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Toward a Post-Appalachian Sense of Place

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This article utilizes recent developments in postsouthern theory to explore Appalachian literature and culture. Analyzing novels by Ron Rash, Terry Roberts, and Charles Frazier, I argue that Appalachian literature will likely follow a trajectory similar to the one identified by scholars in southern literature more broadly. Despite the seeming persistence of historicity among leading Appalachian writers, I anticipate that the homogenization of the region will increasingly lead writers either to commodify outdated notions of Appalachian exceptionalism or to rely upon an ironic, parodic relationship with past Appalachian literary narratives.

In recent years, Ron Rash, Terry Roberts, and Charles Frazier have produced historical novels that complicate critical understandings of the American South as both an actual material geography and, in Michael Kreyling's theorization, an *invented* cultural and literary space.[1] Rash's *The Cove* (2012), Roberts's *A Short Time to Stay Here* (2012), and Frazier's *Nightwoods* (2011) present fetishizations of rural, agricultural spaces that may be the result of lingering fantasies about Appalachia's agrarian past and anxieties about Appalachia's largely post-agrarian present. Although these novels glean material from past cultural productions, their allusions lack the parodic, intertexual qualities that so often mark postmodern and "post-southern" literature. Instead, these novels appear more firmly grounded in historicity, by which I mean Fredric Jameson's explanation of the concept as the "lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way."[2] As a result of this sense of historicity, Rash, Roberts, and Frazier grapple earnestly – or at least more earnestly than is typical of so-called postsouthern writers – with

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[1] Michael Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998). Kreyling's argument is similar to Allen W. Batteau's earlier study *The Invention of Appalachia* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990), which is more specifically about Appalachia.

[2] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 21. Rash's, Roberts's, and Frazier's historicity, or at least perceived historicity, seems to stem from their personal and/or familial connections to Appalachian history.

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how the sociohistorical shifts in Appalachia have impacted the region and its fictional representations. In this essay, I utilize these three novels as case studies that are representative of broader trends in Appalachian literature,[3] and I seek to determine whether postsouthern theory can be applied to Appalachia and whether Appalachian literature – despite its seeming historicity – may be more accurately labeled "post-Appalachian."

Much criticism in southern studies has been concerned with the decline of southern cultural and literary distinctiveness. For example, in *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction*, Scott Romine argues that proclamations about the demise of the South are part of a "standard account of globalization."[4] Romine identifies two common trends in the globalization narrative that, in the southern context, he attributes to cultural critics John Egerton and Edwin M. Yoder: "Both Egerton and Yoder place the Real Dixie in jeopardy, either as an absolute loss of culture under the homogenizing force of Americanization or as a simulation of culture – Dixiefication, not Dixie – that marks continuity itself as a fake." Debates about southern exceptionalism are by no means new; seminal scholars and critics, such as C. Vann Woodward and Allen Tate, highlighted southern cultural performativity and southern literary contrivances as early as the mid-twentieth century.[5] In recent years, the conversation has become more eschatological, prompting Lewis P. Simpson in 1980 to contend that we have entered a "postsouthern" era,[6] and, more recently, Leigh Anne Duck has gone so far as to claim that the "New Southern Studies" is actually "southern studies without 'the South.'"[7]

[3] Due to space constraints, my analysis of contemporary Appalachian literature is necessarily limited. I do not provide a sustained discussion of Rash's, Roberts's, or Frazier's other literary works, nor do I venture into the works of other Appalachian novelists, poets, short-story writers, or dramatists. Additionally, this essay may appear disproportionately weighted toward cultural and theoretical discussions rather than close analyses of the three novels in question. This is a deliberate choice, as my principal intervention in the fields of southern and Appalachian studies seeks to apply significant developments in "postsouthern" theory to Appalachian literature. Thus I utilize Rash's, Roberts's, and Frazier's most recent novels in support of this intervention, and my primary purpose is not to fully explicate these novels or these writers' entire bodies of work.

[4] Scott Romine, *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 1.

[5] C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960); Allen Tate, *Collected Essays* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1959).

[6] Lewis P. Simpson, "The Closure of History in a Postsouthern America," in Simpson, *The Brazen Face of History: Studies in the Literary Consciousness in America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980).

[7] Quoted in Martyn Bone, "Postsouthernism and the New Southern Studies," keynote address, Tompkins Hall, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC, 26 April 2012, 13.

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Such declarations of the meaninglessness of "the South" and even the placelessness of the region may seem strange given that the South and southern literature have long been distinguished by their firm grounding in place. Discourse about "sense of place" has been virtually ubiquitous in southern studies, particularly since Eudora Welty's 1956 essay "Place in Fiction," in which she notes, "It is both natural and sensible that the place where we have our roots should become the setting, the first and primary proving ground, of our fiction."[8] While there is nothing pernicious about Welty's emphasis on place, what is problematic about the politics of place in southern history is that notions of southern place have often been associated with agrarianism, particularly as presented by the Southern Agrarians in their two manifestos, *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) and *Who Owns America?* (1936).[9] According to Martyn Bone, "even now, the standard literary-critical conception of 'place' derives substantially from the Agrarians' idealized vision of a rural, agricultural society," which is "apotheosized in the subsistence farm."[10] One significant originary moment for this tendency to apotheosize the hardscrabble southern farmer was Andrew Lytle's contribution to *I'll Take My Stand*, an essay entitled "The Hind Tit," in which he glorifies the satisfying life of a subsistence-farming family, claiming, "It is in fact impossible for any culture to be sound and healthy without a proper respect and proper regard for the soil."[11]

[8] Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction" (1959), in Welty, *Welty: Stories, Essays, & Memoir* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 781–96, 793.

[9] By "problematic," I refer to the Agrarians' well-known and well-documented reactionary attitudes toward race and class. The Agrarians are also guilty of promulgating many revisionist and apologist histories of the American South. For more information on this topic, please see my essay "The Problematic History and Recent Culture Reappropriation of Southern Agrarianism," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 21, 2 (Spring 2014), 337–52.

[10] Martyn Bone, *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), vii–viii.

[11] Andrew Lytle, "The Hind Tit," in Louis D. Rubin Jr., ed., *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979, first published 1930), 201–45, 202–3. In the Appalachian context, the tendency to romanticize agrarianism far pre-dates *I'll Take My Stand*. Wilma Dunaway, *The First American Frontier: Transition to Capitalism in Southern Appalachia, 1700–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 3, explains, "Despite its origins among the country's wealthiest planters, the 'myth of the happy yeoman' was well entrenched by the early nineteenth century, and the southern mountains have been idealized in the contemporary period as one of the strongest bastions of such self-sufficient farmers." Building upon Dunaway's work, Emily Satterwhite, *Dear Appalachia: Readers, Identity, and Popular Fiction since 1878* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 16, argues, "Belief in a persistent frontier in turn permitted widespread faith that the region sustained a populace of Jeffereson's beloved yeoman farmers shunted from more 'civilized' quarters of the nation." Recent scholarship in Appalachian studies has been devoted to deconstructing

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In part because of the critical influence wielded throughout the mid-twentieth century by the Agrarians (and later the New Critics) – for example, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, and Donald Davidson – literary scholars have tended to yoke Welty's "sense of place" with Agrarian idealizations of rurality or what Richard Godden calls an "aesthetics of anti-development."[12] The persistence of Agrarian conceptions of place is evident if we consider the abundance of scholars and critics who have used Agrarian ideology – regardless of whether they support or revile the Agrarians – as a sort of yardstick to determine the "southernness" of texts both old and new. Contemporary proponents of the concept of postsouthernism argue that this conflation of Weltyan sense of place with Agrarianism is anachronistic, because Agrarian policies against industry, technology, and development are no longer viable in literature given that they are no longer feasible for the vast majority of the region.[13]

Although several prominent literary critics have discussed postsouthernism, the neologism was first used by Lewis P. Simpson. In "The Closure of History in a Postsouthern America" (1980), Simpson states that the term "postsouthern" signifies a diminishment, if not the death, of southern exceptionalism, both in southern culture and in southern literature; the postsouthern, for Simpson, also reflects the flattening of regional diversity and the ascendency of

myths about Appalachia's cultural, economic, and geographic isolation. Examining rural culture in the nineteenth century, Ronald L. Lewis, "Beyond Isolation and Homogeneity: Diversity and the History of Appalachia," in Dwight B. Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford, eds., *Back Talk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999) 21–43, 22, states, "it is clear that much of Appalachia was neither unusually isolated, physically or culturally, nor was its population uniformly more homogeneous than that of other sections of rural America." Cultural heterogeneity was particularly obvious in central Appalachia, which became heavily industrialized in the late nineteenth century: "Industrializing Appalachia was a matrix of cultural interaction among very diverse races and cultures" (ibid., 37). See also David E. Whisnant, *All That Is Native & Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009; first published 1983), as well as Dunaway's *The First American Frontier* and Satterwhite's *Dear Appalachia*. Yet, despite these important scholarly interventions, popular perceptions of Appalachia often remain the same as they have been since the late nineteenth century, imagining the region as a refuge for Jeffersonian ideals, at the heart of which is the small-scale, self-sufficient farm. Even if such idealized farms were never pervasive in Appalachia (Dunaway, 20), they live on in the American imagination and are common, as Satterwhite, 2, suggests, in popular literature.

[12] Quoted in Bone, *The Postsouthern*, ix.

[13] Increasingly, there are exceptions to the shift away from small-scale farming and toward industry and agribusiness. In the South and elsewhere, independent, family-owned and -operated farms – many of them organic and/or sustainable – are growing in number, making it not only possible but also popular to engage in a brand of agriculture that is functionally (if not ideologically) similar to the Agrarians' dream.

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national homogenization. Michael Kreyling's "Fee Fie Faux Faulkner: Parody and Postmodernism in Southern Literature" extends Simpson's theorization of the postsouthern, and for Kreyling postsouthernism is a way to imagine the postmodern tendency toward parody in the southern literary context. Thus, according to Kreyling, writers like Harry Crews and Barry Hannah could best be understood by studying their parodic relationships to Faulkner, and, more broadly, studying these types of parodic relationship demonstrates how writers negotiate and ultimately shed the Bloomian "anxiety of influence" engendered by their southern literary forebears.[14] In "Where Is Southern Literature? The Practice of Place in a Postsouthern Age," Romine builds upon Kreyling's thesis and argues that because a "real South" does not exist that contemporary southern writers can mimetically reflect in their work, they are only left with an intertextual mode of southern writing in which they feed off of older southern texts that actually had a "South" to reflect: "postsouthern literature can be delineated, as it were, only by its relationship to earlier writing that could image itself as Southern (capital S, no quotation marks)."[15]

The concept of postsouthernism has been re-energized in recent years by Martyn Bone, whose *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* (2005) was the first (and to date only) book-length scholarly work to assess postsouthernism and the politics of place in the South. Although undoubtedly drawing on previous scholars, such as those by Simpson, Kreyling, and Romine, Bone's primary aim is not necessarily to examine postmodern parody and intertextuality but rather to examine the South from a "historical-geographical materialist" perspective that enables him to consider the impact of capitalism on contemporary conceptions of southern place.[16] Moreover, Bone's work extends beyond a privileging of place that is the result of lingering neo-Agrarianism and instead moves toward a nuanced sense of place that has more to do with the material cultures and geographies of place than with a commodified and fabricated sense of culture that is often imagined or invented.[17] Bone's emphasis on the "historical-geographical

[14] Michael Kreyling, "Fee Fie Faux Faulkner: Parody and Postmodernism in Southern Literature," *Southern Review*, 29, 1 (1993), 1–15.

[15] Scott Romine, "Where Is Southern Literature? The Practice of Place in a Postsouthern Age," in Suzzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith, eds., *South to a New Place: Region, Literature, Culture* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 23–43.

[16] Bone, The Postsouthern, x.

[17] I particularly appreciate Bone's complication of sense of place because it seems to be more in keeping with significant theoretical work done in the field of geography. For instance, Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 5, asserts the need to reexamine the "view of place as bounded, as in various ways a site of an authenticity, as singular, fixed and unproblematic in its identity." Instead,

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materialist" continuities of place is similar to Kreyling's and Romine's analyses of texts' parasitic, intertextual relationships insofar as all three of these approaches problematize the clearly delineated breaks between the southern and the postsouthern that some scholars have sought to identify.

In a keynote lecture given in the spring of 2012 at North Carolina State University, Bone argued that "the most conspicuous lacuna in existing definitions and discussions of postsouthernism [is] the failure to attend to the cultural productions of non-white southerners."[18] Striving not to fall into the trap of associating southern literature with *white* southern literature, Bone has explored in his more recent scholarship African American writers whose work may be read in the postsouthern vein; perhaps his best example of this is Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* (2001), a postmodern, postsouthern parody of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936). While I certainly appreciate Bone's efforts to analyze more non-white writers, I would also add that a second lacuna exists in theorizations of the postsouthern: the consideration of whether Appalachian writers fit into increasingly codified understandings of postsouthernism.[19] Appalachian writers are, after all, another group that has often been marginalized. In "Writing on the Cusp: Double Alterity and Minority Discourse in Appalachia" (1996), Rodger Cunningham argues,

> Appalachia exists in a blank created by a double otherness – a *doubly* double otherness. For the region is not only an internal Other to the South as the South is the internal Other of America, but it is also the occupier of a simultaneous gap and overlap *between* North and South.[20]

While it is imperative to acknowledge the distinctiveness of Appalachian history, it is equally imperative not to buttress outdated notions of

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Massey contends that places are always "open and porous," and thus global forces, either cultural or economic, must be considered in relation to the local: "The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple. And the particularity of any place is, in these terms, constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counter-position to the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections *to* that 'beyond'." James L. Peacock, *Grounded Globalism: How the U. S. South Embraces the World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 104, makes a similar argument, although his is more specifically about space and place in the American South: "Combine global scope and dynamism, and you get a global force field replacing what may have seemed a smaller, more localized, and less changeable space."

[18] Bone, "Postsouthernism," 9.

[19] Romine comes close to acknowledging this lacuna in the introduction to *The Real South*, 20. After mentioning Fred Chappell, he states that "this project will have nothing further to say" about Appalachia.

[20] Rodger Cunningham, "Writing on the Cusp: Double Alterity and Minority Discourse in Appalachia," in Jefferson Humphries and John Lowe, eds., *The Future of Southern Letters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 41–53, 45, original emphasis.

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Appalachian exceptionalism.[21] Much of southern Appalachia is part of the broader region identified as the South, and southern Appalachians tend to embrace a southern as well as an Appalachian identity. According to sociologist Larry J. Griffin, 74 percent of southern Appalachians identify themselves as "southern," which is a higher percentage of self-identifying southerners than in many places in the "peripheral" South (Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Florida, Kentucky, Oklahoma, West Virginia, Arkansas, and Texas).[22] Overestimating the otherness of the South or the otherness of Appalachia within the South can be problematic because, as Herbert Reid argues, "A retreat to elemental group identity can lock us into a one-sided, hence reified and exaggerated, sense of Otherness."[23] Examining southern Appalachia as part the region commonly identified as the South will demonstrate how this particular portion of the region has at times developed differently – in terms of both culture and literature – than other places in the Deep South and the peripheral South.

Although my intention in this article is foremost to intervene in current postsouthern criticism and theory, my questions about the present state of Appalachian identity and sense of place are consistent with contemporary work that is being done specifically in the field of Appalachian studies. Several examples of the this type of work appear in the Fall 2010 issue of *Appalachian Journal*, which features "Appalachian Identity: A Roundtable Discussion," comprising short articles by Barbara Ellen Smith, Stephen Fisher, Phillip Obermiller, David Whisnant, Emily Satterwhite, and Rodger Cunningham.[24] This roundtable grew out of two sessions at the 2007 and 2008 Appalachian Studies Conferences that were purposely organized to

[21] For example, until relatively recently, many people, including scholars, believed that Appalachia possessed a certain racial innocence because it did not participate in the South's system of slavery (Satterwhite, *Dear Appalachia*, 16). In 1996 Rodger Cunningham, "Writing on the Cusp," 43, wrote, "The defining social fact of the Appalachian South is that, as a whole, it was never part of the slave/plantation economy, whence most of its other differences from the Deep South." However, more recently, Wilma Dunaway, *Slavery in the American Mountain South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1, has demonstrated that in the Mountain South, "slavery flourished amid a nonslaveholding majority and a large surplus of poor white landless laborers." Furthermore, she asserts, "Southern Appalachia's largest group of unfree laborers were slaves who supplied long-term labor to one of every three farm owners and who accounted for one of every five agricultural laborer households" (ibid., 4).

[22] Larry J. Griffin, "Whiteness and Southern Identity in the Mountain and Lowland South," *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, 10, 1–2 (2004), 7–37, 12–13.

[23] Herbert Reid, "Appalachia and the 'Sacrament of Coexistence': Beyond Post-colonial Trauma and Regional Identity Traps," *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, 11, 1–2 (2005), 164–81, 164.

[24] For another useful discussion of regional ontology, see the articles in *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, 18, 1–2 (2012).

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interrogate Appalachian regional identity. In the introduction to this roundtable, Smith states, "Here in the Appalachian region, deindustrialization, economic contraction, and forced migration undermine the viability of place-based communities, while the literal destruction of place through mountaintop removal proceeds apace."[25] A sense of incredulity regarding both the viability and the knowability of contemporary place-based Appalachian identity is echoed throughout the other essays in the roundtable. While Fisher offers what Smith calls one of the two "most favorable interpretations and endorsements" of Appalachian identity,[26] he still admits the impossibility of defining Appalachian identity in the present: "there is still no consensus as to what we really mean when we use the term 'Appalachian.' … In fact, I could make just as strong a case *against* Appalachian regionalism and identity as *for* it."[27] Obermiller's essay, which is Smith's second example of a "favorable" endorsement of Appalachian identity, is similar to Fisher's in that it sidesteps the question of "ontological Appalachianness," instead stating that while Appalachian identity may be constructed, scholarship on the subject is most useful when it considers the "agency of identity, that is, how it can be used to create a better life by people *in* the place, or *from* the place, we call Appalachia."[28] Following Fisher and Obermiller, the essays in this roundtable by Whisnant, Satterwhite, and Cunningham provide even sharper criticisms of the notion of a coherent Appalachian identity. Satterwhite makes the point most directly when she states, "I have zero patience for insider/outside politics: I have no use for claims to authenticity or personal history with the region as evidence of authority and accuracy."[29]

While interest in contemporary Appalachian identity has at times been most robust among historians and sociologists, Satterwhite is one notable

[25] Barbara Ellen Smith, Introduction to "Appalachian Identity: A Roundtable Discussion," *Appalachian Journal*, 38, 1 (2010), 56–57, 57.

[26] Ibid., 56.

[27] Steve Fisher, "Claiming Appalachia – and the Questions that Go with It," *Appalachian Journal*, 38, 1 (2010), 58–61, 58, original emphasis.

[28] Phillip J. Obermiller, "Thoughts on the Importance of Identifying Appalachians," *Appalachian Journal*, 38, 1 (2010), 62–64, 63.

[29] Emily Satterwhite, "Objecting to Insider/Outsider Politics and the Uncritical Celebration of Appalachia," *Appalachian Journal*, 38, 1 (2010), 68–73, 68. In an editorial published in *Appalachian Journal* following the 2010 roundtable, Tal Stanley also divides the roundtable between Fisher and Obermiller on one side, and Whisnant, Satterwhite, and Cunningham on the other. However, unlike Smith, Stanley makes this argument surprisingly personal, blaming the latter group's disregard of Appalachian exceptionalism on their underdeveloped connections to place: "Fisher and Obermiller are of a place, not nomads, having not participated in the transient life fashionable in American higher education. Smith, Satterwhite, and Whisnant offer comments that often imply the values of a wandering, nomadic professoriate – values embedded in their critiques of 'insider' and 'outsider.'" Tal Stanley, "On Appalachian Identity," *Appalachian Journal*, 38, 4 (2011), 356–61, 357–58.

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example of a scholar who has adeptly brought American studies as well as literary studies into dialogue with the question of Appalachian identity. For example, in *Dear Appalachia: Readers, Identity, and Popular Fiction since 1878* (2011), she

> examines fan mail written in response to best-selling fiction set in Appalachia to understand how readers imagined the region and what purposes these imagined geographies served for them. Fan mail shows us that, from 1878 to 2003, readers who embraced best-selling fiction set in Appalachia conceived the region as a rooted, rural place populated by simple whites with a rich and colorful heritage protected from mass culture.[30]

As thorough and convincing as Satterwhite's study is, it does not utilize recent postsouthern theory to explore the construction of Appalachian identity in literature. Furthermore, no postsouthern scholars have yet provided any sustained attention to the production of Appalachian literature and identity.

My argument intervenes in both of these critical veins – Appalachian studies and postsouthern theory – and my hope is that it will foster more discussion in each field and between these two fields that are necessarily linked. Examining Ron Rash's *The Cove* (2012), Terry Roberts's *A Short Time to Stay Here* (2012), and Charles Frazier's *Nightwoods* (2011) can facilitate a study of the relationship between postsouthernism and (post-)Appalachian culture and literature. Aside from the obvious connection between these three novels – i.e. they are all set in or around once-grand hotels in western North Carolina – the most significant link is a thematic preoccupation with an Appalachian past in which native mountain inhabitants appear more substantively tied to the region's purportedly traditional forms of agriculture. While it could be said that Rash, Roberts, and Frazier all indulge in agrarian (lowercase "a," i.e. not necessarily Southern Agrarian) fantasies, each author also demonstrates a self-reflective awareness of this indulgence and each undermines Agrarian (capital A, i.e. Southern Agrarian) understandings of the rural, agricultural South.

Rash's *The Cove* tells the story of Laurel Shelton, a young woman living in a mountain cove outside Mars Hill, North Carolina in 1917. Laurel is ostracized from her community because of a large birthmark on her back that leads the townspeople to believe she is a witch. After the death of her parents, which the locals attribute to a curse upon both Laurel and the cove, Laurel's only human contact comes from her brother Hank, who has recently returned from World War I after losing a hand, and Slidell, an eighty-one-year-old neighbor who is the only member of the community willing to venture into the cove. Laurel's circle of acquaintances expands slightly after she finds an unconscious man in

[30] Satterwhite, *Dear Appalachia*, 2.

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the woods who has been repeatedly stung by yellow jackets. The man has few belongings other than a silver flute and a letter saying, "The bearer of this note is Walter Smith. A childhood affliction has made him not able to speak. He wishes to buy a train ticket to New York City."[31] After Laurel nurses Walter back to health, he begins to work on the farm that Laurel and Hank have been struggling to manage, particularly since Hank lost his hand. Sharing a sense of alterity, Laurel and Walter form a bond that blossoms into a love affair. However, Laurel soon learns that Walter is a classically trained German flutist, who has escaped from an internment camp in nearby Hot Springs that has imprisoned over 2,000 German nationals.[32] Subsequently, Laurel and Walter's plans to wed are interrupted both due to Walter's status as an escaped internee and due to increasing political unrest as America escalates its involvement in World War I.

In *The Cove*, Rash complicates the Agrarians' idealization of the subsistence farm by demonstrating a collision of cultures that dispels notions of insularity, cultural purity, and autochthony. Although Laurel has designs to expand the farm's business model so that one day she can sell milk, eggs, and even livestock in one of the nearby towns, the homestead in the cove that she and Hank manage is essentially a subsistence farm, the likes of which the Agrarians, particularly Lytle, would have admired.[33] Laurel's dreams of expansion demonstrate that the South, including Appalachia, was and is inextricably linked to national and even international networks of social and economic exchange. Additionally, Rash's depiction of the German–American cultural clashing throughout this novel can be read as an example of the increasingly widespread multinational and transnational shifts that occurred in the region throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such cultural clashing in the first decades of the twentieth century undermines Donald Davidson's famous "autochthonous ideal," which Fred Hobson describes as the "condition in which the writer was in a certain harmony with the social and cultural environment, was nearly *unconscious* of it as a 'special' environment, quaint or rustic or backward, and thus was not motivated by any urge to interpret or explain."[34] Rash uses the collision of different cultures in *The Cove* to demonstrate the process

[31] Ron Rash, *The Cove* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 43.

[32] For more information on this topic see my interviews with Rash and Roberts, entitled "Writing the Great War: Terry Roberts and Ron Rash Discuss World War I, the German Internment Camp in North Carolina, and the Historical Novel," *North Carolina Literary Review*, 23 (2014), 30–47.

[33] Rash, 20.

[34] Fred Hobson, *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 80, original emphasis.

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by which people become aware of the unique and idiosyncratic facets of their own culture.

In particular, Rash uses music throughout the novel to convey not only the collision of cultures in this particular moment but also the fusion of cultures. For instance, one evening after a hard day's work at the Shelton farm, Hank, Laurel, and Walter are joined by Slidell and two musicians from the area who have heard that Walter is "a crackerjack fife player."[35] As the two men begin to sing and play the dulcimer, they are joined first by Slidell on guitar and then Walter on the flute. Playing standards such as "I Am a Poor Wayfaring Stranger" and "Shady Grove," their styles merge and the sounds of their instruments "tightly wove … and then untangled."[36] As these two very different musical traditions converge – Walter's European classicism and the other men's old-time Appalachian style – there is also a cultural merging, and the musicians leave the session having each been influenced by the others. This scene would seem like an Agrarian fantasy, following Andrew Lytle's exhortation – "Throw out the radio and take down the fiddle from the wall"[37] – however, Rash complicates the scenario by highlighting a cross-pollination of cultures. While the Agrarians likely would have argued that an insular, agricultural community is the best breeding ground for autochthonous art, Rash seems to suggest that cultural merging actual catalyzes a more complex and interesting artistic expression.[38]

Terry Roberts's novel *A Short Time to Stay Here* is concerned with the same historical event as *The Cove*. Roberts's novel is set in and around Hot Springs, North Carolina, during World War I, and it deals much more directly with the German internment camp than does Rash's novel. Rash's characters are certainly impacted by the internment camp, but the central events of the narrative transpire in "the cove" outside the town of Hot Springs. Roberts's novel, on the other hand, is set principally at the Mountain Park Hotel, which was used during the war to house many of the German captives at the internment camp. The plot of the novel revolves around a man named Stephen Robbins, the hotel manager, who is made "Inspector General of the Hot Springs Internment Camp" after the 2,370 "aliens" are brought to

[35] Rash, 86. The use of the word "fife," rather than "flute," throughout *The Cove* is appropriate within the Appalachian musical tradition. Additionally, in the context the American South more broadly, the fife has been associated with African music performed by slaves. The complicated history of the fife in the South further demonstrates the cultural heterogeneity that Rash highlights in this subtly handled scene.

[36] Ibid., 92.

[37] Lytle, "The Hind Tit," 244.

[38] For a fascinating analysis of the commodification of Appalachian musical traditions, see David Whisnant's study of the White Top Folk Festival in *All That Is Native & Fine*.

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the North Carolina mountains.[39] There are two central narrative threads in the novel: the first portrays Stephen's attempts to keep the German prisoners in the camp and the murderous, jingoistic natives out; the second depicts Stephen's love–hate relationship with Anna, a documentary photographer who comes to the mountains from New York to capture what she assumes will be an interesting collision of cultures between the refined, cosmopolitan Germans and the native inhabitants of the "Darkest part of the South."[40]

Roberts's *A Short Time to Stay Here* is also similar to *The Cove* in that it resists a simple neo-Agrarian reading; however, upon first encountering the narrative, the complexities may not be fully apparent, given that Stephen, the narrator of the novel, often fetishizes a rural, agricultural sense of place. For example, he says that in western North Carolina

> you wouldn't find anything you'd recognize except hard-scrabble farms, pastures, hard-use barns and smoke houses and corn cribs; steep fields of corn, wheat, burley tobacco. Western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee in 1917 wasn't the "rural, undeveloped South" of northern newspaper articles; it was a land far beyond. It was a place of the steepest mountains, the wildest river gorges, the meanest lives, and shortest winter rations in the country. It was deep, hard, lonesome, and – if you weren't starving to death – beautiful.[41]

Descriptions of southern Appalachia such as this one appear repeatedly in the novel, and it is precisely this "authentic" Appalachia that Anna longs to capture in her photographs. Thus she goes to the mountain cove where Stephen was born, "So that she could take her photographs of real mountain people, living as they had always lived."[42] Despite her desire to record this culture that still "followed the ancient course they had learned from the land,"[43] "she had no clue just how dark, how cold, how rough the place – and the people – could be."[44] In these passages, one can see a tendency to romanticize both the "beautiful" and the "rough" Appalachia. In the context of the American South, Romine calls this tendency "nostalgia" or "utopianism with a backward glance."[45] This nostalgia, Romine reminds us, continues in contemporary southern culture and can be applied both to the "detoxified Souths of which Andy Griffith's Mayberry is representative" and to the "'good old bad old days' Tony Horwitz identifies in *Confederates in the Attic*."

[39] Terry Roberts, *A Short Time to Stay Here* (Banner Elk, NC: Ingalls Publishing Group, Inc., 2012), 9.
[40] Ibid., 34–35.
[41] Ibid.,12.
[42] Ibid., 89.
[43] Ibid., 133.
[44] Ibid., 137.
[45] Romine, *The Real South*, 25.

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However, in *A Short Time to Stay Here*, a more sophisticated meta-commentary addresses the difficulties of capturing the authentic mountain South. There are several scenes throughout the novel in which Roberts seems perilously close to perpetuating stereotypes about Appalachia before unexpectedly reversing and undermining this pattern. For example, when Anna shows Stephen a photograph of a rural woman, he immediately argues that it is "posed."[46] Anna then says, "That's why I need you – to help me understand what is real and what isn't in this hidden away, folded up country of yours. … And I hate the fake, the posed, the lie." Later, when Anna says, "I came here, where people live simple, natural lives," Stephen thinks, "She said this last bit as if reading from a tourist brochure."[47] Stephen's sudden awareness of the tendency to stereotype and commodify the people of southern Appalachia provides the narrative with an interesting irony, in that Stephen himself is often guilty of relying on tried stereotypes when describing his native habitat. More importantly, though, this awareness of the commodification of an Appalachian sense of place refutes readers' potential assumption that Roberts himself is guilty of employing the same stereotypes that his characters sometimes use.

At first glance, Charles Frazier's *Nightwoods* may appear to be less closely related than *The Cove* and *A Short Time to Stay Here*. While admittedly the plot and time period of Frazier's novel are vastly different, the setting and thematic preoccupations of *Nightwoods* are inextricably linked with those of Rash's and Roberts's novels. *Nightwoods* takes place at an abandoned hotel in the North Carolina mountains during the late 1950s, and it tells the story of Luce, a young woman who has become the guardian of her sister's two children after she is murdered by her second husband, Bud. The children, Dolores and Frank, are so traumatized by their mother's murder that they have seemingly lost the ability to speak, and the state workers handling the case assume them to be "feebleminded."[48] Out of a desperate attempt to regain agency in their own lives, Dolores and Frank often engage in and relish killing chickens and setting fires. In order to quell "whatever weirdness they shared and ignited between them,"[49] Luce resolves that she will have "to be a teacher" to the children and demonstrate to them how and when it is best to comply with society's rules and mores. Under Luce's guidance, the children's reinitiation into society involves cultivating an intimate knowledge of agriculture and the natural world.

[46] Roberts, *A Short Time*, 46.
[47] Ibid., 47.
[48] Charles Frazier, *Nightwoods* (New York: Random House, 2011), 9.
[49] Ibid., 4.

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Frazier's *Nightwoods* is in some ways more of an agrarian fantasy than either *The Cove* or *A Short Time to Stay Here*. This may be surprising given that *Nightwoods* is set in the late 1950s, while the other two novels are set primarily in the late 1910s. Luce's anachronistic lifestyle in the novel is the result of her living alone in the decrepit old hotel outside her hometown. Luce has set up the hotel to be a subsistence farm, which enables her to produce most of what she needs to survive. Luce's closest neighbor and friend, Maddie, lives the same way:

> In particular, Maddie, living in her own world like it had remained 1898 on and on forever. Or, to be generous, maybe 1917 … Early on, Luce viewed Maddie's homeplace as mostly imaginary, life still circling around hog killings, oil lamps, fetching water, outhouses, and all that other old business. Until Luce realized that these days, her life was a lot like that too.[50]

Throughout the novel, Luce engages in numerous types of behavior that Lytle and the Agrarians likely would have looked upon approvingly. For instance, in the three years that Luce has lived at the Lodge, "she had hardly missed any of the modern world."[51] Later, we also learn that Luce refuses to grow cash crops, instead focussing on subsistence agriculture, and that she "had limited use for cash money. Most of what it bought she didn't want. She was happy without modern conveniences, her desires being mostly impractical and lacking monetary value."[52]

Yet Luce's worldview and, more broadly, Frazier's *Nightwoods* are more complex than Andrew Lytle's romanticized Agrarian fantasy. While Rash complicates the Agrarian platform by revealing the transnational influences on Appalachia and Roberts complicates it by highlighting the potential commodification of Appalachian culture, Frazier extends the Agrarian platform by yoking it to a more complex environmental philosophy. For example, in addition to teaching Dolores and Frank about agriculture and "vegetable lore,"[53] Luce frequently turns her attention away from the cultivated landscape of the Lodge in order to focus on the uncultivated environments surrounding it:

> Watchfulness was something Luce had mostly applied to nothing but the natural world. Birds and leaves and weather. An occasional deer or bear or screaming panther. Distant lights in the sky at night moving contrary to the expected. And the sweetness of it was simple: the natural world would go on and on just fine whether you watched or not. Your existence was incidental. Nature didn't require anything at all other than the bare minimum deal in return for life. Be born, die.[54]

[50] Ibid., 12–13.
[51] Ibid., 24.
[52] Ibid., 141.
[53] Ibid., 27.
[54] Ibid., 30.

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Yet the seeming indifference of the natural world does not prevent Luce from having a significant emotional and psychological attachment to it. When asked if she ever gets lonely living by herself at the Lodge,

> Luce said sure she got lonely, but there had been many reimbursements. Animals, for example … A great deal of pleasure to be found in the growth of vegetables. And in the fall, birds passing over in waves, their calls singing of distance and other landscapes and the weird tones of Maddie's folklore songs from back in an older America.[55]

Luce's sense of solidarity with the natural world evolves from possessing such a complete knowledge of it; however, her worldview takes into account not only nature but also agriculture and even popular culture: "So she tried to cull daily reality pretty harsh, retaining just landscape and weather and animals and the late-night radio."[56] Unlike Lytle, Luce does not disregard the proverbial radio; instead, she incorporates it into a new worldview that acknowledges the importance of agriculture and the environment without simply indulging in an atavistic Agrarian fantasy. This more inclusive worldview enables Luce to experience a local, material-geographical sense of place (as Bone would argue), while also acknowledging and enjoying the displaced, modern culture transmitted through the airways.

Rash's, Roberts's, and Frazier's preoccupations with the past are potentially problematic not only because they occasionally run the risk of indulging in agrarian fantasies but also because these preoccupations may prevent them from engaging in the cultural work of the present. That is not to suggest that historical novels cannot do important cultural work; they certainly can and do.[57] My question, rather, is why these three novelists – two of whom have proven themselves to be among the most important contemporary Appalachian literary figures – insist on setting so much of their work in the past. On one hand, it is significant that these writers are attempting to interject the voices of mountain people into a larger historical narrative that has, throughout parts of American history, relegated them to positions of less significance. If Rodger Cunningham is correct in his assertion that Appalachia has served as the "Other" for both America and the South, then it is crucially important to combat this position of "double alterity" by presenting Appalachian historical narratives to as wide an audience as possible. On the other hand, however, the use of the historical novel – the *repeated* use for Frazier and

[55] Ibid., 142–43.
[56] Ibid., 24.
[57] In the interviews mentioned in n. 32 above, I spoke with Rash and Roberts about the uses and limits of the historical novel, and both held to an unwavering belief that *The Cove* and *A Short Time to Stay Here* speak meaningfully to the present. For example, they contend that by commenting on American xenophobia in the context of World War I, they are drawing clear parallels with various forms of xenophobia in the US after 9/11.

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Rash[58] – may suggest a longing for a cultural exceptionalism that no longer exists. Among certain readers and writers, Appalachian literature that is the most highly regarded generally eschews the present in favor of narratives about the past. According to Emily Satterwhite, "Some best sellers emphasize rough-and-tumble life in a primitive near wilderness, and others emphasize peaceful if arduous agrarianism, but fans found in each a promise of the persistence of Appalachia as a place sheltered from both the ills and the advantages of 'civilization.'"[59]

Although the novels by Rash, Roberts, and Frazier complicate a reductive approach to agrarianism, they nevertheless present an Appalachian sense of place that reflects a yearning for a largely bygone Appalachia that was based more substantively on an agrarian cultural and economic platform. As a result, what sometimes transpires is a fetishization of a particular sense of place that is inevitably anachronistic. In *The Real South*, Romine argues that "efforts to locate culture turn out to dislocate it from the here and now – that is, to defer its imagined 'true' or 'authentic' existence to some nostalgic past or utopian future … Culture has a habit of not being where and when we are presently."[60] In addition, Romine contends that "the fake South … becomes the real South through the intervention of narrative."[61] Therefore the question of authenticity is rendered moot, because what is actually authentic is irrelevant and only what a culture deems authentic truly matters.[62] Regardless of whether the historical narratives presented by Rash, Roberts, and Frazier are "authentic," their very existence can tell us a great deal about how and why contemporary Appalachians are utilizing such narratives. Building upon Henry D. Shapiro's *Appalachia on Our Mind* (1978), Satterwhite makes a point similar to Romine's: "Fiction's narrative power invests meaning in a swath of geographic territory that becomes important for readers in search of 'culture' or 'identity' as grounding in a postmodern world."[63]

So what meaning are these writers hoping to locate by employing the historical novel in this particular historical moment? Are they apprehensive about what they see as the increasing standardization of Appalachia? Can

[58] I should note that that some of Rash's fiction is set in contemporary Appalachia – for example, many of the short stories in *Chemistry and Other Stories* (2007), *Burning Bright* (2010), and *Nothing Gold Can Stay* (2013).
[59] Satterwhite, *Dear Appalachia*, 2.
[60] Romine, The Real South, 3.
[61] Ibid., 9.
[62] Ibid., 13.
[63] Satterwhite, *Dear Appalachia*, 216.

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evoking the history of a place revive a lost culture? And if so, would that revived culture appear contrived and thus overly artificial?

Perhaps postmodern historicity will not be doomed to a never-ending cycle of simulacra if we are willing to forge new cultures and new works of art from our present material and ideological conditions. These new cultures and artistic forms may be at least in part engendered by the past but they must not fall into the trap of idealizing and fetishizing the past. While the historical novel can be used to examine the region – be it the South or the post-South, Appalachia or post-Appalachia[64] – I think it is important to take into account in a more direct way than Rash, Roberts, and Frazier do in these novels both the actual, material qualities and the artistic representations of place in the contemporary moment.

Just as I do not intend to universally discount the historical novel, I also do not mean to diminish the significance of historicity. Questions of historicity have been important for southern literary scholars during and after the Southern Renascence, and in more recent years questions of historicity have become increasingly important for postmodern theorists. In the southern context, historicity has often been synonymous with Allen Tate's famous phrase "historical consciousness" – a mindset which he claims catalyzed the significant flowering of literature during the Southern Renascence.[65] In "The Profession of Letters in the South" (1935), Tate argues that the strength of modern southern literature comes not from a link to the soil but rather from an alienation from it. Thus the southern writer's "historical consciousness" is temporary, and only functions to bring forth brilliant works of art during a period of social and economic transition. In later essays, Tate would pronounce the death of the "historical consciousness" in no uncertain terms. According to Bone, Tate makes it clear that "unlike Lytle and Faulkner, emerging writers do not have the historical consciousness to gauge the modern destruction of the South (let alone an unmediated knowledge of the premodern South). Hence, not only southern literature but also southern literary criticism becomes, at best, a retrospective affair."[66] This argument echoes other southern literary scholars, such as Simpson, who posits "the closure of

[64] To avoid such strict delineations, we could also seek to identify a "late Appalachia" as Romine identifies the "late South": "I refer to the contemporary South as the 'late South,' a term that references simultaneously the condition of intensified continuity (as in 'late modernity' or 'late capitalism') and the condition of recent termination (as in 'the late C. Vann Woodward')." *The Real South*, 2.

[65] Tate, *Collected Essays*, 292.

[66] Bone, *The Postsouthern*, 20.

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history," and Hobson, who asserts that certain postmodern literary characters "are products of a society that disregards history."[67]

Postmodern theorists have made arguments similar to these southern scholars. In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Fredric Jameson argues that a significant "symptom" of postmodern life is "the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way."[68] Jameson implies that this disturbing deterioration of historicity is the result of a widespread historical illiteracy and a corresponding inability for postmodern people to understand the complications of the historical present. In *The Seeds of Time*, Jameson applies this "logic of late capitalism" directly to local and regional cultures, contending that these cultures have been so inundated by corporations that it is "difficult to decide whether [they are] authentic any longer (and indeed whether that term still means anything)."[69] Jameson calls this process of acculturation "the EPCOT syndrome," in which "global American Disneyland-related corporations … will redo your own native architecture [or art] for you more exactly than you can do it for yourself."

Applying these theorizations to Rash, Roberts, and Frazier, we must ask whether the loss of the "historical consciousness" or the "waning of our historicity" is true for these writers. More broadly, do these trends accurately characterize Appalachia in the way that perhaps they characterize the broader region and nation? Are these Appalachian writers guilty of "the EPCOT syndrome," i.e. of commodifying a fantasy of the past in their fiction in order to reach an audience that is obviously hungry for such a fantasy? Or is there something different about Appalachia that has made its inhabitants maintain their "historical consciousness" longer? Has the mountain South been insulated from cultural homogenization longer than other enclaves in the country, resulting in a lag time for the "historical consciousness"?

Although it is important not to reinscribe outdated myths about Appalachian otherness – i.e. its absence of a slavocracy, its frontier mentality, it geographical insularity, its cultural isolation – writers like Rash, Roberts, and Frazier seem to suggest that southern Appalachia (or at least parts of it) resisted homogenization longer than other areas of the South that were more fully inundated generations before with people and cultures from outside the region.[70] Even when writing historical novels, these writers draw from, if

[67] Hobson, *The Southern Writer*, 18.
[68] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 21.
[69] Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 204–5.
[70] Although many scholars have highlighted Appalachia's significant cultural and economic ties beyond the region that extend back to the colonial period, Ronald D. Eller has

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not personal, then at least familial, stories, and thus they appear to readers to be more "authentic."[71] In an interview in 2006, Rash said this of his generation of Appalachian writers:

> We recognize something is disappearing. With human beings it's only when something is disappearing that you even know it. If it's always there, you don't notice it; it's when you're losing it. What's happening right now in the mountains, there's such a huge change, particularly because of an influx of people from outside the region, mainly retirees … who have moved in and are changing the culture. With the inability to maintain the small farm and that lifestyle, a lot of people have been leaving the mountains, trying to find jobs elsewhere. And it's been so rapid, but it happened a little later up there.[72]

If it is true that Rash, Roberts, and Frazier have, or at least are perceived to have, witnessed Appalachia during a period of accelerated change, then they may possess more in common with figures of the Southern Renascence than many other contemporary writers. In other words, they may have a stronger sense of historicity and thus a closer connection to social and economic transitions that have occurred in the mountain South. However, if contemporary Appalachian writers experienced in their younger lives an Appalachia that is quickly disappearing – particularly a rural, agrarian experience of Appalachia – then these present generations are likely the last to have access to this experience.[73] If historicity inevitably wanes, as Jameson has argued

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pointed out that in Appalachia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries "travel was nonetheless always difficult and ensured a relative isolation." See Lewis, "Beyond Isolation," 22–23. While travel was certainly not difficult during the childhoods of Rash, Roberts, and Frazier, such a sense of "relative isolation" probably existed for their forebears, which may have helped local, often agriculturally based, folkways to endure.

[71] Satterwhite, *Dear Appalachia*, 8–9, argues that "fans, critics, and scholars of regional and ethnic literatures have demanded that authors write from personal experience. Fans of Appalachian-set fiction wanted to believe that it was 'true to life.' The authorial persona therefore became key to the success of the fiction." For more information on Rash's and Roberts' personal and familial connections to their narratives see my two pieces "Writing the Great War" and "The Role of Witness: Ron Rash's Peculiarly Historical Consciousness," *South Carolina Review*, 42, 2 (2010), 19–24. In his review of *Nightwoods*, Wayne Caldwell, "Book Review: Charles Frazier's *Nightwoods*," *Appalachian Heritage*, 40, 1 (Winter 2012), 90–92, 92, notes that "the town [in the novel] is reminiscent of Andrews, North Carolina, where Frazier, absorbing details, grew up." Furthermore, many critics have pointed out that Frazier was uniquely well suited to write *Cold Mountain*, both because it was set in his native landscape and because it was based, at least in part, on his great-great-uncle William Pinkney Inman, a Confederate deserter during the Civil War.

[72] Zackary Vernon, interview with Ron Rash, Clemson, SC, 12 Oct. 2006.

[73] There are many names that could be added to a list of significant Appalachian writers, including both the generation of Rash, Roberts, and Frazier and the generation preceding theirs – for example Gurney Norman, Lee Smith, Jim Wayne Miller, Fred Chappell, Robert Morgan, George Ella Lyon, Jo Carson, Denise Giardina, Lisa Alther, Dorothy Allison, Chris Offutt, and many others.

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and as postsouthern literary scholars like Kreyling, Romine, and Bone have demonstrated relative to contemporary southern writers, then the question becomes whether Appalachian writers will follow a similar trajectory. I anticipate that the forthcoming generations of Appalachian writers will be more thoroughly post-Appalachian in their approach to regional subject matter, and either they will increasingly develop an ironic, parodic, and even parasitic relationship with past Appalachian literary forms and voices or, in a desperate attempt to maintain historicity, they will rely on the commodification of Appalachian identity. Critics in Appalachian studies will then have to face the impossible postmodern task of deciding what, if anything, constitutes cultural and literary authenticity.

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