The Appalachian Identity in *Storming Heaven*

For many years the Appalachian people and their way of life has been studied, scrutinized, and written about in great detail. The fascination surrounding Appalachia can be mainly credited to the unique background and culture that has existed there since the earliest settlers called the hills their home. There are multiple factors influencing the identities that define the Appalachian people. The first factor is geographical. Appalachia has an unforgiving landscape, where the mountains tower above the people and isolate them from the rest of society. With this isolation, a way of life and identity is formed, where the people are closed off and rely on hard work to survive. Their land becomes their life and they will die to protect it. The second factor is historical. The roots of the Appalachian people and where they came from, drive them in their everyday life. Their culture, and preserving that culture, serves to dictate everything they do, from raising their families to fighting for their land. The third and final factor, sociological, is in my opinion one of the most important factors of the identities. Appalachian people are aware of the deprivation and economic hardships they face, but prove that they will fight against this deprivation at all costs. They classify themselves into different groups within their Appalachian status, but continue to work towards the progression of that status and the land that they love. A perfect example of forming these identities is in Denise Giardina’s novel *Storming Heaven*. *Storming Heaven*, drawing from those factors, has, and continues to define what the Appalachian identity is.

*Storming Heaven* by Denise Giardina is a historical fiction of The Battle of Blair Mountain. The Battle of Blair Mountain happened in 1921 on August 30th and September 4th ("PAWV, 2006). The United Mine Workers of America were fighting to bring the union into the southern counties in West Virginia, but were met with resistance by the coal companies and local
police. Blair Mountain, in Logan County, West Virginia was the dividing line between union and non-union control. Union miners gathered their weapons and marched on Blair Mountain to confront the coal companies and bring the union to the suffering miners in the area. The battle ended when the U.S. Army was sent in to stop the angry miners, and it would be 12 years before the southern counties would have access to the union. Giardina gives us the dramatic events leading up to the final battle at Blair Mountain.

The novel chronicles the lives of four people who have felt the affects of the coal company’s brutality in four very different ways. C.J Marcum, governor and activist, fights for the progression and rights of his town Annadel. Rondal Lloyd, coal miner and union man, risks it all to bring the union to West Virginia and eventually helps to organize the march on Blair Mountain. Carrie Bishop, fearless nurse, has an outside look at the coalmines and their devastating affects. Rosa Angelelli, a Sicilian immigrant, learns first hand the monstrous toll the mines can take. With each of these characters Giardina highlights how the different factors that make up the Appalachian identity can vary from person to person and can also influence the people who settle here from foreign places.

In a critique of Storming Heaven by Cecelia Conway, Conway points out how Giardina began to form these identities, “She describes, in an interview and in her writings, a value system she finds characteristic of Appalachia: ‘a sense of humility, a lack of pretension, a sense of egalitarian values.’” (Conway, 1999) These values are exactly what we see in the characters of Storming Heaven. Carrie Bishop is so willing to sacrifice herself for the coal miner’s cause and comes from humble beginnings. C.J. Marcum believes strongly that everyone should be equal and fights for that equality in his town of Annadel and the surrounding areas. Giardina’s
characters all have strong Appalachian identities and we see those identities unfold throughout the novel.

In order to understand the identities Giardina uses in *Storming Heaven*, we must examine how these identities were first looked at and shaped. Appalachian identities have been discussed for a long time, but Cratis D. Williams, named the father of Appalachia, has researched into the identities and broken them down into sections. In Williams’s dissertation, *The Southern Mountaineer in Fact and Fiction*, he discusses every aspect of Appalachia, from how it was formed to the personalities and values of the Appalachian people. In his dissertation, along with discussing the identities, Williams examines how Appalachian literature is formed using the geographical, historical, and sociological factors. Authors, both from Appalachia and from outside of the area form their literature around the geography of the land, the history of the land and its people, and the economic and social factors that define the area. The accuracy of the literature, according to Williams, depends on whether or not the author is from Appalachia.

One reason that being from Appalachia allows for more accurate literature is that the Appalachian authors steer clear of stereotypes that authors from other areas might include in their works. Giardina, being born and raised in Appalachia, is careful to never include stereotypes in her literature. In Martha Eads essay, *Raising the Dead in Denise Giardina's Appalachian Fiction*, Eads discusses how Giardina has created a balance in *Storming Heaven*, “Even though Giardina’s Appalachian characters speak in regional dialect, their compelling concerns and commitments prevent them from ever falling into caricature.” (Eads, 2013) Giardina’s characters, such as Rondal Lloyd and Carrie Bishop, speak with Appalachian dialects, but are also educated, which is a balance that most authors fail to create. In Allen Bateau’s *The Invention of Appalachia*, Batteau discusses how novels that rely on creating identities based on
stereotypes are unreliable, that these identities are “a creature for the urban imagination.” (Batteau, 1990) Appalachian stereotypes are easy to lapse into and authors that do not have connections with Appalachia tend to base their works off of those stereotypes. Giardina, however, is successful in avoiding stereotypes and creates character identities that are true to Appalachia.

The first aspect of the Appalachian identity in Storming Heaven to look at is geographical. The Appalachian Mountains are perfect for providing isolation and also coverage from prying eyes. The first settlers of Appalachia found many benefits to settling there, “To assume that there was any mystery attached to the settlement of Appalachia is to neglect the significant fact that once cleared to the threat of Indians, ‘its coves and creek valleys were admirably fitted for the domestic economy of hunter and frontier farmer.’” (Williams, 1975) For Appalachians, the mountains belong to them, they were able to conquer them and therefore come to claim them. The people welcome the isolation, it protects them from a society that they do not want to be apart of, it allows them to live simply. The land that they love is apart of who they are, which brings us to the character Dillion Lloyd.

In the novel Dillion serves to represent the aspect of a true Appalachian. During this time period the land is being destroyed and taken by the coal companies, but Dillion refuses to be subjected to that injustice. Dillion believes that living isolated is the only way to escape the company’s control, he vows, “he was going way back in…” and “Our people allays lived hard…that there is what makes us.” (Page 7) When Dillion says that his people lived hard, he is speaking on the first settlers and the difficulty they had cultivating the land, but they endured. To Dillion the mountains are there for a reason and for him the reason is living as his ancestors did, simply and on his own terms. Dillion does not need anyone to take care of him or tell him what
he can or cannot do; he is truly a free spirit. The isolation of the mountains provides Dillion security and freedom. One quote from Dillion’s nephew, Rondal, gives us the most honest look at Dillion. When describing him Rondal says, “It was a good thing to live on the land, to respect it and to hate anything that would tear it down.” (Page 195) The geography of the land defines Dillion, it makes him who he is, and it gives him his identity.

Another important character to look at when discussing the geographical factors associated with Appalachian identities is C.J. Marcum. C.J. was raised on a farm with his grandparents, due to his parents dying after he was born. C.J. opens the book by spending a considerable amount of time discussing the coal companies taking land away from people, “The Railroad men spoke true-they didn’t bother us no more. Instead they give the minerals over to the coal companies and the coal companies took our land two year later.” (Page 5). The coal companies taking away the land was one of the biggest blows to the spirit of the Appalachian people. Their families had settled this land, cultivated it, and built their lives on it. C.J. felt this blow first hand when the coal companies murdered his grandfather and illegally took his land; he vowed that he would get it back one day. Just as the mountains represented who Dillion was, C.J.’s Homeplace represented who he was. The hard work that C.J.’s family did to make the land theirs determined who they were, it became apart of them. When C.J. passed away, another character makes the comment, “He won’t ever git that land back.” (Page 192) C.J. built his whole life around taking back what belonged to his family, but the coal companies ended up taking his life, just as easily as they had taken his land.

Another factor to look at is the historical influence that has helped form the Appalachian identity. As Williams points out in his work, “Writers of fiction occasionally introduce characters who are of Indian extraction.” (Williams, 1975) Giardina relates many of her
characters to Indians, Dillion is described as having features “like an Indian” (Page 4) and also Carrie Bishop’s aunt has Cherokee blood (Page 30). When the settlers came to Appalachia they chose the area due to the shelter it would provide from the Indians, but they also began to intermix with the Indians and create families. This is why Dillion is described as being one with nature and also wild, these are qualities associated with having Indian blood. This is an important aspect when discussing the historical factor that makes up Appalachian identities. Indians have always been noted as dangerous, feisty, and cunning. When Giardina points out that there are connections with Indians and her characters, she is showing that their values and personalities, inherited through the Indian background, have come to define who they are.

The historical factors that influence the identities are extremely strong in *Storming Heaven*. Almost all of the decisions that the characters make along the way are determined by the values that their ancestors and families have instilled in them. The historical influence changes the characters and alters who they are, therefore defining their identity. C.J.’s grandfather always told him he was named after farmers and freemen and that C.J. needed to be just like them. C.J.’s identity was formed at birth by his grandfather, the farmers were tough and the freedmen refused to conform. C.J. went on to become mayor and fight for unionization, he fought for Appalachia and the men that worked there, his identity was loyal and strong like his grandfather and the traditions that had been taught to him. However, when thinking about historical influence, one character stands out and that is Rondal Lloyd.

Rondal Lloyd is one of the most important characters in *Storming Heaven*. Rondal, influenced by his father, goes into the mines at the age of 10. After watching his father’s friend get killed by a roof fall, Rondal quickly learns that the way things are being done in the mines is not fair and he becomes a union organizer. Rondal is passionate, but also quick tempered and
mean. Rondal grew up in a tough environment, which could be a factor in who he is. However, Rondal’s identity comes from the people who influenced him and the history that he grew up on. Rondal grew up listening to C.J. talk about injustice and a saying from a man named Ermel would come to define his life, “‘You remember, boys,’ Ermel said, ‘anything will bend if you put enough fire to it. You remember that.’” (Page 17). When Rondal began organizing for the union, he held the fire to them, and he never backed down. When it came to marching on Blair Mountain, to unionize the southern counties of West Virginia, Rondal held the fire and was considered a leader in the battle. Another character, Dillion, would also heavily influence Rondal. Rondal grew up never knowing Dillion personally, but always hearing about how Dillion stood up for himself and refused to allow anyone to control him, including the coal companies. Rondal could have remained in the mines and lived out his life, but because of the people in his life and the history that he knew, he decided that he was going to become a fighter for the rights of himself and his people, the Appalachian people.

The last factor to look at is sociological. The Appalachian community has always been aware of their status, both socially and economically. It is no secret that the isolation from the mountains created a society who stuck with each other and protected their own; socially they became dependent on the area, and the people within the area. Due to this dependency, economically the Appalachian area stayed downturned. The coalmines brought in opportunity, but corrupt business kept the area from seeing any kind of success. These factors determined how the Appalachian people came to see themselves; it formed a portion of their identity. These factors helped form and change Storming Heaven character Carrie Bishop.

Carrie Bishop grew up on her family’s farm in Kentucky. The Homeplace, for Carrie, was a refuge from the coal companies. Carrie once said, “I have travelled outside the mountains,
but never apart from them. I have always feared mountains could be as jealous, as unforgiving, as any spurned lover. Leave them and they may never take you back. Besides, I never felt a need to go.” (Page 89) Carrie enjoyed the simplicity of the mountains and her Homeplace. The values she learned working on the farm, such as hard work and resilience, inspired her to become a nurse. Carrie was unfamiliar with life outside of the Homeplace; she had never experienced coal miners or anyone else other than her family. Carrie’s identity was built around the people she knew and what she had experienced from the farm. However, Carrie’s identity changed as soon as she met coal miner Rondal Lloyd. Carrie’s identity was dependent on the Homeplace, but changed to be dependent on the life she built joining the fight against the coal companies with Rondal. Along with the social change that Carrie experienced, she also experienced economic change.

Carrie’s life on the farm was far from poor, they lived with what they had and never did without. She was educated, and happy with the knowledge that she had. She eventually became a nurse and still lived well for the time period and area, she felt that her job and living arrangements gave her dignity above the coal miners. When Carrie married and was forced to live in the coal company’s housing, she felt as though who she was had changed and the things that she found important did not matter anymore, “I was bored in the coal camp. All I did was cook, wipe away coal dust, and worry about where the money would come from.” (Page 165)

Carrie’s identity had been formed by privilege, but the rough life she come to have changed her and altered parts of her identity. Instead of seeing herself as above others, Carrie became one of the women, doing whatever she could to help the union, even when it meant going against what she felt was right. Carrie, at times, felt as though she was losing herself, but in the end discovered that she liked the person she had become better than who she used to be.
In Williams’s dissertation, he divides the Appalachian people into three categories: city people, farmers, and mountain dwellers. (Williams, 1975). The city people are characterized by their proper speech, dress, and manners. The farmers have the same manners and speech as the city people, but choose to work the land and remain out of the city. The last group, the mountain dwellers, prefers complete isolation. The mountain dwellers are sometimes referred to as “poor whites” and have nothing to do with the farmers or city people. These categories define the Appalachian people and give them a part of their identity. We can easily place the characters in *Storming Heaven* into these categories, but it is important to note that some characters changed their status over time, which affects their identity. C.J. Marcum started out in the mountain dweller classification, but grew to love the city and shifted to a city person. This shift allowed C.J. to reflect on his pervious life when making decisions; it gave him the ability to relate to the less fortunate, but keep progressing past what he used to be. Carrie Bishop began in the farmer class, moved to the city people class, but then eventually returned to the farmer class. For Carrie the shift occurred because she wanted more for her life, which drove her away from her Homeplace. However, Carrie realized that the simplicity of her childhood is where she should have been the entire time. Rondal stayed in the mountain dweller class throughout his life. Rondal was happy with where he had come from and where he was going, he just wanted better conditions for the coal miners that he had worked along side of. Each of their identities were shaped and molded by their choices, but they never forgot who they used to be and the roots that made them who they are.

Just as the native Appalachian characters were able to change their identities, Giardina presents an interesting character that is forced to change and adopt the Appalachian identity. Rosa Angelelli came to West Virginia with her husband from Sicily. Rosa had a strong Sicilian
identity; she loved her native land and was proud of her culture. When living in West Virginia, Rosa had a tough time fitting into the area, “The women watch me when I go to the store…They turn their heads and whisper. Little boys cry, Dago, Dago.” (Page 50) The Appalachian people resented the immigrant workers because they continued to work for the coal companies and would not join the fight for the union. However, towards the end of the book Rosa is standing with the other women as the news comes in that their sons were killed in the latest mine explosion. At this point we realize that the same struggles that defined the Appalachian people and gave them their identities were beginning to change Rosa and was forcing her to develop her own Appalachian identity.

When we take a look at our identity, we never consider the factors that have gone into defining that identity. Our identity is dependent on many things and the Appalachian people have an identity that is complicated and reflective upon many factors. The land creates an identity built around hard work and resilience. Their history gives them motivation to continue the fight for what they believe in and the rights of their people. The Appalachian people form tight communities and protect each other. They know that their area might be downturned and they might be considered the poor class, but that does not change who they are, they are proud of their status. Storming Heaven has given us a first hand look at how powerful identities can be. The characters identities defined their fight against the coal companies and if they had not had those strong geographical, historical, and sociological factors working with their identities, they would not have been successful in fighting for Appalachia and beating the union.


