The Descent of Old Haunts: Mental Illness in *The Birds of Opulence*

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Samuel Roy (electronic signature)

By Samuel Roy

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Thesis Director
Dr. Kirk Boyle

_____

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Kirk Boyle

Samuel Roy

Dr. Kirk Boyle

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Crystal Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence* (2018) is set in a fictional Kentucky town not far from Lexington. Over the course of the novel, which takes place from 1962 to 1995, the Goode-Brown women individually experience different hardships that shape a shared history of love, grief, and mental illness. Themes of intergenerational trauma are inherent in the African American literary canon, though depictions of grief and trauma are not monolithic. Bringing these stories to light can be a sensitive task, as it runs the risk of creating, or worse, perpetuating damaging stereotypes about an entire group of people. But a more critical examination can unearth often ignored problems, and how it can disproportionately affect certain people—in this case, Black Appalachian women dealing with mental health issues. Viewing this issue through an intersectional lens proves that even a slight issue can have massive, compounding repercussions for those with multiple marginalized identities. *The Birds of Opulence* offers new insights in how to talk about mental health and how it affects Black Appalachian women. Contrary to the lack of a broader conversation about intersectional mental health problems in Appalachia, *The Birds of Opulence* offers new insights in how to talk about mental health and how it affects Black Appalachian women, in particular.

The Birds of Opulence focuses on the lives of Minnie Mae Brown, the family matriarch, and succeeds down the line of ancestry to her daughter Tookie, to Tookie's daughter Lucy Goode-Brown and ends with Minnie's great granddaughter, Yolanda. Each of these women are affected by their own mental health issues, and the symptoms have a wide range of repercussions—from anxiety borne from trauma, to post-partum depression and suicide. While the novel centers these women's perspectives, the men in the story also have important roles in supporting the women's tumultuous lives. Joe Brown, Lucy's loyal husband and father to both Yolanda and Kee Kee, is the town's best mechanic, known for being able to fix just about anything—except for his wife's diminishing mind. Although Joe isn't from Opulence, Tookie thinks of Joe as blessing and despite missing his city roots, and not truly understanding the hardship of the four generations of women he loves, he takes on the role of caretaker and learns "how to blend into this river of crazy women" (Wilkinson 6). Wilkinson weaves in other perspectives as well, through the local shut-in Francine Clark and her daughter Mona. Contrary to Minnie Mae's insistence on maintaining a positive image in the community, Francine deals with her grief of her husband's passing and her mother's mental break by becoming a stranger in her own community, withdrawing completely from the people of Opulence. Conversely, Francine's daughter Mona, declines to withdraw from her abuse—she reclaims it. She lives with the fact that she was sexually assaulted in her youth, which she allowed herself to be taken over by her assailant, "not because of the pleasure, because there is none, but because she recognizes something iniquitous. She becomes curious about this new thing, this certain kind of weakness she has not known that men and boys have until now" (71).

The residents of Opulence, and especially those within the Goode-Brown family know intimately their shared histories of mental health maladies, or as Tookie calls them, "the descent

of the old haunts," just as her daughter Lucy was giving birth to Yolanda in a squash patch (Wilkinson 13). This moment brought forth their "own separate haunt," symbolizing their individual mental health issues which are rarely discussed but are constantly dealt with in silence (14). Wilkinson creates nuance in highlighting mental health struggles of Black Appalachian women and through her prose gives agency to readers in Appalachia suffering due to a lack of conversation surrounding their mental health issues. While this should not be considered a replacement for comprehensive medical intervention, *The Birds of Opulence* can serve as a catalyst for a much-needed conversation about mental health for Black Appalachian women.

To understand the disparity in mental health care for Black Appalachian women, it is important to note the historical context of how Appalachia has become marginalized within the larger framework of the United States, and indeed, it's regionality within the South; but also the compounding marginalization Black women face by their race and gender within those frameworks. Among the myriad stereotypes plaguing the Appalachian region, perhaps the most insidious is that the region has been occupied only by white people. While it is true that white people make up the majority of Appalachia—which reflects the demographics of the United States—black Appalachian history and lived experiences are actively neglected by writers and scholars outside of the region. In the early twentieth century, Ellen Semple wrote about the demographics of Appalachia: "In these isolated communities, therefore, we find the purest Anglo-Saxon stock in all the United States… There is scarcely a trace of foreign admixture" (Semple 566). The alleged "purity" of Appalachian people is objectively wrong, but it is also a dangerous stereotype that is currently being perpetuated. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission, as of 2018, black people make up 9.8% of the Appalachian population, which is approximately 2.5 million people. Yet even when black Appalachians are recognized, "their

experiences are often so artfully clouded in myth and reality that they remain virtually invisible," according to Sociologist Edward Cabbell, who interviewed black Appalachians to investigate their plight (Cabbell 48).

Perpetuating the purity myth of Appalachia became a profitable endeavor for outsiders of the region. Appalachia, like much of the country has long been marred by poverty. Though if maintaining the "purity" of the region—and indeed, ignoring the ethnic population—Appalachians then became a redeemable people to entrepreneurs from the North and West. Historian James Klotter notes that during reconstruction, Northern reformists, having become disillusioned with helping freed black people, found an easier route in their philanthropy with white Appalachians in similar efforts to educate and assimilate: "The discovery of a needy and pure people in the late nineteenth century had coincided with increased racism and northern disappointment over Reconstruction. Mountain "whiteness," together with the people's material needs—ironically similar to those of black citizens—had allowed some reformers to turn "with clear conscience away from blacks to aid Appalachia." (Klotter 841). In order to "educate" white Appalachians, funds were needed from outside of the region. William Goodell Frost, President of Berea College in the late nineteenth century, helped in perpetuating the trope of the noble, white savage of Appalachia to recruit support from white Appalachians and funding from outside the region. Frost pleaded that Appalachia was "uncontaminated with slavery," and that the people were "not catholic, nor aliens, nor infidels" (qtd. in Klotter 845). Frost would later receive funding from the likes of such figures as Woodrow Wilson, then President of Princeton (845). Extractive capitalists' "philanthropic" involvement was merely to make money since "the general population perceived Appalachia as a region of significance," notes historian Graham Hoppe (Hoppe 7). Historian Ronald Eller notes that coal barons from the North exploited

Appalachian people because "it was the responsibility of the rich and successful to protect the poor and unfortunate from the vicissitudes of life. The laboring poor… were like children who must do their assigned tasks obediently and with alacrity and must defer in their dependence to the social decisions of their superiors" (Eller 199). Viewing Appalachian people as backward, uneducated, and desperate predicated their exploitation.

Black invisibility in Appalachia is part of an ongoing mythology originally perpetuated by academics and travel journalists. In her essay "Locals on Local Color: Imagining Identity in Appalachia," Katie Algeo notes that much of the stereotypes of Appalachia emerge from missionaries, travel writers, and short-story writers that largely left local perspectives out of the conversation (Algeo 28). Hoppe says that local color writers would characterize Appalachian men as "specifically white…usually bearded and barefoot…dim-witted and lazy…violent, drunken louts," and the women as "Buxom, and usually blonde…man-crazy, loose, and just as dim as their male counterparts" (Hoppe 8). By the early twentieth century, the image of the drunken, uneducated, violent hillbilly was entrenched in common thought, establishing Appalachia as a static region with no hope for internal progress. By the mid-twentieth century, popular media assumed the role of stereotyping. Popular television series such as *The Beverly Hillbillies* and movies such as *Deliverance* were consumed by millions of Americans, and the depictions of the characters were taken as fact because of the long-practiced pathologizing of Appalachians. Profit motives largely drive the perpetuation of stereotypes of Appalachians, but typical Americans outside of the region allow tropes to persist because the images present a "figure on which Americans can project feelings of regional and class superiority" (9). What is missing entirely from this discourse is the presence and plight of black Appalachians, which

hurts them because if they are not seen, they cannot be helped. Reclaiming the narrative from outsiders and telling one's own story can help close this gap and dispel Appalachian myths.

Appalachian literature is subgenre within a subgenre as far as American literature is concerned. While authors like Lee Smith and Ron Rash have received national praise in their work, there is less attention on the black writers from the region. These authors undoubtably tackle complicated issues that the region is faced with, but it seems that race and ethnicity is the last frontier in examining the multiple complications of the region. The fabricated hegemony of Appalachia is prevalent in its literature because it is what writers and readers of the region have come to expect (Abrams Locklear 106). These stereotypes hurt the whole of Appalachia. What's worse, is that stereotypes hurt the "invisible" inhabitants disproportionately. The sociological theory of intersectionality, coined by Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a theoretical framework for understanding the exponential effect of marginalization due to race and gender, but where one lives can also be detrimental. According to Rodger Cunningham, Appalachia has been a marginalized region within its own country:

> […] it is commonplace by now that the American South is defined by the North, or by "America" in general, as its Other. Indeed, North and South constitute themselves as each other's Other in a set of shared dichotomies with reversed valuations. There is, however, within America another Other—indeed, an Other's Other—a region marked by a double otherness that complicates its very sense of its own being and yet, by that very fact, opens up unusual possibilities of self-articulation of being. (Cunningham 42)

With racial hegemony stereotypes well established, Appalachia's otherness, of course, compounds when the intersections of race and gender are taken into account, which Cunningham calls a "doubly double otherness" exponentially alienating people at the bottom of the social

hierarchy (45). In a study on Appalachian mental health neglect, psychologist Emily Hausenstein notes that "rural Southern women are more likely to live in persistent poverty, which has unique and often more devastating outcomes than intermittent or transient poverty" (Hausenstein 6). Black women in Appalachia prove are one of the most vulnerable and invisible groups in the United States by virtue of these compounding identities, leaving them completely out of mainstream discourse in the academy, society, and culture.

The unfortunate reality is that black Americans—and thus black Appalachians— exist as part of and outside of the American historical imagination. To make the invisible, visible, black authors have taken it upon themselves to write their own stories to fill in gaps of knowledge. Some black authors have portrayed history through fictionalized depictions of slavery, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. Wilkinson places herself well within this tradition by depicting her black characters as nuanced and fully human in spite of their complicated lives. The lack of plot in *The Birds of Opulence* allows for her characters to become fully realized in their depictions and creates tension within the character as opposed to outside influences. Additionally, the sequential, intergenerational structure of the novel is important in that signifies the long-lasting effects of oppression and trauma for black Americans. Although progress for black Americans has been made in the last half-century, the United States isn't far removed from being the last country to outlaw slavery, and certainly not far removed from codified discrimination. In an essay examining oral history and how it helps construct racial memory, Yvette Louis states: "Every generation that learns the discourse of racial inferiority and experiences the psychological dissociation of being objectified and alienated by their white peers is traumatized by the legacy of slavery" (Louis 283). In the opening chapter, Lucy has just given birth to Yolanda in the squash patch, and in the moments that follow, Tookie exclaims "each of

us—there were six of us then—was enveloped in our own separate haunt. Yet we were one, sharing past and future. Even my father, back in town working, he was with us, too" (Wilkinson 13). These haunts can describe the intergenerational impacts of oppression black people have always faced in the United States. Every story in *The Birds of Opulence* is not one of isolated anguish for the characters; rather, these women's lives become "Lifetimes of stories…stacked up one on top of the other," in which all of the Goode-Brown women share memories of oppression. (Wilkinson 97).

Invisibility can lead to disastrous gaps in equitable research in psychology, sociology, and medical fields. For instance, out of the twenty percent of American women that seek therapy, black women only account for seven percent from that statistic (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 29). According to Sociologist Beauboeuf-Lafontant, this is due in part because of prevailing myths that "a majority of blacks associate depression with moral weakness" (47). It is important to push back on entrenched stereotypes of the region, whether they are racialized, gendered, or geographic—or a combination of the three. But by writing her characters from a place of reality, Wilkinson attempts to subvert these long-held stereotypical depictions of Appalachia and its people. Wilkinson charts new territory in fictionalizing Appalachia by dramatizing the complex intersections of race, gender, and ability in her work, specifically in her novel, *The Birds of Opulence*.

Subverting well-established stereotypes is an ongoing battle for Appalachian authors. A risk in bringing stereotypes to light is that when left unchecked, stereotypes can become cultural values that are difficult to break free from. Despite the damage that stereotypes can cause for people, Hoppe argues that stereotypes are exacerbated because they are necessary in building identity: "The hillbilly is a complicated thing. How can it at once be a load of crap, a (mildly)

subversive icon, and an assertion of identity? Because we need stereotypes—not to pigeonhole

other people, but to construct our own identities" (Hoppe 59). Furthermore, Beauboeuf-Lafontant

writes that one reason black women have difficulty breaking from the inherent strength myth is

that "[black women] had embraced such constraints as preconditions for a way of life seen as

authentically Black and female and were thus incapable of recognizing other, more realistic, and

varied formulations of Black womanhood (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 38).

But by writing about them with care and sensitivity, it is possible to begin a long-needed

discussion about the mental health of black people—primarily those who live in Appalachia.

Wilkinson's work has been seminal in speaking to the black-Appalachian experience, especially

in regard to mental health. She has been very outspoken about her mother's paranoia-

schizophrenia diagnosis, and how it has affected her. Her mother's mental health has been a

major theme in both *The Birds of Opulence* and her previous work *Water Street*. Speaking about

Water Street, Wilkinson spoke to Justin Lewis of WKMS about representing her relationship

with her mother in her writing:

> "[In *Water Street*] There are hints of mental illness… the truth is, that was the first story I
>
> could give a character a thread of myself. My mother had been diagnosed as a paranoid-
>
> schizophrenic… it only took for me to give her [Jeanette] that one tiny thread of truth of
>
> being the crazy woman's daughter that she suddenly opened up and I was able to write
>
> her as a true human being, with a range of emotions…" (Something From Nothing).

She uses a similar dynamic in The Birds of Opulence in Lucy's character, being the town's

resident "plumb-crazy woman," describing her ostracization from her community (Wilkinson

33). It is important to note, however, that the characters Wilkinson uses to address mental health

illnesses are not direct avatars for her mother. Instead, she uses multiple real-life experiences as a

black Appalachian to inform her fiction writing as a way to highlight the ongoing oppression people like her face—even when no one can see it.

Life experiences shape how writers observe the world, and it is easy to fall into the trap of perpetuating a stereotype based on one's lived experience. Simply using a trope is not an endorsement for them. However, tropes can be used to an author's advantage by depicting a common thought, however fallible, as a warning to readers instead of a perpetuation of damaging depictions. In popular discourse, mental illnesses in Appalachia is rarely discussed, and this is especially true for black Appalachians. Without frank discussions about mental health, it's difficult to name what afflictions arise due to trauma or stress. To compensate for the lack of knowledge, Appalachians tend to refer to the many manifestations of illnesses as people being crazy, weird, or not right in the head. In a study of major depressive disorders and its effects on Appalachian women, psychologist Emily Hausenstein notes that "the language and culture of poor Southern women differs from that of mainstream America. They are less likely to view aberrant behavior as signs of mental illness, and more likely to believe that illness and recovery is caused by the work of God or spirits" (Hausenstein 6). A prime example in *The Birds of Opulence* is Lucy's character, who suffers from an illness that is characterized as post-partum depression, though it isn't explicitly named. Throughout the novel, however, her depression deepens into a debilitating stillness that makes her feel as though she "feels hollow, a drained riverbed" (Wilkinson 19). The residents of opulence minimize Lucy's struggle by calling her a "crazy heifer," unaware that this is a major depressive episode and not just aberrant behavior. The indirect characterization of Lucy's illness, as well as her community's reaction to her withdrawal reflects the reality many Appalachians see in their own communities.

The town of Opulence, as well as its residents are fictionalized, but they come from Wilkinson's lived experience in Appalachia. By placing her characters in situations based on her reality, Wilkinson joins the ranks of many African American authors before her in "masking and unmasking" language, as Toni Morrison calls it. In an essay addressing the absence of African American literature from mainstream discourse, Toni Morrison first questions the merit of deeming a work as a "black" work, and offers this response:

> The most valuable point of entry into the question of cultural (or racial) distinction, the one most fraught, is its language—its unpoliced, seditious, confrontational, manipulative, inventive, disruptive, masked, and unmasking language. Such a penetration will entail the most careful study, one in which the impact of Afro-American presence on modernity becomes clear and is no longer a well-kept secret. (Morrison 136)

Masking language by way of indirect characterization allows Wilkinson to interrogate real issues affecting the black community without perpetuating the ubiquitous stereotypes that harm black Appalachians. Wilkinson "masks" the complex nature of how mental illness affects black Appalachians by highlighting it, but not calling it out by name. In using "masking" language, Wilkinson's work as an Affrilachian writer is an act in visualizing the very real nature of the black Appalachian experience. In *The Birds of Opulence*, one key element is its realism, which focuses on characters and their rather than how their illness can move the plot forward. Centering her characters rather than how they can fit into a plot reflects the reality Wilkinson wants her readers to envision about black Appalachians. Wilkinson's careful attention to masking the language of mental illness in her novel highlights the real repercussions of not naming mental illnesses, while also calling attention to how it affects people around those suffering.

Stereotypes can be paradoxical in that even the seemingly positive ones can prove to be dangerous. One such stereotype that pervades Appalachian culture—and also black culture writ large—is the "strong black woman" trope. On the surface, this can be an empowering position that subverts patriarchal ideals of power and strength. Its effects, however, prove to harm the women it supposedly empowers. This trope characterizes black womanhood as having superhuman resilience even through crushing adversity. Strength can seem like a virtuous stereotype, but even the slightest interrogation can prove that it denies Black women their own agency and authority in finding solutions for their psychological ills. Sociologist Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant noted in her research that strength has a negative impact in black women's mental health, saying "being strong consistently emerges as a culturally distinctive aspect of Black women's experiences of depression… being strong operates as a critical link between normative and distressed Black womanhood" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 42). This can make speaking up about mental illness difficult—or worse, taboo—within the black and Appalachian communities because of the need to always put on an air of maintained strength. Further, Dr. Gina Diddle explored a similar topic within Appalachia and says that "cultural taboos regarding mental health and treatment are pervasive in rural Appalachia, and residents are reluctant to discuss problems or seek professional services" (Diddle et. al. 179). This can manifest in people completely withdrawing from people because of their grief, most notably seen in Francine Clark's character. Perceived strength and an unwillingness to confront mental health issues can leave Black women to suffer with these issues with nowhere to turn—even with communal supports such as family or friends.

Because of long-standing cultural values, some Appalachian women still "tend to view mental health negatively and are more likely to seek informal help outside the medical realm"

according to Dr. Diddle (Diddle et. al. 179). As more information about mental becomes available, it presents the opportunity for informal supports for treatment. But those who still adhere to conventional views—such as older residents of Appalachia—might not believe in the efficacy of various treatment options. Hausenstein's study found that one informal pathway for treatment is through family and community support (Hausenstein 7). Though those supports must be openly and enthusiastically welcomed for it to work. Francine Vernon is not part of the Goode family, but has been a resident of Opulence since she was a little girl. Through losing loved ones, Francine suffers a degradation of connection with her community. She loses two important people in her life: the first is her mother, Helen, who suffers a mental breakdown, and the second is her husband, Sonny, who was struck by lightning. The deaths of her husband and mother cause Francine to further withdraw from others because she felt "smothered beneath her own skin, smothered beneath all this worry" (Wilkinson 55). Further, it causes Francine to split herself into two versions of herself; "the lady of the house…and another Francine Vernon…curled up into the girl she was" (Wilkinson 54). Francine's grief greatly influences her relationships with her community. Soon after she brings her daughter Mona home from the hospital, members of the church stop by to welcome the new addition. But she distances herself from the church members by demanding they leave her house. This could be because she has lost people close to her that and chooses to avoid maintaining relationships that result further loss. The onus isn't wholly on Francine, however, as the women in the community also live by the same cultural stigmas surrounding mental health. If it were talked about more broadly, the community of Opulence might find other ways to check in on Francine to stop her from engaging in unhealthy practices.

Though suffering from different traumas than Francine, Lucy also withdraws and does

not ultimately benefit from familial support, even when it is enthusiastically offered by Joe. After

giving birth to Yolanda in the squash patch, she is depicted as suffering from post-partum

depression. Lucy isn't a stranger to this type of depression, as her first pregnancy caused a

similar feeling: "When Kee Kee was born, she settled into this loss for weeks, refusing to come

out of her bedroom, not eating. But eventually that dreariness slipped away" (Wilkinson 19).

This depression gets considerably worse with the birth of Yolanda. At a gathering welcoming

Lucy's new baby, Lucy's depression takes complete hold over with dire circumstances:

> Lucy rocks back and forth in the chair, Tookie reaches in to take the baby, Joe strokes
>
> Lucy's knee like a man who doesn't know what else to do, but before he can intervene,
>
> before Tookie can pull the baby safely into her own arms, before Mama Minnie can cross
>
> the room, the baby rolls from Lucy's lap, rolls like a can of lard, like a wad of fabric or a
>
> cumbersome quilt, like a rolling pin or a small sack of new potatoes, and makes a light
>
> thud on the plank floor like something being cast away. (Wilkinson 17)

Having seen this happen, the members of the community paying a visit reinforced their thoughts

of Lucy as "crazy," ostracizing her from their in-group. Familial responses to something of this

magnitude are different because families don't have a choice in neglecting their loved ones,

though the way they express this help is concerning in how they perpetuate harmful rhetoric.

Knowing that Lucy is experiencing a dire episode, her mother Tookie takes the role of caregiver

for Yolanda because of Lucy's absent state: "Good thing we got bottles boiled and ready, cause

your mama's crazy" (Wilkinson 25). Having family to support during trying times is of the

utmost importance, but ignoring illnesses caused by trauma can bring fatal consequences, such as

Lucy's suicide after her mother and grandmother have died. Just before she ends her life, Lucy

mutters "Mama gone, Granny gone, roots still here," but if roots grow in rotting soil, the tree will always bear strange fruit.

Cultural values and traditions must be reexamined to create a safe space to explore the mental illness within the family or community. In the two chapters focusing on Tookie, Wilkinson describes a traumatic whooping Minnie Mae gave her as a child as leaving her "sore and marked for life" (Wilkinson 141). The whooping resulted because of Minnie Mae's anger in finding out that her daughter, Tookie (then thirteen years old) had become pregnant by a grown man, which is a trauma all its own. Tookie's traumatic memories are "coiled and rusted" things, held deep within her for the majority of her life due to this lack of familial support (132). Due to the lack of access to comprehensive mental health care facilities in Appalachia, mothers are typically seen as a "primary health care resource as well as gatekeepers, stewards, sentinels and care tenders" (Diddle et. al. 179). Although Minnie Mae physically abuses her Tookie for her transgressions, this may still be the case for Minnie Mae's character. In a study examining the impacts of physical abuse within the black community, Dr. Anna Lau et. al. found that:

> Black families reflect a combination of high levels of firm control (including physical discipline) that occur along with displays of warmth and affection. They conclude that firm control coupled with parental warmth may function to protect children from dangerous environments and involvement in antisocial behavior, while promoting self-regulation. (Lau et. al. 91)

Tookie's lifelong pain is trivialized by Minnie Mae because she conflated discipline with care when Tookie needed it most. That is not to say that Wilkinson wrote Minnie Mae's actions as an endorsement for abuse within the black household; rather, she wrote it as a warning that continuing the cycle of abuse as care can have dangerous consequences if ideas aren't changed.

Tookie and Francine become invisible women due to cultural expectations to shrink themselves in spite of their pain. If their stories were allowed to be vocalized, however, they might have found healthier ways of confronting and dealing with their mental health. Hausenstein notes that "invisible women cannot speak on their own behalf" because their ideas about mental health "are so inhospitable that speaking about illness of this type virtually is taboo" (Hausenstein 6). Listening to Appalachian women and hearing their stories—or being the emotional supports women need—can help build critical infrastructure to help invisible women become visible. Having grown up in the city, Joe Brown doesn't bring the same stigma about mental health to Opulence—though he still doesn't fully understand it. In his time in Opulence, Joe has built a strong relationship with the community by being the Opulence's resident handyman. There wasn't a thing that couldn't get fixed. The only challenge that came his way was Lucy's illness. Although he was Lucy's strongest advocate, he "was helpless against those things that twisted Lucy's mind" (Wilkinson 180). Joe stood by Lucy through her postpartum depression as well as her subsequent mental illness struggles, though emotional support is not enough for Lucy. Knowing that more needed to be done to help Lucy, Joe eventually began taking Lucy to see a psychiatrist in secret. Though Yolanda knew how to "will herself invisible" by sneaking around to hear adults discuss these secrets (131). Yolanda's knowledge of her mother's visits to the "head doctor" marks a shift in how the Brown family will treat mental health in the future. In seeing Tookie confront Minnie Mae about her trauma, and seeing how hard her mother's life is, Yolanda becomes the first in the long line of women in the family to seek help in order to control it rather than having an illness take over her life. Joe and Lucy were one generation removed from the cultural stigma but taking Lucy to a hospital to receive help proves that societal norms change, allowing for better access and education surrounding mental

health. This change in norms helps Appalachian women become visible, and to get help before it's too late.

Through Yolanda, Wilkinson attempts to normalize the notion of mental health supports within the black family. Having seen the dire effects of mental health on their family, Yolanda and Kee Kee break the cycle of perpetuating dangerous societal and cultural norms. Late on the night before his wedding day, Yolanda calls her brother, Kee Kee to make sure he was comfortable going through with the marriage, but by the tone of her voice, he knew that she wasn't faring well mentally (Wilkinson 172). It is revealed at the end of the novel that she suffers constant panic attacks, but it is suggested that the family doesn't know much about her ailment. Sociologist Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant would also argue that Kee Kee's concern contradicts the norm: "because a majority of blacks associate depression with moral weakness, black women may experience shame when divulging their depressive realities to kin and friends" (Beaboeuf-Lafontant 47). As adults, Yolanda and Kee Kee learned from their mother's illness that suppressing depressive symptoms or withdrawing can have damaging effects. Kee Kee subverts this common conception and humanizes Yolanda by mining her mind for what is hurting her. He later calls his father, Joe to bring him into the fold that she "got the blues" (Wilkinson 172). In acknowledging Yolanda's yearning for familial support, Wilkinson draws attention to a real problem in the black community and subverts the stereotype that it is abnormal for black women to speak up and about their mental health.

The image of the African Sankofa bird adorns the cover of the book. Its body perched forward, looking to the future and what may come, and its head pointed backwards, always in remembrance of the past. According to Nathan Full, the Sankofa "symbolizes the ability to look back at the past so that one learns and does not do the same in the present or future" (Full 15).

Yolanda has learned over the course of her life that her family has shared immense anguish in struggling to deal with the myriad mental health issues. Yolanda disrupts the antiquated notions of bottling up emotions and proclaims for herself that she will not suffer in silence, and she surely won't suffer alone. Although Appalachian women must still confront the lack of access to mental health facilities, there are informal methods of bringing to light the painful and sometimes debilitating illnesses plaguing people of the Appalachian region.

Using literature to highlight common manifestations of mental health, albeit fictionalized, can prove useful in helping Appalachian women understand their own plight. Nurses Sean McArdle and Richard Byrt conducted a study on the efficacy of using literature as a supplement to traditional psychotherapy. In some cases, they found that "literature has been used to enable clients to explore problems, and express and sometimes resolve painful thoughts and feelings" (McArdle and Byrt 519). Further, they note that with this type of therapy, one patient learned to write poetry that allowed her to share her trauma, giving her "a meaningful language through which it became possible to conceive what, under ordinary circumstances could not be conceived, and committing such understanding to words" (519). Literature is a powerful medium that consistently attempts to disrupt public thought. By using The Birds of Opulence as a tool to peer into the lives of black Appalachian women and what ails them, there exists a possibility to combat long-held cultural beliefs that mental health is a non-issue.

Black women's mental health in Appalachia needs to be explored more comprehensively. This is especially true in regard to cultural and societal stigmas that plague perceptions of mental health. While not a replacement for access to mental health services, novels like Crystal Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence* can be used as a lens into the societal norms that hinder women from seeking help. As Yolanda proves, help is available in one way or another, but

culturally defined roadblocks must be taken apart before any meaningful conversation can take

place. Black Appalachian women's stories can be the catalyst to start this long-needed

conversation about mental health, but they must start from accurate portrayals of the mental

health struggles, rather than outsider stereotypes that exploit vulnerable people. For too long,

black Appalachian women have suffered under the guise of inherent strength, which ultimately

strips them of their agency and humanity. Black Appalachian women may be the most invisible

demographic in the United States, but black Appalachian women's unapologetic narratives are

shared widely, the whole of black America will benefit.

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