an idyllic or pastoral setting. The people do not experience total isolation, but the geography and lack of infrastructure certainly hinder their communication with the outside world. Lumpkin writes, “At times, [the mountains] looked so vast and heavy [John] would turn away and put his head to the ground.”³⁴ Lumpkin frequently incorporates literal and metaphoric references to rattlesnakes as well. In fact, she mentions the snake at least five times before the McClures transition to life in the mill town.³⁵ In each reference, the characters find themselves immersed in nature, even at its mercy, suggesting the cautious dance humans must exercise when dealing with the natural world. Poor environmental stewardship inevitably leads to devastation on all levels, just as disrespect or negligence with a rattler will lead to death. Of course, the object is not to eliminate the rattler, for it serves its unique purpose in the ecological balance of the terrain; rather, the goal is to find ways to coexist with the animal.

Lumpkin’s regionalism foregrounds important aspects of environmentalism, the effects of the larger economy on the region, the relationships of the people within the community, and the

³² Engelhardt, *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature*, 168.

³³ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 7, 15, 16, 51, 114.

role of women in the society. She certainly posits a region that is not a static entity. Her characters' struggles with economic concerns, ecological issues, and a multitude of other forces transform the landscape. At the same time, the environment changes the individual because characters such as Bonnie raise questions regarding her ever-changing relationship with her ever more urbanized surroundings. Inness and Royer observe, "As the earth and its societies change, studying regionalism offers us a way to rethink our relationship to the land as both individuals and members of local, regional, and global communities."³⁶ To be sure, Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread* facilitates discussion of such volatile relationships between humans and the world in which they live.

Like Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread*, Burke's *Call Home the Heart* must be understood as both a proletarian novel and a regional novel. The two genres complement each other because the economic oppression of the region is the reason Ishma must leave Cloudy Knob, only to discover that conditions are even worse in the southern mill towns. Burke's regionalism certainly endows her novel with character and purpose. More than Lumpkin or Page, Burke's intimate familiarity with the Appalachian region seems to give her story an air of intimacy as neighbor or friend, rather than that of anthropologist. Burke herself stated, "I don't like the way some writers picture [the mountaineers] as a peculiar type, for they are not."³⁷ Indeed, through her descriptions of mountain life and landscape and careful attention to dialect, Burke reconciles her novel's regionalism, or art, with its politics, or proletarianism. The regional writer, to portray place, must also re-create the place in a new image designed to supersede the generally demeaning stereotype. Through her characters on Cloudy Knob, Burke does exactly that.

³⁶ Inness and Royer, eds., *Breaking Boundaries: New Perspectives on Women's Regional Writing*, 15.

³⁷ Qtd. In Anna Shannon Elfenbein's introduction to *From My Highest Hill*, by Olive Dargan (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998), xix.

Anna Elfenbein observes:

Set in the Great Smoky Mountains, the opening chapters of *Call Home the Heart* revisit the world Dargan captured so memorably in *Highland Annals*.... Unlike the local color writers, whose highlanders tend to sound alike, Dargan used the linguistic idiosyncrasies and variations she encountered in the mountains to individualize her characters and bring them to life.³⁸

Burke employs a varied dialect for her different characters based on their traditions, locations, and levels of education. For example, Laviny and Bainie lack education and rarely, if ever, travel outside the boundaries of Cloudy Knob, so their speech contains a thicker accent than that of Ishma, who reads and travels. Laviny and Bainie use terms such as “yore,” “kain’t,” “fer,” “keer,” “sence,” “et,” and “larnin’.” The women often drop the final consonant in a word, and often substitute “o’” for “of” and “an” for “and.” Conversely, while Ishma’s dialect certainly reflects glimpses of her mountain upbringing, her language largely conveys a more educated acuity. Two such scenes that illustrate the various degrees of dialect are when both Laviny and Ishma scold Jim Wishart for his selfish and lazy actions on the farm. Laviny reprimands, “There’s dead wood all over the hill, waitin’ fer the axe, an’ you’ve kindled up the fence-rails till I kain’t find enough fer a calf-pen. You’ll be burnin’ up the beds next an’ put us all on the floor. That’s yore idy o’ livin,’ but it ain’t mine, Jim Wishart.”³⁹ By contrast, Ishma reproaches, “And you had to have shells for your gun, so you could loaf in the woods, and the ground cryin’ for the plough. And you had to have a pair of shoes, and me without a hat to wear to meetin.”⁴⁰ Burke’s attention to dialect certainly makes her characters more believable and their variations in speech and mannerisms allow for wealthy, educated mountaineers such as Derry Unthank to fit rather seamlessly into roles of union organizer, orator, even professor.

³⁸ Ibid., xxv, xxxvii.

³⁹ Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 13.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 52.

Burke shows that not all mountaineers were uneducated, shoeless, and isolated from the major political and economic concerns of their day. Erica Locklear notes, “For decades gendered stereotypes about mountaineers have portrayed mountain men as lazy, violent, and patriarchal rulers; while women were generally depicted as either sexually wanton or defeminized, thanks to their constant toiling in field and home.”⁴¹ Locklear points to Elizabeth Engelhardt’s work regarding the Granny and Elly May characters from *The Beverly Hillbillies* to illustrate these two disparate yet related roles. Engelhardt explains that Elly May generally precedes Granny as “the one with illusory sexual power who married early, had too many children, got old before her time, and turned into Granny.”⁴² After constant farming outside and work in the home, these mountain women were presumed to lose all signs of femininity. Engelhardt’s analysis of the Granny and Elly May characters certainly resonates with Deborah Gray White’s concepts of the Mammy and Jezebel constructs. Interestingly enough, both the Appalachian woman and the black woman are forced into inferior roles that underscore their exploitation and oppression.

While Burke certainly includes lamentable characters such as Bainie and Jim Wishart, Ishma Waycaster, Britt Hensley, and Granny Starkweather avoid what Patricia Gantt names “the dual distortions of the quaint or violent Appalachian mountaineer.”⁴³ Like Lumpkin, Burke creates a host of mountaineers who do not prefer ignorance and stasis to change. Britt and Julie balk at the reception their music receives in Knoxville—a public all too eager to embrace the Appalachian stereotype of the “semiliterate, poor white rube: barefooted, wearing overalls, smoking a corn cob pipe, interrupting an almost-continual lethargy only to chase ‘revenooers’

⁴¹ Erica Locklear, *Negotiating a Perilous Empowerment: Appalachian Women’s Literacies* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), 155.

⁴² Engelhardt, *Beyond Hill and Hollow: Original Readings in Appalachian Women’s Studies* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 3.

⁴³ Patricia Gantt, “A Mutual Journey: Wilma Dykeman and Appalachian Regionalism,” in Inness and Royer, 202.

from the still.”⁴⁴ Even Britt asserts, “I didn’t take much to bein’ shown off as a freak o’ the wilderness.”⁴⁵

Burke presents a more romanticized portrayal of nature than Lumpkin, but her nature is not one-dimensional, and Ishma often finds herself alternately struggling against the natural world and finding comfort and inspiration from it. Burke chooses to begin her novel with optimistic descriptions of summertime in Cloudy Knob, unlike Lumpkin’s wintry, snake-like Swain’s Crossing. Despite the initial descriptions of “tumbling waters,” “wild odors,” “trembling flowers,” “innumerable birds,” and “great pools,” Ishma learns that the mountains have the power to replenish her “fount” and also destroy her morale. Nature has agency and affects Ishma’s decision making. This paradox is most evident in Ishma’s attempt to harvest a field of soybeans and her obsession with wild fires.

Burke argues for advancements in agriculture through Ishma’s struggles as a farmer. She uses Ishma’s unusual and unheard of attempt to grow and harvest soybeans as a way to argue for new and more progressive ideas. In other words, Burke argues for innovative methods of farming that will offer sustainability for the poor mountaineers. Traditional methods of hog raising and corn cultivation proved fruitless for the people of Cloudy Knob. As crops failed to elicit enough income to provide for the family, farms deteriorated, debts increased, and men left the mountains to work in the lumber camps where they experienced illness and injury that gave women no choice but to enter the mills. Although she receives criticism, Ishma reads progressive farm literature, collaborates with Allen Beck, the local farm agent, and learns how to inoculate soybeans, a crop that will grow readily in an old field and exact a good price for its corn, roughage, and hay. The experiment takes its toll on Ishma and Britt, however, for it required

⁴⁴ Ibid., 199.

⁴⁵ Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 403.

laborious physical exertion, and Ishma's spirit of adventure succumbs to despair when marauding cattle infiltrate her seven-acre field, destroying and consuming everything in their path.

Salstrom maintains:

The average farmer turned to wage work did so after, note before, his farm began to grow marginally by his own standards. The new outside-financed industrial development afforded many mountaineers their only alternative to long-distance migration. The new local timbering and mining jobs helped many of them continue to be what they wished to be—landowning proprietors of family farms. Since, however, the taking of wage jobs reduced their farming activity to part-time, many of them then allowed the size of their farms to shrink faster than ever—down to sizes that destroyed any hope of returning to a status of self-sufficiency in the event that their wages jobs vanished.⁴⁶

Here, Burke's attention to regional detail concerning Appalachia's decline in agriculture is paramount. Ishma does everything within her power to stay on Cloudy Knob. She accepts her parcel of land from Jim. She cultivates a crop that promises to provide extra cash, but like other farmers, Ishma's debts overwhelm any chance of profit, and she ultimately finds herself earning extra income in the mill. Because of her part-time status as a farmer, and the fact that the Waycaster farm has been sub-divided between the Hensleys and the Wisharts, Ishma will never again experience autonomy as a self-sustaining farmer.

More than the other Gastonia novelists, Burke addresses key issues about farming that directly pertain to the mountaineer's ability to sustain herself, a crucial aspect of life in the Southern Appalachian region. Although sustainability is an important concern for areas such as Appalachia, it is not unique to Appalachia. Sustainability is a global issue, and its universalism fights against what Joe Moran terms "geographical essentialism." He writes, "Geographical essentialism is the notion that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically 'different' inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture, or racial essence proper to

⁴⁶ Salstrom, *Appalachia's Path to Dependency: Rethinking a Region's Economic History*, 12.

that geographical space.”⁴⁷ Indeed, Ishma’s struggles in the mountains shed light on the problems ailing the region, but they are universal in nature and do not promote the otherness or exceptionalism of Appalachia. John Gaventa argues:

The total impact of a power relationship is more than the sum of its parts. Power serves to create power. Powerlessness serves to re-enforce powerlessness. Power relationships, once established, are self-sustaining. Quiescence is the face of inequalities may be understood only in terms of the inertia of the situation. For this reason, power in a given community can never be understood simply by observation at a given point in time. Historical investigation must occur to discover whether routines of non-conflict have been shaped, and, if so, how they are maintained.... If the processes of power that affect quiescence and rebellion in Central Appalachia are more general in source, then they may be similar in nature and consequence for rural or urban, subcultural or mainstream, black or white relatively powerless people elsewhere. And if, within or beyond Appalachia, power relationships do impede challenge to social and economic equalities, then theorists and practitioners of democracy should turn their energies to considering how the power relationships of contemporary society are to be altered if the social and economic deprivations of the people within it are to be overcome.⁴⁸

Practitioners and theorists of ecofeminism strive to respond to Gaventa’s charge by re-framing environmental policies and theories that oppress women and nature across the globe. Including the Gastonia novels in the discourse of ecofeminism demonstrates their contribution to the political and practical significance of women-initiated protests and grassroots organizing activities. The stories of Bonnie and Ishma are relevant because they resonate with phenomena today—that women constitute the largest group of landless laborers in the world.⁴⁹

In addition to aspects of power relationships, Burke also demonstrates her familiarity with Appalachia through her many inclusions of Cherokee folklore, character’s knowledge of various native plants and animals, skills in cabin construction, and the peoples’ aversion to debt. Burke incorporates the wild fires to show how the mountain people come together to protect

⁴⁷ Moran, *Interdisciplinarity*, 167.

⁴⁸ John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 256, 258.

⁴⁹ Kelly, “Women and Power,” in Warren, 116.

their resources and to foreshadow the workers' need to unite against the common enemy of unbridled capitalism, an all-consuming force destroying the lives of its workers and the environment in which it is apart.

On more than one occasion wild fires ravage Cloudy Knob, threatening the livelihoods of its inhabitants. Ishma finds herself mesmerized by its beauty and power and even dreams about its blaze during her time in the mill village. Burke writes, “[Ishma] thought that she had floated high in the air above that fire. Night after night her ecstasy was repeated in her dreams, making it harder to doubt that she had flown over that flaming ocean.”⁵⁰ Leslie Silko notes the power of place in regard to dreams such as the ones experienced by Ishma. Her arguments concerning dreams within the Pueblo culture can be extended to Ishma's struggle as well. She posits:

Landscape thus has similarities with dreams. Both have the power to seize terrifying feelings and deep instincts and translate them into images—visual, aural, tactile—into the concrete where human beings may more readily confront and channel the terrifying instincts or powerful emotions into rituals and narratives which reassure the individual while reaffirming cherished values of the group.⁵¹

The fires in Ishma's dreams connect to her own desire to experience self-awakening and, in part, her desire to coexist with nature as a self-sustaining farmer. On the other hand, Ishma's revelations about class-consciousness place her within a group of people striving to better their existence, and that is why Burke concludes the novel with yet another forest fire whose power Ishma decides she “must carry with her back to her work...where the workers had never heard that they could be free, that the world could be theirs; and she would teach them and stay with them until they held her vision.”⁵² The vision of the landscape and its powerful fire serves as

⁵⁰ Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 25.

⁵¹ Leslie Marmon Silko, “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination,” in Glotfelty and Fromm, 273-274.

⁵² Burke, *Call Home the Heart*, 424.

both personal identity and group identity because the environment and its inhabitants cannot be separated from one another.

The Gastonia novelists certainly cast many of their southern hill characters in a noteworthy perspective. Bonnie Calhoun, Marge Crenshaw, and Ishma Waycaster undoubtedly share traits with honorable Appalachian women such as Gertie Nevels, Ivy Rowe, Lydia McQueen, Judith Blackford, and Ellen Chesser. In addition to their complex characters, the novelists' incorporation of regional details including setting, customs, and dialect prove intricate for the development of such characters and go beyond the decorative aspects of local color.

The environmentalism in the Gastonia novels takes an unflinching look at regional abuses of both natural and human resources, even before environmental causes became fashionable or genuine national concerns. The regionalism in the Gastonia novels raises questions about the nature of our physical surroundings, questions that are common to all people, everywhere. Glen Love asserts, "Throughout human history, a regional geographic sense has been a given in all cultures."⁵³ Indeed, the Gastonia novelists weave together the intricate threads of gender, race, and class and how these human concerns merit a full consideration of the places from which they emerge. In the words of Glen Love, "An ideology which separates human beings from their environment is demonstrably and dangerously reductionist."⁵⁴

⁵³ Love, *Practical Ecocriticism*, 91.

⁵⁴ Love, "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism," in Glotfelty and Fromm, 237.

CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

Burke, Lumpkin, and Page articulate reasons why Gastonia had universal significance, and demonstrate ways in which that significance could be understood and applied to the lives of readers. The feminism, regionalism, and environmentalism in the novels offer rich areas for scholarship, and ecofeminism certainly offers a new interdisciplinary field for exploring how these perspectives intersect in the Appalachia region and the larger national realm of race and class-consciousness. Emily Toth argues for the merit of regional writers, and because the Gastonia novels transcend the proletarian genre to serve as regional texts as well, they should be included in her argument. She posits, “What is needed is the kind of critical attention that will place these writers within a tradition, illuminate their methods, and ultimately, demonstrate their worth to those scholars and teachers who are drawing up syllabi and introducing literary workers to new generations of readers.”¹

The Gastonia novelists and their marginalized female, leftist voices certainly deserve their place in academic study, indeed a place in the literary canon itself. Paul Lauter states, “The literary canon is, in short, a means by which culture validates social power.”² The exclusion of female, black, and working-class voices from the literary cannon supports Lauter’s claim. The work of the Gastonia novelists offers texts for feminist scholars and participants in broad social movements for human and environmental rights to reread for the reconstituting of the canon.

¹ Toth, ed., *Regionalism and the Female Imagination*, 94.

² Paul Lauter, “Race and Gender in the Shaping of the American Literary Canon: A Case Study from the Twenties,” in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex Class and race in Literature and Culture*, ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York: Methuen, 1985), 19.

Glen Love points to the emergence of interdisciplinary fields that will aid in the reinterpretation of canonical works from the past. He suggests:

What is emerging is a multiplicity of approaches and subjects, including—under the big tent of environmental literature—nature writing, deep ecology, the ecology of cities, ecofeminism, the literature of toxicity, environmental justice, bioregionalism, the lives of animals, the revaluation of place, interdisciplinarity, eco-theory, the expansion of the canon to include previously unheard voices.³

Gastonia should not be forgotten, for it is through stories such as *Call Home the Heart*, *To Make My Bread*, and *Gathering Storm* that we shall understand the human significance of the economic and social revolutions in the South. As Harriet Herring points out, “For they will tell in human terms what cannot be told in surveys and statistics, in blue books of boosting or figures of farm foreclosure, in learned treaties or in declarations of right.”⁴ The lives of the Gastonia heroines, most likely modeled after the courageous Ella May Wiggins, remain fully relevant to southern working-class life. Patrick Huber explains:

Fully eight decades after [Wiggins’s] death, industrial workplace issues such as affordable childcare, union representation, and chronically low wages continue to plague southern working mothers. In 2004, for example, her adopted home state of North Carolina, which lost more than 156,000 manufacturing jobs over the previous three-and-a-half years, ranked forty-sixth in the nation in average manufacturing wages and dead last in percentage of union membership.⁵

The Gastonia novels and the actual battle waged by the 1929 textile workers point to the real possibilities for social change in the American South, indeed with the fundamental problems faced by the Appalachian region: issues of land use and ownership, economic security, civic leadership, and human rights.

³ Love, *Practical Ecocriticism*, 5.

⁴ Harriet Herring, “Southern Problems in Story,” *Social Forces* 11, no. 2 (Dec. 1932): 298, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/256970> (accessed Sept. 27, 2010).

⁵ Huber, “Mill Mother’s Lament: Ella May Wiggins and the Gastonia Textile Strike of 1929,” 106.

Finally, the Gastonia novels offer a unique space for activists and academics in the field of Appalachian Studies. As Ronald Eller observes, a volatile alliance exists between activists and academics wishing to understand and promote change for the region.⁶ While the novels serve as important avenues for teaching, learning, and theoretical research, they also call for social change and promote individual awareness and action. Just as the novels serve as both regional and proletarian texts, they also serve as examples of scholarship and activism, genres that complement one another and ultimately provide rich areas of study and action for students of interdisciplinarity.

⁶ Ronald Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 200-201.

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