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*Mindy Beth Miller (Spalding University) won the
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Long Remember, Long Recall: The Preservation of Appalachian Regional Heritage in Ron Rash's *One Foot in Eden*

by Mindy Beth Miller

*How it was in that place, how light hung in a bright pool
Of air like water, in an eddy of cloud and sky,
I will long remember, I will long recall
The maples blossoming wings, the oaks proud with rule,
The spiders deep in silk, the squirrels fat on mast,
The fields and draws and coves where quail and peewees call.
Earth loved more than any earth, stand firm, hold fast;
Trees burdened with leaf and bird, root deep, grow tall.*
—James Still, “Wolfpen Creek”

One of the most exciting and important voices in Southern Appalachian literature today rarely receives the attention he so deserves in literary circles. While Ron Rash's masterful debut novel, *One Foot in Eden*, is a highly significant text in Modern Appalachian literature, it does not attract much national attention. A great deal of analysis on Rash's poetry exists but his fiction, for the most part, has been neglected by scholars. This essay aims to remedy the lack of scholarship available on this valuable American writer.

Ron Rash's writings, fiction and poetry alike, possess a rich sense of place and history. Much like the great Appalachian writer, James Still, one of Ron Rash's objectives is to capture Appalachia's unique culture in verse and prose, setting it all down on paper as if feverishly recording a vanishing way of life. The mainstream American literary canon often overlooks Appalachian literature, relegating it to ghettoized “regional” shelving, ignoring its contributions to the literary world and the importance of its common goals. However, many Appalachian literary critics recognize a powerful and haunting movement in the region's literature—namely, the desire to prevent the homogenization of Appalachian culture by highlighting and preserving the unique aspects of this deep heritage.

As an Appalachian text, Rash's novel features this objective. *One Foot in Eden* serves as a long love story to the memory of a lost culture, that of the Jocassee Valley which was tragically transformed into a reservoir in the early 1970s. At the same time, the novel acts as a direct response to the threat of mainstream American assimilation. The author depicts a distinct Appalachian culture, one that is marginalized, living, and fierce; he sets

it up as existing in opposition to the mainstream. The values of Appalachia—her culture, landscape, language, traditions, folklore/superstitions, and most of all, her people—are all resurrected and kept safe in the pages of *One Foot in Eden*.

How does a minority culture within mainstream America preserve its past? How does a strong culture threatened with its own disappearance remind itself of its history? Ron Rash answers these questions in his writing. His deep understanding of literature as an agent of conservation looms obvious in all of his work, but the author himself acknowledges that the theme of preservation plays a more crucial role in his first novel than in later books. In an interview with James Still scholar, Dr. Claude Lafie Crum, a year after the release of *One Foot in Eden*, Rash said: “Sometimes I think that one of the most important ways to preserve a culture is through fiction and poetry. [. . .] A part of what art can do is to preserve something that’s worth preserving, to keep something from being forgotten. [. . .] I see that as an important aspect of what I’m trying to do” (recorded interview).

Appalachia has been isolated, geographically and historically for over two-hundred years. The Appalachian Mountains create a natural barrier, thus determining the region’s fate as an American backwoods almost from its initial settlement by the first pioneers. Due to its isolation, Appalachia has remained largely underdeveloped, despite the national interest in the region’s wealth of coal. In the last few decades, a drastic change in economy and technology has opened up the region, and with this opening up comes a threat to heritage and culture, a threat that can be seen in our decapitated mountains and the disappearance of traditional ways of life. With this supposed “progress,” comes loss. Because of this, Modern Appalachian literature’s major theme is preservation—a theme shared among all Appalachian writers due to their awareness of cultural change—and this is nowhere better exemplified than in Ron Rash’s *One Foot in Eden*. Rash achieves preservation via a series of intelligent thematic choices and adept literary techniques. The novel parallels the destruction of the Jocassee Valley with the modern-day threat of the erasure of the Appalachian culture.

Regional fiction like Rash’s does not often garner the kind of visibility or respect that mainstream literature enjoys. But, especially in the face of globalization, regional writing should occupy an important place in the literary community. Without regional and other types of marginalized writing, the entire literary output of American literature would read as one unified, indistinct story lacking individuality. In a telephone interview I conducted with Ron Rash on June 9, 2008, he expressed the idea that “all writers are regional,” which stems from the very accurate observation that all writers “are writing about a particular place, a particular set or group of people, a particular time in a particular place.” The American writer’s tendency to produce regionalist literature helps to solidify the various cultural identities that exist in the nation.

One of the best and most moving definitions ever provided for regionalism is from Harmon and Holman’s *A Handbook to Literature*: “Fidelity to a particular geographical area; the representation of its habits, speech, manners, history, folklore, or beliefs. A test of *regionalism* is that the action and personages of such a work cannot be moved, without major loss or distortion, to any other geographical setting” (435-36). The Appalachian writers, particularly those from Southern Appalachia, actively seek to present their region in writing as accurately and faithfully as possible in order to stem the march of time and the changes it brings.

The changes brought about by time lead many Southern Appalachian writers, including Ron Rash, to be seemingly obsessed with the past. In fact, the significance of the past is a single thread connecting all Appalachian literature. No matter the publication

date, Appalachian fiction and poetry reflect the strong propensity to look backward to another time.

In an interview with author and critic, Jeff Biggers, writer Gretchen Laskas speaks about this characteristic: "I've been told my whole life that Appalachia was disappearing, that the best parts of ourselves were being corrupted, stolen, fading away. But as I read, I realized that the only thing that never did seem to change was our insistence that our world was vanishing" ("Out of Appalachia"). In the same interview, Laskas went on to say: "It's easy to call this nostalgia and forget it, but Appalachians know very well that we've undergone huge changes in the past 100 years. [. . .] I want to remember where we came from [. . .]. Because no matter what we become, the past is still our past."

The changes Laskas refers to include the introduction of mass communication (e.g., television, Internet access), an Appalachian diaspora in which a huge chunk of the region's population has relocated, a waning coal boom that has produced run-down and nearly abandoned towns, and the altering of the natural environment due to controversial mining tactics.

Rash's Jocassee stands as a striking metaphor for the history and possible fate of Appalachia. In 1972, the titans of industry that surrounded the Jocassee Valley—without a single thought to heritage—forced the people out, sent them away to other places where their way of life would most likely be changed, and annihilated the valley. Today, Appalachia faces many of the same challenges. Industrial giants tear down whole mountains, clear out miles of natural forest, and lay claim to huge tracts of land they care nothing about (other than for monetary gain), while encouraging those who need it for their very survival, who love it and belong to it, to get out. In the name of economic progress, big business also subjects the region to influences from the rest of America; the message most Appalachians receive from the greater culture is that they will never fit in unless they alter just about everything about themselves. This all-out attack on the Appalachian culture from the outside and within the region (within, because of the internalization of negative views) threatens a unique place and people. The region's writers, like Ron Rash, recognize this perilous situation and know that if the Appalachian people want to remain who they are, they must never forget who they are. If the role of a writer is to be a voice, to provide the testimony of an eyewitness, and to preserve, Rash succeeds completely. With the powerfully moving story of *One Foot in Eden*, he creates something unforgettable. Any reader of the novel will be forever haunted by the memory of Jocassee and its people.

Discussing the danger of losing the Appalachian culture, Jeff Biggers writes in *The United States of Appalachia*: "The land is gone now [. . .]. And with it went [. . .] two hundred years of stories, legends, history, and the unknown contributions of a backwoods lifestyle that I will never understand in person" (209). In America today, the Appalachian culture meets with ridicule and debasement, which causes the current generation of Appalachians to be ashamed of their heritage. Many of them desire change; they shun the region's dialect for the Standard American English they hear on their television sets; they leave the region for places of more opportunity; and they feel embarrassed to identify themselves as Appalachian. All of this arises from the distorted image of Appalachia, the image commonly espoused by the entertainment industry, being accepted and constantly broadcasted as the truth. Rash addresses this response from the younger generation in his novel through the character of Isaac Holcombe. The teenaged Isaac wants to leave home to attend Clemson University, saying: "I'd grown up knowing there was no future here, that Jocassee would sooner or later be covered in water, so I'd never let myself get attached to it the way Momma and Daddy had" (168-69). This sense of a waning con-

nection to the land and pride in one's regional heritage signal a potential future loss of Appalachian culture. Rash's *One Foot in Eden* reminds young Appalachian readers that they live in a place worth holding onto and that once that place vanishes, the memory of it will be all they have to cherish.

In the novels, short stories, poems, and nonfiction currently being generated in Appalachian literature, one can readily detect the influence of the past, of the need to recall the past on the consciousness of the writers. Very little writing from the Appalachian region can be labeled contemporary. Modern Appalachian writers such as Lee Smith, Robert Morgan, Chris Offutt, Ron Rash, Silas House, and Gretchen Laskas mostly write about a rapidly disappearing Appalachia, a place of the past. A great sense of urgency exists in current Appalachian literature, an urgency to preserve the region's heritage in fear that it will slip away in this growing sea of changes.

Ron Rash speaks to this movement, saying in Biggers's interview, "I do believe something can only be truly measured when it's lost. I believe this outpouring of Appalachian writing has happened in part because Appalachian writers are seeing much of their culture disappear." In Rash's *One Foot in Eden*, the narrative focuses on a place in danger of complete erasure. The emotional human reaction to the loss of the Jocassee Valley as depicted by Rash reads like a commentary on the slow death of Appalachia as a unique culture in America. The story is told in five parts of alternating points-of-view, the most significant of which focuses on Sheriff Will Alexander's investigation of a murder in Jocassee. The sheriff believes that Billy and Amy Holcombe hold the keys to unlocking the case, but as the years pass by without a confession, he faces an unthinkable yet inevitable situation: never finding out the true circumstances of the crime due to the forced removal of everyone from the Jocassee Valley, which would soon be completely flooded by the power company.

In *One Foot in Eden*, the past and the present can hardly be separated. This idea enters the novel early on: "it seemed like time had somehow leaked out of the world, past and present blending together" (19). In my telephone interview with Rash, he reiterated the importance of the past and the insistence on cultural preservation (including in his own writing): "This is one aspect of what makes Appalachian literature so distinctive [. . .]. The Appalachian writer is discussing the present even as he or she sets a book in the past." Rash's very apt description of the Appalachian writer's penchant for weaving the past and the present together beautifully expresses what he accomplished in his first novel.

In today's Appalachia, the coal companies rule the mountains. As King Coal razes mountain after mountain to the ground in a practice known as mountaintop removal, fear increases that one day there will be no mountains left. Without the mountains, there can be no mountain culture. In a stirring defense of the Appalachian region, Jeff Biggers writes in his book *The United States of Appalachia*: "In truth, *our* mountains, as in our American mountains [. . .] are being dismantled. And [. . .] all of this rich Appalachian and American heritage is at risk of being erased from our maps" (210-11, his emphasis). This interesting and heart-rending parallel between Jocassee and Appalachia played on Rash's mind as he wrote *One Foot in Eden*. When asked in the telephone interview if he envisioned Jocassee as a metaphor for Appalachia, Rash answered in the affirmative, saying: "It wasn't a conscious decision at first, but it got clearer and clearer to me as I wrote the novel. *One Foot in Eden* is about a culture being lost." Rash sought to prevent Jocassee from vanishing by writing about it. The author uses fiction as a means to record an Appalachian culture in danger of fading away.

In order for there to arise a need to preserve a culture, a unique culture must exist worthy of preservation. Some might argue that in the panorama of world cultures, Appalachia does

not stand out or apart as a place (and people) unlike any other. Questions also naturally develop about the contributions made by Appalachia to the greater culture (that being, of course, America); so, in light of this argument, can the culture be effectively established as unique? In Jeff Biggers's article and interview from *The Bloomsbury Review*, Rash sums up his thoughts on the matter by stating: "I am proud of my Appalachian heritage, and I do believe its culture is different from any other region in the U. S. [. . .]." Working from that standpoint, Rash incorporates all of the unique aspects of the Appalachian culture, as represented by Jocassee, into *One Foot in Eden*. When discussing his view that Appalachian culture deserves to be preserved, Rash says: "In my opinion, it's absolutely insulting to say that there is nothing unique about Appalachian culture. When [people specializing in Appalachian studies] say that, they are making the statement that a culture that has existed for hundreds of years has contributed nothing." From Rash's perspective, Appalachia supplies much to America and the world, especially in terms of its language "in which unique words and similes have been coined," "its people—how long they've been here, who they are, their histories," as well as "its music [. . .] food, customs, traditions, religion," all of which lends to "a literature that is different from traditional Southern literature." These elements of Appalachian heritage appear often in Rash's fiction, and the author took great care to include almost every single one of them in his first novel (the only exception being traditional music).

Rash clearly understands how he should present the place he seeks to preserve in his fiction. He writes *One Foot in Eden* for an audience that includes both Appalachian ("insider") and non-Appalachian ("outsider") readers. For the "insider reader," Rash's book offers a guide to all things Appalachian one should remember and honor with pride. The "outsider reader" receives a great lesson; for a reader who tends to believe stereotypes, he or she is instead offered a true reflection of Appalachian reality. To achieve this, Rash utilizes one of the most striking characteristics of Appalachian literature: its palpable sense of place. Rash turns sense of place into an art form. He illustrates that creating a strong sense of place in fiction is crucial to preserving Appalachia.

Rash does three things to ground the reader in a sense of place throughout the story: he provides a history of the place, describes the landscape, and brings the reader into the place through sensory perception; by doing this, he takes the reader deeper into that culture. In taking readers deeper into the culture, Rash shows the worth, beauties, and complexities of Appalachia. This speaks to an "outsider reader," by teaching him or her about Appalachian culture and achievements. It also speaks to the "insider reader," Rash's fellow Appalachians, like myself, by suggesting and revealing to us what must be preserved of our proud history and heritage.

As an Appalachian and an Appalachian writer, I have considered these same themes and issues. We Appalachians know and value our history, orally passing down the stories of the past. We realize that we live in a very old place, and that our ancestors, whether Native or European, played a huge role in its development. A sense of reverence exists among us for the mountains, and with the telling of this history, we preserve our pride in our heritage. Quite early on in *One Foot in Eden*, Rash records the history of the Jocassee Valley: "The word [Jocassee] meant 'valley of the lost' to the Cherokee, for a princess named Jocassee had once drowned herself here and her body had never been found. The road I followed had once been a trail, a trail De Soto had followed four hundred years ago when he'd searched these mountains for gold" (10). Almost anywhere an Appalachian looks in the mountains, a reminder of the indigenous history of the place can be found. These artifacts (e.g., arrowheads and other remnants of a past Native American civilization) conjure up an image that Rash wants the reader to ponder deeply: "The story was

one I'd heard about and seen parts of growing up in Jocassee, a story of people living and working land for generations and then vanishing, leaving behind [. . .] an echo of a lost world" (23). Rash's message is clear: the place he writes about will one day pass away just like the ancient cultures that preceded it. He showcases the Appalachian sense of land imbued with history—the two inextricably linked.

Rash's depiction of the landscape firmly plants the reader in the world of the book. He brings the reader into a setting that seems frozen in time, an isolated place far removed from the towns and the rest of the countryside. Through Sheriff Alexander, the character whose voice the reader first encounters, Rash thrusts the reader into a rough, mountainous terrain: "The blacktop steepened and pressure built in my ears until I opened my jaws. The road curved around Stumphouse Mountain, and beyond the silver-painted guard posts the land dropped away like those old European maps of the unknown world" (8). As an Appalachian reader, I immediately identify with the landscape of Jocassee, which brings to mind the winding roads that lead into a hidden world and the determination it takes to work the hilly, unforgiving ground. Rash's description of Jocassee (as it appeared in 1952) also reveals a place trapped in the past, nearly a full century behind the rest of the country: "Like almost everything else up here, the road was little different than it had been in the 1860s" (11). This sentence works to speak to the non-Appalachian reader, the outsider, who usually knows very little about the region. Much of Appalachian literature is geared toward the insiders, but while an Appalachian writer seeks to authentically reflect the culture, he or she also feels the need to make certain things clearer for the outsiders. A reader unfamiliar with the region—a region that boasts a culture outside of the mainstream culture—often needs some clarification or a little extra information about details specific to Appalachia. The reader, already aware of the impending destruction of Jocassee, views this Appalachian world as it must seem to most outsiders: the place of "yesterday's people," a pristine, virgin land forgotten by all those beyond the mountains. Rash's eye for detail later shows the painful alterations being made to the landscape: "[Sheriff Alexander] stared across the river at Licklog Mountain. The mountain had been scalped, mainly just stumps and rocks now. [. . .] Though he'd left years ago [. . .] it bothered him to see it all changed" (168). Such sharp illustrations of the land reflect the soul-kinship that Appalachians feel toward the place of their birth. By depicting this juxtaposition of whole mountain with scalped mountain, Rash lets the reader truly feel a sense of loss and change.

In analyzing *One Foot in Eden*, one recognizes that the vital role of a good sense of place cannot be underestimated in Modern Appalachian literature. In this particular situation, in which one of Rash's objectives is to keep Jocassee and Appalachia from being forgotten, the reader needs to feel as if he or she knows this place inside out. If the reader interacts with that world while reading, setting foot on its land and becoming intimate with its sights and smells, then that reader will care deeply for that place. Talking in the telephone interview about the meticulous process of getting the place right on the page, Rash says: "I knew that I was writing about an actual place with real people. I felt a burden to get it right, to be as accurate as possible in recreating that lost valley." Even though Rash's novel does not in any way resemble a historical text, his fiction surprisingly produces a series of still photographs, engagingly visible, of a place that no longer exists.

Rash's choice to single out a specific cultural aspect of the place, such as an old country store, also helps the reader understand Appalachia better. In his novel, Rash describes one store. He writes, in the voice of character Sheriff Alexander: "I pulled off the road when I came to Roy Whitmire's store, parking beside the sign that said LAST CHANCE FOR GAS TWENTY MILES. I stepped past men sitting on Cheerwine and Double Cola

crates. [. . .] The store was pretty much the way it had always been [. . .]" (9). The little details in this passage convey the way in which Appalachians experience their little chunk of the world: with a heightened sense of familiarity in that the store is simply known by the owner's name; the feeling of seclusion with this being the final place for necessities on the road to somewhere else; and the static nature of the place caused by the stubborn wish of its people for things to stay the same. Once Rash determines that the place can be understood from the clues he gives, he sucks the reader further into this world by allowing Jocassee to be seen and heard: "[. . .] after a while the sun fell behind Sassafras Mountain and shadows stretched out till they wasn't shadows anymore. The lightning bugs moved low across the yard like little lanterns. Cicadas sang in the trees and down by the river bullfrogs jabbered at one another on the banks" (142). Appalachia comes alive in this moment, and the author sets the reader down in the middle of it, so that he or she can take it all in. Rash's words seem to be imploring the reader to look, to notice these things, to know that this is how it was in that place.

In addition to a strong sense of place, Rash also provides other key components of Appalachia's cultural heritage. For instance, the Appalachian dialect, indeed its language, must be represented in the narrative with great attention and respect, because this is the characteristic most indicative of the region. Due to the constant barrage of criticism coming from outside of Appalachia (and within it, to some degree), the old way of speaking is dying out, is threatened with a kind of extinction—an irreversible loss of "accent." To lose one's language amounts to the loss of one's sense of self; this murder, as it were, of the language takes away an Appalachian's sense of possessing a unique identity. Acknowledging this fact, Rash's characters speak using words and phrases only known in the mountains. This is yet another act of preservation. In his article, scholar Jeff Biggers addresses the earnest interest of Modern Appalachian writers in preserving various aspects of their culture: "With a profound sense of place and nature [. . .] this new Appalachian writing also understands its region's botany, crops, ballads and music, Old World language patterns, and religious visitations." Rash's decision to tell the story via first-person narration from five different characters permits him to record the language on the page faithfully.

Language, specifically dialect, sets place and characterizes better than any other element of fiction. Nothing else conveys heritage and identity more than something as personal as the way the characters express themselves. The way the characters talk, how they say things, the words that come naturally to their vocabulary, inform the reader about everything from their origins to the clothes the characters wear. Unlike the disrespectful literature of decades past, Rash's portrayal of the Appalachian dialect grants the speakers their dignity and humanity. In *One Foot in Eden*, despite the heavy use of dialect, the reader will be unable to find an ignorant hillbilly or backwoods woman. Drawing from his talents as a poet, Rash hones in on the right words, the words that make the language so distinctive and beautiful. In a passage in which female protagonist Amy Holcombe starts out on a long walk through the woods, Rash puts this woman's eloquence on full display: "I stepped pretty lively the way back down to the river for that old woman had gave me a pail-full of hope when I'd had but a dry well before. It was the shank of evening" (73). The way this woman describes her emotions and the world around her tells the reader something about her wit and charm. Even though the character uses "incorrect grammar" (at least according to the terms of Standard American English) here and in other places, like "I brung this for to pay with" (73), Rash's clever use of syntax and word choice never allow the language to become stereotypical.

It is through this intelligent and sensitive re-creation of the region's language that

Rash also preserves Appalachian culture. He employs certain words and phrases, attributable only to the Appalachian people, language that has survived for centuries. Many of these old speech patterns and utterances fall out of use over time, so the fact that Rash records them guarantees that they will not be forgotten. In addition, these phrases create a genuine-sounding dialogue, one true to the characters and their lives. Rash's choice to limit words unique to the Appalachian language in the narrative, to spread them like salt throughout the story, causes the words to pop out from the rest of the prose. Seeking to capture a dying language in his characters' speech, Rash includes words like "haint" (4) instead of ghost, and "swaged" (118) in place of assuage or reassured; he also utilizes such phrases as "slack talk" (70) for gossip, "taken quite a shine to" (82) for the amorous feelings one shows toward another, "Don't pay her no mind" (97) to suggest the advice to ignore someone, the idea of being "in a fix" (117) or a great deal of trouble, and "waxing like the moon" (117), a very old way of indicating an increase in size. This sampling of words and phrases taken from *One Foot in Eden* reflects Rash's desire to present the language in its natural form, to produce a kind of testimony to its inimitability. This kind of language aids the reader in "hearing" the dialect. Since Rash perfectly crafts the Appalachian dialect on the page, the reader not only learns to appreciate this way of speaking, but more importantly, he or she knows the characters and gathers tidbits of information about how they lived. By extension, the language is simultaneously preserved for Appalachians and made available to a larger American audience.

Rash's conscientious setting down of Appalachian language, written with a zeal for precise transcription, became one of his chief interests while writing the novel. In the interview with Dr. Claude Lafie Crum, Rash stated that he wanted to get the cadence of Appalachian speech correct in the dialogue (and in the first-person narration). He also says that he wished to demonstrate the uniqueness of the language, insisting that "Appalachian words [. . .] are not from Scotland; they're not from England. [. . .] That's better than their being brought over, because what you're saying here is you've got a culture that could develop an interesting language, specific to itself." In essence, the Appalachian language originated from an amalgamation of languages and dialects, which over time produced an entirely new way of speaking. Rash plumbs the depths of Appalachia's beautiful language, and no matter what cultural changes occur, the people of Appalachia will always be able to hear themselves in the pages of *One Foot in Eden*. The pages of the book act as a historical record, a kind of storehouse that can be revisited time and again.

While the dialect of Appalachia remains somewhat intact to this day, the same cannot be said for the region's folklore. Folk traditions from the past do not usually resonate with the new generation of Appalachians, and in truth, these sayings and legends began to gradually disappear decades ago. The oldest people in the mountains remember these things best, and because of that, some of this seemingly outdated knowledge gets passed down as "old wives' tales." Some writers and Hollywood filmmakers love to exploit mountain folklore, creating images of creepy women concocting herbal recipes in shacks tucked away in dark hollows; however, mountain people still value the benefits of folk medicine, even though the idea of witches no longer crops up in our front porch conversations. In the time of Rash's Jocassee, the old beliefs still held a respected place in mountain communities. Rash again preserves the culture of Appalachia by writing about the traditional beliefs of the past. On two separate occasions in the story, the Widow Glendower (commonly believed to be a witch) instructs Amy Holcombe to make her impotent husband herbal teas, once with "bloodroot and mandrake root, some sang too" (72) and the other with "willow bark and boneset" (110). After finally becoming pregnant, Amy also encounters older women who inform her "to carry a bloodstone in [her] left

pocket” and for her not to “look at no cross-eyed woman or eat strawberries” (97). Such legends first emerged in Appalachia with the Native Americans and the earliest arrivals from Europe and Africa.

Along with folklore, superstition figures into the traditional beliefs of Appalachia and merits preserving. In the novel, Billy Holcombe believes in signs and portents, casting a weary eye onto the natural world around him. As a farmer, Billy needs to be aware of the weather and the behavior of animals, so it seems quite normal that he would notice how the earth tends to dry up during Dog Days and that “snakes go blind” (115). He also indicates that this kind of information came to him from the older people in his family and that they believed that things like “see[ing] a new moon through the trees,” “a black cat cross[ing] your path,” or “hear[ing] a screech owl or rooster at night” brought bad luck; likewise, his family thought that “horseshoes and redbirds and planting your crops on Good Friday” signified a stretch of good fortune (122). The old Appalachian idea that a whippoorwill singing at the edge of dark means a death will come, also plays on Billy’s mind (123). The majority of these superstitions still maintain a foothold in Appalachia today, and just as Billy recounts the old beliefs as being handed down to him, Rash’s references to them in the story keep these ideas alive in the minds of his readers.

Rash says that he wrote Billy’s section of the story first, which incidentally mentions folklore at the outset. This part of the book, titled “The Husband,” appears third in the finalized order of narration, after the portions of the story told by the Sheriff and Amy (the wife); however, the fact that Rash began writing his novel with references to the folklore and traditions of Appalachia reflects their importance to place and heritage. About his decision to do this, Rash said in my interview with him: “[Landscape] not only is character in that it becomes a character in the story, but it also shapes character. [. . .] I began by describing the place with its folklore, traditions, and overall landscape; and then, I brought Billy into it.” Rash’s comments suggest the idea that Appalachia itself, the place, molds the characters’s beliefs and even the kind of people they become. The place must be preserved due to the fact that it, in so many ways, gives birth to its own people; otherwise, the people (i.e., their identity) will be lost along with it.

Along with wanting the place to be remembered, Rash hopes that the Appalachian people of Jocassee will live on as well. He immortalizes his people by writing about their way of life, their strong family ties, their names (specifically, surnames), and their mysterious connection to the land. Reading the novel, one becomes filled with an awe and heartache at Rash’s determination to memorialize an entire group of people. The author seems to be mourning their loss, and his writing, at times, mirrors that of an elegist. He wants the people to remain, to be static, unchanging. He does not want the people to vanish as their environment did.

Even though Rash casts a tender eye of remembrance on Jocassee, he does not sentimentalize it. Despite portraying the land as lush and beautiful, Rash also does not shy away from showing the reader the harshness of the terrain, which often creates hard lives for many Appalachian farmers. Some mountain people lead a tough and difficult existence, struggling to make a living off of the land. Billy Holcombe, enduring a protracted dry spell in Jocassee, becomes nearly exasperated at one point with the state of his farm: “Corn stalks stood dead in the fields, the beans half buried in gray dust. The only crop that looked to make it was tobacco I’d planted beside the river” (116). Rash obviously does not romanticize this kind of life, but at the same time, he indicates the pride of the people in the way they live by stressing their desire to carry on with this lifestyle. The family (the strongest component of Appalachian society) feels a responsibility to take care of their ancestral home, to continue on with the work of their ancestors. Rash’s

Sheriff Alexander ruminates about his father's wish to leave his farm to his family: "I knew his greatest satisfaction was being able to look in the fields and see his son and grandsons working the same land he'd worked all his life. [. . .] He'd prepared Travis and me to carry on what Alexanders had done here for six generations" (39-40). Appalachian families stick together and help each other as Rash illustrates in this passage, fulfilling the obligation to honor their heritage. The family is in fact the strongest agent for preserving Appalachian values, knowledge, language, and culture.

Fewer Appalachian families today live off of the land, but in the past, Rash demonstrates the necessity of maintaining a farm, especially with a large garden. Naturally, the fact that Appalachians raised most of their own food produced a traditional cuisine. Rash's Sheriff Alexander mentions the kind of food he grew up eating: "The thick, salty tang of fatback added to the collards and field peas [. . .]. Laura's crackling cornbread [. . .] tasted sweet and moist as cake" (38). Some of the most well known staples of traditional Appalachian cuisine still grace most tables in the region today: soup beans (i.e., pinto beans) and cornbread (mentioned elsewhere in Rash's novel), salt bacon, and just about any kind of garden vegetable. The Appalachians in Rash's novel do not eat fancy foods; they sit down to meals that they all worked hard for or bought for very little money at a local store. Every culture boasts its own kind of food, so Rash rightly thought to preserve this detail of Appalachian life in his novel.

Due to the hard lives that many Appalachians faced on the land in the past, religion gained a stronghold in the majority of mountain communities. It often seems that in small towns or rural locations where nothing much ever really happens the church becomes the chief source of entertainment. In Rash's novel, unlike a lot of Appalachian literature in which the Pentecostal faith reigns supreme, the characters appear to be Baptist. Rash refers to Hardshell Baptists (30) and to Sheriff Alexander's river baptism (54), a tradition of the Old Regular Baptists, and water imagery—the idea of immersion pops—up time and again in the book. Appalachians hold their religious background very dear, and Rash does not forget to include this aspect of their culture. Actually, Rash takes this fact so seriously that the entire novel reads like one long baptism (i.e., the lead up to and eventual submerging of Jocassee), one that cleanses but also changes forever.

A mysterious, somewhat spiritual connection to the land exists among the people of Appalachia. The land rises around them, ever in view, and shields them from the uncertainties and foreign ways of the outside world. This deep, emotional attachment to the mountains and to the specific place of one's upbringing is evident on every page of Rash's novel. Part of this powerful connection can be attributed to the Appalachian's knowledge of roots; most Appalachians know something about their family's origins and recount in epic fashion the obstacles their ancestors overcame to arrive and remain in the mountains. Emphasizing this strong link between his characters and Jocassee, Rash writes about "the love of a place that connect[s] you to generations of your family" (49). Appalachian people do not often stray from the place of their birth, and thus, most of the old surnames survive. Recognizing the swiftness with which Jocassee will soon be destroyed, Sheriff Alexander says: "I thought of how the descendants of settlers from Scotland and Wales and Ireland and England [. . .] would soon vanish from Jocassee [. . .]. Every tombstone with Holcombe or Lusk or Alexander or Nicholson chiseled into it would vanish as well" (23). Appalachia itself, the places these people inhabit within it, is their greatest cultural inheritance, and for it to be taken away ends in a kind of death for them all.

Rash wonderfully illustrates the idea that without the land, Appalachians lose all sense of their identity. Being forcibly removed from the land, they will naturally take

their histories with them, but it will never be the same. Like Jocassee, if the culture of Appalachia ever disappears, the uniqueness of the people will die with it; out of necessity, they will have conformed to the expectations and norms of the greater culture. During my telephone interview, Rash talked about his choice in drowning the characters of Billy and Amy Holcombe in the rising waters of Jocassee: "Billy and Amy had to stay in that place, because they are a part of it." In this instance, Rash confirms his belief that the people are so connected to the land that it becomes difficult to ever separate them from it. He goes on to say, "I hope [that when reading this novel,] people have an idea that people lived here, there was a culture here. Literature can remind people of a lost way of life, and at the same time, it seeks to honor the lives of the people who lived it." Rash does just that in *One Foot in Eden*, preserving the details of these people's lives for generations to come.

Even though Rash mourns and also celebrates the characters's way of life in Jocassee, he does not produce a maudlin story. The author wants the reader to remember the quiet farming life that many of these people led, but he presents that life with all of its blemishes as well. Some of Rash's characters experience personal hardships brought about by the cultural traditions of the region. Amy Holcombe, in her quest to conceive a child, must endure the tremendous societal pressure placed on her to become a mother (62). In her desperation, Amy subsequently sleeps with another man, hoping that her pregnancy would relieve the strain on her marriage. Sheriff Alexander, a man who left Jocassee to live in a nearby town, copes with his family's bitterness toward him for not visiting enough and helping them work the land (17-18). His relationship with his brother becomes especially tense, which suggests that the close family ties in Appalachia also bring their share of burdens. Rash's depiction of the push and pull of Amy and Billy Holcombe's son Isaac's affection for Jocassee (168-69) reflects the unwanted feelings of guilt that come with wanting to leave home. In one particularly poignant passage, Isaac reveals: "I was learning that leaving a place wasn't as easy as packing up and getting out. You carried part of it with you, whether you wanted to or not" (170). Rash shows that the Appalachian's love of place, while rooted deep into one's soul, is not always a welcome emotion.

Jocassee, this little world within Southern Appalachia, with its past and all of its traditions, means everything to the characters in Rash's novel. The characters fear and dread the death of that place, wanting to remember it, to take it with them when they go. Shortly before leaving Jocassee for good (or so they believe), Billy and Amy Holcombe sit in their truck, looking out at the land: "They stared a while out the window, maybe trying to freeze it in their minds so they'd never forget" (186).

The idea of remembrance also finds its way into Rash's story through his character, Sheriff Alexander. While reading an historical text by William Bartram, Sheriff Alexander thinks that the author "understood that things disappeared" and that "he'd felt compelled to preserve with sketches and words everything he saw" (51). The Sheriff knows full well that Jocassee will be destroyed, so he feels a special bond with the aim of Bartram's work at that time. Much like one of Rash's intentions for writing *One Foot in Eden*, in this same passage, Sheriff Alexander says of Bartram: "He wanted to get it all down. He wanted things to be remembered."

Rash reminds the people of Appalachia that if we do not remember our history, culture, and traditions, our rich heritage will be lost. We cannot rely on the greater American culture to preserve this place; it is we who must do it. The Appalachian people who truly love this place exactly as it is must hang onto our language, our old ways, our identity, and even our mountains. As this country and the world become more connected, the people

of Appalachia will increasingly hear the call for change. From outside and within the region, people will ask Appalachians to conform to the larger society, to lay aside our uniqueness. As the mountains bow to the will of industry and as the people change or go away from the region, our Appalachian writers—our voices—must preserve Appalachia by recording its history and all that it is today to ensure its continued existence.

Ron Rash believes, much like so many other current Appalachian writers, that he must fulfill a responsibility to honor the region's place and people. He writes about the region's past and present in the hope that, in the future, this rich culture and boundless heritage will not become a memory. Of the importance of Appalachian writing in the face of increased globalization, Rash told Dr. Crum: "[Appalachian literature] keeps bringing [the culture] back to the surface. In a way, I think that's part of an Appalachian writer's role—to remember that there's something here worth [. . .] remembering [. . .]; and if you honor it and respect it, then it has a better chance of continuing." Rash's idea that a writer should witness, which he mentioned in my telephone interview with him, beautifully describes what he did in *One Foot in Eden*. His novel provides a wonderful testimony for the Appalachian region, a true portrayal of the region's beauty and blemishes, its human triumphs and hardships. Appalachian writer Gretchen Laskas claims that "by remembering, by telling, we ourselves will not be lost." Unlike the people of Jocassee, the people of "the valley of the lost" whose culture was eradicated, today, Appalachian people and culture have a better chance of surviving due to the conscientious writing of Ron Rash.

Ron Rash and many other Modern Appalachian writers heed the call to preserve what most fear will not last—our very existence as a unique culture. Through the creation of a strong sense of place, genuine dialect, an accurate representation of landscape and lifestyle, the thoughtful inclusion of traditional beliefs, customs, and food, along with a truthful portrayal of the region's people, preservation is achieved by Appalachian writers. As the mining companies continue to wipe the mountains from the map and the outside world forces the region to change its old ways, these writers, as evidenced by Rash's brilliant debut novel *One Foot in Eden*, recognize that Appalachia's heritage is slipping away even as they write their stories. As Appalachian fiction, *One Foot in Eden* pays homage to the region's history and passes on an intact legacy to future generations. Rash's hope for Jocassee fulfills the same wish he has for Appalachia—that the place and its people will never be forgotten or brushed to the side of American history. In Rash's novel, a written record of this place, these people, will forever exist.

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