

# DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF WASTE AND SLOW VIOLENCE IN ANN PANCAKE'S *STRANGE AS THIS WEATHER HAS BEEN*<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the representation of environmental destruction in the Appalachian coalfields in the novel *Strange as this Weather Has Been* (Ann Pancake, 2007). Pancake's book follows the disbandment of a family of six in southern West Virginia and presents us with the dilemmas they must confront, most notably whether they should leave or stay and organize against the coal company. I seek to analyze the ways in which the novel conveys each character's embodied, material experience when facing environmental destruction; moreover, I examine the way in which slow violence is represented in the text. Focusing on Appalachia's extractivist past (and present), I argue that *Strange as this Weather Has Been* ultimately helps to counter the existing prejudice against poor whites in the region by fostering reader empathy through the textual recreation of the bleak environmental condition in the novel's storyworld.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo aborda la representación de la destrucción medioambiental en las regiones mineras de los Apalaches en la novela *Strange as this Weather Has Been* (Ann Pancake, 2007). El libro de Pancake sigue la separación de una familia de seis miembros en la zona sur de West Virginia y nos presenta los dilemas que deben

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enfrentar, en particular si deberían marcharse o bien quedarse y organizarse en oposición a la compañía energética. Busco analizar el modo en que la novela verbaliza la experiencia material y corporizada de cada personaje que se enfrenta a la destrucción medioambiental; asimismo, examino el modo en que la violencia lenta se representa en el texto. Centrándome en el pasado (y presente) extractivista de los Apalaches, propongo que *Strange as this Weather Has Been* contribuye a contrarrestar los prejuicios existentes en contra de la población blanca pobre en la región al promover la empatía del lector a través de las desalentadoras condiciones medioambientales reflejadas en el mundo narrativo de la novela.

## INTRODUCTION

Modern American environmentalism crystallized around Rachel Carson's passionate advocacy against toxic chemicals. Laurence Buell situates the origin of "contemporary toxic discourse" in Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), whose denunciation of toxicity and the threat it poses to communities epitomizes the "rhetoric of pastoral betrayal" (645; 649). However, not all communities have historically obtained the same treatment when faced with the threat of environmental degradation. Whereas some groups typify toxicity as an external force jeopardizing the lives of their members, in other cases that same toxicity is regarded—and hence discursively constructed—as indistinguishable from the group in question. Susan Signe Morrison posits that the way to "make wasted humans invisible is to make them cognate to waste" (97): "Once located there, anyone who touches the waste becomes, in turn, contaminated as refuse, to be thrown out socially, geographically, and morally" (99).

One such group is the one formed by poor whites living in Appalachia. There seems to be a cyclic interest in tackling the "Appalachian problem." In the 1960s, Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty attracted substantive public attention to the region's predicament—an interest that was further reinforced by the publication of Harry M. Caudill's *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* (1963) and Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962). More recently, the publication of J.D. Vance's controversial memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), as well as the media press coverage of the 2016 election in so-called "Trumpalachia," has spawned a renewed interest in the

area and its conditions.<sup>2</sup> The ongoing discussion has revitalized, to some extent, some “widely discredited ‘culture of poverty’ explanations for persistent inequities in the region” (Harkins and McCarroll 2). Meanwhile, the region’s environmental plight continues to go largely unnoticed by mainstream media. The presence of companies that enforce destructive environmental practices is often justified on the grounds that it promotes modernization in a region historically defined by its economic and social backwardness. Conversely, the status of Appalachia as a historically extractivist region fosters “preconceptions of Appalachian people as either passive victims or willing conspirators in the brutal exploitation of the land” (Robertson 117). These preconceptions, however, are denounced and countered in an ever-growing body of literature that lends a voice to these communities.

This paper addresses the representation of environmental destruction in the Appalachian coalfields in the novel *Strange as this Weather Has Been* (Ann Pancake, 2007). Matthew Henry catalogs the book as an example of “extractive fiction” insofar as it deals with extractive capitalism and its social, economic, and environmental consequences (403). These fictions counter notions of progress and economic growth that are supposed to follow extractive policies, thereby challenging the ethos of (extractive) capitalism and giving a voice to those residing in “sacrifice zones” (405). Pancake’s novel follows the disbandment of a family of six in southern West Virginia and presents us with the dilemmas they must confront, most notably whether they should leave or stay and organize against the coal company.

My analysis draws from econarratology, in particular the works of Erin James on storyworlds. A storyworld consists of a simulation of “autonomous textual domains that readers must temporarily inhabit mentally and emotionally while reading” (James, *Storyworld* 21). This “imaginative transportation” allows us to experience and understand the environment from the perspective of others (*Storyworld* 2), which we can model and mentally recreate thanks to textual cues. I seek to draw attention to the ways in which *Strange as this Weather Has Been* conveys each character’s embodied, material experience when facing environmental destruction; likewise, I am interested in examining the

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<sup>2</sup> The term “Trumpalachia” appeared in the media coverage of the 2016 presidential election campaign and its aftermath. The pun sought to capture the allegedly unwavering support that the republican candidate had received in the region of Appalachia. See Harkins and McCarroll.

ways in which slow violence itself is represented in the text. Rob Nixon has defined the concept as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). Focusing on Appalachia’s extractivist past (and present), I argue that the text ultimately helps to counter the existing prejudice against poor whites in the region by fostering reader empathy through the textual recreation of the bleak environmental condition in the novel’s storyworld.

### **THE “APPALACHIAN PROBLEM”: CLASS AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION**

As Henry contends, extraction has long been central to Appalachia’s cultural imaginary (404). In spite of the prevailing images of miners working in the Appalachian coalfields that dominate the public imagination, extractivism in the area has substantially evolved and nowadays bears little resemblance to the stereotypical underground mine. In Shirley B. Burns’s words, “[t]he deep mines begat the strip mines, and the strip mines begat mountaintop removal coal mining. Each new process was introduced for one reason only: more money for the companies” (16-7). Mountaintop removal or MTR is “an aggressive form of strip mining that literally blows away mountains to gain easy access to the coal seams” (Burns 16) and uses “mammoth machinery and heavy explosives” (McNeil 49). In a period where most traditional mines have been exhausted, MTR allows companies to access coal seams that would be otherwise too insignificant to establish a full-scale mining operation—and to do so efficiently. Its profitability also stems from the fact that fewer workers are needed to run an MTR operation, which leads to more and more people being laid off in a region that has faced, and continues to face, staggering unemployment figures (Burns 20).

Besides the socioeconomic damage that MTR poses to the region, its environmental impact is appalling. Many scholars and activists have drawn attention to the scale of environmental degradation caused by this practice. Whole communities are forced to grapple with “the direct impacts of blasting, deforestation, flooding, dust, and the loss of access to mountain lands,” among others (McNeil 49). The remains of blown-up mountains, or “overburden,” are “pushed into the valleys and streams below,” and more often than not water pollution ensues (Burns 17). David Orr describes valley fills as

“mountains turned upside down: rock mining debris, trees illegally buried, along with what many locals believe to be more sinister objects brought in by unmarked trucks in the dead of night” (158). Coal dust rises “from the crushing, mixing, and transporting” the coal in processing plants and other facilities, putting people’s health at risk (Hendryx 147).

The juxtaposition of socioeconomic and environmental issues has led to the consideration of Appalachian coal counties as both internal colonies and sacrifice zones, two concepts that often go hand in hand. “Internal colony” refers to the territories that “bear the burden of environmental degradation and unstable employment prospects” so that “wealthy urban centers” can reap benefits (Henry 409). In the case of Appalachia, those benefits include either direct profit (coal companies) or widespread national access to cheap energy. Meanwhile, the term “sacrifice zone” originated in the governmental designation of “areas dangerously contaminated as a result of the mining and processing of uranium into nuclear weapons” (Lerner 2). Nowadays, sacrifice zones are defined as

places that, to their extractors, somehow don’t count and therefore can be poisoned, drained, or otherwise destroyed, for the supposed greater good of economic progress. This toxic idea has always been intimately tied to imperialism, with disposable peripheries being harnessed to feed a glittering center, and it is bound up too with notions of racial superiority, because in order to have sacrifice zones, you need to have people and cultures who count so little that they are considered deserving of sacrifice. (Klein 169-70)

These communities “deserving of sacrifice” align with Rob Nixon’s notion of “unimagined communities.” Nixon claims that the modern nation-state is sustained by the production of imagined communities as well as unimagined communities, where the latter are driven out of sight (physically and metaphorically) in order to maintain discourses of national progress and development (150-1). Unimagined communities are, therefore, evacuated rhetorically and visually “from the idea of the developing nation-state,” that is, from their lands as well as from public awareness (151; 153). Even though Nixon uses examples from the Global South to illustrate his point, those living in Appalachian coal counties might as well be considered ghosted presences in their own territories.

Even nowadays, Appalachia continues to be identified with backwardness, a sort of “forgotten America” where poverty, unemployment, and drug abuse run rampant. According to Elizabeth Catte, there is a longstanding pattern of presenting Appalachia as a monolithic “other America” that defies narratives of progress (19). From providing “a counterpoint to emerging definitions of progress at the turn of the twentieth century,” to being “deemed to be backward and underdeveloped” due to a lack of “statistical measures of progress, both material and cultural,” the region has provided a challenge to modern conceptions of the American dream for more than a century. Appalachia, Eller writes,

has appeared as a place of cultural backwardness in a nation of progressive values, a region of poverty in an affluent society, and a rural landscape in an increasingly urban nation. We *know* Appalachia exists because we need it to exist in order to define what we are not. It is the “other America” because the very idea of Appalachia convinces us of the righteousness of our own lives. The notion of Appalachia as a separate place, a region set off from mainstream culture and history, has allowed us to distance ourselves from the uncomfortable dilemmas that the story of Appalachia raises about our own lives and about the larger society. (21; original emphasis)

The coal industry has taken advantage of this imagery, “capitaliz[ing] on the ignorant hillbilly stereotype to justify the extraction of the natural resources, and, consequently, the exploitation of both people and environment” (Burriss 105-6). Indeed, the “regional affinity for extraction” is further complicated by “long-standing cultural stereotypes of Appalachia as a region predominantly populated by ‘hillbillies, white trash, and other poor whites’” (Henry 410). These stereotypes, in turn, “authorize rhetorical and ideological constructions of the region as culturally deviant” (Wise 332). The association between “social backwardness and moral abjection,” in Henry’s words (410), only contributes to make the general public feel more detached from the plight of these communities.

The hillbilly type, according to Anthony Harkins, presents us with a white other who is “lazy, slovenly, degenerate,” endures “wrenching but always comic poverty” and possesses a “raw physicality and sexuality” (19). Although the stereotype has endured multiple transformations, at its core lies a constant tension between whiteness and the wasted lives of the working class. In the eyes of the upper classes, the fact that there were white people who lived in

poverty could only mean that a fundamental deviation had taken place—be it of moral character, or a consequence of inbreeding.<sup>3</sup> However, in her monumental *White Trash*, Nancy Isenberg contends that, beginning in the seventeenth century, “[i]t was the stigma of landlessness” that determined rigid class hierarchies and “would leave its mark on white trash from this day forward” (14).

This last remark leads us right back to the question of land exploitation. One of the driving points of contention in Pancake's novel refers to people being driven away from their land as a consequence of MTR, with an array of reasons ranging from environmental damage, job losses, health issues, or a combination of any of these aspects. In this regard, physical displacement may be fueled by a metaphorical displacement previously felt by members of these communities. This is what happens to the main character Lace Ricker See and her daughter Bant. In the novel, some people choose to leave because they can no longer make ends meet (as in the case of Lace's husband Jimmy Make), or because their health complicates their survival in the midst of environmental degradation (such as Mrs. Taylor, one of the family's neighbors). The erosion of communal bonds makes it harder to confront the coal companies, as grassroots activist Charlie explains to Lace:

They [coal companies] come into your community that they've already started destroying, then they start making little side deals with people. Brewing suspicion [...], make it harder for people to stick together and fight [...]. And that makes people even less want to stay, which brings the property prices down even lower. Not that a home under a mountaintop mine is worth much anyway. (Pancake 307)

In addition to experiencing feelings of powerlessness in response to being driven away from their homeland, the characters in *Strange...* struggle to find a sense of belonging anew, a sentiment fueled by the tensions of class I have sketched above. Among all characters, Lace displays an acute awareness of such tensions. At the very beginning of the novel, she states that “[g]rowing up here, you get the message very early on that your place is more backwards than

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<sup>3</sup> A thorough discussion of the history and evolution of the white poor in the U.S. falls outside the scope of this article. For further information on the question of poverty, breeding, and morality, see Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash*, chapters 6 (pp. 135-53) and 8 (pp. 174-205). For a thorough chronology of the hillbilly type and its origins, see Harkins, chapter 1 (pp. 13-45).

anywhere in America and anybody worth much will get out soon as they can” (Pancake 3). Despite her desire to move out of the hollow and see the world, once she begins college in Morgantown she feels out of place among classmates and professors who consider her a hillbilly and thus look down on her. Later on, when the family moves to North Carolina in search for a job for Jimmy Make, this feeling of uprootedness emerges again:

But it wasn't just the lack of money that made us poorer in North Carolina. It was what you saw around you, what you had to compare yourself to, and I'd never understood about that before. And if that didn't keep us in our place, then there was the way people looked at us, regardless of how much money they had. Somehow people knew we were different from them, even before we opened our mouths, although I couldn't for the life of me see how we looked much different from anybody else. (Pancake 194)

Underlying class tensions become apparent after an incident in which a grieving Lace loses sight of Tommy, her youngest child. Even though she quickly finds him, Lace is met with the patronizing gaze of one of her North Carolina neighbors:

Then I saw the look she was giving back. Self-righteous. Smug. Redneck woman with so many kids she can't even keep track of them all. And there crashed back onto me [...] the nothingness that North Carolina made me. [...] Because people outside of back home always thought they knew exactly who I was, when they had not the slightest idea. When they'd never see me because they didn't know how to look, knew only to look for what they already thought they knew, so they always saw somebody else. (Pancake 197-8)

Sieged by environmental degradation, the interference of companies, and others' prejudice and misunderstanding, the characters in *Strange...* are cornered into choosing fight or flight. For Jimmy Make, leaving is the only answer—and so he moves out of the state again, in order to keep his children safe and fed. By contrast, Lace and Bant choose to stay even if that means becoming a target for the thugs hired by the coal company. As Lace puts it, “the best way to fight them is to refuse to leave. Stay in their way—that's the only language they can hear. We are from here, it says. This is our place, it says. Listen here, it says. We exist” (Pancake 314). A similar sentiment is echoed by Mrs. Taylor:



"That's exactly what Lyon [the coal company] wants. [...] Scare us to death and make everybody miserable to where we all just move out, then they can go on and do whatever they want. And you know what I say to that? [...] This is my house!" She slams her palms on the kitchen table [...]. "There have always been Ratliffs in this hollow! My father bought these two lots in 1928, and we *worked* for what *we* have!" (Pancake 49; original emphasis)

This logic notwithstanding, the novel's ending is far from optimistic. The effects of the slow violence perpetrated against the territory and its people will not go away any time soon. As Catte denounces, "the dominance of coal's extractive logic has permanently ruined people and land in ways with which we must still contend" (14). In my view, the novel does not seek to show ways to reverse the consequences of MTR as much as it renders these people's plight visible. Unlike the North Carolina woman who cannot really see what is in front of her, Pancake challenges us to look at the region for what it is. In what follows, I turn to analyze the construction of the novel's storyworld, paying attention to the formal devices used to depict the impact of (slow) violence on the environment. I will argue that although the community portrayed here has become unimagined, as Nixon would have it, the novel attempts to reverse this process by means of representing the material conditions of its existence, thereby fostering reader empathy.

## **REPRESENTING (SLOW) VIOLENCE**

The storyworld of *Strange...* is dominated by the impact of MTR in both the environment and those who live nearby. We ought to consider that MTR is an experience difficult to grasp even to those who have witnessed it, which makes it particularly complex to convey. Moreover, not every character in the novel shares the same viewpoint regarding mining—a circumstance that is used in the novel to illustrate the myriad viewpoints that can be held within the same community, hence undermining the perception of the Appalachian coalfields as a monolithic entity. Among the main characters, Lace, her eldest daughter Bant, and her uncle Moge are clearly the most shaken by the effects of MTR due to their deep emotional (and arguably, almost physical) attachment to the land. By contrast, Jimmy Make is as apathetic regarding the mountains as he is wary of the

companies' tactics to deter grassroots activists, but also sees MTR as an opportunity to shake off the Appalachian stereotype: "*for sure the biggest shovel in the world, and we have it right here in West Virginia. And they call us backwards*" (Pancake 163; original emphasis). On a similar note, Corey, Lace and Jimmy's third child, is fascinated by heavy machinery and cannot—will not care to—understand the harrowing implications that this form of mining entails for his family and their milieu.

According to Matt Wanat, in the novel "the rending apart of a family and community mirrors the dismemberment of mountains and living bodies" (165). Arguably, the fragmentary nature of the text, whose jumbled chronology alternates between the present and the family history narrated by Lace, also mirrors the experience of coming apart. The novel switches between six narrative voices: Lace, her children Bant, Dane, and Corey, Mogeey, and Avery, Mrs. Taylor's son. Among these, Lace, Bant, and Mogeey are first-person narrators, whereas the other fragments are narrated in the third person.<sup>4</sup> Even though the narrative emphasis appears to be placed upon the values of communion with the land displayed by those characters against MTR and environmental destruction, "no single point of view in Pancake's book is allowed to speak for the whole" (Wanat 164). I will come back to this. Furthermore, the "Appalachian advocacy" of Lace, Bant, and Mogeey is tempered "with an understanding of others' decisions to abandon their land and community to the mining company" (165). After all, as James points out, "people around the world imagine, inhabit, and experience their environments differently" (*Storyworld* 208). Yet, it is also the case that people living in the same region may experience the same environment in diverse ways.

The novel aims to foster empathy, or at least sympathy, towards other characters through textual cues that recreate their sensorial perception and their responses to those same perceptions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Alexa Weik Von Mossner suggests that "the choppy, present-tense narration in the chapters that are focalized through [Dane] suggests that he may be referring to himself in the third person" (571). The other possibility would be a highly intrusive omniscient narrator, but that possibility does not seem to be sustained by the text.

<sup>5</sup> For Weik Von Mossner, "readers are bound to feel differently about the chapters that are told from Corey's perspective" due to his lack of "affective connection worth mentioning to his environment," his "unkind and cruel behavior" towards others, and his "unhealthy fascination with technology" (572). Personally, I believe it can be harder to empathize with Corey because he possesses many unlikable traits, but the text does offer enough insight into his world as to stir some sympathy—he is ignored by his father, whom he idolizes, and his life ends tragically and abruptly.

Likewise, the reproduction of sensory information manages to convey the effects of slow violence. Following James, my analysis pays special attention to such “categories as spatialization, orality, senses other than sight, and the transgression of ontological boundaries” (*Storyworld* 42). Among these, the role of aural cues, as well as the organization of space and time, are decidedly relevant to the construction of this storyworld in particular. In what follows, I address the complexities of spatiality and chronology, as well as their respective significance for the representation of slow violence in the novel.

*Strange...* takes readers to the southern West Virginia coalfields, where most of the action unravels. The text demarcates two main spaces: that of organic life (the hollow and the surrounding mountains, including people, flora, and fauna) and that of the barren mining sites, characterized by the menacing presence of heavy machinery and toxic waste. I have chosen the term “organic life” in order to subsume urban and suburban spaces, hence stressing their interconnectedness and, above all, their opposition to the wasteland that is the mine’s landscape. Overall, the space populated by organic life is varied and far from idyllic: spots of pristine nature dwindle in size and number, and urban/suburban spaces have fallen into disrepair. Although the latter may be decaying, they are not described as toxic. Instead, the tone is nostalgic: “the sunfaded FOR RENT and FOR SALE signs in the storefronts, and then the storefronts with nothing in their windows at all, had just given up, and you could see clear through to their empty backs [...]. *Poor old Prater*” (55; original emphasis).

By contrast, the mining sites are presented as eerie spots that resist description. Upon seeing the location of an MTR site, Bant muses: “*Moonscape*, that’s what many said after they’d seen it, but I saw right away this was something different. [...] Because a moonscape was still something made by God and this was not, this was the moon upside down” (Pancake 165; original emphasis). Between the unspoiled woods and the MTR sites, the hollows are described as full to the brim with all sorts of waste, ranging from “[t]owers of treetops and logs and brush, spiked all through with tires and metal” to “little stuff gobbled in that, pop bottles, sticks and plastic” (15–6). Water is “colored like creamed coffee left for weeks on a counter” within “sediment ponds” that are “jammed with stuff” (16). An ill-defined “goeey liquid stuff” springs from cracks, “[d]ark greens and blacks that turned blue when light hit them” (21).

The waste(d) landscape is mostly kept out of sight. There must be an explicit intention to go out and look for it, like Bant does when she trespasses, or else find ways to get the information second-hand—for instance, via pictures taken from the air. Even though it is right there, it is also separate from the day-to-day lives of those living in the hollow. However, this separation is punctured from time to time as flash floods erase the precarious but precise demarcation between the two spaces and penetrate violently into the sphere of life and domesticity. This violence is in fact mimicked by the text through the use of rushed sentences: “By then the creek was blasting through our yard, torrenting against the house underpinning, terrible bright brown with white chops raging in it, and down its rapids torpedoed trash and metal and logs, logs, logs, them crashing into the upstream end of the house” (Pancake 17).

Nevertheless, the toxic presence of MTR manifests especially through aural cues. All focalizers in the novel mention the sound of heavy machinery. The impression conveyed is that the noise has itself become part of the landscape, becoming a maddening sound that cannot be turned off. It is worth mentioning that the sound of machines is often cued as coming from “overhead,” hence indicating its ubiquity, but also conveying feelings of powerlessness and subjugation (Pancake 101; 153; 246). Some of the sources of noise are identified as “revving motors and backup beepers and crashes and bangs. Scrape of that humongous shovel against rock” (102). When Bant trespasses to see the mine for herself, she renders the following description: “the machines got heavier, thicker, the sound like grinding your molars while you have your fingers in your ears, only you don’t have the say-so to stop it” (159).

The fact that these sounds are inherent to day-to-day experience suggests the pervasive presence of slow violence. Lace offers a glimpse into Appalachia’s extractivist past when she reflects on her sentiments toward the land:

this is why we feel for it like we do—the long, long loss of it. [...] Its gradual being taken away for the past hundred years, by timber, by coal, and now, outright killed, [...] a constant reminder of what you’ve lost and are about to lose. (Pancake 271)

The impact of extractivism in the lives of people manifests in very specific and material-based circumstances, such as background noise or pervasive coal dust. By scattering aural cues referencing machinery

sounds throughout the text, Pancake manages to capture the numbing effect MTR has over people.

The effects of normalization are tragically made apparent in the novel when Corey steals his neighbor's four-wheeler and accidentally drowns in a spillway after getting trapped under the vehicle. Corey's plan to steal the vehicle takes for granted that no one will notice the engine sound:

They'll do it tomorrow, Sunday morning [...] around ten o'clock, when three-quarters of the hollow will be at church and the ones left won't think nothing of a four-wheeler starting *because everybody's used to engine noise. Four-wheelers, chainsaws, tractor lawnmowers, drills, monster machines working overhead. Everybody's used to it.* (Pancake 322; emphasis added)

In that regard, Corey's death is arguably a byproduct of the slow violence of extractivist practices. Thus, he becomes another casualty on the family's list of extractivism-related illnesses and deaths, including Lace's dad's passing due to black lung disease, uncle Moge's accident with a kettlebottom, and Jimmy Make's stagger after his injury while he worked in the mine.<sup>6</sup> Among these, black lung epitomizes the effects of slow violence on people insofar as it develops gradually over time and cannot be reversed completely.

Even though it can also manifest in sudden outbursts, over the course of the novel violence generally appears in subtler ways and during long time spans. Let us now consider the ways in which violence manifests in, and through, the text's chronology. The main action in *Strange...* takes place during the summer of 2000, although the story as a whole is bracketed between two real life events: the Buffalo Creek flooding of 1972 and the Martin County flooding that happened in October 2000. Both events can be categorized as sudden

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<sup>6</sup> Black lung disease is another name for coal workers' pneumoconiosis, a type of pulmonary fibrosis that may develop after being exposed to coal dust for long periods of time. Inhalation of coal dust particles causes inflammation and scarring in the lungs, affecting the patient's capacity to breathe normally. The symptoms may take years to develop, and although they can be mitigated to some extent, there is no known cure. See "Coal Worker's Pneumoconiosis (Black Lung Disease)."

"Kettlebottom" is a term describing "isolated rock masses in mine roofs, which tend to be semicircular when viewed from below and have a rounded or flat bottom like a kettle. Most kettlebottoms are in-place, fossil tree stumps" (*Kentucky Geological Survey* n.p.). Removal of coal seams in underground mining sites can cause kettlebottoms to fall out of the mine roof, which makes them a potential hazard for miners. See "Kettlebottoms in mine roofs."

occurrences, yet upon closer inspection we can find subtle hints that indicate the flooding is the byproduct of land erosion over the course of the years. In the case of Martin County, Bant comments on how the impoundment that caused the flood “had been sitting on top of a mountain just honey-combed with abandoned deep mines,” until “its bottom simply gave out” (Pancake 345). Even though the placement of the slurry impoundment was problematic from the start, it was the existence of these deep mines which sealed the fate of the inhabitants living down below. This observation points further back to a moment before the erosion of mountaintop removal, and even strip mining—a time where underground mining was the preferred technique and whose effects on the land went unnoticed. The fact that the mountain was already hollow (“honey-combed”) on the inside when the impoundment gave in indicates the slow but inexorable destruction of the environment perpetrated by coal companies throughout decades.

The implicit presence of a longer time span can also be spotted in the accounts of other characters. Mrs. Taylor, Dane’s employer, explains to him “how she has fought coal dust and road dust off coal trucks” and how she “[m]opped up the black slime of Buffalo Creek” only to find herself amidst “blasting dust and flood trash and my house falling down all around me in little pieces” in her “final years” (Pancake 70). These references to past catastrophes suggest a longer chronology of destruction, in which the town and the surrounding hollers have been immersed for decades. In this regard, the implicit signs of destruction emerge as landmarks of slow violence. Even though there are multiple acts in the story that fit the idea of violence as “an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space” (Nixon 2), these more elusive markers indicate that there is a longer time span that underlies the more spectacular violence of flash floods and blasting. According to James:

It is difficult to situate slow violence within [Gérard] Genette’s model of narrative temporality [...]. This violence does not occur in quick, catastrophic events, but accumulates quietly in the background over long periods of time. In appearing off the page or in the background, the extremely slow durations of slow violence challenge the basic separation of description and plot that is fundamental to narrative theory. (“Anthropocene” 193)

A good example of the blurring between description and plot is Dane’s obsession with the Buffalo Creek disaster, which looms large

in the memory of his employers, the Taylor family. Interestingly, Dane has no direct experience of the flood, as he had not been born yet when it happened. However, the testimonies of Mrs. Taylor and her son Avery, who lived through it, have a deep emotional effect on Dane's psyche and condition his attitude towards the flash floods he does actually experience. Working for Mrs. Taylor, he is constantly reminded of "[w]hat happened at Buffalo Creek" (Pancake 44):

[D]ay after day in the darkened house [...] Mrs. Taylor tells the horrors of Buffalo Creek, February 26, 1972. And she doesn't tell them as history or legend. She tells them as prophecy, as threat [...] but Dane listens. She doesn't do it to scare him, [...] it's simply what Mrs. Taylor has to do, and it's what Dane does, too. Dane is the listener. So he listens. (Pancake 48)

Having already experienced a flash flood, albeit a miniaturized version with regard to the one in Buffalo Creek, Dane lives in fear of living through another one, convinced that this time he will witness an actual apocalypse: "I'm only twelve years old. And I'm going to see the End of the World" (Pancake 74; 112). Hearing plays a fundamental role in conveying Dane's trauma in the aftermath of the flood. He is left with what appears to be aural hallucinations, obsessed with Mrs. Taylor's command to "*listen for a rumble, now, that's all we can do*": "And in the distance, he could hear the whispers of the End. A mutter. Soft-chutter. Moany, moany in their mouths" (Pancake 113; 115). Thus, the memory of the event is passed on to Dane as a form of post-memory that merges with his own memories of a different flood, perpetuating a form of intergenerational trauma that manifests as solastalgia, or "the pain or sickness caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory" (Albretch 45).<sup>7</sup> The disruptive and harmful effect of slow violence is not limited to its physical manifestation in the environment. It reaches humans across time, and shapes their perception in unexpected ways.

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<sup>7</sup> Following Albretch's definition of the concept, Weik Von Mossner identifies the nightmares and headaches suffered by Mogeey as symptoms of solastalgia, or the "homesickness one gets when one is still at 'home' and identifies it as feeling of distress that results from the recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault" (573). I believe Dane's overwhelming feelings of dread and tendency to get paralyzed in the face of danger are also a manifestation of solastalgia.

Mrs. Taylor's account corresponds to the type of violence that Nixon opposes to slow violence, the kind that is immediate, explosive, and spectacular:

Now you know them pictures of the clouds in Japan when they dropped the bomb? [...] That's the kind of cloud that dam made when it caved in [...]. When the dam broke, the water behind it shot out onto the gob pile. And when the water hit that smoking gob, it exploded up in the air like a volcano and threw this steaming mud all over their windshields. (Pancake 75–6)

Conversely, Dane learns to tune his hearing to the menace of destruction that a new flood will inevitably bring. Against Mrs. Taylor's tale of shocking violence, Dane listens to anything that may confirm the threat of violence erupting suddenly: "Rain too soft to hear on the roof. Sneaking. All we can do is listen for a big rumble, Mrs. Taylor talking" (Pancake 109). This corresponds to James's observation that "we must now recognize plots that are so slow as to be imperceptible to human experience" ("Anthropocene" 194). Still, Dane's efforts to tune his hearing to what is imperceptible to others fail to provide him with a sense of security. Ultimately, he finds himself unable to react when faced with an actual catastrophe—the death of his brother Corey. Dane's inaction in spite of his knowledge of environmental destruction and its perils illustrates how living in a sacrifice zone takes a toll on the mental health of those affected by it.

In the novel, symptoms of solastalgia are especially noticeable in characters who feel a deeper connection to their surroundings—that is, Lace, Bant, and Mogey—and whose sense of self, as individuals and members of a community, is also jeopardized by MTR. Here it is worth noting that "[a]ny context where place identity is challenged by pervasive change to the existing order has potential to deliver solastalgia" (Albretch 45). In this case, MTR alters the existing (natural) order as it leaves the landscape in a state of disarray, best exemplified by the unnatural amalgamation of organic and toxic elements present in the landfills. In turn, this attack on nature threatens the place identity of the Ricker-Sees, which is intimately connected to their extensive knowledge and "[f]amiliarity with [...] plants and with the topography [that] define Appalachians environmentally" (Houser 98). In what can be read as an act of verbal resistance, Lace, Bant, and Mogey carefully list a plethora of autochthonous plant species, thereby offering a stark contrast to the



chaotic, indistinguishable waste of the landfills: “Shawnee, poke, ramps, molly moochers in spring, blackberries in summer, mayapple and cohosh, then ginseng and nuts—hickory, black walnut, butternut, chinquapin, beech—in the fall. [...] Sumac and sassafras [...] holly and greenery” (Pancake 34–5). Besides providing “intimate insight into the characters’ thoughts, feelings, and actions” (Burriss 101), their first-person narrations contribute to preserving the distinct character of the Appalachian flora. Moreover, the use of regional names (e.g., “molly moochers” instead of “morel mushrooms”) conveys the impression that mining is destroying the lands as well as the traditions associated to the lands, like foraging, that are seminal to the region’s dwellers’ identity.

Their profound love for the woods leads Lace, Bant, and Mogey to suffer the most when faced with the resulting wreckage. In some cases, their descriptions evoke the combined materiality of their own bodies and of the land. For instance, Mogey suffers from headaches and nightmares, dreaming of “animals with metal for teeth” and “a plastic bag for a belly,” or “leaves falling as ash” (Pancake 178). These images of impossible hybrids give way to “a dream of sound” with “nothing but an alarm going on [...] *Mwaaa. Mwaaa. Mwaaa. Mwaaa*” (178–79; original emphasis). The horn-like noise offers a stark contrast with the “hum,” an almost spiritual emanation that Mogey perceives as coming off “the still things, trees and ground and rock, although I only call it hum because I don’t got no other word for it” (169). Even though it is not “something caught by ear” (169), the hum captures the idea of a benign sound or vibration, as opposed to the overwhelming noise of MTR sites.

As for Bant, she struggles with her growing alienation from the mountains, which worsens after the family moves to North Carolina. Prior to leaving, she had been able to sit quietly in the wild and feel “the space dropped away between [her] and the land [...] it was like being inside some kind of body there” (Pancake 35). Later on, as word gets passed on that Yellowroot Mountain has been decimated, Bant feels “like [her] mind didn’t want to make a place for this here” (21). When she gets exposed to the destruction through photographs and talks with her mother, she is shaken: “it made a dry place in my mouth [...] it was like dirty pictures I was seeing [...] like looking at pictures of naked people. Like looking at pictures of dead bodies” (58).

Only when Bant finally decides to climb the mountain and see the extent of the damage for herself does she fully comprehend it. It is there that she experiences “a hurt” that leaves her disoriented, a

reaction akin to physical pain which enables comprehension at a deeper, more intimate level: “But then, finally, I did feel the hurt for myself. I understood” (Pancake 102–3). Here understanding is not depicted as a mental process on an abstract plane, but as a full-on bodily reaction that merges her body to the land, finally enabling her to feel for the mountain: “What I saw punched my chest. Knocked me back on my heels. [...] Monster shovel clawed the dirt and you felt it in your arm, your leg, your belly” (165). The use of second person appeals to the audience represents an attempt to bridge the distance through an invocation to experientiality, inviting us to imagine how the shovel would feel like in our own flesh:

[T]hrough the use of second person as well as direct reference to human organs, [Bant] creates an immediate, three-way, physical connection between the bodies of the mountain, character, and reader. [...] Bant uses her own body—and the fact that our mirror neurons will fire when we read about another human’s bodily movements, feelings, and perceptions—to give readers a sense of what it feels like to behold the remnants of a violated mountain. (Weik Von Mossner 570)

Bant’s assimilation of the hurt enables her to tap into a newfound deeper connection with the land. Through her body, she rediscovers what Mogey identifies with the “hum,” or the feeling of spiritual belonging and unity: “I could feel what was nearby, its size, its closeness, its give, beech, poplar, oak, holly hickory hemlock laurel, touching nothing, tripping nowhere, what Mogey always said about the hum” (Pancake 355). While his explanations are—in some aspects—bordering on the religious, Lace’s are more pragmatic: “[T]hrough all those hard, hard years, I understood now, as I’d lost my self, my dream, my dad, my mom—it was place crept in and filled the lack” (300). Place, then, is imbued with affectivity and in turn conveyed to us readers through textual cues.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has attempted to shed light on the discursive mechanisms whereby a community becomes unimagined by means of its relation to waste, as well as the reversal of those same mechanisms in order to showcase the community’s environmental plight. Likewise, it has proven its point by showcasing the narrative techniques used in the novel that undo that waste-ification process. In particular, the text

manages to foster reader empathy by appealing to the physical, even corporeal dimension as it describes the damage against the environment in terms of human bodily experiences. In addition, it succeeds in translating the sheer horror of living next to a MTR mining site through the deliberate use of aural cues, as well as through hints to the pervasive impact of slow violence applied to temporal and spatial representation.

Furthermore, the novel lends a voice to the unimagined communities of the Appalachian coalfields that is in turn composed by diverse viewpoints and personal experiences that offer a glimpse into the complex interplay of extractive capitalism and internal colonization. The resulting narrative is decidedly heteroglossic insofar as the community, far from being reduced to a monolithic entity that either supports or rejects extractive policies, is allowed room for internal dissent. Pancake's novel demonstrates that the effects of environmental degradation are not easily reversed, and that the peoples affected by slow violence do not have an easy way out of their often dire situation. However, *Strange as this Weather Has Been* clues us in how those experiences shape, and are shaped by, the profound ties with the land that are seminal to a more sustainable future.

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