

**Narrativism and Biography:**  
A Historiographic Reflection on Marget Thomas

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## Prologue

People seem to say “the journey is the destination” only when things turn out badly. But my case is an exception. When I began work on this project, I had a grand scheme of how the project would look in its entirety, how straightforward and rewarding it would be to write a biographical account of my great grandmother. “She’s a woman,” I thought... “Indian too... academics love these sorts of things.” This is not to devalue my original goal, merely to illustrate the naivety with which I embarked on the “journey.”

It is difficult to say why I was first compelled by the stories of my great grandmother, known within the family as “Indian Granny” and to the rest of the world as Marget Thomas. Practically speaking there is little we have in common other than a smattering of DNA. She was born nearly a century before me, in an entirely different part of the country (both geographically and socially), in a large family, a woman, non-White, etc. (assuming for now such traits are what truly “characterize” a person).

In hindsight, my earliest memories of stories about her were a confusion; since she was referred to as “Granny,” I assumed people were talking about my grandmother, not thinking about it enough to realize “Great Indian Granny” doesn’t roll off the tongue so well. And since I barely knew my grandmother before she passed away, such details of our family tree remained a blur for years.

Perhaps she remained a fixture in my family’s memory because of her link to a forgotten and unknown past. The “Indian” prefix to her nickname may have been to eliminate confusion with the other grandmother, who I suppose would have been called “French Granny.” But it seems noteworthy that she was considered the outsider of the family, and some qualification to simply “Granny” was necessary.

I vividly remember the first time I understood my connection to her, and more importantly, to her Indianness. I grew up quite a John Wayne fan, and watched more cowboy movies than is prudent to admit. One day while playing “Cowboys and Indians” with my older sister, she turned very serious while we sorted out roles and said shrewdly “You know, *we* were Indians, not Cowboys.” My world was shattered. Though I was outwardly resistant to this change of identity, I knew deep down that as my older sister, everything she said was true and I would have to accept the fact that now the Indians would have to win every battle and the Cowboys would be the ones running foolishly into ambush.

The more I experimented with my new identity, the more I enjoyed it. Anyone can be a cowboy... it’s easy to be a John Wayne, and it’s easy to always have the script play to your favor. But how much more *noble* it was to be the Indian, to be the outsider that no one thought much of. I asked my mother what kind of Indian I was, hoping to be Sioux or Cherokee, but if I was really lucky, Mohawk.

Seneca. “Well, that will do,” I thought. “At least they named an apple sauce company after them.” What’s more, I later learned that the Seneca were friends with the Mohawk, which meant that I was *basically* a Mohawk if I wanted to be. All that really changed in the short term was that I stopped watching John Wayne movies because I didn’t want to support the enemies of my ancestors. But there was a more significant transformation that took place when I realized that everything I knew to be sacred—John Wayne, the frontier, and covered wagons—was not my own history.

It is perhaps this hole in my family’s past that drives my interest in Indian Granny. I know my parents, I knew my grandparents, and then there is Marget—the link between “us” and our “Indianness.” In this light, the desire to historicize my own past through my great

grandmother's biography seems a natural and useful progression. But is this approach valuable from an academic point of view? What I found once I began writing her history is that biography as a genre is really creative nonfiction that claims historical authority because it is grounded in a few concrete events. But in filling in the gaps, in deciphering events, motivations, and decisions, the story became my own.

This realization led to an impasse, both in the writing process and in my own identity. While interviewing family members to find out more of the "facts" of Granny's life, I realized that many of the events I considered concrete were quite open to interpretation. Some in the family have all but disowned her memory, and wouldn't even talk to me about her. Their representations of her decisions were understandably different than those who idolized and romanticized her memory.

Similarly, it was difficult to determine who the audience for this biography would be, and where my responsibilities lay in the process of historicization. The widest readership would be those related to Marget, those with the greatest interest in hearing that her life was exemplary and idyllic. I felt a distinct obligation to meet the desires of this group, if for no other reason than to "thank" them for spending the time recounting memories of Granny to me. How could I come back to them to report it's entirely possible their grandmother abandoned the family for no greater reason than to work at a steel mill? If the biography would not be used for "greater" purposes than dynastic mythopoesis, did I have a responsibility to report every possibility in Marget's life, even if it would be potentially damaging to family identity?

Because of these limitations, my first attempt at her biography came out highly idealized. All of her decisions were for the best, and all were very well planned. This story was easy to tell, because I knew ahead of time where each fork in the road would lead. It didn't occur to me

to say, “She moved to Ohio because she didn’t know what else to do with herself,” or “She abandoned her child because she thought he was a little brat and was too irresponsible to keep him.” I had to rethink her life as “skeletons in the closet” rather than “sainthood.” In this light, everything she did seemed short-sighted and selfish—yet all the events remained the same.

It was then I came to the conclusion that both “objectivity” (if there is such a thing) and historiography were unreasonable goals given my investment in the topic and the lack of heterogeneous accounts. In all likelihood the “true story” would be some intricate combination of the “saint” and “skeleton” readings. But the story I wrote was my mother’s, my uncles’, my aunts’, and my own, but not Marget’s.

This interpretation was debilitating. I tried to imagine how other biographies had been composed, what assumptions their authors had made, what their purposes were in writing, and for whom they wrote. I didn’t want to produce a questionable account, and if the role of biography is production of knowledge, what good would an incomplete and self-fulfilling narrative be?

Evidence of this problem was abundant in my research, particularly in other ethnographic and biographic accounts from Appalachia. The worst offenders were mass-media representations of “Appalachia” that cast the region as throngs of belligerent, toothless derelicts. In many cases it seemed that these “accounts” were simply an expression of what was fashionable to think at the time; one person would write how “backward” life in the hills was, then a body of literature echoing that analysis would follow. Similarly, when it was decided hill people were actually “noble,” the voices changed and another monolithic discourse emerged.

This process is not necessarily negative, and I do not want to categorically write off any of these narratives. I would, however, like to call into question the system in place that produces

this type of cyclical “knowledge” without any dissenting voices. As it stands, the process of historiography and ethnography in Appalachia seems more a reflection of the era each narrative is written than its subject. Just as it was easiest to be John Wayne when I was a child, it is all too easy now to write the story everyone expects. Would there be a way I could avoid this process, I wondered?

My original plan was to fill in the gaps of Marget’s life with examples from other stories of the time. I wanted to find an *essential* Appalachian, Woman, Indian, Mother, Daughter, Steel Worker, etc. of the time and see if Marget fit into that vision. But that process, *fitting* Marget into the lives of others did not do justice to her memory. What would be the purpose of biography if I simply inserted Marget into a template of *who I think she is* and processed it like a computer simulation?

What this project has turned into is a compromise between my inability to accept the inadequacy of biography with my inability to abandon the project because of its implausibility. What follows is more succinct biography than I had anticipated, but with one major difference: where there was insufficient detail to compile what I considered a reasonable historical record, I split the narrative and created two sub-narratives that attempt to show two possible sides of the story. One is the romantic account I first ended up with, the second a more “pessimistic” version that tries to “speak back” to my own limitations.

Following this truncated memoir is a review of biography and narrative as genres and a look at the theoretical framework I used to deconstruct the writing process and its boundaries. I examine my own experience to dissect obstacles to biography such as memory, responsibility, authorship, romanticism, normativism, and narrativism. This process, I hope, will create a more

complete biography by identifying not just what we know about Marget's life, but also acknowledging the deficiencies inherent in any historical narrative.



## PART ONE: Biography

The story of Marget Thomas is driven by three significant circumstances: Indianness, Femininity, and Appalachianess. Though each trait seems to have affected her in different ways at different times in her life, it is the combination of these traits that makes her story unique. Marget's biography provides a counternarrative to monolithic representations of these groups, and illustrates the ways individuals combat systemic obstacles at a local level. Most of Marget's story takes place in what is now considered "Appalachia." There is tremendous deliberation over what defines Appalachia—where its boundaries are, who its people are, and what its history is, even how to pronounce it. The geographic locale of rural Appalachia is in central or southern Appalachia in a broader sense—the Carolinas, Kentucky, the Virginias, Tennessee, and Georgia, although parts of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Maryland, Alabama, and Mississippi are also considered part of Appalachia. The problem with these groupings, however, is that even among states with similar demography and history, regional variations prevent a monolithic definition of "Appalachia."

Most of the images of Appalachia seem to originate from TV or music, with shows like *The Dukes of Hazard*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and *Deliverance* providing the faces and a twangy banjo providing the soundtrack to a gruesome cast of how Backwater America functions. Jo Carson reflects on these stereotypes in the following excerpt from *Stories I Ain't Told Nobody*:<sup>1</sup>

Mountain people  
can't read,  
can't write,  
don't wear shoes,  
don't have teeth,  
don't use soap,  
and don't talk plain.  
They beat their kids,

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<sup>1</sup> Jo Carson, "Stories I Ain't Told Nobody," in Mary K. Anglin, Women, Power, and Dissent in the Hills of Carolina, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

beat their friends,  
beat their neighbors,  
and beat their dogs.  
They live on cow peas,  
fatback and twenty acres,  
straight up and down.  
They don't have money.  
They do have fleas,  
overalls,  
tobacco patches,  
shacks,  
shotguns,  
and liquor stills,  
and at least six junk cars  
in the front yard. Right?

Bobby Ann Mason calls this vision of Appalachia the story of a “Retarded Frontier,” a “lawless, backward wasteland... populated by L'il Abner [and] the feuding Hatfield and McCoy clans.”

She notes that, “Like many Kentuckians who leave the South, I have experienced the shame these images impose upon us. They make you deny your language and your story and accept as authority others' view of you.”<sup>2</sup> The 1990s brought a new genre of “Redneck Jokes” that functioned in a similar manner: “Redneck jokes define poverty as a matter of inferior taste. If these people are poor, they probably deserve it, and it's probably their own fault. If they live in trailers, have bad teeth, and only go to the fifth grade, it's because they choose it, because they are ignorant and stupid, ridiculous somehow. They are, in any case, not to be taken seriously.”<sup>3</sup>

These images did not emerge independently, however, and though they currently occupy a space in the realm of entertainment, they were at one time a hegemonic vision of Appalachia. In 1912, a government agent by the name of Dawley was sent to Appalachia to report on the conditions. On his trip he found, “There were cabins, shacks and houses almost everywhere it seemed that one could be placed. Even old tobacco-barns, rotting away with neglect, were

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<sup>2</sup> Mary K. Anglin, Women, Power, and Dissent in the Hills of Carolina, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2002) pg. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Anglin, pg. 3.

inhabited. Slattern-looking, idle women were sitting in doorways with children, dirty and ragged like themselves, moping around. They were the women and children that toiled not, neither did they spin.”<sup>4</sup> He continued, “Their bodies are actually starved by the food that fails to supply the nourishment for growth and development of the human body and mind, and then comes the whiskey that makes them mad, and sometimes drives them to killing one another.”<sup>5</sup>

Reports such as these frame the beginnings of the “Backwards Appalachia” discourse, and have been problematic to the residents of Appalachia for generations. Gwendolyn Jackson, a teacher in Kentucky, discusses the limitations it has imposed on her: “When I meet someone from New York or Boston and I tell them I’m from Harlan County, or more specifically, Lynch, Kentucky, they automatically think I’m a hillbilly with a corncob pipe and a straw hat. That’s a hard stereotyped to overcome, and it makes it harder for me to teach.”<sup>6</sup>

In backlash to such broad categorizations, another body of literature has created an antithetic image of Appalachia, where “hill-culture” and “kin” form an egalitarian and idyllic existence in the midst of a “corrupt” modernity. This counternarrative has been taken up by residents and scholars of Appalachia alike and often reflects a certain amount of disgust mixed with regional pride, as seen here in the final lines of Carson’s poem:

Well, let me tell you:  
I’m from here,  
I’m not like that  
and I’m damn tired of  
being told I am.

The result of this “alternate” history is “The recognition of Southern Appalachia as a region whose history belies myths of a simple farming area barely touched by the forces of

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<sup>4</sup> Anglin, pg. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Philippe Cyprés and Randall Norris, Women of Coal, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), pg. 42.

modernization.”<sup>7</sup> To Patricia Musick Hatfield, a resident of Appalachia, “The real danger is that we don’t want to lose our sense of Appalachian culture” through hegemonic and simplistic discourses; Hatfield’s conception of “Appalachian culture” “is characterized by an attachment to the land and the attachment our people feel toward one another.”<sup>8</sup> Forceful commentaries of this sort illustrate the deficiency of the “backward” Appalachia narrative and show there are significant omissions of relevance to many.

Yet, the romantic version of the story seems equally out of proportion, as its idealistic portrayal of life in Appalachia does not include many of the hardships experienced in the region. In this way, both exaggerated visions of Appalachia miss the mark: “For some observers, rural Appalachians shared a violent and primitive culture that needed modernizing and civilizing. Others believed that the mountain people were a romantic remnant of a purer past before modernization spoiled American and that their culture was worthy of preservation. In both cases, simplistic and often inaccurate perceptions of the mountain people bore little relationship to the complex realities of their lives.”<sup>9</sup>

One point both scenarios have in common is their gendered representation of “hill life.” Women are portrayed as “also-rans” in a male-dominated society, the purveyors of large families and either beneficiaries of their husband/father/brothers’ ingenuity (in the romanticized case) or victims of their brutishness (in the backward case). This story depicts women as non-productive and unimportant members of life in Appalachia, and devalues their very significant contributions in formal and informal labor, and as powerful figures in their communities. These “old stereotypes that render Appalachian women as simply wives, mothers, or daughters—

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<sup>7</sup> Anglin, pg. 119.

<sup>8</sup> Cyrés and Norris, pg. 110.

<sup>9</sup> Melissa Walker, All We Knew Was to Farm: Rural Women in the Upcountry South, 1919-1941, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), pg. 4.

essentialized family members who occupied the realm of the private—fail to measure the complexities of their lives” and minimize their appearances in many narratives.<sup>10</sup> Such omissions create problematic accounts, as was the case in one study of Appalachia which entirely ignored women, “as laborers, co-participants in labor disputes, or even as householders reproducing labor for the mines.” Narratives of this type “not only marginalize women, they signal the minimizing of Appalachian culture.... If women exist primarily within the context of families, and families are defined as being part of privatized worlds, then regional traditions can be seen as tantamount to conventions that inform personal identities and private lives. The realm of political economy affects them, but they remain outside it.”<sup>11</sup>

Many cases render women invisible only at times, or in certain situations. There is not necessarily a discerned effort to omit the lives of women from the narrative; they are simply not mentioned. This omission sometimes comes as a result of the author’s conception of what constitutes authenticity; a narrative discussing labor patterns in *Fin de siecle* America might not consider informal work of women to be *true* labor, women employed in the formal sector might be too few to mention, records of female employees might not have been kept because of their “marginal” status, for example. In any case, the exclusion of women from the account is seen as obvious, normal, and natural; when they are brought up, it is usually in a romantic context and in a “traditional” role of femininity, such as Linda Gaile Fee’s recollection of her ancestors: “From my mother, my grandmother, my family members, and other women I’ve known, I’ve learned that mountain women carry the family, and the family revolves around them.”<sup>12</sup> Gwendolyn D. Jackson has a similar view of Appalachian Women: “Appalachian women have always struggled against fear, and that’s what makes them unique. They have to be twice as good, because they’re

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<sup>10</sup> Anglin, pg. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Anglin, pg. 105.

<sup>12</sup> Cyprés and Norris, pg. 6.

struggling against two things: their own men's ideas from the past and myths people have about women from the region.”<sup>13</sup>

It is in response to this type of discourse that I wish to consider the story of Marget Thomas, born in rural Kentucky to parents who had just left their homes on a Seneca reservation in southwestern New York. Marget's life continued to take unusual turns that would eventually lead her to reject conventional notions of femininity and motherhood, the institution of marriage, and the boundaries of race and class in Appalachia. Within this structure are two parallel stories about Marget Thomas; where “facts” run dry and interpretation is necessary, the limitations of authorship have made impossible a single story line. What follows is an attempt to historicize the life of Marget Thomas in a way that serves her memory justice, maintains scholarly integrity, and informs us as much about ourselves as it does the past.

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<sup>13</sup> Cyprés and Norris, pg. 42.

## Background

The Iroquois Confederacy, composed of six Indian nations, supported the British during the American Revolution, and lost much of their land holdings at the end of the war. Subsequent negotiations with the US government throughout the 1780s and 1790s, including the disastrous Treaty of Canandaigua in 1794, “left the Iroquois with a shrunken homeland, a reduced standard of living, and a demoralized society.”<sup>14</sup> The final blow came in 1797 with the Treaty of Big Tree, which parceled out all but a few reservations for each of the six nations (tribes were entities within nations). The Seneca were left with only 311 square miles of land across eleven plots, the largest of which was the combined 200 square mile Buffalo Creek/Tonawanda reservation.<sup>15</sup>

The purchaser of the Iroquois holdings was Robert Morris, a real estate speculator from Philadelphia. However, after running into financial troubles during the drawn-out negotiation process, Morris sold his right to purchase Indian lands to a group of Dutch bankers operating under the name of Holland Land Company, under the condition that Morris take care of all negotiations with the Seneca. The talks reached an impasse when Chief Red Jacket requested that Congress refuse Morris a license to purchase Seneca lands, saying “We are much disturbed in our dreams about the great Eater with a big Belly endeavoring to devour our lands. We are afraid of him, believe him to be a conjurer, and that he will be too cunning and hard for us.”<sup>16</sup>

Ultimately, Morris bribed other sachems and authority figures within the tribe, and on the basis of false promises, negotiated a sale with the Seneca. Although lot 329, a forested twenty-six acre plot of land within the reservation, was sold to the Holland Land Company, stipulations

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<sup>14</sup> Anthony F.C. Wallace, “The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca,” (New York: Random House, 1969) pg. 179.

<sup>15</sup> Wallace, pg. 183.

<sup>16</sup> Wallace, pg. 181.

within the Treaty of Big Tree gave the Seneca power over the sale of their land holdings; so at the time, the transfer of ownership was simply symbolic. But in 1810 the Holland Land Company grew tired of their purchase, and sold the right to preemption to David Ogden and a few other local land speculators, under the name Ogden Land Company. Over the next few years, the Ogden Land Company attempted to persuade the Seneca to sell their land and move west to Ohio or Kansas, and frequently used “bribes, threats of dire punishment ... and deliberate misrepresentation of the facts.”<sup>17</sup> Three more treaties in 1821, 1826, and 1838 chiseled away at the Iroquois and Seneca holdings, until the final negotiation in 1842 left the Seneca with only the Alleghany, Cattaraugus, and Oil Creek reservations.<sup>18</sup> Upon realizing their mistake, Chief Red Jacket and the Seneca protested and continued negotiations until a forged treaty was ratified and the land was officially transferred. After further attempts to have the treaty annulled failed, the Seneca regained some rights to their land until 1842, when the land was signed over for good.<sup>19</sup> Residence continued for several years while the last of the Buffalo Creek reservation left for refuge in neighboring communities.

Around the time of the final sale of Seneca lands in 1842, four Germans including Christian Metz left for New York in search of a new home for their religious congregation. From this trip, the "Community of True Inspiration" (a.k.a. "Inspirationists" and "Ebenezers") bought 5,000 acres of the Buffalo Creek holding from Ogden on which to create their society. For the next few years the Seneca continued to live on the reservation, as New York law still stipulated that the land was under tribal control in spite of all the sales and treaties that had taken place. But after a final reappraisal by the U.S. Government on plea from the Inspirationists, the Seneca were paid an additional sum for the land and received a letter explaining that they had

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<sup>17</sup> Wallace, pg. 323-4.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Lloyd Graham, "Obtaining Indian Lands Through Bribery," Buffalo Courier Express, 02 December 1973.



lost claim to the land and "...that the Indians must yield up the tracts or they would only bring ruin upon them, and the stipulations of the treaty must be strictly adhered to."<sup>20</sup>

This community, dubbed "Ebenezer" after a Biblical term meaning "Hitherto has God helped us," would attract some 800 members from Germany and Switzerland between 1843 and 1846.<sup>21</sup> The residents of Ebenezer lived in communal manner; however, "Unlike Marxian communism, the system of the Inspirationists was controlled by religion."<sup>22</sup> In 1855, after all the tribulations of gaining rights to the land, the 1,200-some Inspirationists left to establish a new settlement in Iowa named Amana (meaning "believe faithfully," the name they are now most widely recognized by). Metz sold the Buffalo Creek settlement for a "considerable profit."<sup>23</sup>

During this time, Marget's parents, Rena (b1855) and Felix Thomas (b1853), were born on the Buffalo Creek reservation and were undoubtedly affected by the disputes of the time. Nathaniel Strong (b1829), Rena's father, was a council chief on the reservation, and would have been active in the politics of the land dealing. Family records show that Nathaniel Strong died on the Cattaraugus reservation, where the family likely moved after being evicted from Buffalo Creek. Thus, when Rena's father died in 1872, five years before the birth of Marget, it may have seemed a reasonable choice to leave the reservation (there is no death information for Rena's mother, Isabella, b1831).

The specific reasons why Rena and Felix left the reservation are as unknown as the route through the Appalachians they took to arrive in Kentucky. One possibility is ill sentiment towards Seneca in the region resulting from all the disputes over land rights, perhaps resulting in

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<sup>20</sup> Frank J. Lankes, *The Ebenezer Society* (Buffalo: Kiesling Printing Company, 1963), pg. 36.

<sup>21</sup> Bertha M.H. Shambaugh, "Amana: the Community of True Inspiration," (Iowa City, IA: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1908) pg. 61.

<sup>22</sup> Barbara S. Yambura and Eunice W. Bodine, "A Change and a Parting: My Story of Amana," (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1908) pg.29.

<sup>23</sup> Bodine and Yambura, pg. 30.

a lack of employment opportunities. With the reservation's social structure falling out from under the tribe over the course of a few decades, it is quite likely many families were split apart in the diaspora resulting in a sudden loss of community.

Another important and unquantifiable consideration is the effect of the Civil War on the Thomas' decision to head south. With all the fighting taking place a few states to the south, and Rena and Felix being just ten and twelve at the war's conclusion, it is unlikely that the war had a daily influence on their upbringing or social consciousness. Still, the war must have had an influence on the journey Felix and Rena took in arriving in Kentucky; there is no evidence that they chose Kentucky beforehand as their destination, so there may have been a specific set of circumstances that led them to stay in a border state rather than continuing south or stopping farther north.

## Industry and Proletarianization: 1879 to 1936

One such circumstance may have been the rapid industrialization of Appalachia during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially the growth of coal production in Kentucky. Though many historians portray the “Appalachian frontier... in unchanging isolation until coal mining developed in the 1880s,” such accounts are incomplete, for “variations within the regional economy are ignored.”<sup>24</sup> Rather, the “Evolution and patterns of those activities reveal complex economic change and diversity between 1800 and 1860, when a frontier economy was gradually replaced by burgeoning agricultural and industrial structures.”<sup>25</sup> Further, the growth of the salt and iron industries “created an external demand that surpassed the... production capacity” of the region, created a market beyond “localized exploitation of mineral resources,” and created new jobs. For instance, “Census returns for 1840 showed 104 men employed at four ironworks, which had produced a total of 900 tons of cast iron... More than 4,000 tons were produced in 1870, with iron and ore mines and charcoal blast furnaces providing employment for more than 425 people.”<sup>26</sup>

There is no information within the family about the employment sought by Rena and Felix, nor is it clear whether they knew of the industrial transformation taking place at the time. Yet, family lore has the couple making the journey on foot (with a horse?), through the Appalachian Mountains, where they likely stayed in isolation. This story is also consistent with many historical accounts, which portray Appalachian mountain life as an idyllic existence: “Oral histories testifying ‘we’re all kin’ are taken as proof of a largely undifferentiated population and that kinship, rather than class, was the organizing principle of mountain society,” although such

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<sup>24</sup> Tyrel G. Moore, “Economic Development in Appalachian Kentucky, 1800-1860,” in Appalachian Frontiers: Settlement, Society, & Development in the Preindustrial Era, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky) 1991.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Manuscript of Censuses Manufactures, 1850, 1860, and 1870; from Tyrel G. Moore.

statements “come with the caveat that class distinctions did exist in the mountains during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and eventually became very important.”<sup>27</sup> Still, there is some truth to this “juxtaposition of the modern coal-dependent society to the premodern subsistence society,” as there is significant evidence that families “were able to reproduce themselves without also producing for a commercial market.”<sup>28</sup> This kind of atmosphere, however tenuous it may be in reality, might have appealed to the Thomas family after coming off a similarly family and subsistence-oriented life on the reservation, particularly if they originally left Buffalo Creek because of the encroachment and possible ill-treatment by settlers.

It was in this setting that Marget was born somewhere in eastern Kentucky on October 27, 1879. The twenty-five year gap between Nathaniel Strong’s death in 1872 (and the presumably corresponding departure of Felix and Rena from New York) and the birth of Marget’s first child around 1897 may indicate that the family achieved some degree of comfort and sustainability in Kentucky. If no news is good news, then the family seems to have gotten along well during those years. Marget was one of nine children and had at least one brother, Chester, whom she would later rely upon for child care. Thus, it seems reasonable, given historical evidence of labor and settlement patterns of the time, the geographic location of the birth of Marget’s children (Bath County, in eastern Kentucky, according to a birth certificate), and the family’s upbringing on the reservation, that they were able to live as an extended family unit in the relative isolation of the Appalachian hills, perhaps with some supplemental income provided by labor in the burgeoning industrial complex of the region.

At the same time, the large gap between when Rena and Felix left the reservation and the birth of Marget may indicate that the family encountered significant difficulty in Kentucky.

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<sup>27</sup> Moore, 238

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 240

Rena and Felix were twenty-four and twenty-six at the time of Marget's birth, which was somewhat older than average. That they did not have a child for so long might be evidence of the impediments they came across in Kentucky. It is possible they either could not find any employment, and thus did not have the resources necessary to raise a family, or they were both so overemployed in the local industries they did not have time for one. At the same time, it might a modern interpretation to talk about couples waiting to have children, as no contraception was available to the couple. This view could be anachronistic; perhaps they were simply unable to conceive before then.

In either case, it is uncertain whether Marget or Rena was formally employed during their years in eastern Kentucky. Had they been employed it would likely have entailed some type of industrial labor, as their rural dwelling may not have afforded such informal options as childcare, seamstressing, etc. available in major urban areas. Susan Oglebay's account of the changes that took place at that time paints a mixed picture: "Back then, this area was a rural, very sparsely populated, subsistence farming region. The coal industry changed it into a business center of sorts." Yet, she is quick to add, "It's a very limited business center because it doesn't teach skills that go beyond the coal industry itself, and those skills don't transfer into other areas. It creates temporary financial security."<sup>29</sup> Thus, formal employment in a business setting may or may not have benefited—or been pursued—by the Thomases. Similarly, it is difficult to determine what women's roles in factory settings were; as Helen M. Lewis discusses it, "The history of women's role in the coalfields and their struggles to improve family life and communities has been poorly documented, partly because much of their work is conserving, preserving, trying to hold the family and community together, and survive the onslaught of

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<sup>29</sup> Cyprés and Norris, pg. 35.

industrialization and exploitation.”<sup>30</sup> Though her reason for the omission is perhaps excessively romanticized, it is confirmed by census studies of the time: “The 1880 census identified girls and women mainly by virtue of their relationship to heads of household, [and] information about gendered economic relations can be gleaned from this problematic source... the population schedule did not record women’s involvement in gender-stratified occupations such as midwife, washerwoman, or tayloress and also the work of teaching and servanthood (domestic/field labor) where both women and men found employment, in different capacities.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, it is possible that Marget and other women in her family benefited from the industrialization of the region, even if there are no memories or records of their achieving formal employment. At the same time, by far the most prevalent vision of Femininity was that of a domestic sphere. Gwendolyn D. Jackson recalls that children “were also raised with the idea that things should stay the way they were in the old coal mining days, when Daddy went off to work and Momma stayed home and raised a houseful of kids.”<sup>32</sup> Both may have been true, though there are no records to prove or disprove either theory.

In this setting, the family lived not in complete isolation as many accounts of Appalachia portray. Photos of Marget in later life show that she must have been an attractive young woman, with long, straight and shiny black hair, high cheek bones, obsidian black eyes. A consistency in descriptions of her, whether positive or negative in perspective, is her energetic nature, likely a basis of both her courtships and her entanglements with people espousing antagonistic points of view. As a young woman, she led enough of a public life to be courted by two men, Sherman Crisp and Lee Chambers. Crisp was the father of Marget’s first child, Edith, who died of tuberculosis at three or four. Sherman and Marget never married, and three years later she was

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<sup>30</sup> Cyprés and Norris, pg. 96.

<sup>31</sup> Anglin, pg. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Cyprés and Norris, pg. 42.

pregnant with her son Joe, fathered by a Welshman named Lee Chambers. Chambers has been described in family lore as being “a man of some means,” and while he was likely not wealthy by modern standards, he may have been somewhere in the middle of the Appalachian dichotomy of industrial tycoons and subsistence mountain folk (again, an oversimplification perhaps made popular by such media as *The Dukes of Hazard* or *The Beverly Hillbillies*).

There are two points of significance to Chambers’ wealth and Marget’s involvement with both men. First, she lived unmarried with both men in succession, a highly unusual practice at the time (to say the least). Second is in Marget’s pronouncement: “I don’t need any man’s money and I don’t need any man’s name.” Women refusing to marry was not, however, completely unheard of; Sarah J. Barton, who lived in the same era in a similar region, echoed this decision: “I never thought about marrying. Whenever you marry there’s two lines, and if you live by yourself there’s just one line and you can do what you want. The Bible says contentment is great gain. If you’re content with what you’re doing, then you’ve got it. Don’t ask for more.”<sup>33</sup> Alta Whitaker felt similarly, though for different reasons: “I don’t have a man and don’t want one. Every one I ever had treated me like a dog.”<sup>34</sup> The reasons for Marget’s refusal to marry are unknown, but it’s clear she was not alone.

Recounted by her grandchildren, Marget’s statement in defiance of marriage has been remembered as a characteristic of Marget’s defiance of just about anything she didn’t agree with, as well as her fiercely independent nature. This anecdote may also be evidence of Marget’s Seneca identity, as family records within the tribe are matrilineal and children are given their mother’s last name. Accordingly, her renouncement of marriage (in spite of extensive shared

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<sup>33</sup> Cyprés and Norris, pg. 38.

<sup>34</sup> Cyprés and Norris, pg. 24.

residence) with the requirement to take another name may also have been a sign of her identity as Seneca, though the family showed no outward signs of celebrating Indianness.

This interpretation gives Marget quite a bit of credit, however, and gives her decisions great purpose, foresight, and rationality. Though it is possible Marget was very forward-thinking, another reality of the situation is that she was 17 when her first child was born, never went to school, and by all accounts had no access to social circles that would embrace her behavior. Though they now may be construed as expressions of independence and “identity,” Marget’s actions may just as well be interpreted as signs of the desperation and destitution she experienced growing up. It is possible her family arrived in the hills of Kentucky as “outsiders,” and without viable work skills in the rapidly industrializing area, they were left on the margins of society, barely getting by. In this case, Marget’s renunciation of marriage could have been a rebellion against her family’s wishes for her to marry and use a husband as a vehicle for change, or as contempt for people in the community she did not consider “her own” and did not accept her or her family.

Thus, in 1906, with her son Joe just six years old, Marget left Kentucky for Middletown, Ohio in search of work. She left Joe in Kentucky to be raised on a farm with her brother Chester Thomas and their cousin Charlie Scott, and family accounts indicate that she rarely saw him again until her return some thirty years later. Named for its location between Dayton and Cincinnati, Middletown had a population of about 13,000 in 1910 that grew to nearly 30,000 by 1930.<sup>35</sup> The reasons why Marget may have decided to leave for Ohio are unknown, but could be similar to her parents’ motivation to leave Buffalo Creek. Though there are no records of Felix and Rena’s deaths, they would have been close to 60 when Marget left Kentucky, and their

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<sup>35</sup> Middleton Population Census, 1880-2000, <http://www.ci.middletown.oh.us/pdf/planning/Census.pdf>, City of Middleton Planning Department, 2002.



passing (along with the death of her first child, Edith) may have been a catalyst for her leaving. Further, since Marget was a single mother, she might have relied on her larger family for support (as she rejected her suitors' money). If there was a sudden shift in family structure, like the death of one or both parents, the family might have split apart, and leaving Joe with her brother could have been Marget's only viable option if she was to work for a living. In addition, if she was living with Chambers up until 1906, her rejection of his marriage proposal and a possible falling out of the couple could have prompted her leaving, if for no other reason than because she was out a home.

The climate of growth in Middletown thus may have appealed to Marget in the same way Kentucky, emerging from the civil war and heading into an era of industrialization, appealed to her parents. Located in the Miami valley along the Miami Rivers, Middletown has an industrial history dating back to the antebellum blitz of Appalachian manufacturing. The major industries of Middletown included paper, steel, tobacco, and later, aircraft.<sup>36</sup> With at least steel and tobacco in common with the communities Marget came from in Kentucky, it is possible she moved north in response to an increasing demand for a type of labor she was already familiar with. This possibility is similar to the situation of Cosby Ann Totten: "That's basically what coal mining meant to me. It was a way to raise my kids until they were old enough to get out of school."<sup>37</sup> Totten felt pressured by the social climate to support her family, and noted, "Work gives people their dignity, and in the United States, you're not worth anything unless you're drawing a paycheck."<sup>38</sup> For both women, the demands of the family may have outweighed gendered labor taboos of the time.

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<sup>36</sup> George C. Crout, "Industrial Middletown," [http://www.middle-america.org/crout/Social/ch\\_05.html](http://www.middle-america.org/crout/Social/ch_05.html), Middletown Historical Society, 1999.

<sup>37</sup> Cyprés and Norris, pg. 16.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

Another possibility is that Marget's departure was not really a *decision* at all, but a response to an unfavorable social climate. Supposing the contempt/rebellion/marginalization theory holds water, perhaps Marget left Kentucky because she needed to start over in a community that did not know her past. In her late life Marget outwardly rejected religion, though perhaps not simply because she was left-leaning and did so on her own volition. Most of the community engagements of the time were through church groups, and whether or not she wanted to attend, she may not have been allowed because of her personal history. Some now might say she could simply have repented, joined the Baptist church, and mended her ways. As a born-again, she could have been accepted. "I'm not sure about this in any detail, but I strongly believe that was not an option," recalls her granddaughter. "The church did not extend open arms to people, especially women, of any type of marginality." Her sister, Florence, "was not accepted as a divorced woman, and despite her intense religiosity now, that is very recent, only after she remarried."<sup>39</sup> This portrayal of the Baptist church at the time is congruent with other historical accounts: "The arrangements of the Baptist church, where men held the most powerful positions as deacons, preacher, and choirmaster, mirrored that distrust. By contrast, women could aspire only to become church secretary, treasurer, and Sunday school teachers in the women's and girls' classes."<sup>40</sup> Thus, the most likely group to enable Granny to integrate with the community was closed to her, not by any official decree, but by a norm that "everybody knows." Moving to Middletown, where she could live without her illegitimate child and in isolation from those who knew her past, may have been necessary.

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<sup>39</sup> Sue Hegyvary, Personal Interview, March 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Anglin, pg. 122.

## **Homecoming: 1936 to 1951**

In Marget's absence, Joe Thomas grew up and stayed in Kentucky, eventually purchasing a farm in Dry Ridge, Kentucky, about seventy-five miles south of Middletown. Joe went through a hard upbringing with his uncle, to whom his presence was a burden and cause for significant resentment. How much of that resentment was directed at him individually and how much was vicariously felt for the family's ill sentiment toward Marget is unclear, but he clearly was not taken in without working for it. Joe did not receive much education and in return for board labored extensively on the farm, either in the fields, with the animals, or helping with the family moonshining for supplemental income.<sup>41</sup> Family accounts portray Joe as both an angry boy and an angry man for most of his life, even going so far as to say that Rena, his wife, was the only one who could "tame him." Yet, somehow ingrained in him during that time was a powerful sense of family responsibility and motherhood, for the only person he could never stand up to was Marget.

There is no evidence the two had contact over the years, but Marget did visit occasionally and seemed to always know where she could find Joe. In 1936, Marget called Joe out of the blue and told him, "Joe, come get me." Joe did so without a word, and there is evidence the family somehow knew that the man Marget had been living with in Ohio had died and she was left alone. When she returned to Kentucky at the age of fifty-seven to live with Joe, Rena, and their seven children (by the time Marget would die in 1951, two more grandchildren would be born), it was seen as the natural thing to do.

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<sup>41</sup> The illegal production of alcohol is one of the more prevalent stereotypes of Appalachia, but seems to be for good reason; Alta Whittaker conveys a similar story: "I started bootlegging in the 1950s so I could take better care of the boys... I bootlegged for eighteen years, until the boys were raised, then I quit. It kept me off welfare, and I raised my three boys." (Cyprés and Norris, pg. 24)

Just as unclear as her reasons for leaving are Marget's reasons for returning, especially to a son she didn't raise. After three decades of working to support herself through a world war and a depression, it is quite likely that she was ready for a break. The time period in which she returned to Kentucky may also have been relevant: "For the women of the upcountry South, the years between the end of World War I and the end of World War II marked a liminal moment in their struggles to shape their own lives—a point at which the modern industrial world and the intervening hand of big government intruded on their once-insular communities, forcing new choices and redefinition of their roles as women."<sup>42</sup> It is possible that Marget's generation were unable to transform to the demands of the new era, and her failure to adapt caused her to seek refuge in the Kentucky family.

The family was not wealthy, though they did not consider themselves poor. Indeed, this was in a large part because "Social status was based on rural, communal values—a complex and dynamic mix of economic and cultural factors. Resources alone did not determine where one fell in the social hierarchy."<sup>43</sup> The fact remained, however, that the family had neither extra space nor resources that would have inspired Marget to return. She had her own corner of a room beside the kitchen in the farmhouse, with a bed and a dresser. On her dresser was a woven basket that all of the grandkids knew never to touch, but one thing they knew was in it was her rouge. As her grandchildren report, Marget always swore she never wore it, but neither the mirrors nor her eyesight were very good. If anybody commented on her makeup, she would say she didn't wear makeup, she was just healthy. On one occasion, one of her grandsons said to her one morning, "Granny, I think you're healthier on the left side than on the right today" at which point she "swelled up like a wet hen."

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<sup>42</sup> Walker, pg. 3.

<sup>43</sup> Walker, pg. 6.

Marget's physical position in the house is in some ways emblematic of her emotional position. Just as her bed was stuck in the corner of the room by the kitchen (not quite the living room, but the kitchen serves the same purpose for this interpretation), Granny occupied a space in the family consciousness that was simultaneously at the center of affairs and in the margins. No one could help but interact with her, and each person in the family seems to have had a different relationship with her. But at the heart of the arrangement was the impression that Margaret was somehow a questionable addition to the family. Nobody knows how she felt about the situation, whether she was embarrassed, regretful, or simply pragmatic. She gave no sign that she expected comfort or anybody's indulgence. Whether she was really so utilitarian in her ethics and values is unknown. She was a marginal person, both by circumstances and by her own choosing. Societal norms in those days provided little latitude for anybody, but especially for a woman—at that, a woman of Indian ancestry, a woman who refused to marry, a woman who bore two children out of wedlock, and a woman who abandoned her son. Most likely, none of these facts was ever discussed aloud by members of the family.

One anecdote is particularly illustrative of her interactions with the family: Granny's name was always a bone of contention. She insisted it was Marget, but on multiple occasions someone in the family would tell her Marget is not a name, it has to be Margaret. She insisted she was not Margaret, she was Marget. The disputes ended in silence, Granny brooding, and others shaking their heads that she could be so stubborn and ignorant. These quarrels are seemingly minor, but they demonstrate how she did not fit their mold. It was not possible for somebody to exist outside of the family's, much less the region's, social norms.

Nonetheless, Marget contributed to most every aspect of farm life, though in her later years cooking and work in the house replaced work in the tobacco fields. One aspect of family

life never embraced by Marget was the family's regular attendance at the Baptist church. Many of the grandchildren's questions about Granny were left unanswered, and one such unmentionable was why she stayed at home on Sundays. Although "Granny had no use for preacher men," the other matriarch of the house, Rena, would regularly invite them over for Sunday dinner after church services.

This difference was one of a few sore spots that existed between "Granny" and "Mama Rena," both of whom fought for dominance within the Thomas household throughout Marget's time there. By all accounts, Rena's resentment of Marget's presence extended beyond her rejection of church. First, Rena did not approve of Marget's background, not marrying, mothering two children from two different men (whom she lived with), then abandoning her son at a young age. Yet, Rena's pleas that Joe not allow Marget to stay went unheard, and "When Mama Rena and Granny started to fight, Papa Joe went to milk the cows." Another sore spot in the house was over the disciplining of Granny's favorite grandchild, little Cecil, her eighth grandchild. The only son to grow up the house during her stay, Cecil was born in 1941 and, to Marget, could do no wrong. She insisted that Cecil not be punished for anything, and the conflict between the two women brewed over proper roles of motherhood.

At the heart of this dispute was Joe, whose intervention was expected but never actualized. Joe was a laconic but forceful presence in the house, domineering to everyone but his mother, whom he addressed as "Marget." Most of his time was spent on the farm, where he retreated whenever family problems (such as the conflict between his wife and mother) arose. An interesting question about Joe's character is how he was ingrained with such a profound understanding of what his mother and his family meant, and "proper" ways to deal with both. Perhaps his faint memories of his mother, whom he last knew only as six-year-old boy, were

romanticized during his difficult upbringing and sustained him throughout his life. Perhaps he had little regard for his own mother, but gained his understanding of family norms from his uncle's family, then simply extended those norms to his own mother when she returned, though he never called her "Mother." Or perhaps he harbored resentment for his mother all those years, and was so debilitated by it that he reverted to his childhood emotions when she came back, and was simply unable to face her. Regardless, the conflicts between the women subtly continued until her unexpected death of a stroke on July 23, 1951.

## Legacy

The effects Granny had on her family were mixed, and perhaps felt most by her grandchildren. Joe's apparent ambivalence about the situation probably belied a greater set of emotions about his past, yet his introversion in later years and complete focus on the state of the farm rendered him somewhat marginal to the family's daily routine until some action from him was needed. After Granny's death the family was centered on Mama Rena, whose status as matriarch was then unquestioned. Yet, Marget was around long enough to influence many of the grandchildren.

The question of Marget's Indianness continues to arise, as she was the last "full blood" Seneca in the family and was the junction between parents that left the reservation and children that all but denied their Indian heritage. Although she is sometimes remembered as "Indian Granny," her Indianness was strictly undiscussed in the family per Mama Rena's hushing, in spite of her family being of unclear Cherokee lineage. The times were not as embracing of American Indian ancestry as they were for the generation of the grandchildren, many of whom later celebrated their Indianness. The effects of Seneca traditions on Joe are also unclear, for although he was technically "half" Seneca, he never knew his father and was raised by a Seneca uncle. One grandchild remembers hearing, on several occasions, Papa Joe singing in the fields when he thought he was alone, and described the singing as "pow-wow type songs" with words he could not understand. That grandchild, Cecil, went on to hold a position on the board of directors for SACNAS, the Society for the Advancement of Chicano and Native Americans, and continues to be a member of both SACNAS and AISES, the American Indian Science and Engineering Society. Another grandchild profoundly influenced by Marget was Melvin, who was born in 1933. Shortly before his death of lung cancer in 1988, Mel went to the Seneca



reservation in New York to track down information about his ancestry, and most of the family records (dating back to 1802) are a result of that visit. His pride in his Indian heritage is evident on his grave marker, on which is written “An American Indian.”

Granny’s influence extended all the way to the youngest child in the family, Cecil’s little sister Sue, who has described what she considers Marget’s “non-conventional, even rebellious, feminist, nature.” One story Sue has about her grandmother is as follows:

A neighbor, Mrs. Phillips, lived up the road about a mile and she used to come to visit Mom, quite often when the tomatoes were ripe and the green beans and corn were at their peak. Everybody knew Mom grew enough garden for an army and would share it with anybody who admired it. Granny never liked "ole Ms. Phillips" who sort of cackled when she talked and was a freeloader. One day after Mrs. Phillips and her scrawny little husband left, Granny and I were working in the garden. I was quite grumpy, as they could always tell by my lower lip sticking out. Granny asked what was wrong. I said "I don't like old Mz. Phillips." Granny asked why. "Cuz she's always asking me what I want to be when I grow up." Granny replied "What did you tell her?" "I dunno. Nothin... She told me I wanna be a lady when I grow up." Granny, after a pause as she continued whopping weeds, remarked: "Ahhhugggh. You don't wanna be a lady when you grow up. Ladies don't have no fun.”

Although Sue admits that she “tends to romanticize [Marget’s] being and her behavior,” Granny’s unconventional outlook on life may have influenced Sue, who, born in 1943, was not quite eight when her grandmother died. Marget’s role in shaping Sue’s conception of femininity may have functioned in much the same way that Marget influenced Joe—through powerful, romanticized, childhood memories. Sue was the second child and the only girl in the family to go to college, and with considerable hesitation from her family, went to Ghana to work in a bush hospital while attending the University of Kentucky. Both she and Cecil, the only children not to know Granny as adults (the oldest child in the family was nearly thirty when Marget died), went on to earn doctoral degrees and tenured professorships.

Yet, there seems to be a distinct difference in grandchildren's memories of Granny based on birth order; though the youngest children tend to place their grandmother on a pedestal in their accounts, the older siblings regard her memory with varying levels of ambivalence or even contempt. One grandchild, Faye, was deeply affected by her grandmother's past. When she found out that her father was born out of wedlock, she reportedly left the room and cried. To her, Marget is not a link to an important but forgotten past, but a foul family secret not worth discussing. Faye remains tight-lipped about her grandmother to this day.

Thus, the legacy of family could be the most profound of Granny's influences on her grandchildren, but also the most disputable. Some say Marget set a poor example of motherhood by abandoning her son and leaving the state to work, only to return later in life to benefit from his success. Her life is remembered as a series of shameful events rooted fundamentally in her rejection of the church, and perhaps peripherally in her Indianness. Her first mistake was having children outside marriage; the second was to forsake her family, however illegitimate it was. She did so selfishly, they say, to pursue employment in "men's work," then lived in sin until her partner died and it became convenient to return to the family she left behind. Granny's years on the Thomas farm were non-participatory at best, parasitic at worse; her presence was a burden on the family, causing tension and setting poor examples. To these relatives, Granny is regarded as a bad apple in the family tree, a hellion whose memory is one of historical fact rather than nostalgia.

Others see Marget's actions in a light of sacrifice rooted in an overwhelmingly idyllic understanding of the family unit. For Marget to take Joe with her to Ohio would have been a difficult, if not impossible proposition at the time, for whatever her employment, there would have been neither time nor money for childcare. Simultaneously, the acceptance of Joe by

Chester Thomas exhibits the emphasis of extended family over the late twentieth century ideal of the nuclear family, however reluctant and resentful Chester and his family may have been about the situation. The same kind of kinship was extended to Joe beyond the family as well; the role of Charlie Scott in Joe's upbringing is hazy, but it seems he spent as much time with the Scott family as his own, perhaps bouncing back and forth where his work was needed. Further, there is no evidence to suggest that Marget was an uncaring or sentimentally devoid person, so her decision to leave Joe must have been unthinkably difficult for her to make.

The reception Granny received upon her return to Kentucky also illustrates the family mentality of the time—there was not a question of whether or not Marget would live on the farm, in spite of her thirty-year absence from Joe's life. “Blood runs thick among hill people,” and it seemed to have been a given that whatever Marget had done in the past would not trump her status as mother to Joe or the rest of the house. Ultimately, whether this kind of intense focus on family relationships was a result of Marget's upbringing as a Seneca, her early life in the Appalachian hills of east Kentucky, or the three decades she spent alone and isolated from her family, the people Granny felt were “her own” seem to be all that mattered to her. She rejected marriage, she rejected wealth, she rejected religion, and she rejected norms of femininity, and the only constants in her life were the relationships with family, even if they had to be put on hold for years at a time while such mundane things as sustenance and housing were dealt with alone, and far away from her family.

## **PART TWO: Analysis and Criticism**

What, then, is the story of Marget Thomas—how would she have defined herself? In all likelihood, Marget did not foster a categorical conception of herself—as Woman, Appalachian, or even Indian. Gwendolyn D. Jackson’s describes her self-concept in a way I can imagine Marget would relate to: “I just look at myself as Gwen, not as an Appalachian woman, not as a black woman. I’m just Gwen.”<sup>44</sup> Further, there are enough turns and empty spaces in her biography to create countless sub-narratives, and with only secondary and tertiary accounts of her life, the current product is more a reflection of the tellers than of Marget. But the same is true of most other biographies, a genre that seems to reside precariously on the seam of historiography and literature. I would like to approach the analysis of Marget’s biography from these two vantage points: literary criticism—looking at the biography as a piece of literature—and historical criticism—analyzing the biography for its historiographic legitimacy. To this end, I will apply the writings of a number of contemporary literary and historiographic theorists to the deconstruction of Marget Thomas’ biography and its creation.

The first series of theorists include Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari, whose writings build upon one another into a valuable method of post-modern textual analysis. Saussure radically changed the interpretation of language and semiotics by asking different questions about language than previous theorists did, in a search for the underlying structure of language that allows people to speak the way they do and know language the way they do. He eventually concluded that language is an arbitrary construction based on a system of opposition through binary relationships. Building from this idea, Saussure’s contemporary Jacques Derrida refined and problematized Saussure’s binary structure by applying fundamental metaphysical problems

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<sup>44</sup> Cyprés and Norris, pg. 42.

to the language paradigm, a process further refined by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan who used the same binary system to apply linguistic study to other realms of human existence. Ultimately, these theorists showed that linguistics are structured in a framework of negative terms, and that the linguistic model can be applied to interpretations of epistemology and other fields in the humanities. The foundation of their work is the basic relationship of visual characters (signifiers) and their meanings (signified); this connection is then extrapolated to describe the relationship between language and knowledge, authors and texts, and it ends with the systemic production of knowledge.

Using this starting point in literary theory, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari refined ways to think about literature in a larger framework of epistemological interpretation. Barthes begins the process by comparing the reader-text relationship to broader applications, such as ethnography and historiography. Similarly, Foucault discusses the role of an author in creating a text, and how the appropriation of discourse takes place; Foucault also ascribes the author-text relationship to non-literary domains. Finally, Deleuze and Guattari present a revolutionary theory of interpreting all types of phenomena. Writing back to the binary structuring of previous linguistic models, Deleuze and Guattari propose an entirely new way of ordering the world that can be applied to every form of knowledge. Though each theory is different, Barthes, Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari all show that literary analysis can be applied to other fields, and linguistic models are a universally defining tool in epistemology.

Building from this underpinning in literary criticism, I will introduce historiographic, ethnographic, and anthropologic theories from Stephen Greenblatt, Clifford Geertz, Hayden White, Gérard Genette, John Toews, and Martha Nussbaum. At the heart of Geertz's argument

is a call for ethnographers to more “thickly” describe their subjects in a way that captures not only the physical, “mute” act, but also the complex implications and objectives framing the matter. Greenblatt agrees with Geertz’s assertion about the necessity for empathetic understanding in ethnographic narratives, but questions the validity of such accounts on the basis of its privileging nature. White and Genette run with this point, and discuss the nature of narrative discourse and its ascendance into the primary form of historiography. In doing so they claim that narrative, although more compelling than other forms of historiography and seemingly more “complete,” is actually most susceptible to the author’s individuality, and thus becomes its own story. In doing so, the history also takes on a self-fulfilling quality whereby its legitimacy and accuracy are judged by its ability to be narrativized, causal, and teleological. Toews echoes this point, but adds another dimension to the author by claiming that the author engages in a dialogical process whereby the subject is “exorcised” the process of historicization (and writing in general) and speaks across worlds to the historiographer. The exchange becomes a “self-making” process for the historiographer, and functional more in reifying the identity and “world” of the author than reporting accurately an historical episode. Finally, Nussbaum explains how narrativization, however useful for its author, can be detrimental to historical accounts because of the “Descriptive” and “Normative Vices” committed during evaluation. The combination of analyses will help clarify the role biography plays in the creation of memory and identity, and illustrate its role in the process of historiography.

## Literary Theoretical Framework

My entry point into a literary criticism of Marget Thomas' biography is the early twentieth-century linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Using language as the basis for an epistemological assessment, Saussure claims that examination of the structure of language offers useful information for other epistemological and philosophical pursuits. The basis of his theory is what he claims is the arbitrary nature of semiology, specifically the interaction between a "signifier" and the "signified." Saussure shows that language is not a "naming-process," whereby we are all equipped with "a list of words, each corresponding to the thing it names;" rather, because "the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary," then "the linguistic unit is a double entity, one formed by the associating of two terms."<sup>45</sup>

In this way, arbitrary assignments of a "signifying" symbol to a "signified" phenomenon give us a linguistic "sign." Using these binary relationships, "the signifier... is fixed... with respect to the linguistic community that uses it."<sup>46</sup> Without these "fixing" definitions, there could be no language, for signifiers are nothing without the signified; therefore, "thought—apart from its expression in words—is a shapeless and indistinct mass."<sup>47</sup> Saussure uses these defining characteristics of language to show that thought is a symptom of language and not the cause, for "There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language."<sup>48</sup> To fix meaning to signifier/signified relationships, "Each linguistic term is a member, an *articulus* in which an idea is fixed in a sound and sound becomes the sign of an

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<sup>45</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, General Course on Linguistics, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966) pg. 67.

<sup>46</sup> Saussure, pg. 71.

<sup>47</sup> Saussure, pg. 111.

<sup>48</sup> Saussure, pg. 112.

idea.”<sup>49</sup> This system establishes linguistic “value,” the meaning that comes out of definition, and sets up language as a system of opposition and difference.

Saussure’s argument later framed the claim that human interactions and knowledge can be represented and examined through the study of linguistics. Saussure was the first to elevate semiotics to a metaphysical level, and showed that language may serve as the ultimate example of how a priori knowledge is handed down memetically among generations. Just as “Language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system” (and thus untraceable origins), so too is human thought dependent on “givens” and memes.<sup>50</sup>

Using this linguistic framework, Derrida deconstructs Saussure’s model, and in doing so both problematizes and validates it. Derrida accepts the signifier/signified relationship of signs, yet attacks it with a basic metaphysical question: if sign relationships truly are arbitrary, then there is no actual structure to language, and if there is no structure, there can be no “center.” As such, Derrida says “Language [has] invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything [becomes] discourse.”<sup>51</sup> To account for the discourse which post-structuralism imposes on the world, Derrida borrows a term from anthropologist Levi-Strauss, “bricoleur.”<sup>52</sup> The bricoleur assembles “the means at hand” into a “bricolage,” a mythopoetic construction of any phenomenon.<sup>53</sup> In creating these myths, the bricoleur reifies whatever arbitrary assignments made in the bricolage, all in order to create a complete structure of the structureless and unstructurable. Because such constructions are reflections of the

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<sup>49</sup> Saussure, pg. 113.

<sup>50</sup> Saussure, pg. 120.

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) pg. 280.

<sup>52</sup> Derrida, pg. 285.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



bricoleur's assumptions and assignments, there is room within the structure for what Derrida calls "play" or "the disruption of presence."<sup>54</sup>

Play of language is thus the elementary problem with arbitrary relationships without positive terms—that multiple signifiers might share a signified, and thus multiple signs might mean the same thing (synonyms). Similarly, multiple signifieds might share a signifier, and thus one word (or phenomenon) might have multiple, radically different meanings. Derrida shows that the binary methodology Saussure originally proposed can be applied to both language and epistemology, validating the claim that language is based on difference without positive terms.

Lacan later used Derrida's model of Saussurian signification to show how semiotics can be applied to psychoanalytic theory. A doctor himself, Lacan wanted to refine Freud's model of Id, Ego, Superego, and did so using a type of signifier/signified → sign methodology. Lacan claimed that we are all born into a structure of language, and as such are molded by it. In this way, language functions as an act of repressions, whereby each person's consciousness is mediated by and through language. Just as Freud discussed repression of the unconscious, Lacan showed that language has repressive qualities. Poetry, jokes, puns, etc. all bring up repressed signifier/signified relationships, for language fixes meaning in the same way the unconscious does. He also discussed metonymy and metaphor, using "algorithms" to illustrate repressed semiotic chains, claiming that metonymy works horizontally by replacing a signifier in a chain with an entirely new one, whereas metaphor works vertically by substituting the signifier with signifier'.<sup>55</sup> These algorithmic chains continue infinitely without a final term, just as human knowledge and existence do.

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<sup>54</sup> Derrida, pg. 292.

<sup>55</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 1982) pg. 164.

By applying fundamental linguistic problems proposed by Saussure to other fields in the humanities, Derrida and Lacan were able to better interpret both language and epistemology. The binary relationship of signifier/signified proposed by Saussure remains the foundation to their models, as all three theorists depend on negative-term definitions. Further refinements such as metonymy/metaphor, play, bricolage, value, etc. all add depth to the linguistic framework, and account for such phenomena as aesthetics, metaphysics, narrative discourse, mythopoesis, etc. Finally, semiotics illustrates the fragility and arbitrariness of human knowledge, as all knowledge is contextually linked to language, an arbitrary construction. Through linguistic inquiry, Saussure, Derrida, and Lacan illustrate not only how language works and is defined, but also that its structure can be applied to other fields and become a comprehensive framework.

Once this paradigm—French structuralism—was established, it was immediately followed by a second wave of literary theory known as post-structuralism. We intercept this stream with Barthes' discussion of how literature gives the reader "pleasure" and "bliss," and how that process can be usefully applied to ethnography, historiography, and anthropology. Barthes starts by asking us to "imagine someone... who abolishes within himself all barriers, all classes, all exclusions."<sup>56</sup> In this model, the reader is an objective interlocutor, "neither a body nor even an object... but merely a field, a vessel for expansions."<sup>57</sup> From this vantage point, the reader finds pleasure in the new text (or culture) from what Barthes describes as an "edge:" "neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, which becomes so."<sup>58</sup> Thus, pleasure from text comes from a new signified meaning linked to a

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<sup>56</sup> Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, New York: Hill and Wang, 1975, pg. 3.

<sup>57</sup> Barthes, pg. 5.

<sup>58</sup> Barthes, pg. 7.

familiar signifier. For Barthes, the dividing “seam” between the signifier and the signified is what “seizes the subject in the midst of bliss.”<sup>59</sup>

His next step is comparing that edge, or seam, of language to human relationships. Barthes compares the new seam between signifier/signified to “the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing,” noting “it is this flash itself which seduces.”<sup>60</sup> In the same way, it is not the understanding of another culture that is appealing, it is precisely that Otherness, the misunderstanding, the erotic, and the marvelous which entice and give us “pleasure.” In these situations we seem to relish the difference of cultures, which Barthes says “is achieved over and above conflict... *beyond and alongside* conflict. Conflict is nothing but the moral state of difference.”<sup>61</sup>

Barthes then accounts for why cultures dispute just as languages do: “We are all caught up in the truth of languages... in their regionality... for each jargon (each fiction) fights for hegemony; if power is on its side, it spreads everywhere in the general and daily occurrences of social life, it becomes *doxa*, nature.”<sup>62</sup> In this way, powerful cultural paradigms spread by their perceived self-evidence become assimilated into other cultures, and are eventually incorporated into those cultures as “nature.” This point is similar to Derrida’s concept of “play,” which he notes exists naturally between signifier/signified and leaves the connection arbitrary, socially constructed, and constantly changing. Eventually, a single definition (sign) is declared for a certain culture and others are subverted, just as “The social struggle cannot be reduced to a struggle between two rival ideologies: it is the subversion of all ideology which is in question.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Barthes, pg. 10.

<sup>61</sup> Barthes, pg. 15.

<sup>62</sup> Barthes, pg. 28.

<sup>63</sup> Barthes, pg. 33.

Finally, Barthes says that he who encounters another culture cannot be the moral authority on difference, just as the reader of a text cannot re-assign signifier/signified → Sign relationships outside of their meaning within the chain of language. Both the reader and the traveler are simply onlookers in a constant battle for meaning, and this conflict (edge/seam) is what gives pleasure: “Bliss may come only with the *absolutely new*, for only the new disturbs (weakens) consciousness.”<sup>64</sup> In these ways, Barthes’ understanding of literary pleasure is applied to non-literary matters and illustrates how aesthetics shape human experience.

Foucault makes a similar link between the study of linguistics and episteme. Building from the relationship of signifier and the signified, Foucault shows that the arbitrary relationship of an author (signifier) and “his” text (signified) does not necessarily change the meaning of what has been written (sign). He begins with the claim that there has been an “individualization in the history of ideas.”<sup>65</sup> Foucault goes on to say, that this “individualization” in the form of authorship is a “privileged position,” one that actually “suppress[es] the real meaning.”<sup>66</sup> He notes that, in focusing on the author of a text, “We try... to imagine the general condition of each text, the condition of both the space in which it is dispersed and the time in which it unfolds.”<sup>67</sup> In doing so, Foucault argues that we lose sight of what the text truly *means* and focus instead on what we expect from that particular person, on his “general condition.” In a sense, rather than looking at the *text* as a signifier of meaning, we look at the *author* as the signifier, and in doing so “repress” other possible signified meanings.

Foucault continues to say of classifying authors that “An author’s name is not simply an element in a discourse... it performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a

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<sup>64</sup> Barthes, pg. 40.

<sup>65</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” In Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism. New York: Cornell University Press, 1979, pg. 101.

<sup>66</sup> Foucault, pg. 103.

<sup>67</sup> Foucault, pg. 105.

classificatory function,” and that “The author’s name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse: the fact that the discourse has an author’s name... shows that this discourse is not ordinary everyday speech that merely comes and goes.”<sup>68</sup> In this way, a signifying value is placed in the author’s name, such that a group of ideas is signified inextricably as a result (e.g. “Platonic,” “Socratic,” “Cartesian,”). Hence, “Discourses are objects of appropriation,” such that “If a text should be discovered in anonymity... the game becomes one of rediscovering the author.”<sup>69</sup> Foucault advocates a more anonymous focus on the text itself, that our reading be centered more on “an interplay of signs arranged less according to its signified content than according to the very nature of the signifier.”<sup>70</sup> In this case, the signifier is not just the semiotic representation of language, but also the appropriation of ideas to a particular “author.”

Ultimately, Foucault does not negate the value of “authorship” in the study of literature, but simply suggests that the author is an “ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning.”<sup>71</sup> As a result, he claims that “It is time to study discourses not only in terms of their expressive value of formal transformations, but according to their modes of existence.”<sup>72</sup> Only in this way will we truly be able to separate the arbitrary relationship of author (signifier) and text (signified) from the meaning of what has been written (sign), then move forward into a deeper understanding of literature. These same sorts of appropriation of discourse take place in historiographic communities, where certain narratives are valued more than others in the name of creating one comprehensive narrative. Foucault’s analysis of literary “authorship” thus illuminates the problems with historiography and the role

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<sup>68</sup> Foucault, pg. 107.

<sup>69</sup> Foucault, pgs. 108-109.

<sup>70</sup> Foucault, pg. 102.

<sup>71</sup> Foucault, pg. 119.

<sup>72</sup> Foucault, pg. 117.

of narrative discourse in the humanities, further illustrating the role of literature in our understanding of epistemology.

Deleuze and Guattari's attempted to speak back to that problem, and claim that literature and the ideas therein do not exist in a binary relationship of signifier/signified. They deny that linguistics and literature depend on a central "root" system, a sort of cosmic epistemological origin from which ideas branch: "The world has become chaos, but the book remains the image of the world: radicle-cosmos rather than root-cosmos."<sup>73</sup> Rather, they advocate an "assemblage" or "multiplicity" of ideas.<sup>74</sup> Here the theory of a rhizome is introduced: rather than the arboreal model of a root, a stem, and branches, there is a single fascicle of jumbled roots and branches, with neither origin nor direction. These rhizomes "ceaselessly establish connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles," and as such "There is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of dialects, patois, slangs, and specialized languages."<sup>75</sup> "Collective assemblages" thereby take the binary "between" out of linguistic relationships and replace it with a less linear "among." In this way, Deleuze and Guattari show that books "exist only through the outside and on the outside," furthering Foucault's claim that there can be no authorship in a possessive sense, and saying neither the writer nor the book itself has ideological rights to the ideas therein: "Literature is an assemblage... it has nothing to do with ideology."<sup>76</sup>

Another feature of a rhizome is what Deleuze and Guattari call an "aparallel evolution," a separation from a linear, teleological progression of roots and branches to a more fluid,

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<sup>73</sup> Deleuze and Felix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) pg.

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<sup>74</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, pg. 4.

<sup>75</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, pg. 7.

<sup>76</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, pg. 4.

disconnected model “jumping from one already differentiated line to another.”<sup>77</sup> With a parallel evolution, “The book is not an image of the world,” but rather “forms a rhizome with the world;” in this way, “the book assures the deterritorialization of the world, but the world effects a reterritorialization of the book, which in turn deterritorializes itself in the world.”<sup>78</sup> Book and world are not intrinsically connected in a binary fashion, but interconnected rhizomatically; thus, fascicular relationships cannot be reduced to a “tracing,” as can root systems, but must be “mapped” inasmuch as “the map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself,” but “fosters connection between fields, the removal of blockages on bodies without organs, the maximum opening of bodies without organs onto a plane of consistency.”<sup>79</sup>

Therefore, tree and root images “inspire a sad image of thought that is forever imitating the multiple on the basis of a centered or segmented higher unity,” and establish hierarchical relationships where it seems that some ideas are privileged over others, and present a “topological explanation” to everything.<sup>80</sup> Deleuze and Guattari thus moved away from opposition-centered theories, and toward “an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states.”<sup>81</sup> Rhizomatic theory requires a more interconnected methodology in which ideas are presented not as *better* and *worse*, but simply as different.

Using literature as a lens for inquiry into other fields incorporates the aesthetic and the “real” into one web of knowledge. Barthes, Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari all presented original theories of literary analysis and created multi-disciplinary models for structuring thought. Barthes’ explanation of how readers find pleasure in texts is also an excellent example

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<sup>77</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, pg. 10.

<sup>78</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, pg. 11.

<sup>79</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, pg. 12.

<sup>80</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, pg. 16.

<sup>81</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, pg. 21.

of cultural interaction, and the importance and significance of narrative accounts of encountering the Other. Foucault's separation of Author and Text illustrates the subjective nature of narratives, one of the main focuses in historiographic and biographic inquiry. And Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic model is a radically different way of ordering the world in a non-hierarchical manner, eliminating cultural problems of a binary world view.



## Historiographic Theoretical Framework

My historiographic analysis of the Marget Thomas biography begins with Clifford Geertz and his seminal model of “thick description.”<sup>82</sup> At the most basic level, thick description is a method of analysis used for “sorting out the structures of signification... and determining their social and ground and import.”<sup>83</sup> In this way, thin and thick descriptions differ in the former “merely describing the mute act, the other giving the act its place in a network of framing intentions and cultural meanings.”<sup>84</sup> Though useful in the study of anthropology, the real value of Geertz’s work at the time was “like touching one wire to another: literary criticism made contact with reality.”<sup>85</sup> He began by explaining the ways contemporary anthropological studies were conducted and transcribed, referring to their removed narrative as being “a note in a bottle” whereby the author’s “data are really his own constructions;” this method leads to a process that is “more observational [than] interpretive” and fundamentally “obscured, because most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, custom, idea, or whatever is insinuated as background information before the thing itself is directly examined.”<sup>86</sup> Thus, thin descriptions create narratives that do not fully consider the context of “the thing itself,” thereby taking meaning out of action. This situation is similar to the signifier/signified nature of language; words out of “context” are simply sounds and shapes, and it is through an understanding of background information (type of language, historical period, speaker, etc.) that meaning can be attained.

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<sup>82</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in The Interpretation of Cultures, (New York, 1973), pg. 3.

<sup>83</sup> Geertz, pg. 9.

<sup>84</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, “The Touch of the Real,” in *Representations* 59 (Summer 1997): pg. 15.

<sup>85</sup> Greenblatt, pg. 14.

<sup>86</sup> Geertz, pg. 9.

However, a crucial difference in the case of historiography is that a narrative without context still claims meaning, legitimacy, and authority, while language without context is simply not understood. This distinction lies in the role of the historian—the author—the bricoleur—of the narrative; while language seems without origin, or can be thought of rhizomatically, historical texts without exception originate from an individual. What Geertz calls the “note in a bottle” narrative style is an attempt by the author to give writing a timeless and originless quality: “The image nicely serves to emphasize that something at once specific... has bobbed up from 1912 and thus from [an era] that has by now long since vanished over the horizon... It thus underscores the promise, implicit in most ethnographic texts... that the excerpt has not been invented by the anthropologist, that it comes from ‘somewhere else.’”<sup>87</sup> In this case the historian attempts to remain anonymous, rather than becoming Foucault’s “Author” and being appropriated the narrative. But however noble this intention, however “objectively” this process is carried out, anonymity is damaging to historiography because the reader is not told the assumptions, motivations, and omissions inherent in a narrative. Accordingly, the role of thick description is to give the reader the signified in addition to the signifier, for “to understand what people are up to in any culture... you need to be acquainted with the imaginative universe within which their acts are signs.”<sup>88</sup>

Yet, regardless of the “thickness” of a description, the value of narrative itself as a form of historiographic representation should be examined. In looking at the role narrativity plays in historical accounts of reality, Hayden White discusses how a narrative differs from other types of historical discourse, such as chronicles or annals. The primary difference between narrative and other forms of historiography (chronicles and annals included) is our ability to “distinguish

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<sup>87</sup> Greenblatt, pg. 15.

<sup>88</sup> Greenblatt, pg. 19.

between a historical discourse that narrates, on the one side, and a discourse that narrativizes, on the other: between a discourse that openly adopts a perspective that looks out on the world and reports it and a discourse that feigns to make the world speak itself and speak itself *as a story*.”<sup>89</sup> White makes this distinction with Gérard Genette in mind; Genette claimed that narrative is characterized “by a certain number of exclusions and restrictive conditions,” assumed by the author, imposed on the reader, and absent from other forms of historical discourse.<sup>90</sup> The product of these two processes is a historical account that sacrifices authenticity for narrativity—an account that omits facts the author deems superfluous or cumbersome to the story. At the same time, ironically, “The objectivity of narrative is defined by the absence of all reference to the narrator,” the same kind of “note in a bottle” tone described by Geertz.<sup>91</sup>

The way we know that narrativism is really the production of a reality rather than a reflection of it is that chronological accounts of events seem in some way limited, meaningless, and unanalyzed; as White says, “Narrative becomes a *problem* only when we wish to give to *real* events the *form* of a story. It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that narrativization is so difficult.”<sup>92</sup> White’s alternatives to historical narrative are annals and chronicles; the first sets forth events chronologically, without interpretation; the second narrates events in chronological order, but without drawing any conclusions from them—“The chronicle is usually marked by a failure to achieve narrative *closure*. It does not so much conclude as simply terminate.”<sup>93</sup> In these methods the historian’s latitude for interpretation lies in which events are considered important, reflected by inclusions and omissions from the account.

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<sup>89</sup> Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn 1980): pgs. 6-7

<sup>90</sup> Gérard Genette, “Boundaries of Narrative,” in *New Literary History* 8, no. 1 (Autumn 1976): pg. 11.

<sup>91</sup> White, pg. 7.

<sup>92</sup> White, pg. 8.

<sup>93</sup> White, pg. 9.

So if narrative historiography is indeed so problematic, why has its existence become so widespread, its acceptance nearly universal? And more importantly asks White, “What kind of insight does narrative give into the nature of real events? What kind of blindness with respect to reality does narrativity dispel?”<sup>94</sup> I believe the answer is that narrative resolves what otherwise is simply a recitation of happenings, but not quite the production of practical knowledge. Focusing entirely on objectivity in historical accounts does not take into account the signifier/signified→sign relationship of historiography; indeed, the role of the historian as creator of narrative is not necessarily negative, but sometimes elemental in generating powerful and useful tellings of history. Assuming that one monolithic *History* exists is like assuming that signs have an original and static signifier/signified relationship; yet, just as words and languages change over time, so too can tellings of events.

Thus, it is not narrative itself that White finds problematic, merely that “The very distinction between real and imaginary events, basic to modern discussions of both history and fiction, presupposes a notion of reality in which ‘the true’ is identified with ‘the real’ only insofar as it can be shown to possess the character of narrativity.”<sup>95</sup> In this way, narrative claims that a chronological telling of events is not a “full” historiography because it lacks causal connections and an according resolution. But this *story* format is an imposition on a reality that may or may not exist, and reflects the historian’s interpretation. This process is accomplished without narration or attention drawn to the author’s choices, and in a way that claims *authority* and *truth*. Yet “Every narrative, however seemingly ‘full,’ is constructed on the basis of a set of events which *might have been included but were left out*,” and thus constructs a “narrative account of reality in which continuity rather than discontinuity governs the articulation of the

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<sup>94</sup> White, pg. 10.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

discourse.”<sup>96</sup> In this way, the ability to mold an historical event into a cohesive narrative form becomes a litmus test for the validity of an account: “The reality of [an event] does not consist in the fact that [it] occurred but that, first of all, [it was] remembered, and second, that [it is] capable of finding a place in a chronologically ordered sequence.”<sup>97</sup>

According to this analysis, the impulse to narrativize comes from a desire to transform a vertical representation of history—a chronological listing of events—into a more tendentious horizontal telling. White first recognizes that “Narrative strains to produce the effect of having filled in all the gaps,” then notes that such is the case in order “to put an image of continuity, coherency, and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time.”<sup>98</sup> Therefore, it seems to White that narrativity is as much an individual practice as it is historiographic. If “Every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to *moralize* the events of which it treats,” then a historiographer cannot help but impose meaning—the interpretation of what the author finds valuable to tell—on his subject, and in doing so seem to reveal “at the end a structure that was immanent in the events *all along*.”<sup>99</sup> Consequently, narrative historiography is useful not so much in the realistic capturing of events passed, but more in making those events “speak to us, summon us from afar, and display to us a formal coherency that we ourselves lack.”<sup>100</sup>

Narrativism is a tool that has “transformed from a manner of speaking into a paradigm of the form which reality itself displays to a ‘realistic’ consciousness... [ and into] a value, the presence

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<sup>96</sup> White, pg. 14.

<sup>97</sup> White, pg. 23.

<sup>98</sup> White, pg. 15.

<sup>99</sup> White, pgs. 18-23.

<sup>100</sup> White, pg. 24.

of which in a discourse having to do with real events signals at once its objectivity, its seriousness, and its realism.”<sup>101</sup>

John Toews expresses similar concerns about narrative discourse and its affects on historiography, but approaches the subject from a new angle; hinted at by White in his statement that narratives “summon us from afar,” Toews’ grievance with narrative is that it is inherently an “othering” process that removes the historian from the subject in a way that produces not objectivity but immutability. His description illustrates the historian as marveling over a subject more than understanding it: “Archival research, like ethnographic fieldwork, is imagined as direct contact with otherness—as experience that is not yet mediated into our webs of meaning. It presents the experience of opacity, impenetrability, meaninglessness—the resistance to being easily assimilated into our worlds.”<sup>102</sup> For Toews, narrative historiography makes the author of a narrative a *translator* of culture, a privileging position, for it implies that *he alone* knows both cultures (the one narrativized and the one narrated to). Here again is the connection between literature and historiography—there can be no narrative without language, but the author’s marveling at his subject creates an othering narrative that is “reinforced by linguistic and textual metaphors that imagine cultures as ensembles of texts produced according to the implicit grammatical rules of a specific language.”<sup>103</sup> Thus, the historiographer becomes “a reader and translator, redescribing statements and actions in other worlds in terms of the grammatical, or idiomatic rules within which they operated,” and in doing so is inherently limited by the context of language.<sup>104</sup> This relationship is problematic because it creates a structure where the author’s interpretations are simply an “attempt to present the subjective construction of pastness as a true

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<sup>101</sup> White, pg. 27.

<sup>102</sup> John Toews, “Historiography as exorcism: Conjuring up ‘foreign’ worlds and historicizing subjects in the context of the multiculturalism debate,” in *Theory and Society* 27 (1998), pg. 542.

<sup>103</sup> Toews, pg. 543.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

representation of the past as an objective reality. Historical realism or objectivity is transformed into an aesthetic effect with ethical implications, a way of constructing the world, rather than a representation of the way the world is.”<sup>105</sup>

Seen in this light, Toews paints a bleak picture of narrative historiography; it seems tendentious at best, meaningless or damaging at worse. But Toews sees value in the narrative method more in its ability to create an identity for the author and those occupying the same “world” than to generate *accurate* representations of another “world.” Accordingly, “conjuring up the exotic world of the other is to provide a prospect on the previously unseen strangeness of the present, of the self.”<sup>106</sup> What White described as “speaking to us from afar” Toews considers a process whereby the Other “become guests [who] speak across the divide to us in our worlds... become active participants in the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.”<sup>107</sup>

Assuming Toews’ assertion that historiography is dependent on the othering of its subject, we must then ask “What place does the presentation play in producing the identity of the text, the textmaker, and indirectly of those for whom the text is written?”<sup>108</sup> Narrative offers an outlet for “self-making within the limitations of language,” an arena for the historiographer to interact with another world in a way that reporting cannot. The creation of a historical narrative is thus more akin to creative non-fiction, where the author creates a third world separate from both his own and that which he historicizes; this world is bound by “a desire to hear one’s own distinctive voice and to integrate the [past] into one’s own story,” and is dependent on a dialogical interaction between the author and Other.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Toews, pg. 551.

<sup>106</sup> Toews, pg. 549.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Toews, pg. 551.

<sup>109</sup> Toews, pg. 550.

This interaction is where historiography takes the form of signifier/signified, and is the “seam” which Barthes said is where the pleasure of literature comes from. For a historiographer, the seam is the process of translation of signifiers in one culture into those of another, or signifiers of the Other into those of the self. But is it possible to express the same signified values—to produce the same signs—when an author is bound by language and context? Martha Nussbaum addresses this problem with a new vocabulary to examine the process of historicization—what she calls “Normative” and “Descriptive Vices.” The first, “Descriptive Chauvinism” as she calls it, “consists in recreating the other in the image of oneself, reading the strange as exactly like what is familiar.”<sup>110</sup> An example Nussbaum gives is in Western representations of the Greek god Zeus illustrating him in a monotheistic way, and indication of early interpreters’ inability to capture and appreciate the culture’s polytheistic ordering of the universe. “Descriptive Romanticism” is just the opposite—“This vice consists in viewing another culture as excessively alien and virtually incomparable with one’s own, ignoring elements of similarity and highlighting elements that seem mysterious and odd.”<sup>111</sup> In explaining this vice, Nussbaum draws attention to “mystical” portrayals of India in Western cultures, which paint the region (the “Orient”) as a simplistic, highly sensual, and morally devoid place, and simultaneously the “Occident” as conspicuously deficient of those qualities.

These “Descriptive Vices” occur early in the historicization process, as writing a historical narrative originates with a description, or evaluation: “When we describe what we see, we try to make sense of it, and our descriptions are therefore likely to be limited by our experience, by our habitual ideas of the sensible... once we have described a culture we are to

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<sup>110</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pg. 118.

<sup>111</sup> Nussbaum, pg. 124.



some extent free to evaluate it in different ways.”<sup>112</sup> This evaluative tendency is when the “Normative Vices” occur, the first being “Normative Chauvinism.” In this case, “The evaluator judges that her own culture is best, and that insofar as the other culture is unlike it, it is inferior.”<sup>113</sup> Normative Chauvinism is largely dependent on the Descriptive vices, either by commending the similarities between worlds and condemning the differences, or by declaring the other entirely different from the self and criticizing that mysteriousness. At the heart of this problem is misunderstanding: a historiographer might disparage an alleged fact that is itself erroneous, in turn criticizing not the topic itself but a misconstrued fiction of that topic. The opposite normative vice, “Normative Arcadianism,” depends on a basis of Descriptive Romanticism for its moralistic evaluation. The name stems from narratives which paint idyllic “images of Arcadia in pastoral poetry,” but in a larger sense is whenever the author celebrates or condemns the Other for what is perceived to be a diametrically opposed and irreconcilable difference.<sup>114</sup> Nussbaum’s terms are thus interdependent and mutually defining; however, the key to her model is that Descriptive Vices may occur without any Normative quality, but a Normative Vice takes place only within the framework of a Descriptive Vice. In this way, historiographers may simply *get wrong* a description without moralizing it—herein is the difference between description and evaluation in narrative.

Collectively, these models for interpretation of narrative bring us to a point in theoretical framework where several problems exist for the historiographer. Narrative accounts are compelling because they offer resolution and causality in a way chronologies cannot; yet, they are bound by an underlying semiotic structure similar to the construction of language, whereby fixed relationships between signifiers and signifieds (words and their meanings, narratives and

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<sup>112</sup> Nussbaum, pg. 131.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Nussbaum, pg. 134.

that which they describe, social norms and their purposes, etc) are neither universal nor static. Further, the role of authorship in narrativization is threefold: first, the author uses the best interpretation and translation possible to overcome the boundaries between “worlds,” but ultimately reflects his own understandings of signs—both linguistic and cultural—in the narrative, and in doing so enters a dialogue with the Other. This practice is privileging to the historiographer, and herein is the second point: narratives have self-fulfilling legitimacy, whereby the reader is a passive onlooker to the interaction between author and Other, and is able to establish a relationship with only the narrative and its author (rather than with the subject itself)—for whom the narrative process is dialogical and self-making. Finally, the privileged position the historiographer takes through narrativization opens up the analysis to various Descriptive and Normative Vices, and in doing so creates an entirely new reality, the narrative, which is neither the author nor his subject.

## Discussion

While this theoretical framework suggests that considerable limitations exist in narrative historiography, there are ways to combat the damaging forces at work. Toews offers a useful vision of how historiography can successfully take place within the context of the individuals who create it; in order to walk through his model, we must return momentarily to his initial assertion that “Writing is self-making within the limitations of language.” It is clear that Toews views historiographic narrative as an interaction between the author and the Other, but he also sees it as an interaction among historiographers and the realities they create in the collective body of narratives about a single topic; this model is similar to the rhizomatic structure of language proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, whereby signs are produced by constantly changing signifier/signified relationships in “webs of meaning” reaching throughout a specific discourse. In this way, “Otherness is constituted in a constant process of production and reproduction within contingent historical discourses of self-identification.”<sup>115</sup>

An example of how this system relates to the biography of Marget Thomas is in my original intention of “comparing” her to other images of “womanhood,” “Indianness,” and “Appalachianness” in various historical narratives. According to Toews, this objective would be productive in adding to the body of narratives about these three discourses; however, it would not be a comparison so much as an addition, because based on a rhizomatic model of historical discourse, there are not monolithic categories that exist *before* or *outside of* the narratives that define them. Thus, “‘Woman’ is not a ‘natural’ identity with its own history of emergence, repression, and possible liberation, but a culturally constructed reality that cannot be described outside of the relations in which it is constituted.”<sup>116</sup> For my purposes, this statement means that

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<sup>115</sup> Toews, pg. 554.

<sup>116</sup> Toews, pg. 555.

to “compare” Marget to other narratives is elevate them to a higher level of legitimacy just as White suggested—that their truth exists in the ability to demonstrate causality and resolution. Marget’s story, whether or not it is the same as *mine of her*, is as valid as other narratives within the discourse, and to compare them—to try to determine which is *more legitimate*—is a fruitless practice. In doing so I could not very well conclude that Marget was not a *Woman*, was not *Indian*, was not *Appalachian*, even if her actions (as I interpret them) seem to place her on the periphery of those categories. As part of every historical discourse, “Power relations within any cultural space and time produce a multiplicity of subjective identities, but one is privileged as the norm and becomes naturalized as representative of the human.”<sup>117</sup> To show that Marget either contradicted or reinforced a single, normative, and hegemonic vision within a discourse does not *prove* or *disprove* her story or that vision. Rather, it adds an additional position to the rhizome which stretches its boundaries—possibly relocating the “center” in the process—and ultimately reshapes the discourse by establishing an alternate vision of “reality.” Finally, this system creates “a multiplicity of interwoven stories reproducing the historical construction of provisional identities in a constant struggle for mutual recognition,” and assembles a discourse with narratives that interact in the same way their subjects did.<sup>118</sup> As it relates to Marget, this process means that, “No longer can Appalachia be simply regarded as a land of poverty or a problem to be solved with the right combination of wisdom and progress, but must instead be understood as the locus of interventionist discourses with ulterior motives.”<sup>119</sup>

Another function of narrative is in defining the author’s identity in the present. Because the historiographer engages the topic in a dialogue—the narrative text—the resulting history is a document reflecting both the Other and the self. Embedded in the narrative are elements of the

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>118</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>119</sup> Anglin, pg. 15.

author's identity as he tries to define Otherness in opposition to himself, an unavoidable process that requires self-reflection to create a normative, hegemonic vision of the world *as seen through the author's eyes*. Thus, "In recounting the construction of difference we are thrown back on our own involvement in the construction of Otherness." In Marget's case, discussion of her status as "Woman," "Indian," and "Appalachian" depend heavily on my own understanding of those terms, as they hold no firm boundaries or monolithic definitions.<sup>120</sup> As Walker says, "Labels have a way of masking complexities and tempting us to engage in a one-dimensional analysis of a region's past and present."<sup>121</sup> This limitation seems particularly pervasive in biographic literature, as the subjects have little or no say in their representation, the accounts are often the product of a single author creating a single narrative (versus a large, global event that results in multiple narratives), and the individuals about whom biographies are written are automatically perceived as extraordinary—people whose stories are *worth* being told—in the process of creating discourses about them. In these ways, biographic narratives become mediums through which we "impose or project... 'act out' [our] own identity anxieties on the Other... transform the Other into a reified item within the narratives of who we are."<sup>122</sup>

Problems aside, the authorial self-definition that takes place during historiography is productive in spite of its inability to accurately document the past; the value is in the creation of a discourse that transcends time—and affirmation of "communality." "The dead were story tellers like us, subjects constructing identities within the forms available to them, and in unequal power relations. It is the specificity of their particular stories that allows us to recognize the particularity of our own, and to gain a sense of critical perspective and a legitimation for the

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>121</sup> Walker, pg. 3.  
<sup>122</sup> Toews, pg. 556.

hope that relations can be changed.”<sup>123</sup> Perhaps the goal of “accurate” or “authentic” historical narratives is itself flawed, and the greater value of historiography is not in defining the past, but in defining the present in relationship to a *conception of Otherness*. Just like Nussbaum’s Normative and Descriptive vices, historiography need not create perfect narratives about the Other in order to define the self. Thus, the importance of narrativism is its ability to produce “A new set of stories about how people construct continually changing stories about themselves as they struggle to define who they are and who they are not within relations of domination, accommodation, and resistance framed by discursive and political relations that their actions constantly revise, ‘translate,’ ‘redescribe,’ and ‘refashion,’ but that they do not ultimately control.”<sup>124</sup>

So where do these theories leave us in the case of Marget Thomas, particularly in my original goal to discuss her status in both past and present as characterizing Womanhood, Indianness, and Appalachianess? According to the literary theories discussed, this primary goal is somewhat fruitless because such monolithic definitions cannot exist across time and space. Language, bound by context, creates multiple definitions that are dependent upon circumstance and do not function exclusively in a binary manner. Rather, they exist in rhizomatic assemblages that create collective meanings according to individual interpretations within a discourse. Thus, defining Marget as “Woman” or “Not” cannot be accomplished because those categories cannot exist with as firm boundaries as are necessary; stories of Appalachia can thus “be understood from the vantage point of political economic structures and historical factors, and not as a response to hypothetical deficiencies (whether cultural, psychological, or genetic) in the region

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<sup>123</sup> Toews, pg. 557.

<sup>124</sup> Toews, pg. 558.

or its inhabitants.”<sup>125</sup> Similarly, analysis of historical narratives reveals the similarities between historiography and literature; just like language, narratives are bound by context, and cannot be removed from the author’s identity or evaluations. In this way, narratives are unable to reproduce historical realities, but create a new one that is a reflection of the author and his conceptions of past and present truths. Accordingly, historical discourse is a rhizomatic process in that it assembles a body of competing but equal knowledge that exist simultaneously and horizontally—no narrative can be “more true” than another.

Therefore, Marget Thomas’ biography is valuable in itself on two levels: first, by adding to the historical discourse in relevant fields (Femininity, Indianness, Appalachianess, Americana, etc); and second, by creating an alternate vision of both self and Other for the author, Marget’s family, and those who can empathetically identify with the story. For myself, my mother, and others who cannot help but see Marget in a romantic light, her story takes on great purpose and illustrates the values we want to see in her, and as a corollary, in ourselves: Indianness, defiant femininity, and unwavering family loyalty. For Faye and other family members to whom Marget’s memory is a burden, the same actions—the same “history” is representative of everything they fear and despise: Indianness, immorality, and unfaithfulness. These opposing stories of Marget are similar to the opposing stories of Appalachia: the romantic, Arcadian vision on the one hand, and “mean mountain cabins, poor garden patches, and grinding poverty” on the other.<sup>126</sup> In both cases, the same chronicles take on different narrative paths and thus create competing realities that can exist side by side in a greater discourse and without predilection. By acknowledging the authorial component to historical narrativization, we create more accurate historical accounts not so much because the contents of the narrative change, but

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<sup>125</sup> Anglin, pg. 100.

<sup>126</sup> Walker, pg. 4.

because the history can be better placed into a body of literature for wider interpretation. Hence, we find true the old mantra, “History is in the eyes of the beholder;” but to this we should add “the beholden,” and “the beheld.” Only then will we see the truly rhizomatic and collective nature of history, and through it, create realities for ourselves and for the past.



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