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A Study of Tree Writing in Twenty-First-Century Southern Appalachian Environmental Crisis Fiction

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Abstract— *Southern Appalachia has experienced a severe ecological crisis as a result of long-term deforestation and resource extraction, and it offers a clear example of the "resource curse" in the history of Western modernity. Against this background, Appalachian environmental crisis fiction develops a distinctive way of writing about trees that reveals the interweaving of capitalist violence, ecological trauma, and the ethical problems of the Anthropocene. Focusing on Ron Rash's Serena and Barbara Kingsolver's Flight Behavior, this essay uses close reading to examine the multiple meanings attached to trees in these works and to show the warning force and ethical value of Appalachian environmental crisis fiction in an Anthropocene context.*

Keywords— ***Appalachia, environmental crisis fiction, tree writing, Serena, Flight Behavior***

I. INTRODUCTION

As an important ecological barrier in eastern North America, Southern Appalachia contains abundant temperate hardwood forests and mineral resources, and this natural endowment has made ecological concern a defining feature of Appalachian literature. Yet during American industrialization and urbanization, the region's forests and mineral deposits were systematically damaged. By 1920, according to Donald Edward Davis, old-growth forest cover in the Appalachian Mountains had fallen to four percent; and mountaintop removal mining, promoted from the 1950s onward, stripped more than 500,000 acres of original forest, devastated native species such as the chestnut, severely polluted rivers, and sharply reduced the biodiversity dependent upon mature forests. The region has therefore often been understood as a U.S. "sacrifice zone."

In response to this long history of ecological crisis, Appalachian literature has also shifted in focus. Some critics regard Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* as an important turning point. The book helped energize the U.S. environmental movement of the 1960s and also marked the shift of Appalachian ecological writing from scenic description toward a more critical engagement with environmental justice. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, writers such as Cormac McCarthy, Barbara Kingsolver, Jeff VanderMeer, and Ron Rash have taken the environmental crises of their age and region as the point of departure for richly varied forms of crisis writing. Their fiction reflects deeply on the social and historical origins of environmental disaster and has produced ecologically oriented literature of broad international significance. These representations of environmental crisis are aesthetically diverse and ethically charged, and they offer important resources for Chinese scholarship reflecting on the ecological trauma of Western modernity.

Within these environmental realities and literary practices, trees—as central elements of Appalachian ecology—have drawn sustained attention from writers and critics alike. They recur as important figures throughout Appalachian environmental crisis fiction: in Rash's large-scale logging and transport of forests, in McCarthy's damaged or mutated trees under altered environmental conditions, and elsewhere. A close study of the representation of trees in Appalachian environmental crisis

fiction not only helps explain how this recurring image responds to ecological crisis in the Anthropocene, but also sheds light on the aesthetic features and environmental ethics embedded in Southern Appalachian environmental crisis fiction. Accordingly, this essay focuses on Ron Rash's *Serena* and Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* in order to explore the ecological and cultural significance of tree representation in these representative novels, and thereby to trace how twenty-first-century Southern Appalachian writers respond to the ecological crises of their age and region through diverse forms of environmental crisis fiction.

II. CAPITAL EXPANSION AND SLOW VIOLENCE: REPRESENTATIONS OF TREES IN SERENA

Rather than treating the forest as mere background, *Serena* places trees at the center of its historical narrative. Trees are both the material foundation of an Appalachian ecological community and the first objects taken over and reshaped by extractive capital. Set against large-scale logging in the Great Smoky Mountains of early twentieth-century North Carolina, the novel traces the rise of the Pembertons' timber empire and shows how a living forest is turned into a commodity. Rash is concerned not only with the number of trees cut down, but also with what happens when trees are reduced to measurable, transportable, and immediately profitable timber: the ecological order, local memory, and ethical sensibility supported by the forest are all gradually emptied out.

The novel first makes this process visible through sharp contrasts in the forest's shape, density, and spatial organization. Before industrial development, the mountains are defined by layered plant life: hardwoods, firs, shrubs, grasses, and undergrowth create a damp, shaded, and densely inhabited world. Once logging begins, however, trees lose their roles as shelter, habitat, and watershed protection and become entries in an account book. Bare slopes, stumps, stripped bark, and newly opened roads record the conversion of a mountain ecosystem into an extractive landscape. Trees no longer appear as living beings within a network of relations; instead, they become objects to be cut, counted, transported, and sold. Rash thus exposes a basic logic of modern development: nature is destroyed not because it has no value, but because its value can be too quickly turned into profit.

The recurring image of dogwood gives the novel's tree representation a deeper cultural meaning. Unlike large quantities of timber, dogwood is valuable not mainly as a commodity but as part of the visual texture of the mountain landscape, local memory, and forms of natural life beyond practical calculation. For that reason, Serena's wish to remove "useless" species such as dogwood, laurel, and rhododendron means more than managerial ruthlessness. It shows how capitalist reason systematically excludes what cannot be directly used for profit. The decline of dogwood therefore has a double meaning: it signals the damage done to native Appalachian ecology and, at the same time, the weakening of regional historical memory. Rash does not turn trees into abstract symbols. Instead, a specific species carries the weight of place, so that the destruction of trees becomes inseparable from the erosion of local identity.

Rash's narrative strategy also highlights the role of trees as witnesses to history. Workers move ever deeper into the forest along newly cut roads, and natural space—once dense, winding, resistant, and hard to enter—is turned into industrial space organized for access and control. Every road, sawmill, and transport route thus becomes part of the infrastructure that makes large-scale forest destruction possible. The falling tree is never just a local change in scenery; it marks the violent entry of industrial time into ecological time. Trees need decades, sometimes centuries, to mature, while capital demands fast turnover and immediate return. This difference in timescale is one of the main sources of the novel's historical force.

Most importantly, *Serena* does not stop at the visual aftermath of deforestation. It traces the chain of effects that follows the disappearance of trees. Rob Nixon's idea of "slow violence" is especially useful here: a form of environmental destruction that does not appear as a single spectacular event yet steadily damages the conditions of life. In *Serena*, large-scale logging leads to muddy streams, silted waterways, exhausted soil, harsher winters, declining biodiversity, and the gradual breakdown of local livelihoods. Trees are not cut in isolation; their removal spreads through hydrological, climatic, agricultural, and social networks. Rash is especially skillful in using water to make this slow violence visible. Streams that begin as clear, drinkable, and life-giving gradually lose their clarity and vitality through erosion and runoff. The loss of the forest is therefore not a momentary disaster but a prolonged process that drives both environment and community toward depletion.

For this reason, trees in *Serena* are far more than silent background. They are wounds left by capital, records of Appalachian historical trauma, and visible signs of a moral order collapsing under extractive pressure. Through the commodification of forests, the symbolic meaning of dogwood, and the spread of ecological damage after

logging, Rash builds a clear link between capital expansion, environmental loss, and the silencing of place. The representation of trees in the novel does not simply support the plot. It forces readers to see that the myth of development often advances by sacrificing irreplaceable ecological foundations and regional memory.

III. CLIMATE INSTABILITY AND SUBJECT FORMATION: REPRESENTATIONS OF TREES IN *FLIGHT BEHAVIOR*

If *Serena* emphasizes the historical destruction of forests under extractive development, *Flight Behavior* asks how trees make the climate crisis visible and tangible in the present. The novel centers on the unusual migration of monarch butterflies, yet butterflies do not carry all the ecological meaning. Hillside woods, logged slopes, fallen old trees, and forests drained of color form the most immediate local record of climate imbalance. Kingsolver uses trees to translate global warming—often experienced as abstract, distant, and statistical—into something that can be understood within the scale of an Appalachian household and community.

Trees first give concrete form to the climate crisis. The road Dellarobia remembers as having been cut for logging already suggests the historical vulnerability of the region's ecology. When mountains are repeatedly opened, cleared, and harvested, extreme weather can no longer be dismissed as purely natural; it is intensified by long-term human disturbance. As the novel develops, weakened orchard trees, the fall of century-old trees, the fading of forest color, and the visual sense of collapsing slopes turn climate change from a media narrative into a local sensory experience. Trees become the earliest nonhuman witnesses to the disruption later embodied by the monarchs. Their damaged condition shows that abnormality is not limited to the butterflies; the entire mountain ecosystem has entered a state of imbalance.

Kingsolver also uses trees to turn a global climate problem into a local ethical conflict. Bear Turnbow's agreement with a logging company appears, on the surface, to be a practical response to family finances. At a deeper level, however, it reveals the structural pressure under which poor rural communities must choose between short-term survival and long-term ecological responsibility. In this respect, *Flight Behavior* goes beyond simple environmental moralizing. The novel does not portray potential loggers as one-dimensional villains; instead, it shows that shortsighted choices in Appalachia are closely tied to chronic economic insecurity, limited development options, and the unequal distribution of environmental risk. Trees become the measure by which ethical judgment is tested: once the forest is seen as an asset that can be sold off at once, people unwittingly take part in using up the conditions of their own future lives. Kingsolver's point is not only that climate crisis is global, but that it enters family decisions, class conditions, and the everyday politics of place.

At the same time, the representation of trees becomes crucial to Dellarobia's formation as a subject. Her growth does not come from abstract instruction alone. It emerges through repeated movement into the woods, attention to the butterflies, and bodily encounters with damaged trees, unstable slopes, and altered weather. The forest helps her recognize that her marital frustration, economic limits, and the larger ecological crisis are not separate from one another. In the novel, the constrained female self and the damaged natural world quietly echo each other: both are shaped by occupation, regulation, and forced submission to inherited orders. As Dellarobia works with Ovid's research team, learns to explain monarch migration, and eventually opposes the logging plan, trees cease to be objects she simply observes. They become relational presences that reshape how she understands herself and the world around her.

Here trees also mediate between knowledge and feeling. Ovid represents scientific explanation: he can clarify the relationship between monarch migration and climate change. Yet what gives the ecological crisis emotional force in the local community is Dellarobia's embodied experience of trees, hillsides, mud, and weather. Kingsolver does not set science against local perception. Instead, she brings the two together through the concrete image of trees. Only when climate change is registered as fallen timber, unstable ground, and damaged habitat does a global scientific claim become a problem that ordinary people feel compelled to understand and answer. This is one of the novel's central formal achievements: it preserves the knowledge dimension of climate fiction while remaining attentive to everyday experience and the politics of feeling.

In this sense, the trees of *Flight Behavior* perform a double function. From an ecocritical perspective, they reveal the causal chain linking human activity, climate abnormality, and the loss of habitat. At the level of character, they accompany and enable Dellarobia's movement from passive domesticity toward interpretive and ethical agency. When the novel ends with her leaving the course of her earlier life and moving toward education and a different future with her children, this is not a simple rejection of Appalachia. Rather, it is an effort to imagine another way of living through an awareness of ecological

fragility. Trees are not only traces of damage in the novel; they are also catalysts for subject formation.

IV. CONCLUSION

Taken together, the representation of trees in Appalachian environmental crisis fiction goes far beyond descriptive landscape and enters directly into contemporary ecocritical debates on nonhuman materiality, environmental justice, and the ethics of the Anthropocene. *Serena* reconstructs the way capital turns forests into usable matter in the history of resource extraction and thereby stages a historical form of ecological dispossession. *Flight Behavior*, by contrast, places trees within the double frame of climate crisis and subject formation, showing how global warming becomes understandable in local daily life and how that understanding can prompt ethical and cognitive reorientation. The former emphasizes accumulated trauma and the spread of slow violence; the latter highlights the visibility of crisis and the emergence of ecological agency. Together the two novels show that trees are not passive scenery but carriers of ecological memory, regional history, and moral reflection.

The two works also outline two timelines of Appalachian environmental crisis: the historical exploitation driven by timber capital and the contemporary risks intensified by global warming. Across this broader historical span, trees gain the power to connect past, present, and future.

In Southern Appalachian fiction, tree images become narrative links between local experience and planetary concerns. They record the overlap of capitalist development, climate imbalance, and communal insecurity, while prompting readers to reconsider the costs hidden within modern narratives of progress, use, and development. To recover the meanings of these trees is therefore not only to reconstruct a regional history of environmental trauma, but also to understand how literature, under Anthropocene conditions, can reshape our sense of history, responsibility, and the future.

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