Representing Appalachian Childhood: Medical Pathologies in Gwyn Hyman Rubio’s *Icy Sparks* and Holly Farris’s “Lockjaw”

Published in 1998 and selected by Oprah’s Book Club, Gwen Hyman Rubio’s novel *Icy Sparks* is set in the late 1950s in eastern Kentucky. Its titular first person narrator recalls her childhood made difficult by symptoms of Tourette Syndrome that appear when she is ten-years-old. Holly Farris’s 2007 collection, *Lockjaw*, is set in the mountains of southwest Virginia. Its title story occurs in the summer of 1962 and takes it name from the tetanus—colloquially known as “lockjaw”—contracted by one of the protagonists, Brenda, when she is just six-years-old.

*Icy Sparks* and “Lockjaw” occur at the rich interstices of gender, age, medical pathology (or disability, broadly defined), and region. Thus, I want to consider the significance of linking medical pathologies, girlhood, and Appalachia in these contemporary texts. In this paper, I suggest that Rubio and Farris engage pathology to explore the precarity of living in Appalachia. They do so through the subjectivities of those they perceive as most vulnerable. *Icy Sparks* and “Lockjaw” utilize the familiar girls studies trope of the “girl in crisis” as she undergoes the emotional and intellectual developments that facilitate her entry into normative culture. In these narratives, the crisis of “coming of age” is compounded by the girls’ diagnosis with conditions that disrupt conventional forms of linguistic expression. Tourette’s and tetanus sometimes cause and at other times are symptoms of the alienation the protagonists feel towards their Appalachian homes. I argue that Farris and Rubio literalize through the use of medical pathology the girls’ struggles to heal themselves through self-expression and establish a stable subjectivity from within the contexts they have been given. Finally, because popular culture so often links Appalachia with non-normative bodies and behaviors, this paper concludes with a consideration of the problematic politics of representation undertaken by these texts.
The protagonists in *Icy Sparks* and “Lockjaw” describe their conditions as endemic to an Appalachia that stunts subjectivity. As a young orphan girl being raised by her grandparents, Icy eschews genetic explanations and instead explains her phonic and physical tics through the particularities of place. She links Tourette’s to the Appalachian land and its fruits, for her mother ate only green crab apples when she was pregnant. Icy muses, “I had to take that sour skin into my wee little stomach, grind it down, digest it, and grow. In the darkness of my mother’s belly, I ate the tart fruit, so sour on my tongue that it made my lips curl upward, so full of kick that I burped liked a bubble-popping” (1). Icy describes her inheritance as one of memory and repetition, and thus links Tourette’s to the despair her mother must have felt while compulsively eating crab apples that failed to nurture (3).

Icy similarly traces the paternal origins of her Tourette’s to the mines of Ginseng, Kentucky, a town in which one is never too far from the traces of the coal company’s totalizing influence. She describes how coal dust hangs in the air and can be tasted on the tongue (196). Icy recalls her grandfather explaining, “All his life, your daddy was nervous, hearing them veins of coal popping open. Sometimes they exploded, sometimes they just croaked; but the noise always rattled his brain” (2). Icy identifies her paternal inheritance as a fear of Appalachia’s noisy, dead-end mines (3). She thus interweaves Tourette syndrome and Appalachia, individual subjectivity and region. From that first burp in the womb, Icy constructs her neurological disorder as a symptom of her parents’ repressed unhappinesses with their circumscribed lives.

While Icy’s inheritance is one of verbal excess, Farris’s “Lockjaw” identifies poor, rural Appalachian girls as rendered silent by tetanus, a disease most often contracted from rusted metal objects. This pathology connects the trash-filled landscapes of an intensely patriarchal Appalachia and the disposable girls that inhabit it. On break, Janelle and Brenda head out back
behind the gas station, flopping down on a set of rusted bed springs (38). The first person narrator, Janelle, recalls a conversation in which Brenda tells about the time she contracted lockjaw. Banished by her father from the “manly” pursuits of drinking and possum running, she wades in the creek and steps on a nail. Brenda recalls contracting, “Honest-to-God-lockjaw. My body locked up so tight the least little thing’d send me off . . . . Broke all my teeth inside my own mouth I locked so. Then, I went home and my momma combed my hair constant for a month . . . Tetanus left” (41). Brenda miraculously survives a sickness for which there is no cure in the days before antiserum. It is as if she experiences a "psychosomatic conversion disorder" in which a mental condition mimics a physical illness. Her mother’s care seems to have a curative force against an illness precipitated by her father's dismissiveness and an Appalachian landscape treated as a dumping ground (37).

As she listens to a tale of fatherly neglect and sickness, Janelle reminds us that they sit amidst discarded material goods. She kicks at gravel mixed with beer caps, and Brenda throws her beer bottle “against what could have been the top of a bedroom dresser or kitchen cabinet” (38, 42). Feeling like the trash that surrounds them, the girls recognize that they are disposable in the eyes of men and abandoned by a community that has little to offer them anyway. Brenda is running away to Fort Bragg to join the army (37). A recent high school drop out, the narrator has lost hope for a future beyond the gas station. Janelle has never met her father, and a boy from the high school has left her pregnant with his baby. The girls feel powerless and disposable.

Through the use of medical pathology, Rubio and Farris literalize the girls’ struggles to self-express and establish a stable adult subjectivity from within these contexts. Each narrative charts a path from sickness to healing in which the adolescent self must be actualized through non-alienating forms of expression. As Rosemarie Garland-Thompson theorizes that the
interwoven metaphors of girlhood and disability serve as both a source of radical difference and a reminder of physiological and psychological fragility (29). Thus, it is through the “in-betweenness” of their experiences as Appalachians, girls, and pathologized bodies that these protagonists engage multiple and potentially damaging epistemological systems: region, age, gender, and ablism. Their overlapping liminal statuses make them both potentially disruptive to social conventions and susceptible to silencing and erasure.

Icy repeatedly labels Tourette’s a “disorder.” It is one that initially disrupts her ability to engage in socially acceptable, ordered forms of expression. As a maturing girl who feels pressure to conform to hegemonic discourses of gender, sexuality, and culture, language and conventional behavior loom all-powerful for Icy. She comes to feel keenly the tyranny of convention, which she locates in the word “world.” Icy worries, “If I didn’t repeat world, it would grow larger and larger. Soon it would expand and extend itself from the top of my head to the tops of my toes. Like an enormous parasite, it would live in my body, change into a breathing, thriving, eating world, and devour me. So I had to say it. Saying world would diminish its power. Pay homage to the word, my thoughts told me, and the world will be satiated” (28-9). As Icy repeatedly discovers, the “world” circumscribed by her Appalachian home is indeed exacting, demanding conformity of individual self-expression.

Icy manifests many of the typical verbal and physical tics displayed by those with Tourette’s. However, she is most ashamed of, punished for, and alienated by her compulsion to say obscenities, a rarer form of complex phonic tic (Miller 520). It represents the most extreme form of Icy’s failure to speak in culturally acceptable ways when subjected to the pressures of “behaving” in polite society. Her “dirty mouth” angers her grandparents, causes her schoolmates
to turn on her, robs her of her first boyfriend, eventually gets her kicked out of school, and precipitates a stay at the Bluegrass State Hospital.\textsuperscript{viii}

Icy desperately wants to be everything her community feels a “good girl” should be, and the well-meaning people closest to her respond in a variety of damaging ways that range from repression to management. After her first major outburst, her grandfather’s solution is to silence her with whiskey until she cannot speak. As he rubs her head, pondering what set her off, Icy recalls, “I tried to answer, but he shushed me” (29). While she repeatedly tells herself, “I ain’t a bad girl!” (27), it is only in her grandfather’s shushing that he validates her as a “good girl” (29). He positively reinforces Icy’s unsuccessful attempts to repress her desire to repeat words, curse, yell, and croak. Instead of encouraging silence, Icy’s friend Miss Emily polices her language, snapping, “It’s time you talked right...Your speech will mark you for life...If you don’t change it, It’ll hold you back. You won’t become the person I know you can be” (33). Miss Emily links Icy’s disordered language to the disordered subjectivity of a still-liminal adolescent.

Rubio’s novel thus depicts a coming of age story that charts a path from sickness to healing, one that must include the proper ordering of Icy’s language. Icy retains her need to “draw [herself] with words,” despite the fact that this need is not understood by those around her who would rather see a quiet, supplicant young lady (201). However, though she rejects silence, Icy ultimately chooses to speak herself into being through conventional means. She satiates “the world” by finding a satisfying and socially acceptable form of self-expression: gospel singing. After a revival, Icy joins not one but five church choirs singing in a fourth of July choral competition. This group participation affords her the self-expression and sense of belonging that she seeks. Icy remembers, “When I sang, every nerve in my body relaxed. Like everyone else, I was normal. No grotesque twitches overwhelmed me. No unnerving sounds jumped from my
throat. My voice simply washed them away. Only my essence remained—simply that of a yellow-haired girl with a golden voice” (298). Singing allows her to order her voice and thus her subjectivity so that she feels most herself. In this moment on stage, Icy comes of age. Miss Emily holds a sign reading “Welcome to the World,” and Icy finally believes she has a future (306). By engaging in normative self-expression, Icy creates order from disorder, healing from sickness, belonging from alienation, and maturity from childishness. Despite the novel’s conventional move towards healing, which does nothing to destabilizing hegemonic definitions of normalcy, we are left to wonder if satiating the world through word requires one to wear too a heavy mantel. Icy “sweat[s] profusely beneath all five [choir] robes—the green, the blue, the white, the gold, and the red” (306). It is as if each robe represents a layer of acculturation.

Although “Lockjaw” also moves from sickness to healing, its protagonists must overcome repression rather than compulsion. Brenda likens the pathology to eating a popsicle: "My teeth touch that mealy frozen wood. That’s lockjaw, teeth points clamping, on edge, wanting to bite in, nibble something good, but me not knowing how to stop if I did” (42-3). This is lockjaw: Janelle and Brenda’s sublimated hunger for what normative culture tells them they have no right to desire: a father's attention, meaningful sexual encounters, another woman, a future, and telling of the miracle of survival.

Thus “Lockjaw” dispenses with the communally sanctioned expression Icy finds so freeing. For neither Brenda nor Janelle long to be “good girls” and their emotional coming of age actually seems contingent upon destabilizing hegemonic definitions of normalcy in 1960s Appalachia. In taking its name from the disease that painfully locks the mouth, the story suggests that any form of self-expression is the true miracle. Among the trash, Brenda finds the ability tell of her healing, which authorizes an erotic exchange between the women. It is in the telling that
Janelle erotically dotes on her friends bare legs and feels compelled to continue that act of care begun by Brenda's mother, noting “I felt she needed me, needed someone, so she could spit out how it was to be so alone and then feel her way back” (42). So Janelle steals an orange Popsicle from the gas station store for them to share as confirmation of their connectedness.

Once in Brenda’s newly self-assured hands, the Popsicle becomes an expression of desire: “With that, an orange staying inside its wrinkled paper wrapper, single stick leg poking out, Brenda aimed her Popsicle half along my neck back and shoulders behind, down my spine’s too-snug tank top, and around front to where my jeans' belt loops hid under my belly hanging right out. Circles and circles she drew, the paper envelope catching what sweet melted” (43). In a this moment of eroticized care and double surrogacy, the Popsicle becomes a mouth caressing the body even as the narrator’s body becomes a mouth for Brenda, melting the Popsicle down to its mealy core (43). In leaving us with the image of a mouth free to do and say what it likes, “Lockjaw” suggests that only unhindered verbal and bodily telling can alleviate paralysis and allow for the articulation of a healthy subjectivity.

In conclusion, I’d like to spend a moment considering the politics of representation that Rubio and Farris engage in by linking Appalachia and childhood pathology. The Appalachia of popular culture is one of non-normative bodies and behaviors, the land of poverty, dirt, moonshine, snuff, poor nutrition, bare feet, toothlessness, and inbreeding. We live in a moment when people donate millions to help mobile clinics treat children’s rotting “Mountain Dew Mouths.” Thus, I see the potential dangers of representing Appalachia through anomalous bodies as twofold. First, through the pathologies of their girl protagonists, Rubio and Farris risk literalizing Appalachia as a region of damaged and dependent subjectivities in need of healing. Because, as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have noted, anomalous bodies are often pressed
into service as a metaphorical signifier of deviant subjectivity that manifests upon the body (222, 230), there is a real risk that *Icy Sparks* or “Lockjaw” might reinscribe damaging stereotypes about the region.\textsuperscript{xii} Second, the fact that Tourette’s and lockjaw function as symbols of difference more generally risks obscuring the lived experiences of those living with disability in Appalachia today. In fact, Appalachians are more likely than other Americans to suffer from heart and other cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cervical breast and lung cancers, and work disabilities (241).\textsuperscript{xii} Literature is an important technology for promoting the modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving, and believing.\textsuperscript{xiii} The complex content of concepts like “Appalachia” and “pathology” as well as the rich subjectivities of individuals indentified with those concepts, requires us to read *Icy Sparks* and “Lockjaw” at the uneasy intersection of aesthetics and ethics.
Disability is a broad term that clusters ideological categories as varied as sick, deformed, abnormal, crazy, ugly, old, feeble-minded, maimed, afflicted, made of debilitated. Disability is a term that has an uneasy alignment with concepts such as illness, disease, congenital difference, poverty, and with the readings of degeneracy, tragedy, loss, victimhood. It is a contested term used to describe individuals in a position of difference from the center. See Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory” in *The Disability Studies Reader*. Ed. Davis Lennard J Taylor and Francis Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2013. (333-353).

Girls studies scholars Caren J. Town, Janie Victorian Ward, and Beth Cooper Benjamin all note the prevalence of the “girl in crisis” trope.

Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature 1997, vi


Dr. James Miller 2001

Girls studies see schools, in particular, as sites where femininities are constructed through hegemonic discourses of nation, gender, sexuality, and culture, and sometimes resisted by girls themselves (Bettis and Adams xix).

Scholars such as Patricia M. Gantt and Anthony Harkin have long noted the historical vulnerability of Appalachia to distortions and stereotypes in literature and popular culture.

Thanks, Diane Sawyer and *Hidden America: Children of the Mountains*.


In *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983), Terry Eagleton describes literature as having “some kind of relationship to the maintenance and reproduction of social power” (15)