

## ABSTRACT

VERNON, ZACKARY. "A Place for the Lost": Ron Rash and Contemporary Southern Identity. (Under the direction of Michael Grimwood.)

In his seminal essay "The Search for Southern Identity," C. Vann Woodward asserts, "The time is coming, if indeed it has not already arrived, when the Southerner will begin to ask himself whether there is really any longer very much point in calling himself a Southerner. Or if he does, he might well wonder occasionally whether it is worthwhile insisting on the point" (3). Although Woodward first published this essay in 1958, his assertions may be even more pertinent today, given the effect that an increasingly homogeneous national culture has had on American regionalism. Over the past half century, the persistence of questions such as those Woodward raises has manifested itself in an enormous amount of writing about the idea of a distinctively Southern identity. In this essay, I will examine the literature of Ron Rash, a contemporary writer from western North Carolina, and I will explain Rash's complex relationship with Southern identity by considering, at least tangentially, his three poetry collections as well as his three novels. Ultimately, after examining the history of Southern identity, Rash's use of Southern identity and culture in his fiction and poetry, the ways in which Rash's characters exploit Southern identity, and the version of Southern identity that Rash perpetuates in his own life, I will conclude that Rash's employment and portrayal of Southern identity are genuine. Rather than consciously commodifying Southern identity and culture as a marketing tool to sell his work to a specific audience, Rash artfully records a disappearing culture to which he has strong personal ties.

**“A PLACE FOR THE LOST”  
RON RASH AND CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN IDENTITY**

by  
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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Zackary Vernon grew up in Pawleys Island, South Carolina. He will receive his M.A. in English from North Carolina State University in the Spring of 2007, and he will enter the Ph. D. program in English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the Fall of 2007.

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## INTRODUCTION

### My Southern Void

As an undergraduate, I read C. Vann Woodward's seminal essay "The Search for Southern Identity." Reading it altered my life, not because the ideas in it were new to me, but rather because it articulated an impression that had been playing itself out in some dim corner of my mind for as long as I could remember. In the opening of the essay, Woodward states, "The time is coming, if indeed it has not already arrived, when the Southerner will begin to ask himself whether there is really any longer very much point in calling himself a Southerner. Or if he does, he might well wonder occasionally whether it is worthwhile insisting on the point" (3). Being from a proud Southern family, I feel appalled at times when I consider Woodward's assertion that Southern identity may no longer really matter; at other times, however, I find myself wholeheartedly agreeing with him. Although Woodward first published "The Search for Southern Identity" in 1958, his assertions may be even more pertinent today, given the effect that an increasingly homogeneous national culture has had on American regionalism. Over the past half century, the persistence of questions such as those Woodward raises has manifested itself in an enormous amount of writing about the idea of a distinctively Southern identity. My interest in these questions stems from my upbringing.

"You ain't from around here, are you?" I've been asked this question more times than I care to admit, and every time it makes me wince. Because I don't have a strong Southern accent and because accent is the easiest way to convey and detect Southern identity, people have often assumed, to my great dismay, that I'm not from

the South. For as long as I can remember, I've felt a strong desire to link myself to the South, to make Southern identity my primary identity. In theory, I possess all the right credentials. My father's family has lived in the Charleston area since the early 1700s, and my mother's family has lived in upstate South Carolina for even longer. When I was young, I was exposed to two dissimilar but distinctly Southern worlds. I grew up in Pawleys Island, South Carolina. Between Myrtle Beach and Charleston, Pawleys is a small island set off from the coast by a thin strip of marshland. Several major rivers flow through the Lowcountry near Pawleys—the Waccamaw, the Black, and the PeeDee—the banks of which are still lined with antebellum rice plantations. My best friend's family owned one such plantation. He was a direct descendent of the Asheville Vanderbilts, who purchased the plantation in the early 1930s. Growing up, I spent a lot of time on this plantation, traipsing around its hundreds of acres of grounds, which included gardens, stables, rows of former slave cabins, rice fields, and two "big houses."

I also was able to experience the small-scale agrarian lifestyle common to mid- and upstate South Carolina. I used to spend summers on my grandfather's farm in St. Matthews, fishing, hunting squirrels and deer, herding cattle, and working in the garden. Yet, despite these ties, I have often felt like an outsider in my own region. For example, I certainly cannot lay claim to the agrarian tradition that has defined my family and indeed much of the South for hundreds of years. Now, when I go to my grandfather's farm or the farms of my cousins and uncles nearby, I feel more like a trespasser than a native coming home. I've always felt a distinct lack of Southern identity, as if a Southern void exists in me. If this is the case, I worry that I'm forever

doomed to inhabit an awkward, liminal space between two worlds, a space such as Everett V. Stonequist describes in The Marginal Man: A Study in Personality and Culture Conflict:

So the marginal man...is one poised in psychological uncertainty between two (or more) worlds; reflecting in his soul the discords and harmonies, repulsions and attractions of these worlds, one of which is often “dominant” over the other; within which membership is implicitly if not explicitly based upon birth or ancestry (race or nationality); and where exclusion removes the individual from a system of group relations. (8)

Ron Rash, a contemporary writer from western North Carolina, lives in a similar marginality. In his fiction and poetry, Rash frequently examines his marginal status as well as the question of whether the South retains a cultural identity all its own. A firm believer in the idea that “many Souths” exist simultaneously, Rash applies the question of Southern identity to Southern Appalachia, particularly western North Carolina and northwestern South Carolina, rather than to the South as a whole. By writing about both the historical and cultural shifts that have affected Rash’s own family as well as Appalachia in general, Rash depicts the deterioration of the Southern Appalachian identity that he has witnessed since childhood. I will explore in detail Rash’s portrayal of the flooding of the Jocassee Gorges, the shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy, and Southern Appalachia’s complex involvement with the legacy of the Civil War. I will also explore what Rash has said about the

deterioration of Southern Appalachian identity and about his artistic responsibility to record his changing landscape and culture.

Scholars have written very little on Rash or his work. As an undergraduate at Clemson University, I was fortunate enough to become acquainted with him, and, since then, I have interviewed him several times about his family's history, the origins of his novels and poems, and his feelings about the question of contemporary Southern and Appalachian identity. I will draw much of the information for this paper from these interviews.<sup>1</sup>

### **Ron Rash:**

#### **Appalachian Roots and Geographical Accidents**

Although Rash's Southern roots are undeniable, his connection to Appalachia seems tenuous at best. In 1953, Rash was born in Chester, South Carolina, although he considers this circumstance a "geographical accident." Both sides of Rash's family have lived in western North Carolina since the mid 1700s, but at the time of his birth his parents were working in a cotton mill in Chester. They stayed in Chester until Rash was seven. Then, as soon as they were financially secure enough to move, the Rashes went back to North Carolina, first to Hickory and then to Boiling Springs. Thus, Rash considers his "landscape" to be Appalachian and identifies himself as an Appalachian writer first and a Southern writer second. Rash's parents both worked in mills while trying to make a better life for their children. His mother eventually went to college and became an elementary school teacher. His father, who had never

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<sup>1</sup> Unless noted otherwise, future quotations will be from my interview with Rash on October 12, 2006 at his home in Clemson, South Carolina.

even finished high school, taught himself the necessary information and earned a GED, while still working in the mill. He then went to college. Later he received a Master's degree at Gardner-Webb University and eventually taught art classes there as well (Brown 339).

Rash's parents vehemently encouraged him to read and study in order to avoid the mill work they were forced to do for so many years. However, Rash does not credit his parents with instilling in him the desire to be a writer. Instead, he says his illiterate grandfather led him to embrace his craft. In his essay, "The Importance of Place," Rash recounts that when he was five he asked his grandfather to read The Cat in the Hat to him, not knowing that his grandfather had never learned to read.

Without hesitation, his grandfather took up the book and proceeded to "read" it; yet Rash quickly realized that the story was different and far better than the one he had grown accustomed to hearing from his parents. The next week Rash asked his grandfather to read the book again. This time his grandfather told another story, again far better than the original. After that, Rash often got his grandfather to "read" him stories, and the experience led him to "grow up believing words were magical" (1). Thus, the genesis of Rash's literary vocation is embedded in orality.

Rash also credits his childhood affinity for nature and the isolation of rurality with instilling in him a desire to write. Growing up, Rash spent his summers on his grandmother's farm near Boone, North Carolina, which he says was the "most important time of [his] younger life." Rash's grandmother did not have a car or television, so Rash spent virtually all of his time outside. His grandmother would often pack him a lunch and he would stay out in the woods from sunup to sundown.

While sometimes he would spend time fishing, he says that generally he just liked being alone in the natural world, which has been invaluable to his craft. Rash says, “I think that was really important because it made me pay attention....I just got to where I kind of knew the natural world. That’s very important for my writing.”

Rash cultivated his interest in stories and storytelling by pursuing degrees in English first from Gardner-Webb University and then from Clemson University. Rash has taught high school English at the South Carolina Governor’s School for the Arts and at a small rural high school in Oconee County, South Carolina. He has also taught college-level writing and literature courses at Clemson, Queens College, Tri-County Technical College, and the University of South Carolina. Rash currently teaches at Western Carolina University and has been named the John A. Parris and Dorothy Luxton Parris Distinguished Professor of Appalachian Cultural Studies. Rash also has a partnership with Western Carolina University’s Mountain Heritage Center. Founded in 1979, the Mountain Heritage Center is dedicated to preserving and celebrating the cultural history of Southern Appalachia. Coordinating the work of many professors from Western Carolina, the center provides an interdisciplinary approach to studying Appalachian history, and Rash frequently represents Western Carolina’s English Department (Mountain).

Although he loves teaching, he quickly realized that what he truly wanted to do with his life was write. This desire was catalyzed in particular by the fact that Rash sees himself as a “witness” to the rapid deterioration of the landscape and culture of his native region. Growing up in and around Madison, Watauga, and Buncombe Counties in western North Carolina, Rash has witnessed the destruction of

many natural landscapes, the spread of generic urban and suburban sprawl, a steady decrease in agrarian traditions, particularly relating to tobacco, a shift toward industrialization, and a decline in the use of regional dialects. Rash says, “I can remember when Boone was a one-stoplight town, and I can remember being on that road five miles from Boone....[and] being kin to ninety percent of the people on that road. Now I look at the mailboxes and I don’t know any of those names. It’s just changed; that community’s changed. I won’t sentimentalize, but I think something important was lost.” Rash has assumed the responsibility to record the changes he has observed by artistically rendering these cultural shifts in his fiction and poetry. According to Rash, “Part of what art does is it keeps things from being forgotten.”

Rash has published prolifically since the mid 1990s. All of his novels, poems, and short stories represent the culture and landscape of Southern Appalachia. Rash asserts that he has never considered setting his work outside of Southern Appalachia: “I’m just so consumed with that landscape I just can’t imagine doing it....It’s almost like it’s genetically imprinted, or I want to believe that. I just feel like it’s the landscape I know best. I think, like a lot of Southern writers, I follow the example of Faulkner. He just had this little postage stamp of land but that was enough.” Like Faulkner, Rash’s “little postage stamp” seems to provide endless material. Anchored in Southern Appalachia, Rash has published three poetry collections, Eureka Mill (1998), Among the Believers (2000), and Raising the Dead (2002); two short story collections, The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth and Other Stories from Cliffside, North Carolina (1994) and Casualties (2000); three novels, One Foot in Eden (2002), Saints at the River (2004), and The World Made Straight (2006); and one children’s

book, The Shark's Tooth (2001). He has received numerous awards, including a General Electric Younger Writers Award in 1987, a National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship in 1994, the Sherwood Anderson Prize in 1996, a James Still Award by the Fellowship of Southern Writers, an O. Henry Award in 2005, a Sir Walter Raleigh Award for Fiction, and another National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 2006. One Foot in Eden won the Novello Festival Novel Award in 2001 and Foreword Magazine's Gold Medal in Literary Fiction in 2002. One Foot in Eden was also named Appalachian Book of the Year. Saints at the River was named the Fiction Book of the Year by both the Southeastern Booksellers Association and the Southern Book Critics Circle. In 2006, North Carolinians all over the state read Saints at the River as part of the "Together We Read" program (NEA and Ron Rash).

In this essay, I will explain Rash's complex relationship with Southern identity by examining, at least tangentially, his three poetry collections as well as his three novels. In Chapter One, "The History of Southern Identity: C. Vann Woodward and James C. Cobb," I will untangle the complex history of Southern identity and seek to understand the current state of Southern identity both in the South at large and in Southern Appalachia. To explore Southern identity, I will primarily rely upon C. Vann Woodward's The Burden of Southern History and James C. Cobb's Away Down South: The History of Southern Identity. In Chapter Two, "The Appalachian Renaissance: Rash's Imagery of Flood and Water," I will examine in detail Rash's use of the flood as a symbol for the destruction of Southern culture. Rash writes about this cultural destruction in order to record a way of life that he believes is disappearing. Rash links Appalachians' current desire to record mountain culture

with the desire of the writers of the Southern Renaissance to record their culture in the 1920s and 30s. In Chapter Three, “The Peculiar Historical Consciousness,” I will examine Southerners’ tendency to link themselves with Southern history. In particular, I will trace the cultural transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy. Rash depicts this transition, which was common to many Southerners, through the experience of his own family, primarily his grandfather. Rash intentionally portrays this transition less romantically than he believes is typical in Southern letters. I will also look at how history and the legacy of the Civil War affect the minds and actions of Rash’s characters. In Chapter Four, “The Commodification of Southern Culture,” I will examine Rash’s pervasive use of Southern identity and culture in his work. Many of Rash’s characters are aware of Southern identity and its marketability, and they often don stereotypically authentic versions of Southern identity and exploit those identities for their own financial gain.

Ultimately, after examining the history of Southern identity, Rash’s use of Southern identity and culture in his fiction and poetry, the ways in which Rash’s characters exploit Southern identity, and the version of Southern identity that Rash perpetuates in his own life, I will conclude that Rash’s employment and portrayal of Southern identity are genuine. Rather than consciously commodifying Southern identity and culture as a marketing tool to sell his work to a specific audience, Rash artfully records a disappearing culture to which he has strong personal ties.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The History of Southern Identity:

#### C. Vann Woodward and James C. Cobb

Before attempting to untangle the complex relationship between Ron Rash and Southern identity as well as between Southern and Appalachian identities, one must first seek to understand contemporary Southern identity, and in order to understand Southern identity in the present, one must understand Southern identity in the past. To comprehend the history of Southern identity, I will primarily rely upon C. Vann Woodward's The Burden of Southern History. To understand Southern identity in the present, I will use James C. Cobb's Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity and Redefining Southern Culture: Mind and Identity in the Modern South.

The Burden of Southern History, particularly the first chapter, "The Search for Southern Identity," has become one of the classic sources used by historians and literary scholars to determine what is, or rather was, distinctly Southern. In discussions of the question of Southern identity, more literary critics and historians quote Woodward than any other scholar. However, given that his essay was first published in 1958, some of Woodward's assertions now appear dated. Nonetheless, "The Search for Southern Identity" is an invaluable tool for examining the aspects of Southern culture that have distinguished and perhaps still distinguish it from other regions of the United States. Among these distinguishing features cited by Woodward are agrarianism, racism, poverty, a sense of defeat, a collective tortured conscience, a historical consciousness, and a psychological tendency toward the concrete and away from abstraction.

In the opening of “The Search for Southern Identity,” Woodward questions the state of Southern identity at the time of the essay, 1958, as well as in the future. He asserts that Southern identity may no longer be an indelible part of Southerners’ heritage but rather something Southerners have learned to take on and off:

Has the Southern heritage become an old hunting jacket that one slips on comfortably while at home but discards when he ventures abroad in favor of some more conventional or modish garb? Or is it perhaps an attic full of ancestral wardrobes useful only in connection with costume balls and play acting...? (3)

Woodward is quick to admit that many of the features that have served to distinguish the South from the rest of the U.S. were not entirely positive, such as “the one-horse farmer, one-crop agriculture, one-party politics, the sharecropper, the poll tax, the white primary, the Jim Crow car, the lynching bee” (5). Despite the embarrassment and even sheer horror that Southerners may experience when looking back at these “landmarks of regional identification,” Southerners can deny neither their existence nor their role in creating a distinct identity for the South.

To Woodward, the South of the late 1950s was entering into what he called the “Bulldozer Revolution,” during which the rural areas around many Southern cities were being destroyed in order to expand the urban into the rural. According to Woodward, most Southern cities were expanding at a rate more than three times as fast as American cities outside the South. At the time, Southern cities were not only expanding out into the country but people in rural areas, both black and white, were fleeing toward urban and suburban areas (7). Additionally, Woodward’s South was

experiencing immense economic growth, the likes of which it had not witnessed since before the Civil War. For these reasons, Woodward, like many Southerners of his generation, was concerned that the South was losing its sense of identity: “The threat of becoming ‘indistinguishable,’ of being submerged under a national steamroller, has haunted the mind of the South” (8). The presence of such an immanent threat is what led Woodward to write The Burden of Southern History. As a historian, he looks to the past to uncover that which is distinctive about the South and uses such distinctions to bolster the “haunted” minds of Southerners in the present and future.

The first “landmark of regional identification” that Woodward calls into question is agrarianism. In the 1920s, the pro-agrarian manifesto, I’ll Take My Stand, was written by the Nashville Agrarians, some of whom had formerly comprised the Fugitive Poets—among them Robert Penn Warren, Allan Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Donald Davidson. The Agrarians saw that Southern identity was dwindling and believed the best way to curtail the destruction of Southern heritage was by promoting the agrarian tradition in which they believed the South was firmly rooted. While much of America was becoming increasingly industrial, they consciously sought to go in the other direction. In the Introduction, Ransom claims “to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way; and all [of the coauthors] as much as agree that the best terms in which to represent the distinction are contained in the phrase, Agrarian *versus* Industrial” (xix). Yet the dream of the Agrarians never came to fruition. In fact, despite their vehement efforts, the South embraced industry in the same way that the North had. According to Woodward, the Agrarians “seem to have been championing a second lost cause” (9).

Another Southern “landmark,” one less innocuous than the struggle of agrarianism against industrialization, is the struggle between races within the South. Woodward credits historian Ulrich B. Phillips with defining the essence of Southernness in terms of “race consciousness” (10). According to Phillips, in 1928, the continuity of Southern heritage depended on the South remaining “a white man’s country.” Woodward says that this criterion had a longer and more widespread impact than the Agrarians ever had. Yet, not unlike the Agrarians, white supremacists have also fallen away. Woodward warned his generation, still in the heat of the Civil Rights Movement, against defining Southern identity by such a “morally discredit[ing]” facet of Southern culture: “If Southernism is allowed to become identified with a last ditch defense of segregation, it will increasingly lose its appeal among the younger generation. Many will be tempted to reject their entire regional identification, even the name ‘Southern,’ in order to dissociate themselves from the one discredited aspect” (12).

Woodward goes on to blame historians, even Southern historians, for the destruction of Southern heritage, because they have worked hard to be iconoclasts, attacking the mythology of the South and Southern history. Again, the deconstruction of Southern mythology is not necessarily a misfortune. Some of the deconstructed myths that Woodward highlights are the “Cavalier Legend,” the “Plantation Legend,” the paternalistic and “benign” institution of slavery, the evils of Reconstruction, and “the hallowed memory of the Redeemers who did in the Carpetbaggers” (13). While many national or American myths have remained “sacrosanct and inviolate,” the mythologies that are distinctly Southern have come under such extreme scrutiny that

they “have become weak material for buttressing Southern defenses.” Woodward asserts that for Americans a faith in America seems to subvert allegiance to heritage, ethnicity, and even, in some cases, religion: “The same urge to conformity that operates upon ethnic or national minorities to persuade them to reject identification with their native heritage or that of their forebears operates to a degree upon the Southerner as well” (15).

Woodward finally identifies the one aspect of the South that makes and will continue to make it distinct within the United States—the history of the South. In several ways, the history of the South has been different from, and even contradictory to, the historical experience of most of the U.S. For example, while the U.S. in general experienced relative “economic abundance” (16), the South has endured “a long and quite un-American experience with poverty” (17). This poverty persisted in the South from the Civil War through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In 1880 the “per capita wealth of the South was 27 per cent of that of the Northeastern states.” Even as late as 1938, President Roosevelt declared the South “The Nation’s Economic Problem No.1.” Linked to the American experience of “economic abundance” is the American experience of success, which Woodward calls “the legend of success and invincibility” (18). In essence, “American history *is* a success story.” Antithetically, the South knows defeat intimately, not only the military defeat of the Civil War but also “defeat in the provinces of economic, social and political life” (19).

Woodward relates the myth of inevitable American success to the myth of American innocence, in which early Americans “shook off the wretched evils of

feudalism and broke free from tyranny, monarchism, aristocracy, and privilege” (20). Yet, again, the South was never able to embrace this myth, because of its “tortured conscience.” In the beginning of the South’s history, Southerners had to live with the institution of slavery that flourished among them. Then, after Emancipation, they still had to live with the ramifications of that evil. Therefore, Southerners (at least, those who actually believed the institution of slavery was inherently evil) never felt this sense of American innocence.

Woodward believes that these distinct aspects of the South’s history give the region a unique identity and have empowered its literature since the Southern Renaissance. Although Woodward begins “The Search for Southern Identity” with a highly skeptical tone, he provides a rather optimistic conclusion to the essay, crediting Southern history with keeping the South a distinct culture: “In their unique historic experience as Americans the Southerners should not only be able to find the basis for continuity of their heritage but also make contributions that balance and complement the experience of the rest of the nation” (16). In a much later book, Thinking Back: The Perils of Writing History, published in 1986, Woodward reaffirms this optimism: “The South’s distinctive collective experience of the past....[is] the true source of Southern identity” (108). Nearly thirty years after he published “The Search for Southern Identity,” Woodward still believed that a distinct Southern identity existed, an identity linked directly to history. The South’s unique past is one of the only facets of Southern culture that most critics would not refute.

Although James C. Cobb may not carry quite as much clout as Woodward, he is an important figure in the study of contemporary Southern history and culture.

Currently the B. Sphinzzy Spaulding Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Georgia, he was formerly the president of the Southern Historical Association, and he has published prolifically in the area of Southern studies. In the Introduction to his newest book Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity (2005), Cobb examines some of the same aspects of Southern culture that Woodward discusses in The Burden of Southern History to determine what was and is Southern. Cobb says that historians have often pointed to common “sources of Southern distinctiveness...such as dedication to white supremacy, a peculiar climate, a decidedly un-American historical experience, and....a unique ‘culture of the folk,’ rooted in life on the land” (2).

Cobb spends much time explaining the relationship between the identities of the North and South, an opposition that Woodward does not emphasize in The Burden of Southern History. Cobb believes that identity is often measured not by what something or someone is in isolation but rather in relation to something or someone else. An “other” must be present to serve as a point of contrast. For many years, the North served as the South’s other, and vice versa. Cobb even suggests that the South may have been the other for all of America. The North tends to represent America at large; therefore, when Franklin Roosevelt led efforts to change the South in the late 1930s, rather than “Americanizing” the South, instead he was, in the words of Richard N. Current, “northernizing the South” (Cobb 4). Cobb ends his Introduction by arguing that in the U.S. the interest in and even obsession with regional identity is a particularly intense phenomenon in the South:

The idea of a “North” as a fundamental source of identity and an object of attachment has been far less important historically to Americans above the Mason-Dixon line than has the idea of a “South” to those who lived below it. Simply put, where southerners (regardless of race, to some extent) have staked their claim to a distinctive regional identity defined in contrast with the North, northerners have been more likely to characterize their own identity as simply “American” and define that in contrast with the South. (7)

Cobb’s chapters, “Divided by a Common Past: History and Identity in the Contemporary South” and “The South and the Politics of Identity,” are the most relevant to the question of the continuity of Southern identity in the contemporary South. Particularly in the former, Cobb takes the work that Woodward began in “The Search for Southern Identity” and examines it after the gap of nearly half of a century. He begins this chapter by citing the conclusion of “The Search for Southern Identity,” in which Woodward says that the South remains distinct from the rest of America because of its “unique historic experience.” However, while Cobb does not dispute this point, he believes that the experience of Southern history has been radically different for Southern whites and blacks, and he believes that Woodward largely neglected the role black people played in this history (289). Cobb believes that Woodward was correct in saying that “Southern history, unlike American, includes large components of frustration, failure and defeat” (19), yet he expounds upon the idea by acknowledging the sometimes antithetical experience of African-Americans:

Blacks and whites defined components of frustration, failure and defeats so differently that one group's tragedy quite frequently represented the other's triumph. After all, the white South's defeat in the Civil War freed the black South from slavery....As a result, for all the inspirational rhetoric about the heritage they share, contemporary black and white southerners have remained a people more divided than united by their common past. (290)

Cobb portrays the persistence of this dual interpretation of Southern history by paralleling it with "the never-ending conflicts over the Confederate flag, Confederate monuments, and other symbolic reminders of slavery and segregation." The paradox, according to Cobb, is that while Southerners certainly share a common past, many contemporary Southerners, regardless of race, interpret that past in various ways, often refusing "to share or accept each other's version of that past" (302). Cobb concludes this chapter with a warning that fragmented, misrepresented, or fallacy-laden versions of the past may prevent twenty-first century Southerners, both black and white, from creating a new, truer sense of Southern identity (317).

In "The South and the Politics of Identity," the final chapter of Away Down South, Cobb considers what John Egerton calls the "Americanization of Dixie" and the "Southernization of America" (318). According to Cobb, the North and South have had a reciprocal relationship from the mid-twentieth century onward, sharing many of the positive and negative aspects of each region. To illustrate the process of the "Southernization of America," Cobb traces the Southern origins of country music, the blues, and even NASCAR. Cobb also provides a host of statistics about Southern

and Northern perspectives on race and race relations. In general, according to Cobb's findings, white Southerners seem to possess similar, if not better, views on race relations than non-Southern Americans: "...it was nonetheless difficult to see how the region could be blamed for fostering racial polarization beyond its boundaries when in many categories related to racial tolerance or perceptions thereof, it was trending more positively, or at least less negatively, than the rest of the country" (321).

Cobb also makes the point that Southerners are not the only Americans who have become increasingly interested in regional identity since the mid-twentieth century. Although the South was probably the first of America's regions to create centers for regional studies, especially at major universities, just about every other region followed their example (328). Along with a new, or at least renewed, interest among scholars in "collecting, cataloguing, and emphasizing their distinctive cultural artifacts and traits," many regions have seen an increased pride in regional identity: "In fact, a 2004 New England poll showed that a whopping 87 percent of those contacted wanted to be identified as New Englanders, compared to the 74 percent of the respondents to a similar poll in the South who wanted to be known as southerners" (328).

Despite what appears to be a higher level of regional pride among New Englanders, in general people from Europe tend to relate to and express interest in Southerners more readily than Northerners. To illustrate this point, Cobb again cites Woodward's "The Search for Southern Identity," in which Woodward states that "the South's history of conflict, poverty, and defeat" (19) is more closely related to European history than the "North's heralded story of harmony, affluence, and

accomplishment that stands out as distinctive or exceptional” (329). For example, in the same way that many contemporary Southerners obsessively recall the Civil War, Cobb says that the Irish still speak of King Billy’s victory in 1690 “as if it happened last week” and that the Serbs “who are clearly still deeply bittered by the outcome of the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 could surely teach the ‘fergit hell’ crowd of southern whites a thing or two about holding grudges.” Southern Italians have even appropriated the Confederate flag to wave tauntingly at soccer matches against northern Italian teams. In addition, you can find the Southern breakfast restaurant, “Mississippi Mud,” in Germany, “Arkansas Barbeque” in London, “Texas Party” in Bellagio, and the “Jook Joint Café” in Tremezzo (332).

This national and international interest in contemporary identity has been catalyzed at least in part by the homogenizing effects of global culture (330). The interest has also made identity something to be marketed. Just as Woodward compared Southern identity to an “old hunting jacket” or “ancestral wardrobe” (3), Cobb says that contemporary Southerners can easily don the garb of Gomer Pyle or Scarlett O’Hara (332). Yet, this ability to alter one’s identity is happening throughout America and the world:

We have seen some notable examples of the commodification and marketing of southern identity, but the phenomenon is hardly confined to the South. Ironically, the ascendant global economy that has helped to plunge so much of humanity into a panic by threatening to take away our identities is now proceeding to sell them back to us....Although the concept of a distinctive identity seems exclusionary

by definition, from the commercial standpoint, the more claimants and aspirants to a particular identity and the more intense their attachment to it the better. In such an environment, nations and products become almost indistinguishable. (331)

To illustrate this point further, Cobb says that Dublin's tourism officials in recent years have been coming to New York City to observe the festivities that Americans hold for St. Patrick's Day, which is apparently a rather uneventful religious holiday in Ireland. Dublin's tourism officials hope to accentuate the Irishness of the celebration in Ireland, both to instill Irish pride in their own people and to provide American tourists with an "Irish" experience similar to what they could experience in New York (331).

In the end of Away Down South, Cobb indicates that the South has undergone vast changes and done so relatively quickly. He says that Southerners, both black and white, possess a great "capacity for adjustment" (338), which has enabled them to change over time while retaining a sense of identity:

Ultimately, instead of destroying the "southern way of life," the overthrow of Jim Crow seemed to result in a broader, biracial effort to keep it alive, although often on dramatically different terms. Resolving some of these differences or at least learning to respect them may well be crucial to determining whether the label of "southerner" continues to have legitimate meaning and, more important, whether the South finally becomes a place where southerners can truly come to know themselves and each other.

While his end remarks may provide a valuable warning for contemporary Southerners, Cobb fails to confront directly the question of Southern distinctiveness in the contemporary world. Instead of providing any sense of closure for a book that is supposed to track Southern identity up through the present, Cobb remains ambivalent on the issue. The closest he comes to addressing where the South is and where it will be in the future is to say that Southerners should inhabit their identities without worrying about being “Southern.”

In an earlier book, Redefining Southern Culture: Mind and Identity in the Modern South (1999), Cobb’s conclusions are equally ambivalent and unsatisfying. The book’s chapter on “Searching for Southernness: Community and Identity in the Contemporary South” is strikingly similar to “Divided by a Common Past: History and Identity in the Contemporary South” and “The South and the Politics of Identity” in Away Down South. In the earlier book, Cobb links Southern identity with race identity and race relations in the South. He claims that post-Jim Crow Southern whites have lost their Southern identity, because it was largely based on segregation and white supremacy: “...with the garments they wore as the defenders of Jim Crow decidedly out of fashion, white southerners awoke suddenly to find themselves desperately in need of a new, suitably distinctive, and appropriate cultural wardrobe to replace them” (141). Similarly, some post-Jim Crow Southern blacks believe they have lost their sense of identity because integration has destroyed their sense of community: “...for many black southerners, the long-awaited, much-suffered-for destruction of Jim Crow with its barriers to education, social, and economic advancement actually seemed to have led to the erosion of this cherished sense of

solidarity and belonging” (131). In his closing paragraph, Cobb says that Southerners, both black and white, need to find “something meaningful and enduring” (148-49) to bind them and forge a new Southern culture. Perhaps the ambivalence in the conclusions of both of Cobb’s books on Southern identity is telling about the current state of the South and Southern identity. Cobb consistently seems unable, or at least unwilling, to comment directly on the state of contemporary Southern identity, much less Southern identity in the future.

Ron Rash’s identity as a Southerner is even more complex than that of many other contemporary Southerners’ because of his deep Appalachian roots. As I mentioned in the Introduction, Rash links his primary regional identity to Appalachia and then to the South. Historians as well as literary scholars have written very little about the relationship between Southern Appalachia and the rest of the South. Instead of comparing the sub-region, Appalachia, to the region as a whole, most scholars of regional identity tend to focus on comparisons of the South and the U.S., or Appalachia and the U.S. For example, in A History of Appalachia, Richard B. Drake devotes entire chapters to exploring “the conflicts inherent between traditional Appalachian life and modern American culture” (221), but he only mentions in passing that Appalachians may represent “a different kind of Southerner [as well as] American” (219). Similarly, in “Appalachians: Adrift in the Mainstream,” Julia Damron Porter explores the relationship between Appalachians and the U.S. but never mentions the relationship between Appalachians and the South:

The irony is that most Appalachians are so similar to mainstream America—white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. Yet that very

similarity has yielded an invisibility which has resulted in Appalachians being one of the most neglected of minority groups, with the high costs of the acculturative process hidden from view. Appalachians do differ from mainstream America in value orientations and in their history. (13-14)

According to Rash, Southern Appalachia and the South in general share many attributes. However, they differ in that Southern Appalachia has been more gradual in relinquishing much of its cultural distinctiveness. Rash says that many Appalachians are currently becoming aware of their changing cultural dynamics, and he believes this awareness is causing a renaissance.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Appalachian Renaissance:

#### Rash's Imagery of Flood and Water

Perhaps the most powerfully symbolic image that recurs throughout Rash's poetry and fiction is that of manmade lakes, which he uses to represent the destruction or covering up of Southern culture. Rash's attraction to manmade lakes is part of a larger fascination with water. He claims that he "has always been drawn to water." In a recent poem, "First Memory," which is to be published in a forthcoming collection, Rash describes looking down into a pond, one of his earliest memories from childhood. He says this memory stems from spending his summers in relative isolation on his grandmother's farm near Boone. Because they did not have a car or television, Rash stayed primarily outside, spending most of his time playing in the creeks and ponds scattered around the farm. He says that these times were invaluable to him because they forced him to pay attention to the world as well as instilling in him a lifelong obsession with water.

Rash credits two other aspects of his heritage with contributing to this obsession – his Southern Baptist upbringing and his Celtic ancestry. According to Rash, the former "gives an importance to being immersed and all the symbolism that goes along with that. But also with that there's that sense in Biblical stories of how water's both destructive and life-affirming, and that contradiction about how it can be both." This Biblical contradiction is apparent in the poem "Last Service," which describes a congregation gathering to worship before their church is flooded by the formation of a manmade lake:

...they still congregated there,  
 wading then crossing in boats  
 those last Sunday nights, their farms  
 already lost in the lake,  
 nothing but that brief island  
 left of their world as they lit  
 the church with candles and sang  
 from memory deep as water  
 old hymns of resurrection  
 before leaving that high ground  
 where the dead had once risen. (Raising 3)

Just as water acts as a force of destruction in the sixth chapter of Genesis, here too it destroys the landscape of the poem. Yet, at the same time, Rash uses water as a simile for the depth of Christian faith, memory, and understanding. In addition, the image of resurrection in the last lines of the poem connotes not only the resurrection of Jesus Christ but also the resurrection from water after a full-immersion baptism. This image as well as the dichotomy of water's role in Christian life comes up later in Rash's second novel, Saints at the River, in which a reverend explicitly acknowledges that the river gives life to his congregation by baptism but often takes it away as well (223).

Rash is also deeply interested in Celtic folklore, which explores "how the dead impinge on the living." To Rash, one way in which the dead come to bear upon the living is through water. He says that in Celtic folklore water acts as "a conduit

between the living and the dead.” That “connectedness” is particularly prevalent in his first novel, One Foot in Eden, in which a manmade lake covers an area of upstate South Carolina, called the Jocassee Gorges. For Rash, the water that now covers the Jocassee Gorges acts as a conduit between him and the dead culture that once existed there. Rash says, “When I wrote One Foot in Eden, part of what I wanted to do was...resurrect that valley.”

Rash may not have used manmade lakes as literary symbols until he was an adult, but he has been obsessed with them since childhood. Rash says, “I’ve always been haunted by manmade lakes. I can remember even as a kid....going over a lake and knowing it was manmade and....wondering what was beneath it. It kind of bothered me, spooked me.” In the late 1970s, Rash began to see the literary and symbolic potential of manmade lakes. At that time, he had recently received his Master’s in English from Clemson and was teaching at a rural high school in Oconee County, near Clemson, in the northwest corner of South Carolina. Just a few years before Rash came to the area, Duke Power Company flooded the Jocassee Gorges in order to create a new power plant. By the mid 60s, Duke Power had obtained over 83,400 acres of land in upstate South Carolina. They purchased much of the land but also seized some of it from landowners under the law of eminent domain, which is often employed to appropriate private property in order to build new roads, schools, municipal buildings, and parks, or to run new power, water, sewer, and gas lines. With governmental support, Duke Power used the law in the early 70s to build a power station that would provide electricity for much of upstate South Carolina. By damming the Keowee River to create the Jocassee Pumped Storage Hydroelectric

Station, Duke Power flooded much of the area, forming the 7,500-acre Lake Jocassee and the 18,400-acre Lake Keowee. The lakes reached full capacity in 1974 (History of Lake Jocassee).

Because Duke Power exercised the law of eminent domain to complete the project, they displaced thousands of families in the area, many of whom had lived in the Jocassee Gorges for centuries. When Rash moved to Oconee County, he taught at a high school attended by many children whose families had been displaced from the Jocassee Gorges. While there, Rash heard accounts of the way life had been in the valley prior to its flooding. Rash says that he was strongly “drawn to those stories” and, therefore, increasingly spoke with the people who had lived in the area. He quickly “became obsessed with that world and what had been lost.” The agrarian tradition that had dominated the area is one of the primary lost aspects of the Gorges that interests Rash. Although textile and timber mills had moved into the area as early as the late nineteenth century, the Jocassee Gorges remained predominantly agricultural until the flooding, which destroyed much of upstate South Carolina’s agrarian tradition. Therefore, to Rash, this displacement of people and the destruction of the agrarian way of life that they had known “started to become emblematic of what was happening to a whole culture, the disappearance of this whole lifestyle.”

Rash began to address the flooding of the Jocassee Gorges in his poetry collections, Raising the Dead, Among the Believers, and Eureka Mill, and it is the primary focus of his first novel One Foot in Eden. In writing the novel, he discovered the distinctive power of using manmade lakes as symbols of the cultural deterioration in which he is so personally vested. The story is set in the 1950s in Jocassee, South

Carolina, and revolves around two central events—the murder of Holland Winchester and the flooding of the valley to create a new hydroelectric plant. Despite some anachronisms, Rash largely stays true to the history of the Jocassee Gorges.

Throughout the novel, Sheriff Alexander investigates Holland's disappearance. Although he suspects from the beginning that Holland's neighbor, Billy Holcombe, has murdered Holland, Alexander cannot confirm his suspicion because he fails to locate Holland's body. The novel is broken up into five sections, each of which is told by a different first-person narrator. As Alexander continues his investigation, the narrative point of view periodically shifts – from Sheriff Alexander to Amy Holcombe to Billy Holcombe to Isaac and finally to Deputy Bobby Murphree. Their narratives reveal that Amy has copulated with Holland because Billy is infertile and she wants a child. When Holland learns about the child and when Amy refuses to have anything more to do with him, Holland becomes belligerent and will not leave her alone. To defend his wife and child, Billy kills Holland and hides his body. Throughout all five narratives, the flooding of the valley remains in the forefront of everyone's mind, and by the last narrative, the lakes have nearly reached full capacity and the world of the novel is covered by the flood.

While the flood connotes a Biblical cleansing in the valley, it also destroys many positive aspects of the valley's culture. In reality, as well as in One Foot in Eden, the flood displaced the people who had previously dwelled and, in most cases, farmed in the valley. Many people were even required to disinter their dead relatives and rebury them elsewhere, because Duke Power was afraid their caskets would one day float to the surface of the lake. After fleeing the valley, most families did not

return to agriculture; instead, they relocated to towns and cities, finding work in mills. Billy Holcombe, for example, takes work at Dobson Mill (167) after being forced to abandon his farm. Billy struggles to acclimate to life at the mill, still noticing the slightest shifts in the weather and worrying how it will affect the crops he imagines he still possesses (187).

Rash's fascination with manmade lakes certainly did not end after he completed One Foot in Eden. In his second novel Saints at the River, he makes the connection between the burial of the land and the burial of Southern culture even more explicit:

Bonding fires originated in the Scottish midlands. A family's hearth fire was never allowed to die down completely. Banked embers from the previous night's fire were stirred and kindled back into flames.

When children left to marry and raise their own families, they took fire from their parents' hearth with them. It was both heirloom and talisman, nurtured and protected because generations recognized it for what it was—living memory. When some clans emigrated they kept the fires burning on the ships as they crossed the Atlantic. Then they hauled them up into the southern Appalachians from Charleston or down the Shenandoah from Philadelphia. There had been one bonding fire started in the 1500s that was kept alive until the 1970s. The flame was tended by an old man and extinguished only when a dam flooded the valley where he'd lived eight decades. Two hundred feet of water covered that hearth now. (111)

The tradition of passing down this bonding fire was evidently strong enough to prevail for almost five centuries. Rash remains ambiguous about whether the flood is blameworthy for destroying the source of the fire or whether the people are blameworthy for allowing the fire to go out. If emigrants could bring the fire all the way from Europe, the displaced people of the Jocassee Gorges feasibly could have taken the fire with them regardless of where they relocated. Those who had kept the fire going had done so by sheer determination, simply because maintaining the tradition meant enough to them to find a way. One can assume that the people who finally let the fire die out did so because to them it no longer symbolized what it had to their ancestors; it no longer represented “living memory.” Rash, however, refuses to allow the fire to die; he refuses to abandon the distinct culture that had existed in the Jocassee Gorges.

Rash’s desire to prevent the history of his region from being forgotten is a trait common to many Southern writers. In “The Profession of Letters in the South,” Allen Tate refers to this trait as “the peculiarly historical consciousness of the Southern writer” (533). In another essay, “The New Provincialism,” Tate claims that it was “that backward glance [which] gave us the Southern renaissance, a literature conscious of the past in the present” (545). Rash believes that contemporary Appalachian writers, such as Charles Frazier, Robert Morgan, Lee Smith, Chris Offutt, Fred Chappell, Wendell Berry, and, of course, himself, are now contributing to a new Appalachian Literary Renaissance. He says, “To me what’s happening in the Appalachian Mountains right now is what happened in the 20s and 30s” to the South at large. Rash claims that the deterioration of Appalachian culture has been

significantly slower than the deterioration of Southern culture in general simply because the mountains have been geographically “set off.” Therefore, the culture has taken longer to be wholly penetrated by outside forces. Rash cites two primary factors that are causing the current cultural changes in Southern Appalachia. The first is the shift away from the agrarian traditions that have in many ways defined the mountains for hundreds of years. The other factor is the steady influx of non-natives into the region, particularly retirees. Rash believes that he and many other Appalachian writers “recognize something is disappearing. With human beings, it’s only when something is disappearing that you ever know it. If it’s always there, you don’t notice it; it’s only when you’re losing it.” Although the voices of Appalachians were not strongly represented in the Southern Renaissance, Richard B. Drake does note in his book A History of Appalachia that several strong writers did emerge from Appalachia at that time: “The region did not develop its own clear and strong literary voice until the 1930s, with the appearance of three writers...James Still, Jesse Stuart, and Don West” (219-220). Although these three writers represented Appalachia at the time of the Southern Renaissance, they do not compare to the immense outpouring of art and literature from the region today.

One Foot in Eden communicates a theme common to Southern literature. The recognition that “you can’t go home again” was popularized by Thomas Wolfe, another Appalachian Southerner, and it aptly describes what many Southerners experienced during the Southern Renaissance and what many Appalachians are now experiencing. Given that these writers cannot return home, the best they can hope for is to recreate a sense of home or lament the loss of home in their works. The

literal displacement that was caused by the manmade lakes in upstate South Carolina thematizes this basic issue. Rash's choice of a manmade lake as the symbol for the deterioration of Appalachian culture places him within a long tradition of writers and filmmakers using the same symbol to conceptualize the South. Robert Penn Warren's Flood, Madison Jones' A Buried Land, James Dickey's Deliverance, William Faulkner's If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem, Dot Jackson's Refuge, the Coen Brothers' Oh, Brother, Where Art Thou?, and Elia Kazan's Wild River all participate in the tradition of TVA or flood narratives.

In a nonfiction essay simply entitled "Mississippi," Faulkner, like Rash, employs the symbol of a manmade lake to describe the deterioration of his particular version of Southern culture. The essay constitutes an autobiographical sketch, in which he intermingles his own history with Mississippi's natural history and the histories of many of his fictitious characters, including the Sartoris, De Spains, Compsons, McCaslins, Hogganbecks, and Snopeses. In the autobiographical thread of the essay, Faulkner refers to himself at different stages of his life as "the child," "the youth," and "the middleaged." However, whether Faulkner is speaking of his own life or the lives of his characters is often difficult to discern. In particular, his autobiographical narration seems to lapse into Ike McCaslin's life, and Faulkner places himself at the center of Go Down, Moses. In the pivotal moment of the essay, Faulkner notes that "an artificial lake" (35) has covered the landscape "of his youth." The lake was built as a "flood control project for the cotton fields below the huge earth dam." According to Michael Grimwood, "The Tallachatchie River bottom where Faulkner and Ike both hunted as boys has been submerged" (106). In a striking

passage that evokes portions of Go Down, Moses, particularly “Delta Autumn,” Faulkner describes how this manmade lake has destroyed the culture he loved as a child:

Home again, his native land; he was born of it and his bones will sleep in it; loving it even while hating some of it: the river jungle and the bordering hills where still a child he had ridden behind his father on the horse after the bobcat or fox or coon or whatever was ahead of the belling hounds and where he had hunted alone when he got big enough to be trusted with a gun, now the bottom of a muddy lake being raised gradually and steadily every year by another layer of beer cans and bottle caps and lost bass plugs. (36)

Faulkner’s body of work is undoubtedly one of the primary expressions of the Southern Renaissance. Perhaps, in order to parallel the Southern and Appalachian Renaissances, Rash appropriates the symbol of manmade lakes from the Southern tradition of TVA or flood narratives, and, like Faulkner, employs it to represent the deterioration of his culture. He may even hope that scholars will one day view his work among the harbingers of this new Appalachian Renaissance.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “The Peculiar Historical Consciousness”

As I mentioned in Chapter One, C. Vann Woodward concludes “The Search for Southern Identity” by indicating the only facet of Southern culture and the Southern mind that is distinct from the rest of America is history: “Is there nothing about the South that is immune from the disintegrating effect of nationalism and the pressure for conformity? Is there not something that has not changed? There is only one thing that I can think of, and that is its history” (15). James C. Cobb arrives at a similar conclusion, asserting, “Be it real or imagined, however, the most common foundation of group identity is a shared sense of a common past” (6). In the same way that Woodward and Cobb emphasize history as the one factor that gives Southerners a distinct group identity, Allen Tate cites “the peculiar historical consciousness of the Southern writer”(533) to distinguish Southern and non-Southern writers. To illustrate this same point, Woodward states that, while Faulkner proclaims, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past,” writers outside the South tend to place less value on the historical context of their lives and literature. For example, Hemingway’s “characters appear to live completely in the present. To emphasize their historical rootlessness they are invariably pictured as expatriates, as wanderers, as soldiers or adventurers. They are temporarily in Italy or Spain, in France or Africa, in Cuba or the Florida Keys. A Hemingway hero with a grandfather is inconceivable” (The Burden 31).

Many of Rash’s characters, as well as Rash himself, illustrate Southerners’ “peculiar historical consciousness.” First, in One Foot in Eden, several characters incessantly display a strong interest in reading Southern history. For these characters,

particularly Sheriff Alexander, the knowledge of their Southern forbears helps put their lives in a meaningful context that enables them to come to a fuller understanding of the present. Then, in Eureka Mill, Rash demonstrates his own “historical consciousness” by depicting his family’s struggle to transition from an agrarian to industrial lifestyle. Rash also evokes his own family’s history to explore how contemporary Southerners, and especially Appalachians, grapple with the legacy of the Civil War.

### **Reading Southern History**

Throughout One Foot in Eden, Sheriff Alexander constantly alludes to books he has read about the history of the Carolinas, most of which have to do with the displacement of Native Americans. In fact, in the opening scene of the book, Alexander is interrupted while reading a book on the Cherokee Indians. His wife, Laura, has been reading History of Charleston. Their choices of reading material display their interest in Southern history but also their different versions of the South. The daughter of a wealthy doctor, Laura’s South is one of Charlestonian gentility. The son of a small-scale Appalachian farmer, Alexander is interested in those who cultivated and farmed the region before his people arrived. Later in the novel, as he reads Chapman James Milling’s Red Carolinians, Alexander considers the parallels between the destruction of the Native American culture that existed in the Jocassee Gorges centuries ago and the forthcoming destruction of the valley’s agrarian culture. Alexander laments the fact that while Native Americans have been able to retain some of their culture, the flooding of the valley will now make the disappearance

permanent both for their culture and his own (23). The flood will destroy Indian burial grounds and reservations, in the same way that it will destroy the graveyards of those bearing his family's name. Alexander says, "Reservoir, reservation, the two words sounded alike. In a dictionary they would be on the same page."

Later, Alexander discusses his familiarity with the historical writings of Andre Micheaux, Hernando de Soto, Rodrigo Rangel, and William Bartram, and alludes to them frequently throughout his narrative, particularly as he travels to the rural gorges to investigate Billy Holcombe's farm. Alexander provides a detailed account of his reading of William Bartram's Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida for the first time. Alexander's interest in this book stems from the fact that his grandfather's great-grandfather had settled in the valley twelve years before Bartram's explorations in 1775. Alexander says, "Like Micheaux, Bartram was a naturalist. He understood that things disappeared. Maybe that was why he'd felt compelled to preserve with sketches and words everything he saw, from Cherokee council-houses to buffalo bones. He wanted to get it all down. He wanted things to be remembered" (One Foot 51). Rash parallels his own intentions with those of Bartram. Comprehending the volatility of their worlds, they both seek to record what is being lost. Bartram chronicled his naturalistic observations about upstate South Carolina, in the same way that Rash chronicles the cultural history of the Jocassee Gorges, so that it will not be lost forever.

Alexander, in the last paragraphs of his narrative, speaks of his lifelong desire to be buried in Jocassee with all the other Alexanderes. Only in death will he be able to become part of history and one with the valley:

I hoped I would be in the that grave before they built the reservoir so when the water rose it would rise over me and Daddy and Momma and over Old Ian Alexander and his wife Mary and over the lost body of the princess named Jocassee and the Cherokee mounds and the trails De Soto and Bartram and Mixhaux had followed and the meadows and streams and forests they had described and all would forever vanish and our faces and names and deeds and misdeeds would be forgotten as if we and Jocassee had never been. (56-7)

In this passage, Alexander presents an idea antithetical to Rash's purpose in writing. While Alexander desires to be forgotten along with his family and all others that previously dwelled in the Jocassee Gorges, Rash seeks to record the valley's history so it will never be forgotten.

### **From Farm to Mill:**

#### **Industry by Necessity, Industry by Choice**

Another example of Rash's desire to chronicle Appalachian history is his portrayal of the shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy. To accomplish this, Rash tells of his grandfather's experience working in a cotton mill. He explores the trend of agrarianism to industrialism most explicitly in his poetry collection Eureka Mill, which depicts how his grandfather was forced away from his family's farm and into a mill by financial necessity. Rash is quick to point out, though, that unlike many Southern writers he does not want to "sentimentalize that agrarian lifestyle." He says that after his grandfather had the opportunity to return to farming, he—unlike

his brothers—chose to stay at the mill. Rash uses the “migration from that agrarian world into this industrial world” not to romanticize the Southern agrarian tradition but rather to explore the psychological effects of moving from the relatively autonomous world of self-sufficient farming to the mill, which he describes as an “incredibly regimented world where they pretty much would tell you everything from when you could use the restroom to when you woke up.” Like many people confronted with such a transition, at times Rash’s grandfather coped by turning to whiskey and violence.

In poems such as “Spring Fever” and “Mill Village,” Rash portrays men who have made the shift from the farm to the mill and probes the shift’s continuing psychological effects. In “Spring Fever,” each year at “planting time” (17) the men at Eureka Mill “get more careless on the job/ and have that far-away look in their eyes./ You’d know they were behind a mule and plow.” At this time of year, the men drink “a lot more whiskey” and are increasingly obstinate with their bosses. In keeping with Rash’s desire not to romanticize the agrarian tradition, at first the speaker accuses the men of having forgotten the less pleasant aspects of farming such as hailstorms, barn burnings, and back-breaking days of labor. Yet, in the poem’s last stanza, the speaker provides a rather bleak conclusion as he reconsiders his former assertions about the mill workers’ blind optimism:

But maybe deep inside they did remember.

They must have because every March you’d hear  
men swear come planting time next spring they’d be  
back in the fields. They’d say that every year.

“Mill Village” depicts a similar struggle caused by the shift from the farm to the mill. Written in the first person, this poem portrays solely the experiences of the speaker. Although one cannot know conclusively from the content of the poem, the speaker is most likely Rash’s own grandfather. He seems consistent with the characterization of his grandfather in other poems that explicitly identify him. After moving to the mill, the speaker buys “a dimestore picture, a country scene/...no people in it, just a lot of land,/ stretching out behind an empty barn” (13). The speaker plugs his ears with cotton and stares at the picture any time he finds himself missing the farm. For a while, the picture seems to provide him with solace. However, in the last stanza, all feeling has been “jarred” out of the speaker by the weave room, and entering into a state of mental paralysis, he takes the picture down.

Similarly, “Drought,” “Tobacco,” and “In a Dry Time” depict the difficult choice many faced when farming proved unable to yield a sustainable living. Rash portrays industrial work in almost all of his poems as simultaneously the salvation and the damnation of Southern Appalachians. While mill work provided stability and survival, it also destroyed the way of life many people had known and loved. Although the poems often portray the soul-draining effect of the mill’s tedium on Rash’s grandfather, the poems are often equally negative in their portrayal of agriculture. In the poem “Hand-bill Distributed in Buncombe County, North Carolina: 1915,” Rash arranges into poetic lines and stanzas the words of an actual handbill from Eureka Mill. The handbill begins with the testimonial of a man who supposedly works at the mill: “Three years ago I owned a mountain farm/...Most years I did quite well or so I thought” (8). The man goes on to recount that each year

was harder for him to make a profit, until he could no longer break even. Finally, he describes moving to Eureka Mill, where everything is provided and his daughter “earns more than a grown man in the hills.” If this testimony is at all true, it might help to explain why Rash’s grandparents stayed at the mill, even after they were given a chance to return with their family to their old farm.

Industrialization is famously lamented by the Nashville Agrarians in I’ll Take My Stand (1930), in the preface to which John Crowe Ransom claims “to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way; and all [of the book’s co-authors] as much as agree that the best terms in which to represent the distinction are contained in the phrase, Agrarian *versus* Industrial” (xix). Despite their vehement arguments, the Agrarians’ hope that the South would abstain from industrialization seems to have been an utter failure. Although the South did not adhere to the Agrarians’ philosophy, their ideas have pervaded Southern culture for more than three quarters of a century and still remain firmly planted in the minds of many Southerners. Through this traditional framework of defining the Southern as agrarian, the fact that Rash is two generations removed from the farm should prove to diminish his Southern identity. However, for two reasons this is not the case. First, Rash’s identity as a Southerner seems to be reaffirmed simply by the action of evoking his ancestral proximity to something that was considered unquestionably Southern at one time. The other reason, which the Agrarians never could have anticipated, is that Southern identity is no longer based on a dichotomy of “Agrarian *versus* Industry.” Perhaps if their philosophy had come to fruition, defining Southern identity would not be as difficult as it is today.

When I asked Rash if he thought his grandfather would side with the Agrarians after having worked in both the worlds of the farm and of the mill, he seemed put off by the Agrarians, claiming that some of them “envision[ed] themselves as plantation owners essentially. Somebody else is going to be doing the hard work.” He says that his grandparents often told him that mill work gave their family security and stability: “You knew at least that you were going to get a paycheck. You knew you weren’t going to plant a crop and work on it three months and then have a hail storm or a drought or a tobacco barn burnout.” Although Rash has said repeatedly, both in my interviews and in his poetry, that his relatives did not romanticize the agrarian world, he also admits that all of them want to be buried on their old farms in the mountains. “So,” he says, “that landscape and that place continue to have a pull on them.”

### **The Persistence of the Civil War**

Another way in which Rash portrays the persistence of history as well as his own “peculiar historical consciousness” is by looking at the effect the Civil War is still having in the lives of contemporary Southerners. David Goldfield similarly explores the effects of the Civil War in the contemporary South. As the title of his book suggests, Goldfield argues that Southerners are Still Fighting the Civil War. According to Goldfield, the Civil War is “like a ghost that has not yet made its peace and roams the land seeking solace, retribution, or vindication. It continues to exist, an event without temporal boundaries, an interminable struggle...” (1).

In particular, Rash uses the Shelton Laurel Massacre to demonstrate this persistence. He writes about the massacre in several poems in Raising the Dead, and it is a primary focus of his third and latest novel, The World Made Straight. Rash's interest in the massacre stems from the fact that his relatives may have been directly involved. In 1863, a Confederate regiment, the North Carolina 64<sup>th</sup>, captured fifteen local Union sympathizers, including several old men and two young brothers, one thirteen and one fifteen years old. Under the maniacal command of Colonel Keith, the 64<sup>th</sup> executed the Union sympathizers. The members of the North Carolina 64<sup>th</sup> as well as those they took prisoner were all predominantly from Madison County. Because they were all from the same place, the Union and Confederate sympathizers most likely knew each other before the massacre. Rash's great-great-great-great-grandfather, Doctor Candler, was a member of the 64<sup>th</sup>. Although he cannot say definitively that his grandfather was present when the massacre occurred, Rash believes his involvement is a distinct possibility. To complicate the issue, Rash also had "a number of relatives in that county who fought for the Union at that same time." In fact, most of the Candlers, Rash's mother's family, fought for the Confederacy, and the Rashes, his father's people, fought for the Union, in the same place and, of course, at the same time.

In The World Made Straight, the protagonist, Travis Shelton, grapples with what the massacre of several of his family members at Shelton Laurel should mean to him in the contemporary South. After dropping out of high school and leaving home, Travis befriends a teacher turned drug pusher named Leonard Shuler, who informs Travis about his family's involvement in the Shelton Laurel Massacre. They become

very close and Leonard gives Travis a place to stay, helps him earn his GED, and prepares him to go to college. In the end, after their friendship has deepened, Leonard reveals to Travis that his ancestors killed Travis's ancestors at the Shelton Laurel Massacre. Leonard finally atones for the sins of his fathers by giving up his life to save Travis's. According to Rash, The World Made Straight is "a novel that dealt not only with the massacre but its continuing importance over a century later to the participants' descendants" ("The World" 2). This sentiment echoes a poem Rash published several years before the novel:

My older kin always believed  
 in looking backward to explain  
 the here and now, always a sign  
 present in the past each time. (Among 33)

Despite, or perhaps because of, the cultural changes undoubtedly taking place in Southern Appalachia, Rash believes that Southerners in general have a deep interest in and even obsession with the past. If this interest fails to curtail the deterioration of a culture and identity that Southern Appalachia can claim as its own, at the very least it will prevent those living in the region from forgetting the way of life that once existed, and by examining both the good and bad of that culture, assist them in determining how we should live in the present. When I asked Rash if he thinks the South will retain a distinct sense of identity, he replied, "Well, I'll tell you the way the South will retain its identity. Chambers of Commerce don't want it; politicians don't want it; all these people are quite willing to sell out for any buck. What's going to preserve the South is three things: its cuisine, its music, and its

literature. Those things are going to be the last; they're going to fight the fight to keep us a distinctive culture."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Commodification of Southern Identity

C. Vann Woodward's notion that Southern identity can be taken on and off like an "old hunting jacket" (The Burden 3) is applicable to many contemporary Southern writers. A lucrative market for Southern letters exists in the current world of publishing, and stories from and about the South are immensely popular, especially stories by writers who appear authentically Southern—set apart in some special, perhaps ineffable way from the rest of America and American letters. Given the marketability of Southern literature, some writers inevitably tailor their work and indeed their own personas to appear more Southern and thus meet the demands of the market. As Woodward suggests, the contemporary Southern writer may feel the compulsion to don those "old hunting jackets" and "ancestral wardrobes" to imbue his life and work with Southern flair.

The marketability of Southernness has probably existed since long before Southern identity began to be called into question. James C. Cobb, as well as many other Southerner historians, points to "the wake of the Civil Rights movement" when Southerners, especially those who disavowed segregation, began to seek a new foundation for Southern identity (Redefining 141). Cobb indicates that one way post-Jim Crow Southerners sought to cover their "cultural nakedness" was through publications on Southern culture, such as Southern Living. The inaugural issue of the magazine in 1966 claimed to provide Southerners, particularly those living in urban and suburban Southern areas, with new ways to enjoy the Southern lifestyle. Cobb points out the irony that in 1985 Southern Living was acquired by Time Warner,

which is based in New York City. He says that the acquisition is “hardly surprising. It merely confirmed the growing perception that, having at last acquired the resources for full-scale participation in the national consumer culture, upwardly mobile southern whites were not only able but eager to consume their own regional culture as rapidly as commercial marketers could commodify it.” Academics are also marketing Southern culture. For example, Cobb calls the Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, published in 1989 by the University of Chapel Hill Press, “the intellectual equivalent of Southern Living.”

### **Snuffy Smith Acts Appalachian**

Although not Rash’s best novel, Saints at the River provides a valuable study of commodification. Rash says that he typically writes novels very quickly. Once he has the idea and a rough outline, he writes a concise skeletal version of the novel, in which he tries to summarize all the basic plot points. He then revises numerous times, working on dialogue, creating setting, and fleshing out dynamic characters. Saints at the River, which Rash’s publisher hurried him to finish in order to meet publication deadlines, reads in places like a plot sketch rather than a fully developed novel, and, therefore, critics often consider it Rash’s weakest book to date. Nevertheless, Saints at the River contains some cultural dynamics that are revealing about Rash’s relationship to the construction of Southern identity.

The novel begins with the drowning of a young Northern girl named Ruth, in the Tamassee River, near the town of Tamassee, in the “Dark Corner” of South Carolina. Ruth’s body is sucked into a hydraulic, a surging whirlpool-like mass of water at the

base of a section of rapids. The hydraulic pins her body under a shelf of rock, so that drivers cannot retrieve the body. Her parents want her corpse in order to bury it in their home state of Minnesota. Therefore, they propose to the town that they build a temporary dam to divert enough water from the hydraulic to recover Ruth's body. Most of Tamassee's locals fight the temporary dam, because it is in clear violation of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1978, which stipulates that

...certain selected rivers of the Nation which, with their immediate environments, possess outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, or other similar values, shall be preserved in free-flowing condition, and that they and their immediate environments shall be protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations. (52)

Although the portable dam would require only a few small holes in the river's bedrock, environmentalists, led by Luke Miller, a local rafting guide, fight against Ruth's parents' desire to build the portable dam. The environmentalists claim that allowing the law to be broken in this case will set a precedent for the law to be broken in the future. Specifically, they do not want local developers to use the precedent as a way to create residential areas on the banks of the Tamassee.

Maggie Glenn, the first-person narrator of Saints at the River, is a young newspaper photographer in Columbia, South Carolina. She is originally from Tamassee, so the newspaper sends her to cover the story along with Allen Hemphill, a Pulitzer finalist for his journalistic work in Rwanda. Maggie is torn between siding with Ruth's parents and siding with the people of Tamassee among whom she was

raised. While in Tamasee, Maggie acts as a guide for Allen. Although they were both raised in rural South Carolina, Allen is from Chester, in the Piedmont, and does not understand the mountain culture of Southern Appalachia. Despite the fact that Maggie remains ambivalent about whether she wants the Wild and Scenic River Law violated for the sake of the drowned girl, in the end her pictures of the grieving parents help persuade the State Supervisor of Forests to allow them to build the dam.

In Chapter Two of Saints at the River, Allen and Maggie drive north through South Carolina toward Tamasee. As they abandon the interstate for a small two-lane road, her descriptions of the landscape become increasingly pastoral. Maggie comments that “it’s like time-lapse photography in reverse” (17), as they encounter fewer mailboxes, homes, and signs of civilization. Instead, their attention turns toward the natural landscape. Densely wooded mountains leap up in all directions. Judas trees, Jessamine, and silver bells have almost stopped blooming, but the dogwood trees are still in full bloom. The spell of the pastoral landscape is broken only as they near Tamasee and begin to see signs for new developments: “LAUREL MIST: ANOTHER TONY BRYAN PLANNED COMMUNITY” (18). As soon as they reach Tamasee, Allen and Maggie stop for gas at “Billy Watson’s service station and general store” (20). Although several of Rash’s characters commodify Southern culture to one extent or another, Billy is the only one who is wholly conscious of what he is doing:

Though it was still too early for many tourists, Billy sat in a rocking chair on his store’s rickety porch, a book in his hand and a brown Labrador retriever at his feet. He wore a torn flannel shirt and faded

overalls. A black beard draped off his chin like Spanish moss. All his costume lacked was a corncob pipe. Billy had a degree in agriculture from Clemson University, and his family owned the biggest apple orchard in the valley, but he'd decided after college that his true calling was playing Snuffy Smith to fleece tourists. He swore if he could find a cross-eyed boy who could play banjo, he'd stick that kid on the porch and increase his business 25 percent. (21)

Billy has also redecorated the store since he bought it from its previous owner. A large hand-painted sign sits outside the door, advertising "MINNOWS AND REDWORMS FOR SALE." The store's interior walls are hung with old hornet's nests and rattlesnake skins. A large "red battered-metal drink box" (22) that holds glass bottles of Cokes, Nehis, and Cheerwines sits next to cigarette racks and fishing and hunting equipment. Billy has even installed a potbelly stove in the back of the store, which he tells tourists is a moonshine still.

Allen immediately notices the stark contrast between Billy and the character of Snuffy Smith which he performs. Having grown up on adjoining farms and having gone to Clemson together, Maggie and Billy know each other extremely well, but Allen is unfamiliar with Billy's operation. Billy introduces himself to Allen as William Watson the Third. Unlike the stereotypical hillbilly character in Billy DeBeck's comic strip, Barney Google and Snuffy Smith, Billy Watson is smart, well-spoken, and well-read, especially in regard to Southern Appalachia. Billy has carefully constructed his store and his own identity in order to fulfill tourists' stereotype-informed expectations. Woodward believed Southerners don the "old

hunting jackets” and “ancestral costumes” of identity for other Southerners in the South. Snuffy Smith represents the stereotypes not for the people of Tamassee but rather for the sake of outsiders, both Northern and Southern. The Snuffy Smith image adheres both to the expectations of the Northerner who desires to see a truly new place with exotic new people and the expectations of the Southerner who longs to experience how his ancestors may have lived.

Similarly, Lee Gervais, Maggie’s managing editor at the newspaper, also possesses a contrived version of Southern identity. Yet Lee’s identity is far different from Billy’s Snuffy Smith. These characters display the dichotomy of what passes for Southern in South Carolina and reaffirms Rash’s notion that “many Souths” coexist. While Billy attempts to represent the identity of Southern Appalachia, Lee represents the South Carolina Lowcountry: “Lee’s low-country accent made girl and gull indistinguishable. It was an accent [Maggie] knew he had refined the way another man might perfect some convoluted Masonic handshake. And in a way that was what his accent was: a sign of belonging. It spoke of old money and old houses, of Porter-Gaud Academy and Charleston cotillions” (9). Lee frequently uses his Lowcountry heritage as a point of contention between himself and Maggie. Maggie says that he often jokes about her “Appalachian backwardness and nostalgia for the good old days” (82). Lee even has a picture hanging behind his desk from his Kappa Alpha days at the University of Georgia. In the picture, Lee and all of his fraternity brothers are dressed like Confederate soldiers.

Luke Miller has also adopted a contrived identity. He is almost solely responsible for securing the Wild and Scenic River status for the Tamassee. After having served

in the Peace Corps for eighteen months in Africa during a famine, Luke vowed to find one pure place on earth and protect it. For Luke, that place is the Tamassee River. Although he was trying to save the river, he experienced great resistance from the community because he was not a local. Over the years, while attempting to secure the Wild and Scenic River Law and then making sure it was enforced properly, Luke seems to have commodified an identity more in keeping with that of the locals. This contrivance is most obvious in his careful use of dialect. Maggie says, “You would never guess he’d grown up in Gainesville, Florida, the son of a neurosurgeon and a University of Florida English professor. After a decade of living here, his accent was pure Southern Appalachian” (51). In order to be taken seriously by the people of Tamassee, Luke has to don the local costume and, in a sense, learn to speak an entirely new language.

### **The Bilingual Southerner and the Distancing of Education**

While Luke seems to abandon his native dialect completely, some Southerners are able to retain their native dialect and adopt a second, entirely new way of speaking. Therefore, rather than changing the language they speak, they learn to be bilingual, possessing the ability to flow seamlessly in and out of standard and dialectical American English. In “Appalachians: Adrift in the Mainstream,” Julia Damron Porter explains Appalachians’ bilingual capability: “Many Appalachians speak two languages—that of the mainstream culture and that of their own—a symptom of the dichotomy between the city and the mountains, between school and home. From this unhealthy biculturality springs marginality” (13). In One Foot Eden, Alexander is an

example of a bilingual Appalachian. Although he and his wife, Janice, are from the same area, their upbringings have been very different. According to Alexander, Janice was “a town kid” (19) and the daughter of a wealthy doctor, while he was born and raised on a tobacco farm located in the rural outskirts of town. Janice constantly attempts to make Alexander less “hillbilly.” One such attempt is to refine Alexander’s use of the dialect or nonstandard English common to Appalachia. One night, when he tells Janice he is going to have a “look-see” (7) out at Billy Holcolme’s farm, she winces at the phrase. Alexander says, “Hillbilly talk, Janice called such words, but it was the way most folks still spoke in Oconee County. It put people more at ease when you talked like them, and when you are the high sheriff you spend a lot of time trying to put people at ease.” Alexander employs this bilingual capability every time he is around the people, particularly the farmers, of the Jocassee Gorges. For example, when he goes to see Holland Winchester’s mother about her missing son, he slips “more and more into the way of speaking [he’d] grown up with.” For example, he says, “If he’s went and done something against the law that’ll make no difference” (13).

One reason Alexander has learned to be bilingual is that he has received a formal education. The fact that he attended Clemson University distances him from the community. Although Alexander was born and raised near Jocassee, the people of the area now treat him like an outsider simply because he left for a brief time. Alexander’s father assumed that he would come back from Clemson and take over the family farm with him and his other son. When Alexander’s education at Clemson led him into law enforcement, he was distanced even further from his father and his

community (13). Later, after Billy kills Holland and has to think of a place to hide the body, Billy assumes that Alexander must think in an entirely different way than him, simply because he has gone to college. While Billy seems to possess a certain amount of respect for Alexander's intellectual capacity, he also distances Alexander because of this capacity. Similarly, Alexander is ostracized by much of the community because of his education. Even regarding the way he thinks, the people of the community assume Alexander is somehow no longer like them (137).

In Saints at the River, Maggie is also capable of switching back and forth between an Appalachian dialect and standard English. When Lee Gervais initially gives Maggie the assignment to cover the girl's drowning in Tamasee, he does so partly because she is from the area and can speak the language: "The assignment's in Oconee County. Since you know the natives, you can translate mountain speech into standard English for Hemphill" (9). Like Sheriff Alexander, Maggie has learned to be bilingual through her education. Rash is obviously aware of the effect of education on Southerners' dialect. While listening to the voice of Brennon, the builder of the portable dam, Maggie says, "Brennon's voice had the same flat Midwestern inflection of news anchors. It was the inflection taught in Charlotte and Atlanta—even in Columbia—to Southerners ashamed of talking like their parents and grandparents. But such classes weren't taught in Oconee County" (49).

Education produces an effect in Maggie similar to the effect it produces in Alexander. Maggie also went to Clemson, but instead of returning to her place of birth like Alexander, she consciously tries to escape. She says, "Aunt Margaret's prophecy had been correct, for college and each new job took me farther from the

mountains—first Clemson, then Laurens, and now Columbia” (68). When Maggie comes back to visit Tamasee, she no longer feels that she has a place in the community. When asked if she ever thought about returning to Tamasee to live, Maggie replies, “No...It would be too hard to fit back in” (36). The people of the community, including her own father, think that college has changed her. After she returns to Tamasee to cover Ruth’s drowning and begins to sympathize with Ruth’s parents’ request to dam the river, instead of siding completely with her native community, Maggie’s father blames her behavior on her having gone to college: “And you supporting them...If that’s what going to college does to you, I ought not have let you go in the first place” (42).

When I asked Rash if his experience with language and education was similar to that of Maggie and Sheriff Alexander, he replied,

Yeah. It’s really interesting how quickly I’ll lapse back into a non-grammatical idiom. Because a lot of my uncles, in particular, didn’t go to college, I didn’t want to make them or myself uncomfortable by seeming to be putting on airs. It’s interesting to me how I can shift back into it when I’m around people I grew up with....I think for a lot of people...if you come from a family where not everyone went to college, there’s sometimes a sense of tension, particularly among family with a person that’s gone off to school and thinks he or she is [now] too good [for the family].

Because Rash is a “marginal man” and because education has distanced him from his family, he has learned to be bilingual or bi-dialectal, cultivating the ability to

converse in his native region as well as in the academic community of which he has long been a member.

### **“Speckled Trout”:**

#### **The Search for Old Relics**

In the same way that he uses manmade lakes, Rash employs the speckled trout as a recurring symbol to represent the disappearing culture of his youth. The speckled trout or brook trout, as it is also commonly called, is the only trout native to western North Carolina. However, now it has virtually disappeared from the state’s rivers and streams and has been artificially replaced by rainbow and brown trout to bolster fishing for tourists. In a poem entitled “Speckled Trout,” from the collection Raising the Dead, Rash describes fishing for speckled trout as a boy with his cousin, Jeff Kritcher. The speaker of the poem is led by his cousin through a seemingly virgin forest, without even a trail to follow. To find the speckled trout they must seek out “faraway creeks no map/ could name” (33). For Rash, these fish represent relics of Appalachia’s past. The speaker of the poem, presumably Rash himself, remains ambivalent about whether these relics represent his Appalachian ancestors or some other facet of bygone Appalachian culture, but in either case they appear as “shadows of another world”—a world primarily contained in the past. As a boy, with the assistance of an older wiser family member, Rash is able to locate these relics; however, even then they cannot stand up to much examination or scrutiny. Rash is aware that like the trout in the poem, whose color immediately fades when it is

removed from its element, the relics of his past often run the risk of appearing tawdry and contrived if he attempts to bring them to light in the present.

Rash's latest novel, The World Made Straight, opens with the main character, Travis Shelton, fishing for speckled trout. The nucleus of this novel was a short story, also called "Specked Trout," which received an O. Henry Award in 2005. Like the poem and the story, The World Made Straight begins with a young man traveling deep into the forest to locate streams where speckled trout might still exist. Travis passes several places along the French Broad River where he can see large trout breaking the surface, but he refuses to fish here, because "Nothing swam in the French Broad he could sell, only hatchery-bred rainbows and browns, some small-mouth, and catfish" (6). While the speaker of the poem hopes to catch the trout because he believes it will in some way link him to "another world" that existed in the past, Travis seeks to catch the trout simply for profit. He sells them to an old man named Jenkins, who buys them because he used to eat them when he was young and claims "they taste better than any brown or rainbow" (7). Jenkins purchases these romanticized relics of his past, and Travis is happy to exploit his sentimentality. The fact that Rash opens the novel with this scene indicates that he himself is uncomfortable with or at least conscious of Southern and Appalachian writers' potential to commodify that which is Southern—to appropriate and exploit distinctly Southern elements from their cultures and histories in order to sell books to certain romantic-minded, backward-glancing audiences.

## CONCLUSION

### **Rash as Witness, Rash as Appalachian**

In October of 2006, I drove down to Clemson to interview Rash. I had seen him a few times when I was a student at Clemson, and he was good friends with all of my favorite professors, but we certainly did not have an established relationship.

Therefore, I was surprised but thrilled when he asked me to come over to his house for the interview. I guess I was expecting Rash to live a life similar to that of his characters. I imagined him wearing Wranglers and cowboy boots, with dark sun-cracked skin, a graying scraggly beard, hard calloused hands, half-moons of dirt under each fingernail. I imagined him chain-smoking Lucky Strikes and offering me a bourbon as soon as I came through the door. I imagined him living far outside the limits of Clemson, on a large piece of property, if not a farm then at least several acres—a modest one-story house, a shed out back full of well-used tools and hand-selected mahogany planks, a nice but utilitarian pickup in the dirt driveway, and maybe a couple of rusting vintage cars in the tall grass of the yard surrounded by scattered piles of salvaged bricks, barbed wire, and corrugated roofing tin. I did not expect him to be a farmer, but I thought he would keep chickens or goats, and at least grow a few tomatoes and corn.

What I encountered could not have been farther from what I had imagined. As I pulled into his neighborhood, I thought I had somehow received the wrong directions. Just outside Clemson, I left the four-lane highway that led out into the country and entered Rash's neighborhood. Three to four thousand square-foot houses lined both sides of the street, each with an artfully contrived suburban flair—perfectly

manicured lawns, pristine landscape islands featuring Japanese maples and trimmed azaleas, woodchip-covered rose gardens, and spotless white driveways. Rash's house was no exception. Three stories, the house was easily three thousand square feet. A four-door Japanese economy car and a Volvo were in the driveway. The inside of the house was spacious, immaculately clean and new, with contemporary interior decoration—hardwood floors, oversized white molding, earthy blues and tans on the walls. Rather than being uncomfortable in such a lavish environment, as I imagine most of his characters would be, Rash seemed perfectly at ease. A tall, scarecrow-lean man, Rash wore a long sleeved purple T-shirt, jeans, and white, hospital-looking sneakers. Rash's only attribute that conformed to my expectations was his voice. Deep, slightly gravelly (but not the hard gravel of a heavy drinker or smoker), his voice sounds, in the words of Maggie from Saints at the River, "pure Southern Appalachian" (51).

At the time, I was disoriented by the disparity between Ron Rash in my imagination and Ron Rash in reality. Despite my insecurities about my own status as a Southerner, I remember thinking that even my life seemed more stereotypically Southern than Rash's. However, I quickly checked the ridiculous stereotypes I was harboring, and my disappointment in Rash's lifestyle abated. The more I study and contemplate Rash and his work, the more I respect the lifestyle he has chosen. While Rash's attention to Southern history may occasionally lead him to commodify a sense of bygone Southern identity in his work, he does not do so in his own life. In his fiction and poetry, Rash consciously records the facets of his Appalachian culture that he thinks are extinct or are threatened with extinction. Yet Rash never attempts to

bring these extinct facets of his culture back to life. He desires only to commemorate the cultures of the South and Appalachia, not perpetuate them.

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