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**FREEDOM THROUGH MENTAL HEALTH
IN CRYSTAL WILKINSON'S
*THE BIRDS OF OPULENCE***

Lucy Lansing

Mental illness in Appalachia, especially among women, is both stigmatized and misunderstood. Deeper examination of the states of mental health in the region is necessary for developing a more complete and accurate portrait of reality. Appalachian women's stories—especially those concerning mental health status—must be written about and loudly proclaimed so that the necessary infrastructure can be erected to aid women in their own healing processes. Enabling women is not synonymous with speaking for them or constructing solutions for Appalachia based on nonnative conceptions of the region; rather, outside resources can help improve states of mental health only if implemented on a foundation of accurate accounts of real circumstances. As Emily Hauenstein states in *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, “invisible women cannot speak on their own behalf.”¹ It can be dangerous to assume that women are inferior or incapable of solving their own problems. Doing so can breed a toxic culture of submissiveness and acceptance of negative circumstances; further, patriarchy obstructs frank discussions regarding mental illness among women. Opening up dialogues about differing states of mental health could create a new kind of culture within Appalachia, or at least augment some of its existing aspects. Casting off the links of patriarchy and peering into their own psyches, invisible women could become visible.

¹ Emily Hauenstein, “No Comfort in the Rural South: Women Living Depressed,” in *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing* (2003), 7.

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Crystal Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence* serves as a tool for creating such a new atmosphere in Appalachia. The novel, written in 2016 and set in a fictional Kentucky town, spans the decades adjacent to either side of the early 1960s that are pertinent to the multigenerational Goode-Brown family's lives. *The Birds of Opulence* is littered with characters who battle against either their own mental illness or that of loved ones. While mental illness is only named by overbearing neighbors and fellow churchgoers, it still pervades the universe of Opulence and the lives of the Goode-Brown family. The Goode-Browns are comprised of a host of female characters struggling to understand sex, mental illness, and their roles in Appalachian society. The matriarch, Minnie Mae, does her best to look after her daughter, Tookie, as well as the family property. Lucy, Tookie's daughter, struggles with what might be characterized as post-partum depression, among other issues; Lucy's husband, Joe, can fix any broken thing except for his wife's mind. As the daughter of Lucy, Opulence's resident crazy woman, Yolanda seeks solace in her best friend, Mona. Relationships between and among the girls and women of Opulence are multifaceted but are largely centered on understanding personal histories in the context of mental illness. Life in Opulence is based on Wilkinson's personal and factual understanding of Appalachia. Because of the grounding of the text in reality, the author illuminates ways in which contemporary and future iterations of Appalachia might seek to improve women's access to and understanding of mental health in its various states. Women in Appalachia are not simple creatures, as so many non-regional authors have characterized and romanticized them; they are real people who have real triumphs and real struggles. They deserve real mental health care.

The literature pertaining to mental health among women in Appalachia is inconclusive but makes clear that cultural values impact regional women's conceptions of mental health. As evident in Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence*, social norms can affect how women view themselves based on

both personal convictions as well as community standards. In *Wingless Flights: Appalachian Women in Fiction*, Danny Miller breaks down selections of Appalachian literature in terms of gender and mental health;² Hauenstein, Ida Slusher et al. in the *Journal of Cultural Diversity*, and Henrietta Yurchenco in *American Music* have examined many of the real-life cultural implications of Appalachian life that promote mental illness stigma.^{3, 4, 5} For example, Hauenstein writes, “In the rural South there is a greater tolerance of aberrant behavior, beliefs that illnesses arise from God and must be removed by God, and the value of self-reliance.”⁶ If women exhibit what those around them term “aberrant behavior,” their conceivable illnesses might be said to come from God, as is evident in Wilkinson’s chapters focused on Lucy Brown. Regional value systems have significant impacts on the states of mental health in Appalachia, such as emotional repression and isolation; accurate representations of the cultural circumstances in the region are crucial for developing solutions to these and related issues. The integration of critical work on mental health in the region with literary interpretations of the phenomenon, such as *The Birds of Opulence*, can prove beneficial for navigating the complexities of Appalachian culture’s effects on women’s mental health. This paper will illustrate that Appalachian

² Danny Miller, *Wingless Flights: Appalachian Women in Fiction* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996).

³ Emily Hauenstein, “No Comfort in the Rural South: Women Living Depressed,” in *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing* (2003), 7.

⁴ Ida Slusher, Cora Withrow-Fletcher, and Mary Hauser-Whitaker, “Appalachian Women: Health Beliefs, Self-Care, and Basic Conditioning Factors” in *Journal of Cultural Diversity* (2010), 84-89.

⁵ Henrietta Yurchenco, “Trouble in the Mines: A History in Song and Story by Women of Appalachia” in *American Music* (1991), 209-224.

⁶ Emily Hauenstein, “No Comfort in the Rural South: Women Living Depressed,” in *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing* (2003), 7.

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women already possess the cultural abilities to assuage some negative implications of mental illness in the region. Examining Crystal Wilkinson's novel in conversation with the pertinent literature can offer valuable answers for some of the questions surrounding mental health among women in Appalachia. Specifically, in manifesting the daily trials of Appalachian women whose lives are tainted by mental illness, Wilkinson's characters serve as experiments in confrontation with some of the factors, such as patriarchy, that inhibit efforts to curb the negative effects of mental illness.

Patriarchy is the system of Opulence. Though Crystal Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence* focuses on women, the cultural values of the community in which the female characters live are centered on a male-dominated interpretation of the world. The relationship between Yolanda and Mona particularly affirms this point. Both girls, whether or not they do so consciously, subscribe to the masculine superiority complex of Opulence in ways that damage their self-images and therefore their mental health. As one scholar argues, "Appalachian history has been constructed out of masculinist narratives...broadening the concept of agency to include women's critique and challenge of power, particularly through hidden transcripts of subversion, illuminates the anti-isolationist emphases that are revealed in women's networks."⁷ Agency is a complicated topic in Wilkinson's novel because women build their levels of personal freedom on a male-oriented foundation. When Obie Simpson sexually assaults Mona, Yolanda's "legs won't move, but she thinks that if she wills it hard enough, Obie Simpson will let Mona go."⁸ There is a specifically male sense of entitlement undergirding Obie's aggression that, in addition to the violence and suddenness of the

⁷ Patricia Beaver, "Women in Appalachia and the South: Gender, Race, Religion, and Agency" in *NWSA Journal* (2008): xx.

⁸ Crystal Wilkinson, *The Birds of Opulence*. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2016): 70.

event, likely stalls Yolanda's response to coming to her friend's aid in a time of danger. The communication of women's realities to a broader community is therefore necessary to stem the pervasiveness of female-female malevolence; girls and women, such as Mona and Yolanda, are capable of instead pulling each other up to stand on the platform where positive mental states exist. The girls were friends once, but the bond has been broken by external pressures. Were the friendship reestablished, it is plausible that at least the girls' mental suffering caused by rivalry might be mitigated.

The social rift that gradually develops between Yolanda and Mona is the fault of neither of the girls; rather, they unintentionally succumb to the patriarchal norms of their community. Yolanda shrinks in on herself while Mona actively and intentionally subverts many of Opulence's expectations for women, including how she chooses to dress. The network of women in which they live is anti-isolationist, but Mona extends the web of relationships further, eventually exploring networks outside Opulence; in contrast, Yolanda relies on the existing social framework of her home. Competition for attention from men is derived from male superiority, not any inherent need on the part of the girls to please the male residents of Opulence. Appealing to the power structure is a natural response to a socially imposed position of inferiority. When such inferiority is exacerbated by the actions of Obie Simpson and others, Mona and Yolanda attempt more vehemently to clamber up the social slope toward the pinnacle of maleness. Mona is, however, able to temporarily subvert the unequal power dynamic even during such an overt display of male dominance when "a little, tiny feeling of glee replaces her fear and anger" at discovering "this certain kind of weakness she has not known that men and boys have until now."⁹ She experiences, for a moment, the sensation of control. Within a patriarchal framework, Mona asserts her cultural

⁹ Wilkinson, *The Birds of Opulence*, 77.

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power derived from her sex; still, she is like the birds of Opulence, trying to escape from a cage she was born into.

Social circumstances disrupt the friendship between Mona and Yolanda, but the Appalachian emphasis on relationships is present even in difficult times. At Tookie's funeral, Lucy notices Yolanda and Mona clinging to one another; the female friendship remains strong, despite years of cultural tensions. It is this tendency of women to cleave to one another in times of strife that ensures they are able to withstand the stresses of mental illness affecting themselves or loved ones. Lucy exhibits this very strength when she gives birth to her daughter in the rough environment of a squash patch and again when she wrestles with the fact that "mama gone, granny gone, roots still here."¹⁰ Lucy seems to cling to who she used to be, though she has irreparably changed. Joe notices the shift in his wife: "The cooking, cleaning part of her is all he recognizes now, all she recognizes of herself. It's all that's inside her left to give."¹¹ After Lucy comes home from Eastern State, presumably a mental institution, she takes up smoking but is still affected by something deep within her. Joe's taking Lucy to seek professional help paints him as a symbol for the empathy that must exist in communities if mental health is to be successfully treated and integrated into holistic health systems.

Francine Vernon demonstrates how social connections can be forged and severed depending on how one conforms to or diverges from communally established norms pertaining to mental health. These female- and Appalachia-specific norms include voluntary integration into social networks and participation in communal care of children, among others. Through losing loved ones, Francine suffers a degradation of connection with her community. She loses two important people in her life, and then eventually a third. The first is her mother, Helen, who suffers a breakdown, and the second

¹⁰ Wilkinson, *The Birds of Opulence*, 183.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 184.

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is her husband, Sonny; later, her daughter, Mona, leaves Opulence in pursuit of what a city might provide for her. When Helen's mind warps into something unrecognizable, Francine splits herself into two versions of Francine—"the lady of the house...and another Francine Vernon...curled up into the girl she was."¹² The deaths of her mother and her husband cause Francine to further retreat within herself, to feel "smothered beneath her own skin, smothered beneath all this worry."¹³ Francine's shift in mental state, whether or not it can or should be termed an illness, influences her relationships with her community. Soon after she brings her daughter Mona home from the hospital, members of the church stop by, seemingly to offer support and sustenance. Francine interprets their presence as nosy and stifling, and "something rolls through her hot and quick as thunder."¹⁴ She distances herself from these members of the community when she demands that they leave her home. The major mental shift—possibly, a break—in Francine that comes when her mother changes in personality and then dies affects how she chooses to interact (or not) with those outside her home. Francine also begins to hoard food, evidently in response to negative changes in her life. Perhaps it is because she has lost people close to her that Francine chooses to abstain from much of the social life of Opulence; she may want to avoid forging any relationships that could result in more personal loss. Whatever the reason for her relative isolation, Francine's tendency to largely keep to herself negatively impacts other women's views of her. The harmful repercussions of this tendency—namely, the disapproval of women who might otherwise be in her social circle—are not solely due to Francine's actions. The women around her must realize that they have the ability to relieve at least some of the internal discord Francine experiences because some of it is

¹² Wilkinson, *The Birds of Opulence*, 54.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

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wrought by their treatment of her. Casting more light on the truths of women's realities can reveal specifically female abilities to change circumstances affecting mental health.

Examination of Francine in particular can prove beneficial for understanding female interactions with Appalachian value systems. Wilkinson communicates a particularly troubling event in Francine's history—the rape of this character. Francine recalls this disturbing episode in terms of physical sensation when an unwitting neighbor tries to soothe with what is supposed to be a calming hand; Francine lashes out against the women who purport to want to help her.¹⁵ She does not act in the way the women of Opulence expect that she will. The “pathetic mountain women...accepting of their lots in life” regarding abuse from men and other hardships, represented in such Appalachian literature as that by Mary Noailles Murfree, can inspire pity in some.¹⁶ Francine's rape and fairly solitary life, in some views, might breed pity. She might appear to fit into the beaten-dog schema derived by those onlookers of Appalachia who lack a real understanding of regional culture, but she supersedes the constraints of simple categorization. Francine, for all the emotional manipulation she has endured, still has the capacity to care deeply for her daughter. “Usually quiet and somber as a cow,”¹⁷ Francine vehemently protests Mona's romantic involvement with a married man, possibly to protect her from the sort of trauma from her own past. “Although the picture of the mountain women as hardworking, patient, in many ways subservient, and victims of the mountain social system is accurate in some respects,” overemphasis of the effect of hardships Appalachian

¹⁵ Wilkinson, *The Birds of Opulence*, 59.

¹⁶ Danny Miller, *Wingless Flights: Appalachian Women in Fiction* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996), 36.

¹⁷ Wilkinson, *The Birds of Opulence*, 160.

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women suffer incorrectly paints these women as weak.¹⁸ Francine, by many standards, might lead a difficult life, but she is not defined by what she endures. Though not wholly in accordance with Opulence cultural norms, her responses to trying events are the result of personal agency and will. Francine represents the strong Appalachian women that nonnatives romanticize and misunderstand through their “externally imposed structures of domination.”¹⁹ This character in particular exemplifies the approach that must be taken toward Appalachia in general if progress is to be made in the arena of regional mental health; assumptions about women in Appalachia must be cast aside and the truth examined for community-level responses to mental illness to be more flexible.

In grappling with the effects of mental illness, family responses can prove critical for affected individuals’ success in overcoming otherwise debilitating illnesses. As previously discussed, Francine exemplifies one route a life characterized by mental illness can take; Lucy also struggles with what might be called mental illness, but her proximity to this phenomenon is perhaps more immediate than Francine’s. Lucy is arguably the most complicated character in *The Birds of Opulence*. Much of her understanding of the world is portrayed through others’ perceptions of her, rather than through her own thoughts and motivations. The community of Opulence widely regards Lucy to be crazy. This characterization is pervasive; it even affects Joe’s perception of his wife, though “he could never have left her side, no matter how crazy she was.”²⁰ Lucy denies her child milk,²¹ drops her on the floor,²² and plays with

¹⁸ Danny Miller, *Wingless Flights: Appalachian Women in Fiction* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996), 37.

¹⁹ Mary Anglin, “Moving Forward: Gender and Globalization in/of Appalachian Studies” in *Appalachian Journal* (2010): 291.

²⁰ Wilkinson, *The Birds of Opulence*, 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

²² *Ibid.*, 32.

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suffocating her.²³ Familial responses to these events differ from those of members of the community; Tookie shoulders the tasks of caring for both infant Yolanda and distant, adult Lucy, matter-of-factly feeding the child and cleaning human milk and blood from Lucy's skin when Lucy is seemingly unable to do so. When people aggregate in such large groups as the population of Opulence, individual mindsets can be blurred by the overwhelming nature of a dynamic conversation. Bunches of women viewing Lucy through a communal lens chastise her for being an incompetent mother, while Lucy's individual family members cast a more compassionate eye on her mental state. Even when she "feels hollow, a drained riverbed" after Yolanda is born,²⁴ Lucy is still engaged enough with her surroundings to feel a deep love for Joe Brown. Especially because of her struggle against the confines of her mental state, she should be understood in terms of her abilities to seek freedom from mental illness rather than by what binds her. Family responses to mental illness, in contrast with the constricting community response from many of the women of Opulence, help Lucy as she tries to free herself from the depression she never asked for.

The motif of the bird, emblematic of freedom, is integral to *The Birds of Opulence*. Evident in the novel's title and throughout the book, birds communicate the flights undertaken by Wilkinson's various characters. Lucy is shackled by what some purport to be mental illness; Mona seeks the freedom that might lie beyond the fields of Opulence as a "bird in the darkness."²⁵ A bird motif strings together seemingly disparate narratives of women who are linked by blood and history. As Tookie relates, "birds were always a sure sign" of

²³ Wilkinson, *The Birds of Opulence*, 34.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

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some important emotional encounter;²⁶ several chapters include the names of birds, and female characters are often likened to the flying creatures. The concept of freedom, inherent in birds' flight, is embodied by the bird-like characters looking skyward for escape and answers. Several characters' (especially Lucy's) wings seem to have been clipped by direct and indirect experiences with what might possibly be categorized as mental illness. Though the image of birds with clipped wings might engender pity, Wilkinson's characters—and non-fictional Appalachian women—possess the ability to implement solutions to problems pertaining to mental health.

Using their own cultural power, women can derive the freedom they seek from the snares of mental illness. Through community fluency, familiarity with the social trends of Opulence provides some freedom from the stresses of daily life; even in the act of taking her own life, Lucy is still aware of the cultural practices in which she has been immersed since birth. "When she slices through her wrist, she is reminded of cutting through chicken bone and gristle."²⁷ The memory of cutting chicken, perhaps for a meal enjoyed by her family, temporarily distracts her from her current emotional and physical pain. Still, because Lucy lives in Appalachia, the culture in which she has evolved has restricted certain elements of her life, especially her ability to speak freely about what ails her, a circumstance that could have led to her suicide. "Cultural, social, and economic practices may constrain expressions of self-determination."²⁸ It is possible that in the face of trouble, Lucy feels she has run out of options. Edging out stigma through education and awareness might stem some of the issues pertaining to senses of loneliness that often pervade those groups of people suffering from mental illness. It appears that "Rural poverty also contributes to Southern women's invisibility and

²⁶ Wilkinson, *The Birds of Opulence*, 139.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 188.

²⁸ Mary Anglin, "Moving Forward: Gender and Globalization in/of Appalachian Studies" in *Appalachian Journal* (2010): 290.

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increases their risk for MDD (Major Depressive Disorder).”²⁹ Even if Lucy were to want to articulate how she feels, “the language of nerves or other colloquialisms for depressive symptoms may not be associated with MDD by primary care providers.”³⁰ Establishment of open dialogue as a trademark of Appalachian cultural systems could help to solve some of the problems associated with the stifling of the voices of currently “invisible” women. Such establishment requires complete, accurate understandings of the cultural practices of Appalachia, including native forms of language.

Mental health among women in Appalachia needs to be examined more deeply in the context of regional cultural systems. Such literature as Crystal Wilkinson’s *The Birds of Opulence* can provide insight into the implications of cultural norms for women’s perspectives on both their own mental states as well as those of their loved ones. Deviance from the implicitly agreed-upon cultural standards can result in being ostracized, as Wilkinson’s Francine and Lucy demonstrate; attempted compliance with such standards can be injurious to mental health if stretching to fit a socially prescribed form is taxing or ultimately unattainable. Women in Appalachia have the cultural power to solve the very problems associated with mental health that can result from culturally induced stressors. Accurate portrayals of the mental struggles Appalachian women face do not involve external voices speaking on regional realities; rather, they are comprised of the perspectives of women intimately familiar with the intersection of cultural values and mental health. Wilkinson’s novel provides valuable tools for peering into the lives of people navigating daily the questions of mental illness. Surmounting the minimization of emotions’ importance and other obstacles on the path toward greater levels of regional mental health among women might be difficult, but it can only be accomplished with the guiding

²⁹ Hauenstein, “No Comfort,” 6.

³⁰ Hauenstein, “No Comfort,” 7.

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principle that Appalachian women can use their own cultural power to solve their own problems.

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