Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies
vol. 6, no. 1, 2024, pp. 54–73
doi: 10.47060/jaaas.v6i1.193

"Magic Dirt": Transcending Great Divides in Scott McClanahan's *Crapalachia*

Eva-Maria Müller

ABSTRACT

Scott McClanahan, rising star of the US Indie Lit world and "Poet Laureate of Real America" (Moran), writes miasmic chronicles of life in a West Virginian holler. In *Crapalachia: A Biography of Place* (2013), as in many of the tales he releases in Dickensian pace, McClanahan ties the fate of a place to the fate of its people and connects environmental destruction to the ruins of life. Where mountains are stripped away, happiness is not at home. McClanahan tells family stories of deforestation and disability, mining disasters and mental illness, structural poverty and opportunities denied. His stories are about the slow and fast deaths of forgotten people in forgotten places and he tells them with a ballistic sensibility that opens up new spaces to negotiate difference. *Crapalachia* is a threnody for a wounded region that complicates imagined hierarchies of center and periphery and blends the worlds of fact and fiction as well as tragedy and comedy. The semi-autobiography mines so deeply for privation that, at its close, it lays bare some of the most hopeful principles of American transcendentalism. In between personal hardships, local misery, national movements, and universal human experience, McClanahan has us see "Crapalachia as the center of the world" (35). This paper explores how the aesthetic, narrative, and stylistic strategies of *Crapalachia* help navigate the local, national, and global routes of fictions of disregard.

KEYWORDS

American Romanticism, Appalachian Studies, mountain literature

The curious transgressions of incompatible geographies, cultures, and styles begin with the cover page of *Crapalachia*: *A Biography of Place* (2013), a semi-autobiographical book by West Virginian native Scott McClanahan. The author is hailed as "the Poet Laureate of Real America" by Nick Moran in a recognition that graces the cover of *Crapalachia*. The title's neologism and the red and black cover (see Figure 1) promise something unusual: something as delicate as it is bold, as funny as it is furious, and as realistic as it is imaginative.

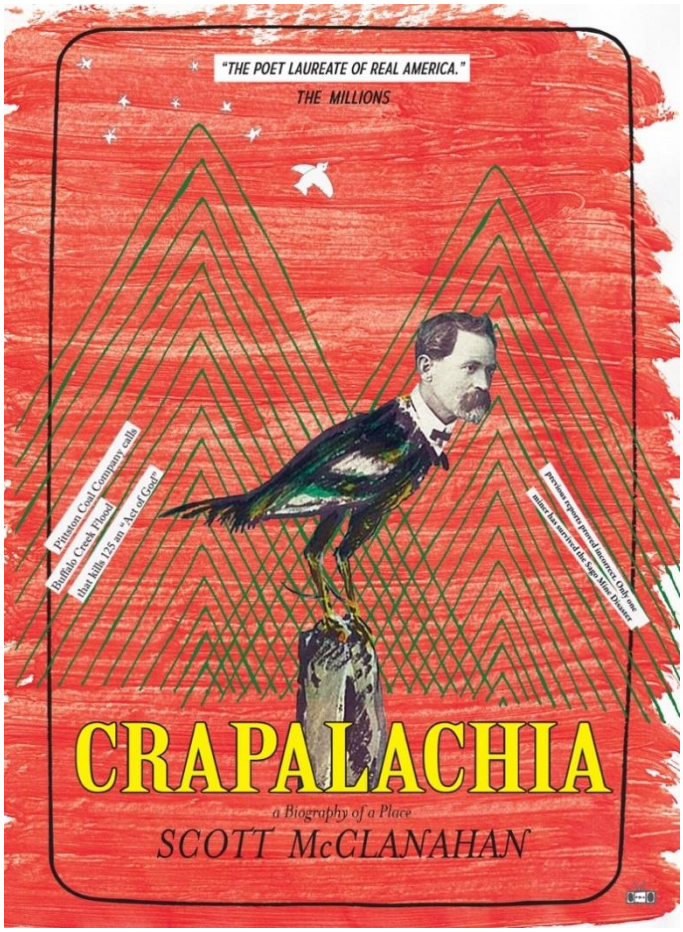

Figure 1: *Crapalachia*, book cover (2013)
Reproduced by permission of Two Dollar Radio

The cover image is a graphic montage centered around a political cartoon about a 1917 Australian coal strike: The figure of a raven's body with the head of John C. L. Fitzpatrick, secretary of mines, sitting atop a coal nugget or fence post conjures up Edgar Allan Poe. In the backdrop, abstract mountain-like lines form two peaks interspersed with quotes related to Appalachian mining disasters. The montage sits firmly on the coined word "Crapalachia" and shows a white bird soaring into the red, star-studded sky. The story explores the disadvantaged lives in overlooked America that the narrator, also named Scott, lumps together and punctuates with various phonetic

versions of "crap" and "shit" and mines with a sense of hopefulness that seeks to bridge the insurmountable barriers between lives lived on the margins and in the centers of this world. Most fascinating about the cover is that it relates the notion of an America either ignored or idealized to political protests from elsewhere. It conjures the ghosts of American Romanticism to offer new perspectives on flyover country. My interest here is precisely in this layering of flyover's regional, national, and global implications that complicate as much as they contain the binary logic that envisions the US along polar opposites. According to Anthony Harkins, the term "flyover country" emerged in print in the 1970s ("The Midwest" 98). This was a period when the Appalachian coalfields lost their role as the country's primary coal provider (Zipper et al. 1). Anthony Harkins further shows how commercial air travel and broadcast television co-created regional difference first along geographical then along cultural terms, dividing the country into two meta-regions ("The Midwest" 100): the "coasts" and "the rest" (102). Contrary to the flattening notion of flyover, "the rest" has many names in the American imagination. From 'rural America' to "mudville" (Averill 4) and "Shittown" (Reed),[1] the names all denote a place where nothing good happens. For McClanahan, the imbrication of geographical locale and cultural connotation that began in the 1990s are characterized by Crapalachia. His book ties the fate of a place to the fate of its people and connects environmental destruction to the ruins of life. It is a miasmic chronicle of growing up in rural America that follows Scott, a young man who lives with his grandmother Ruby, palsied uncle Nathan, and a host of other family and friends in a hardscrabble West Virginian holler, a narrow mountain valley. It tells family stories of deforestation and disability, mining accidents and mental illness, structural poverty and opportunities denied. McClanahan's tale is about boys skipping school and young men stealing from medical cabinets, helping older male relatives with toileting, and listening to radio preachers droning names of the diseased and dying. It is about the slow and fast deaths of forgotten people in forgotten places, told with a ballistic sensibility that opens up new spaces in which to negotiate the false dichotomy and flattening notions of flyover.

Crapalachia positions itself confidently against two kinds of flattening: the conceptual flattening that deems everything between east and west as the insignificant rest and the geological flattening of mountains through MTR mining. The text – as much an account of flyover as of extraction fiction – combines the two in a careful deconstruction (or demounting) of the divides that sustain flyover. *Crapalachia* has a great deal to tell us about how flyover was and can be envisioned. Building my

[1] *S-Town* is a 2017 podcast hosted by Brian Reed and created by the producers of *Serial* and *This American Life*. It centers around a crime committed in Woodstock, Alabama, that the central character refers to as "Shittown" and tells stories of isolation, white poverty, and sexual repression in rural America. The podcast was downloaded more than ten million times in the first four days after its release.

argument on the central position of landscape representations in the imagining of US-American national identity as well as interdisciplinary scholarship that highlights mountains' conflicting cultural history (Schama; Nicolson; Macfarlane) and their mediating role (Müller and Quendler), I focus on three aspects. First, I delve into how *Crapalachia* renders regional specificities of flyover in order to establish mountains as a useful concept in the discussion of fictions of disregard. Second, I mine with McClanahan for the great depths of flyover to arrive at the roots of American Romanticism and discuss the term's national and earthly ramifications. Third, I discuss how much McClanahan's writing on the margins of mainstream America reaches beyond a traditional US context to tell a global tale of opportunities denied. Together, the three sections foray into the dynamic textures of contrasts and connections of flyover and argue that the wondrous mountainous world of rural America and *Crapalachia*'s narrative and stylistic strategies help navigate the local, national, and global routes of fictions of disregard. My reading of McClanahan's text is prefaced by a conceptualization of the Appalachian Mountains as symbols for flyover.

Appalachia as Flyover

West Virginia is the ultimate flyover state – if the meaning is taken literally: Its location between major hub cities means that West Virginia has the highest flyover-to-destination ratio in the country, with almost two hundred times the number of flyovers than landings in 2021 ("Flyover States"). In 2021, West Virginia was also ranked among the five states with the lowest life expectancy and highest poverty rate (DePietro), suggesting a correlation between the conditions of being passed over and living in poverty. This connection is particularly pertinent in Appalachia, a region that incorporates all of West Virginia along with parts of thirteen other states. The region is defined by the oldest mountain range in North America and deemed "the poster child of poverty" (Applebome). Numerous scholars highlight Appalachia's unfortunate position in the US and see it first politicized and mediatized in mainstream American cultural, social, and political arenas in the poverty tours of the 1960s that may (or may not) have paved the way for thinking about the country in socio-geographical binary terms (Barcus and Brunn 29; Fackler 191). While scholars such as Wayne Flynt and Alessandro Portelli trace the dynamics back to the local color writers and missionaries of the nineteenth century, my investigation starts with the 1960s when the US, as Flynt claims, "confronted its own internal diversity as never before" (xii). The political parades in which presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson travelled to rural America, followed by a swarm of journalists and filmmakers, attempted to give poverty a human face (Bowler 239; Fackler 191). The unemployed coal miners of Appalachia were the ideal subjects of the 'War on Poverty' campaign.

Katherina Fackler demonstrates how the reporting of the era tended to depict them as symbols representing the entire region rather than contextualizing these people's lives within specific and often intricate cultural, economic, and political backgrounds (191).

An irony of the national perception of a poverty-stricken Appalachia is that these "mountains of misery" – as an eponymous article in *The New York Times* had it ("Mountains of Misery") – provided the natural riches for economic success. Throughout long periods of US history, Appalachia has carried a lion's share of the costs for national economic growth and seen the wealth of the region hauled out on coal trains. This has led to understanding Appalachia as an "internal colony" dominated by extraction and exploitation.[2] The region was the primary coal provider in the US from the 1800s to the 1970s, first through underground mining and then through mountain top removal (MTR), an especially destructive form of surface mining that involves blasting the top layers of mountains and has long-term environmental and social effects (Zipper et al.). Not only was Appalachian coal essential to the development of the US-American railway network, providing the basis for US industrialization and mobility, but as the key resource for the construction of the steel-skeleton tall buildings that dominate urban skylines to this day, Appalachian coal has quite literally built the face of urban America (14). The Appalachian coalfields kept their prominent position in national affairs even after the shift of US coal production to non-Appalachian areas. Their role as a political, if no longer economic, powerhouse became apparent during Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, which drew on US energy symbolism and connected MTR mining to notions of economic sovereignty (Harrison 734).

The ambiguous perception of Appalachia has been subject to intensive scholarly inquiry (Harkins *Hillbilly*, "The Midwest"; Fraley; Eller; Jones; Ledford and Llyod; Quendler and Robbins). Across disciplines, scholars agree that Appalachia bears the dual burden of being overlooked and subjected to the dynamics of Othering. This burden is evident in two distinct ways: First, Appalachia is positioned as an outsider in the mainstream American narrative, and second, it falls victim to binary thinking that reinforces the marginalization of the region. As a result, Appalachia is defined both in contrast to and within the broader US-American context, revealing its complex and paradoxical place in the national consciousness (Stewart 141; Jones 21). William Schumann sees Appalachia almost exclusively defined by distance (2), and Allen Batteau calls it

[2] Literature on Appalachia as an internal colony in the economic sense is extensive and has involved more nuanced reflections since the beginning of the twenty-first century compared to its origins in the 1970s (see, for instance, Eller; Fisher and Smith).

> a creature of the urban imagination. The folk culture, the depressed area, the romantic wilderness, the Appalachia of fiction, journalism, and public policy have for more than a century been created, forgotten, and rediscovered, primarily by the economic opportunism, political creativity, or passing fancy of urban elites. (1)

In the national perception of Appalachia as "an American 'other'" (Harkins, *Hillbilly* 5), Appalachia is either "America's best" or "America's worst": "a genetic and cultural reservoir of . . . noble poor rural white people of northern European ancestry who spoke Elizabethan English and lived a lifestyle like that of the colonial era" or "degenerate poor rural white moonshiners and feudists who spoke substandard English" (Ledford and Llyod xviii). Such a selective discourse presents Appalachians as either noble savages or savage brutes, portraying them as a dismal representation of human life in a remote place away from the coastal centers. This discourse contributes to the cultural dimension of viewing Appalachia as an internal colony. Several studies highlight that the cultural stereotyping of Appalachians as hillbillies serves to make the region available for plunder: Rebecca Scott relates "epistemologies of disgust and social distance" to environmental extraction (63), Jill Fraley sees stereotypes "wrapped up in efforts to dominate and oppress" (367), and Diane Martinez explains that the "vulgar characterization of the people of Appalachia as strange, dirty, violent, uneducated, and deviant plays a significant role in the exploitation of the region" (229).

Understanding Flyover through Mountains

The practice of Othering people native to a region in an effort to capitalize on its material and cultural riches is a fate Appalachia shares with mountain regions around the world. For example, the coal miners in Southern Wales are rendered along similar lines as the Appalachian hillbilly (Robertson; Hansell). Cultural Othering plays an equally concerning role in alpine tourist economies in the Rockies, Alps, Himalayas, and Andes. What becomes apparent, upon closer inspection, is that mountains share more than conspicuous stereotyping with flyover countries. They embody much of the cultural baggage of flyover and symbolize the multilayered conditions and conflicting ascriptions of being passed over.

First, mountains share with flyover a common cultural legacy as places approached with an equal amount of disregard, disapproval, and desire. For most of their geological history, mountains were conceived of as deserts and wastelands (Macfarlane 14). Up to the 1800s, they were rendered as formidable obstacles to be overcome and as great nuisances that made journeys unnecessarily painful and long. If not obstructing easy passage, mountains were maligned from a great distance, deemed "barren of life" (148), barren of culture, and useful only for natural resource extraction. With this in mind, the vast landmass that lies between New York and Los Angeles might

as well be a mountain. Second, mountains are thought of as places of exclusion, living up to their name as great divides that separate the cultural centers of the world. Before Grand Tourists[3] romanticized mountains during the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, the Alps were a natural barrier between the cultural centers of Europe. During European colonization of the US, mountains were also synonymous with the division between the America populated by Europeans and the Western frontier yet to be conquered. Importantly, while major technological advancements of the travel industry and increasingly favorable representations of mountains in literature helped overcome the distance between cultural centers in Europe from the late 1900s onwards, in the US, the media and travel industry enhanced separation in the second half of the twentieth century, allowing, as mentioned above, the great national divide to be instituted in the first place. Third, flyover's dichotomous epistemologies neatly align with those of mountains. Mountains, like flyover, are culturally constructed along the binaries of rural/urban, nature/technology, tradition/modernity, stillness/mobility, and scarcity/abundance. Fourth, while mountains often symbolize separation, their boundaries are porous. They transgress much of the tension that arises from multivalent human projections onto landscapes. Standing firmly between heaven and earth, they master in-betweenness and, as powerful mediating forces and transnational spaces, help transcend some of the dichotomies inscribed onto place (Müller and Quendler 112). Finally, mountains provide an aerial perspective that is two- rather than three-dimensional. They disturb and expand the flyover gaze and position themselves against the flattening of distinct landscapes and cultures. McClanahan seems to have all these qualities in mind when he installs mountains as a key symbol in his narration of flyover and its regional, national, and transnational configurations.

The High, the Low, and Nothing in Between

The dichotomies that inform the concept of flyover shift from center and periphery to superiority and inferiority, bleeding into a high/low metaphor that has gained currency in flyover semantics to express class inequalities and economic hegemony. To speak about flyover in terms of high and low is in keeping with Sarah Kendzior, who employs a language of verticality to argue that the Great Recession had a significant impact on class inequalities in the US heartland and pushed people further towards the highest and lowest rungs of the social ladder (xiv). In *Crapalachia*, McClanahan exposes socio-economic inequalities experienced by those who remain on the ground

[3] Grand Tourists were young European men of means and status who embarked on a customary journey through continental Europe during the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries. This trip, known as the Grand Tour, focused on Renaissance destinations in Italy and was commonly undertaken in the company of a tutor or family member.

by mapping flyover's oppositions onto Appalachia's vertical landscape. The narrative employs mountains as potent symbols that reveal uneven power relations and their socio-economic ramifications. Nowhere is this more evident than when Scott's grandmother Ruby insists that "she was a farmer's daughter" and "didn't want to be associated with any coal-mining McClanahans who lived at the bottom of the mountain" (90) in a scene that marks the mined mountains as the ultimate symbol of flyover's class disparities. The physical removal of mountaintops takes away all chances of an elevated life and arrests those living at the bottom in social immobility. In a poignant scene, McClanahan emphasizes the stark contrast between the peak and foot of the mountain as symbolic representations of flyover. Scott says he "felt darkness" because he "had been deep in the hollers" and "knew glory" because he "stood on top of the more beautiful mountaintops" (70). The darkness at the bottom of the mountains alludes as much to the coal seams as to the devastating human cost of their extraction. Arguably, this mountain symbolism functions as an explicit critique to MTR mining and establishes a causality between blasted landscapes and disadvantaged lives. It suggests that stripping mountains equates to stripping people of opportunities.

In the act of removal, extractive as well as flyover fictions expose a discourse of negation, which is clearly expressed when the narrator drives through a holler and is struck by the absences he encounters. To demarcate the void created by the extractive industries, the narrative repeatedly employs the words "there wasn't" and "there weren't" (McClanahan 91–92). The text further marks absences through line breaks, ellipses, and unfinished sentences, creating a formal vacancy that renders visible the discursive construction of Appalachians along everything that is not – as unprivileged, unprosperous, unsophisticated, unhealthy, unsafe, uneducated, unemployed, and wholly unfortunate.

The text establishes early on that hollow and hard-luck lives are everywhere in Crapalachia (both the narrative and the place). Introducing the McClanahan family in the very first paragraph, the narrator highlights their names ending in Y ("why?") sounds (1). This immediately sets the tone for a story about people whose place in the world is constantly questioned. The story then delves into the various manifestations of this questioning, painting a bleak picture of a life defined by misery, poverty, and criminality. The pages are punctuated with long screams of "shit" stretched over lines and pages, evoking despair in various spellings and formats. The narrative's dedication to present and express long-standing patterns of misfortune continues in the chapter titled "First Chapter," which is in fact the fourth chapter in the book, thus hinting at flyover country's belatedness. The inevitability of tragedy is explicit in Scott's and Ruby's reflections:

> ". . . It seems like you can't even go out of your house now without something horrible happening."
>
> Then she thought about all the people she knew who were having bad things happen to them.
>
> She talked about the little girl who had her foot run over by a riding lawnmower and lost her toes. She talked about how I came to live with her.
>
> She talked about seeing her cousin, who was driving down the road and a rock slide crushed her to death.
>
> Then she talked about her friend who just had her deformed leg amputated and couldn't get out of the house now.
>
> And then she looked like if you just left the house something bad would happen to you, hurricanes, earthquakes, and then she grew quiet with another look on her face like something terrible was going to happen to all of us one day.
>
> And you know what?
>
> It will…
>
> …if not tonight, then the next night. (13–14)

In the repetitive iteration of misfortune that befalls residents of Crapalachia, and which is presented in the form of an open list, the passage suggests a normalization of hardship. Whether yesterday, today, or in an anticipated tomorrow – the terror traps those living in flyover country, spatially, socially, and temporally. The notion of temporal arrest and the sense that "the rest of the world is moving while you remain still" (O'Gieblyn 6) is a staple of flyover semantics. It dominates ascriptions of "backward hillbillies" (Harkins, *Hillbilly*; Robertson 504) and establishes that flyover "is the past" (Averill 8) – a place where every new tomorrow only continues previous tragedies. It is a place where "the mountain collapse[s]" on people (McClanahan 28) every day, both literally and metaphorically, and ultimately a place where one is better off dead than alive.

Crapalachia suggests that flyover is not only about being passed over but also about passing away, as the presence of misfortune is only surpassed by the presence of death. The deaths that loom over the entire story are framed as ghosts of the extraction economy, which kills people quickly and slowly. To honor the lives lost in mining disasters, McClanahan lists how many thousands of men were killed each year from 1922 to 1941. As if to set the record straight, McClanahan juxtaposes the official numbers with those felt by the community, and he just as thoroughly keeps record of the slow deaths in the shadows of mined mountains. To evoke a sense of loss over lives cut short, the story repeatedly refers to the death of children. This occurs in instances when Scott learns that his great-grandmother lost "baby after baby after baby after baby" (23–24) on a graveyard visit with Ruby. It occurs in family

tales that describe leaving an abandoned baby on the side of the road because the McClanahans could barely feed themselves (31). And it occurs in moments such as when Scott discovers that five of his grandfather Elgie's eleven children committed suicide (4).

The notion of lives cut short is further revealed by individual characters' longing for death in the hope of attaining a final moment of glory. Nathan cannot wait to die (McClanahan 63), and Ruby too "waited to die," "waited all those years" to have her life honored by the preacher (113). In fact, her last day could not come fast enough, and "she called everyday claiming she was dying" (23). She takes Scott to visit her future grave, to rehearse her funeral and install in her a sense that her life might have mattered. Flyover's principle that these lives do not matter continues into death, where the characters are not spared from becoming a laughingstock of the mainstream. At Nathan's wake, he is turned "into a cross dresser" and the music played during the event "sounded so bad" it "made you want to die" (67), reminding everyone that culture dies along with life in flyover country. If flyover semantics follow the logics of verticality, then rural America does not have much to contribute to an esteemed cultural landscape of the US, producing cultural representations that audibly fall short.

The omnipresence of death extends to the non-human in *Crapalachia*. Besides the obvious decimation of mountains, Scott encounters "dead deer on the side of the road" (66), a dying possum caught in a fence (146), and cats that might not be dead but look like they are surely "going to die any minute" (8). Scott's story is the story of flyover, a place where everything dies every day. Life's continuous loss, including the loss of hope that the American dream might eventually find its way into the West Virginian hollers, combined with McClanahan's rhythmic language, conjures a sense of Southern Gothic that evokes the ghost of Edgar Allan Poe from the book's cover. As a dead ringer for death itself, the raven-bodied poet supports McClanahan's critique of the myth of US-American progress. Much like Poe's stories of decay, McClanahan's tales of death in the mined mountains of Appalachia reveal a loss – the loss of flyover – that demands a reconfiguration of how to imagine community beyond the regional.

Hear America Singing in the Coalfields

The apparition of a Poe-like raven on the book's cover suggests *Crapalachia* may be read beyond purely regional contexts and connects flyover fiction to the national literary canon. The tale redirects our attention from flyover's aerial perspective into the abyss of forgotten America. Dictated by the downward movement of MTR mining, the narrative gradually erodes the binary order of flyover and helps free the term

from its regional constraints. It messes with the established hierarchy of flyover's highs and lows, exposes and subverts them, and essentially breaks down the conceptual mountains that divide the nation. McClanahan's narrative achieves this by dissecting the great divides and their socio-cultural guises. In a first instance, the tale shows a country that has fallen apart, but, descending further into the abyss, it also sees a country that is coming back together. McClanahan mines Appalachian soil to reveal the narrative's connections to American Romanticism.

The calls from Donna Haraway as well as Anna Tsing et al. to stay with the trouble (Haraway) and "pay attention to ruins" (Tsing et al. G2) are key to understanding *Crapalachia*'s deconstruction of binaries as part of the collaborative reimagination of flyover from within a place damaged by coal capitalism. Tsing urges us to forge relationships between human and non-human actors in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2019) and Haraway chooses compost as a master metaphor to turn dead matter into new life. Compost serves as a tool to break down binary divisions between life and death as well as between human and non-human entities. Rather than seeing them as separate, Haraway highlights their interrelatedness, challenging oppositional thinking and offering instead an ecological and relational perspective. Compost, she argues, consists of more than individual remains, parts of dead leaves, and billions of microorganisms. It teems with life and involves a myriad of symbiotic processes. It teaches us, as Haraway puts it, to "become-with each other or not at all" (4).

Compost, at once material, conceptual, and metaphoric, offers multiple nodes, nets, and pathways to connect the trouble in Appalachia with the trouble of a national imaginary that cannot conceive a sense of connection. Haraway sends her "Children of Compost" (134) to the Appalachian Mountains and sees people used and abused by the extractive industries reforming themselves in multispecies communities. Crapalachia is a compost coinage. The text mines the mountains for "magic dirt" (157). While the region may be "Shittown" in the national US-American consciousness, the dismissive ascription ends up producing the "shit that makes the flowers grow" (162) in the imaginative space of flyover fiction.

In celebrating the utterly regenerative energy of dead matter, McClanahan connects his flyover fiction to the US-American literary canon. He follows in the footsteps of Walt Whitman, who, as the great American poet of life and death (Aspiz 1), transforms dead matter into a living substance that nourishes the resurrection of a collective America. This is in keeping with Sascha Pöhlmann, who sees in Whitman's poem "This Compost" a celebration of the cycle of ruin and rebirth (11) and a transgression of binary oppositions: Whitman includes "mineral and organic existence, city and county, good and evil, Earth and the whole universe in order to create a total material and spiritual environment without dissolving its particularities" (12). The poem,

which M. Jimmie Killingsworth calls "the most remarkable nineteenth-century contribution to the poetry of ecology in America" (19), moves from the speaker's terror over a landscape troubled by death, disease, and decay to an exclamation of wonders over earthly healing powers. The poem captures the generative quality of compost chemistry in a convergence of scientific and eco-spiritual admiration. McClanahan's mountain crap, Haraway's children, and Whitman's sweet soil are all products of literary imagination and, as seed bags of change, harbor the potential to reimagine community. When mining is "tearing apart communities" (House qtd. in Harrison 751), then the literary imagination can reestablish, if not harmony, a certain sense of connection. In this sense, McClanahan's magic soil composes a highly productive imaginary space from a state of decay and division.

One way in which *Crapalachia* establishes a foundational theme of connection is through radically abandoning the orders of genre classification and chapter organization. It refuses to be labeled and instead plays with the spaces between fact and fiction, comedy and tragedy, poem and memoir, history and folklore. *Crapalachia* breaks with readerly expectations of narrative category and form and allows for interstitial narratives of flyover in the ensuing gaps. The strategy of bridging gaps and shaping connections is reflected at the chapter level: the last line of one chapter connects to the title of the next, so that in one instance, a chapter ends in the middle of an announcement of Nathan's home nurse, "*Her name was …*" (45, original emphasis), continuing with the title of the next chapter, "Rhonda" (46). Through such transfers, the text resists divisions at the narrative level and additionally blurs hierarchies between chapter headings and the running text. If one envisions each chapter of *Crapalachia* as a mountain, with the chapter title serving as its peak and the final sentence as its foot, then the text not only engages with the high/low metaphor of flyover but also takes on a deeper significance, reoccupying the space of mountaintop removal. As readers traverse the chapters, the collective effect of McClanahan's textual mountains helps reclaim the larger range of the Appalachian Mountains that connects communities across the nation.

The second way in which *Crapalachia* rebuilds connection from the ground up is that the narrative evokes the earthly and egalitarian interests of American Romanticism. *Crapalachia* breaks through the disparity between high and low culture by merging regional and national literary traditions and by seamlessly interweaving regional voices with nods to the US-American literary canon. With vulgar expressions, rhythmic staccato, and poetic repetition, McClanahan once more echoes the aesthetic of Walt Whitman. With the help of the poet associated like no other with American nationality, McClanahan turns Appalachian soil into a symbol of US-American unity. In *Crapalachia*, the metamorphosis of mountains from top to bottom goes hand in

hand with a metamorphosis of the relationship between American self and Other. Not unlike Whitman, McClanahan answers to disillusions about the US with an unparalleled optimism and deep ecological affirmation. And like Whitman, McClanahan is not an author of the past but one obsessed with new beginnings.

> I saw the graves filling up all around her and I saw how Grandma would be here beneath it one day and then Nathan and then one day Stanley, and then one day … me. So I saw her whisper, "Oh lordie," and claim she was dying like she always did.
>
> I wished we were already back home so I could eat some more peanut butter fudge. Nothing lasts.
>
> I snapped the picture and it was like she was already gone.
>
> It was like I saw that she was dying right then – real slow – and she knew the secret sound. It's a sound that all of us hear. It's a sound that sounds like this. *Tick. Tick. Tick.*
>
> AND NOW A MOMENT TO ONCE AGAIN REMEMBER THE THEME OF THIS BOOK.
>
> The theme of this book is a sound. It goes like this: *Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick*. It's the sound you're hearing now, and it's one of the saddest sounds in the world. (26)

The sounds and tastes of time passing and a life unlived could not be spelled out more clearly than in this passage and is deeply felt throughout the book. By emphasizing that the sound of time passing is heard by everybody, Scott further highlights the egalitarian quality of c*arpe diem*. The narrative as a whole functions as a paradoxical moment to seize the day. At the close, McClanahan offers a final, all-encompassing call to cherish time and makes it abundantly clear that

> [t]his book is a time machine. The words you have just read are the past. The next page is the future. Your beautiful, young bodies, and your beautiful, young faces are the present.
>
> The PRESENT… (169)

With this untampered proclamation to stay alive, *Crapalachia* challenges the allochronic discourse of forgotten America and demands for flyover a place in the present. The premise of every *carpe diem* is a reckoning with time's destructive powers. Yet the Latin *carpe* also signifies "pluck" and "harvest" as well as to "seize," providing the narrative with a form of extraction that provides rather than denies opportunities.

Flyover Multiplicities and Mountains Everywhere

Besides regional grounding and national narrative reconnection, the other key theme in *Crapalachia* is the transnational nature of flyover. The narrative routinely engages with Appalachia's position in the world to stipulate an upsetting of the flyover axis

that relegates Crapalachia to the bottom of the social ladder and to cultural inferiority. Toying with the mountain symbol, McClanahan's tale effectively transgresses borders to unfold the dual process of glocalization and the coal industry's multidimensional nature in a localization of networks and a globalization of places (Mihr). The text carefully mediates between a world that denotes the US and one that means the globe. This transition from a national to a global understanding happens as gradually as subtly in the otherwise explicit and fast-paced text and in both instances relies on the worldmaking of literary imaginaries. At the beginning of *Crapalachia*, the narrator invites us to "imagine Crapalachia as the center of the world" and "imagine skyscrapers rising from the mountains" (McClanahan 35). In this scene, Scott finds himself in a history class, contemplating the potential consequences of Virginia's continued prominence in US history. This highlights a distinctly US-American reimagining of the world that allows us to see in *Crapalachia* a postcolonial writing back to Appalachia's position as an internal colony. The repetition of "imagine" in the passage above underscores the remarkable ability of flyover fictions to envision alternative worlds. By superimposing urban icons onto rural ones, the narrative further transcends the dichotomies of flyover and its world-ordering principles and places the degraded 'rest' firmly at the center of the world. The global implications of this perspective emerge later in the text and become apparent via a reading that considers the fictions of flyover alongside economic realities. Matthew S. Henry understands Appalachia as a "node of the capitalist world ecology" (403), and similarly, McClanahan's ode to Crapalachia functions as a junction in the global economic network of coal capitalism, mirroring how "flows of commodities, capital, labor, and information always render boundaries porous" (Harvey 35). In this sense, economic entanglement suggests an acceleration of places coming together, reflective of the proximity of different mining peripheries and their recentralization. The montage on the book's cover invites a reading of *Crapalachia* as a universal story of opportunities denied in the service of a (neo)imperial resource-centered economy. It further invites consideration of resource-cursed regions in Australia and beyond, such as mining communities in Wales, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Bolivia. Most importantly, the cover sets the tone to "rearrange the world" (McClanahan 157). With West Virginia holding the record for having the most towns named after cities in other countries (i.e., Berlin, Athens, Calcutta, Geneva, Shanghai, and Cairo), Appalachia appears to be the perfect place from which to build a new global world order and *Crapalachia* the narrative space in which to negotiate divides within and beyond the traditional US-American context. Having followed Whitman's plea to begin a new America, McClanahan moves on to building a reconfigured world in which the forgotten individual is rooted in a

global collective, literally taking on Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous appeal at the End of *Nature* (1836) to "build, therefore, your own world" (94).

As suggested in the compost metaphor, Scott's new world involves a destruction of the old. The narrator starts removing the mountains that separate him from the rest of the world and takes on the mountain symbol at the book's close. He starts "digging at the mountain" and pushes "the shovel deep in the rocky ground" to "cut out clumps of dirt and stones hard as gall" (McClanahan 156). While the excavation undertaken by the mining industry increases the cultural and socio-economic distance between Appalachia and the world and arrests the region ever so tightly in global networks of extraction capitalism, Scott's digging is geared towards minimizing distance, maximizing liberation, and removing the bitterness of flyover. Scott digs at the mountain and packs the dirt and stones into plastic bags to distribute it across the world. He travels first to the big and small urban centers close to home, then to the economic and cultural centers of the country, before imaginatively expanding his travels to encompass the entire planet:

> I went to Pittsburgh, PA, and Chicago, IL; and Atlanta, GA. I went back to Pittsburgh, PA. I left my dirt there in the streets. I went back to Chicago, IL. I went to New York City. I went to Washington, DC. I went to Charlotte, NC. I went to Raleigh, NC. I went to Oxford, MS. I went to Ann Arbor, MI – the home of Iggy Pop and the ever beautiful Elizabeth Ellen. I went to Portland, OR. I dreamed of China. I dreamed of India, Berlin, Paris, London. I went to Seattle, WA. I went to New York City and I dropped my dirt. I went to New York City. I went to New York City for a third time. I went to New York City.
>
> I gave my dirt away to the people I met. I called it magic dirt and they laughed. They put it in flower pots and the flowers grew. I dropped the stones on the sidewalks. I told them I was going to make the whole world Crapalachia. (156)

Scott's repeated return to New York City as a crucial node of the flyover axis and his repeated action of dropping dirt on the streets and sidewalks signifies a flattening of flyover's cultural verticality that brings the urban and rural closer together, laying the dichotomies of flyover to rest. Hereby, the text creates a sense of connection in a troubled space that allows for McClanahan's magic dirt to evoke Walt Whitman's worldly gestures once again: "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles" (Whitman 77). Similar to the embeddedness conjured by the earthly rebirth in "Song of Myself" (1855), *Crapalachia* invites a transformation towards new possibilities and demands to pay attention to what is below. Scott anticipates "the whole world to become this place" and announces that he is "making the world [his] mountain" (157).

At the onset of the narrative, Scott's world ends at the US-American borders. At the close, his work turns the Appalachian Mountains into "the whole world" (157). The fact that Scott only dreams of traveling to Asia and Europe with his pockets full

of Crapalachian dirt does not diminish the imaginative possibilities of literary worldmaking referenced early in the text but it underscores them. While Scott might not physically embark on a global journey, the text foregrounds the role of storytelling to conjure new worlds in a self-referential stance on flyover fictions: The passage moves from recounting Scott's actions to placing emphasis on the act of storytelling itself. The scene concludes with a series of sentences beginning with "I told" (157) to effectively illustrate the worldmaking abilities of flyover fiction. *Crapalachia* is, in many ways, an ode to oral culture and Appalachian storytelling tradition (Portelli). In this scene, however, Scott decides to "write a book" (157) as a means of connecting not only lives within the narrative but also forging connections through the act of writing itself. One way of reading Scott's imaginary distribution of mountains across the planet suggests that the entire planet has started to look more like Appalachia. This levelling proposes that flyover is everywhere, that there is no place on this planet unaffected by uneven power structures and capitalism. A Whitmanian reading of Scott's efforts, in contrast, takes a more hopeful turn by establishing a connection between rural dirt and urban sidewalks. In both contexts, it introduces a downward-oriented focus. This invitation to look down affords an imaginative view of the world as a vast pile of compost, promoting an understanding and appreciation for human and non-human interconnectivity.

The sense of connection and leveling that McClanahan evokes in repositioning and multiplying flyover country by letting mountains fly challenges binary visions of the world at large. In addition to the deconstruction of the binary of coastal centers and the rest that defines flyover, the narrative unravels the great divides of rural/urban as well as nature/culture. In this sense, *Crapalachia* not only focuses on the trouble of flyover and the trouble of a damaged planet, but it speaks to problems that sit at the core of the Anthropocene: an understanding of the natural world as something remote from human livelihood (Cronon) and a perceived distance between regional action and global consequences (Nixon). Not only does McClanahan demonstrate that dualistic visions reinforce socially and environmentally irresponsible behavior, he articulates a large network of regional, national, and transnational pathways that connect binaries and places. To think of Crapalachian soil on the sidewalks of New York, London, and Paris, and to imagine flowers growing from their pots everywhere, is to imagine a world beyond separation. If flyover can stop being 'down there' and start being 'right here' – in West Virginian hollers as much as on the urban sidewalks of this world – then perhaps we can transcend great divides and learn to master the ongoing struggles and joys of sharing life on this planet.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded in whole by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF): P 32994-G.

About the Author

Eva-Maria Müller holds a PhD in English and American Studies from the University of Gießen, Germany. Her research is broadly situated at the intersection of postcolonial studies, interdisciplinary mountain studies, and the environmental humanities, with a particular emphasis on North American, British, German, and Austrian representations of the Rockies and Alps. In her research, she is generally interested in the relationship between representation and power. She was a postdoctoral researcher in the FWF-funded research project "Delocating Mountains" at the University of Innsbruck, co-editing a special issue on *Mediating Mountains* and contributing articles and book chapters on narratives of descent. She recently served as a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at Emory University and is the author of *Rewriting Alpine Orientalism: Postcolonial Readings in Canadian and Austrian Mountain Tourism* (Bloomsbury, 2024).

Peer Review

This article was reviewed by the issue's guest editors and one external reviewer.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Works Cited

Applebome, Peter. "The Nation; for Better and Worse, Poverty's Poster Child." *The New York Times*, 11 July 1999, p. WK3, www.nytimes.com/1999/07/11/weekinreview/the-nation-for-better-and-worse-poverty-s-poster-child.html.

Aspiz, Harold. *So Long! Walt Whitman's Poetry of Death*. U of Alabama P, 2004.

Averill, Thomas F. "American Eye: Flyover Country: An Introduction." *The North American Review*, vol. 284, no. 1, Jan.–Feb. 1999, pp. 4–9.

Barcus, Holly R., and Stanley D. Brunn. "Towards a Typology of Mobility and Place Attachment in Rural America." *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1–2, 2009, pp. 26–48.

Batteau, Allen. *The Invention of Appalachia*. U of Arizona P, 1990.

Bowler, Betty Miller. "'That Ribbon of Social Neglect': Appalachia and the Media in 1964." *Appalachian Journal*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1985, pp. 239–47.

Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Environmental History*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1996, pp. 7–28.

DePietro, Andrew. "US Poverty Rate by State in 2021." *Forbes*, 4 Nov. 2021, www.forbes.com/sites/andrewdepietro/2021/11/04/us-poverty-rate-by-state-in-2021/?sh=38f7a99a1b38.

Eller, Ronald D. *Uneven Ground: Appalachia since 1945*. UP of Kentucky, 2008.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature*. James Munroe and Company, 1836.

Fackler, Katharina. "Looking at Appalachia: Online Intermediality, Collaboration, and Mountain Multiplicity." *Appalachian Journal*, vol. 48, no. 3–4, pp. 188–211.

Fisher, Steve, and Barbara Ellen Smith. "Internal Colony – Are you Sure? Defining, Theorizing, Organizing Appalachia." *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2016, pp. 45–50.

Flynt, Wayne. *Dixie's Forgotten People: The South's Poor Whites*. Indiana UP, 2004.

"Flyover States: Flight Data Shows Which States Americans Think Are Boring." *Champion Traveler*, www.championtraveler.com/news/flyover-states-flight-data-shows-which-states-americans-think-are-boring/. Accessed 6 June 2023.

Fraley, Jill M. "Appalachian Stereotypes and Mountain Top Removal." *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2007, pp. 365–70.

O'Gieblyn, Meghan. "Dispatch from Flyover Country." *Interior States*, edited by Meghan O'Gieblyn, Penguin, 2018, pp. 3–18.

Hansell, Tom. *After Coal: Stories of Survival in Appalachia and Wales*. West Virginia UP, 2018.

Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke UP, 2016.

Harkins, Anthony. *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*. Oxford UP, 2004.

———. "The Midwest and the Evolution of 'Flyover Country.'" *Middle West Review*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2016, pp. 97–121.

Harrison, Summer. "Mountaintop Removal Mining Fiction: Energy Humanities and Environmental Injustice." *Appalachian Journal*, vol. 45, no. 3–4, 2018, pp. 732–62.

Harvey, David. *Spaces of Hope*. Edinburgh UP, 2000.

Henry, Matthew S. "Extractive Fictions and Postextraction Futurisms: Energy and Environmental Injustice in Appalachia." *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2019, pp. 402–26.

Jones, Bradley M. "(Com)Post-Capitalism: Cultivating a More-Than-Human Economy in the Appalachian Anthropocene." *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2019, pp. 3–26.

Kendzior, Sarah. *The View from Flyover Country: Dispatches from the Forgotten America*. Flatiron Books, 2018.

Killingsworth, Jimmie M. *Walt Whitman and the Earth: A Study in Ecopoetics*. U of Iowa P, 2004.

Ledford, Katherine, and Theresa Lloyd, editors. *Writing Appalachia: An Anthology*. UP of Kentucky, 2020.

Macfarlane, Robert. *Mountains of the Mind*. Pantheon Books, 2003.

Martinez, Diane. "Agency and Environmentalism in Appalachia." *Appalachian Journal*, vol. 48, no. 3–4, 2021, pp. 228–44.

McClanahan, Scott. *Crapalachia: A Biography of Place*. Two Dollar Radio, 2013.

Mihr, Anja. *Glocal Governance: How to Govern in the Anthropocene*. Springer, 2022.

Moran, Nick. "A Year in Reading: Nick Moran." *The Millions*, 8 Dec. 2013, www.themillions.com/2013/12/a-year-in-reading-nick-moran-3.html.

"Mountains of Misery." *The New York Times*, 4 Nov. 1963, p. 34, timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1963/11/04/89571302.html.

Müller, Eva-Maria, and Christian Quendler. "Mediating Mountains: Introduction to the Special Issue." *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2021, pp. 105–14.

Nicolson, Marjorie Hope. *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*. U of Washington P, 1997.

Nixon, Rob. "The Anthropocene and Environmental Justice." *Curating the Future: Museums, Communities, and Climate Change*, edited by Jennifer Newell et al., Routledge, 2017, pp. 23–31.

Pöhlmann, Sascha. "Whitman's Compost: The Romantic Posthuman Futures of Cascadian Black Metal." *Sounds of the Future: Musical and Sonic Anticipation in American Culture*, edited by Jeanne Cortiel and Christian Schmidt, *ACT: Zeitschrift für Musik und Performance*, vol. 6, 2015, www.act.uni-bayreuth.de/de/archiv/201506/02_Poehlmann/index.html.

Portelli, Alessandro. *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*. Oxford UP, 2011.

Quendler, Christian, and Benjamin Robbins, editors. *Transnational Perspectives: Attachment and Appropriation in 'Our' Appalachia*. Special Issue of *Appalachian Journal*, vol. 48, no. 3–4, 2021.

Reed, Brian, host. *S-Town*. *This American Life*, 28 Mar. 2017, stownpodcast.org.

Robertson, Sarah. "The Green, Green Hills of Home: Representations of Mining in the Fiction of Appalachia and Wales." *Transatlantic Exchanges: The American South in Europe, Europe in the American South*, edited by Richard Gray and Waldemar Zacharasiewicz, Austrian Academy of the Sciences, 2007.

Schama, Simon. *Landscape and Memory*. Vintage Books, 1995.

Schumann, William. "Introduction: Place and Place-Making in Appalachia." *Appalachia Revisited: New Perspectives on Place, Tradition, and Progress*, edited by William R. Schumann and Rebecca Adkins Fletcher, UP of Kentucky, 2016, pp. 1–25.

Scott, Rebecca R. *Removing Mountains: Extracting Nature and Identity in the Appalachian Coalfields*. U of Minnesota P, 2010.

Stewart, Kathleen. *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an 'Other' America*. Princeton UP, 1996.

Tsing, Anna. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capital Ruins*. Princeton UP, 2015.

Tsing, Anna, et al. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*. U of Minnesota P, 2017.

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*. Edited by Michael Moon, W. W. Norton and Company, 2002.

Zipper, Carl E., et al. "The Appalachian Coalfield in Historical Context." *Appalachia's Coal-Mined Landscapes*, edited by Carl E. Zipper and Jeff Skousen, Springer, 2021, pp. 1–26.