

Appalachian Journal



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“The best way to fight them is refuse to leave”: Mountaintop Removal and White Vulnerability in Ann Pancake’s *Strange as this Weather Has Been*

EVANGELIA KINDINGER



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In the introductory essay to *Ecocriticism & The Future of Southern Studies* (2019), editor Zackary Vernon describes the “U.S. South” as a “site of environmental precariousness” (5). Admitting that “we must remain careful not to reinscribe outdated notions of southern exceptionalism based on the region’s environmental histories,” he still considers it “permissible to note that the South has been and continues to be a place of quantifiable environmental degradation and loss” (5). One specific location of “degradation and loss” he mentions is Southern Appalachia and its mountains that have supplied the nation with coal for almost two centuries. In *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2009), bell hooks contemplates the ambiguous status coal has had in her hometown of Hopkinsville, Kentucky; an “amazing natural legacy” that has become an epitome of violence, “Coal is one of earth’s great gifts.... Yet it did not come into our homes and into our lives without tremendous sacrifice and risk” (26-27).

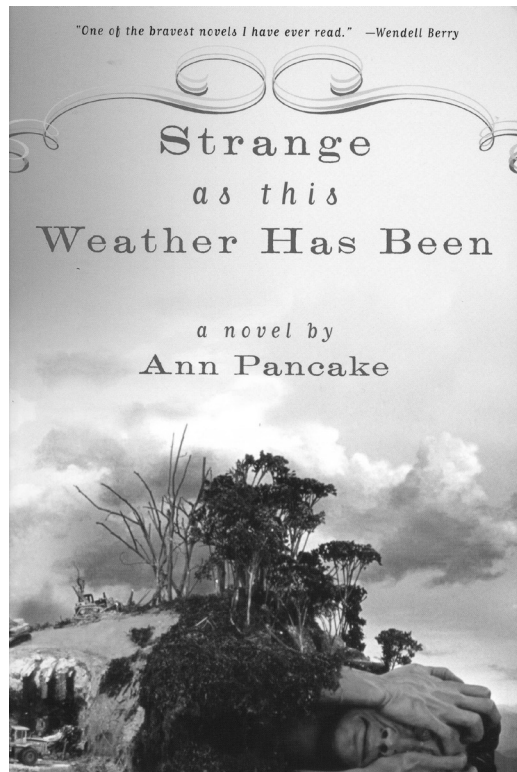
Ann Pancake’s 2007 debut novel *Strange as this Weather Has Been* is one such narrative of sacrifice and risk. The title refers to a phrase people use to describe the anomalous weather conditions, “too much water or too little, the temperature too high or too low” (Pancake 101). The book was inspired by interviews Pancake conducted with people in the coalfields of southern West Virginia and eastern Kentucky (359). The West Virginian author paints a desolate picture of a small town at the foot of the fictional Yellowroot Mountain in the early 2000s, a town marked by poverty, unemployment, foreclosures, and memories of the Buffalo Creek Flood of 1972 and the Martin County Spill of 2000. The town’s community

lives a precarious life, constantly vulnerable to flash floods, injuries, and death caused by mountaintop removal mining, which is “a multistep process of clearing, blasting, digging, and dumping waste [that] has eliminated the need for miners by relying on increased mechanization” (Hinrichsen 25). As Richard Drake explains,

In mountainous terrain, problems emerge that are not present when strip-mining is attempted on flatter lands.... the “overburden,” when it is pushed down the mountains, creates an unstable “spoil bank” that may not stabilize for years. In areas of heavy rainfall, which is characteristic of all of Appalachia, streams become clogged, and mountains of mud destroy downstream farm acres. (204-05)

The mudslides and floods caused by this disastrous interplay appear to be “natural disasters,” but they are not. Ever since the effects of Hurricane Katrina, which made visible the vulnerable position of poor and Black New Orleanians, the “natural-ness” of natural disasters is questionable. Natural disasters seem to be unpredictable and unavoidable, while they are often “endogenous results of human agency invisibly working their effect slowly over a period of years” (Holm 16); mountaintop removal mining, for instance, has taken place over a period of many decades. Such mining is “responsible for introducing a wide range of toxic materials into the air, streams, and soil of the region” (Hinrichsen 25), materials that make people and nature “sick.”

Bearing witness to the people and the landscape of Appalachia, Pancake clearly criticizes mountaintop removal mining by displaying the violence it inflicts on land and its people. I purposefully write “its people,” because the author presents a world in which land and people belong to one another. It is crucial to pay attention to who is vulnerable, because the community Pancake offers space to is a white community; her protagonists are all white Appalachian mountaineers, a fact that previous analyses of the novel have not fully addressed. My reading of *Strange* recognizes the whiteness of Pancake’s mountaineers and the ways in which she paints the region as “naturally” white, despite “the cultural diversity of Appalachia and the interaction of various ethnic and religious groups throughout the history of the region” (Straw 4). The whiteness of *Strange* is crucial, as the novel is an exemplary text that traces the complex contours of Appalachian whiteness. It clearly demonstrates what I have elsewhere called the intersections of whiteness.¹



Whiteness in Appalachia, as the novel demonstrates, intersects with other vectors that determine identity, the most obvious ones being class and gender. In addition, place and ecology are key to understanding the position her characters find themselves in, namely one of severe vulnerability.² Vulnerability allows for an intersectional reading of mountaineers, because it is caused by an interplay of conditions that include “class ..., occupation, caste, ethnicity, gender, disability and health status, age and immigration status” (Wisner et al. 11)—and place. In an attempt to make mountaineer vulnerability visible

Pancake uses point of view to make visible the closeness of some characters to the land, as well as to mark other characters’ slow detachment from the land.

and relevant, Pancake resists the historical marginalization of Appalachia and its people by exposing a particularly white vulnerability and making use of colonial narratives to argue for the need for protection, resistance, and rootedness.

* * *

“Its people,” for Pancake in *Strange As This Weather*, are the family Ricker See that lives in the hollow, their neighbor Mrs. Taylor, and her son Avery. Pancake dedicates individual chapters to the characters and thus constructs a polyvocal and diverse

narrative in which each protagonist is affected differently by mountaintop removal mining, yet what they all share is the experience of loss. The narrative perspectives vary in the novel: some characters are given their own voice, in chapters narrated through a first-person perspective, while other characters are introduced by a third-person narrator. The difference in narrative perspective expresses the different attachments individual characters have to Yellowroot Mountain. Lace Ricker See, for example, is a mother of four who joins an environmental group and tries to resist the landscape’s, and thus her family’s, destruction. She is very attached to the mountain and therefore the first-person narrator of the chapters named after her. Lace’s husband Jimmy Make is only interested in keeping a job and does not share his wife’s contempt for the coal industry; therefore, he narrates no chapters. Their oldest daughter Bant, another first-person narrator, is torn between her parents’ loyalties and tries to navigate her identity while growing up in Appalachia. The two female characters certainly stand out, and not only because of the narrative position. Along with Bant’s uncle, Mogy Ricker, the third first-person narrator, they mourn the loss of land most. Pancake uses point of view to make visible the closeness of some characters to the land, as well as to mark other characters’ slow detachment from the land. Lace’s sons Corey and Dane are too young to understand the extent of loss, despite having lived through disasters—their chapters are

narrated by a third-person narrator. Her youngest son Tommy runs along with his brothers and has no voice in the narrative.

The family's neighbor, Mrs. Taylor, feels loss very intensely, living on her own and with the memory of the Buffalo Creek disaster. Dane is her caretaker because all her children decided to leave Yellowroot, fleeing from the precarity of mountain life. Her son Avery Taylor left West Virginia behind and moved to Ohio, only occasionally visiting his mother, trying to convince her to follow him. His chapters are relayed by a third-person narrator to symbolize his abandonment of his home, it seems. In flashbacks, Pancake narrates these people's relationships to Yellowroot, the ways in which the mountain's resources helped them survive hard times, but also the losses created by floods and the effects of coal mining and mountaintop removal on the community, the land, and Appalachia.

Appalachia and Mountain Identities

Scholars of Appalachia are quick to say that the region is both a place and an idea. The geographical boundaries of the place sometimes shift, depending on who is drawing them. Richard A. Straw, for instance, defines a "core area" that is made up of "West Virginia, southwestern Virginia, eastern Kentucky, eastern Tennessee, western North Carolina, and the northern mountains of Georgia" (4). Ideas about Appalachia shift as well and are also dependent on who is sharing or creating them, but there has been a long history of nationally shared ideas about the region. As Emily Satterwhite has convincingly shown with reference to the cultural work of popular fiction about Appalachia, there are two images of Appalachia that have dominated the national imaginary, "the wretched and the redemptive" (1). The "wretched" invokes "toothless hillbillies," "coal mining," "poverty," "moonshining," "incest" (Satterwhite 1), while the "redemptive" image is one of "pastoralism and even utopianism" (Satterwhite 1), based on the assumed self-sufficiency of Appalachians and the riches of the mountains. It is these material riches that have, according to John Hartigan Jr., led to the exploitation of the region "by various corporate interests and government agencies, producing a degrading dynamic of dependence that continues to this day, accentuated by rampant environmental destruction caused by ongoing mining operations" (158). Hartigan uses a colonial logic to explain the exploitation of Appalachia: "government agencies" have come into the region, have occupied it, and used its resources (both natural and human) to benefit the people outside the region.

This logic is based on the "colonialism model" (cf. Lewis et al.) that has been widely used in Appalachian Studies since the late 1970s to create a conceptual framework that offers a language to describe what corporations and the government have "done to" Appalachia. In his *History of Appalachia*, Drake makes use of the colonialism model to explain why "a region of great and crucial wealth," such as Appalachia, has remained poor: "The approach of the rich and prosperous America toward a poor Appalachia has ... often resembled that of a colonialist

toward a colony, or of a corporate exploiter toward a region that has been kept powerless” (215). The model certainly results from what Matt Wanat has termed “the curious marriage of marginalization and economic interest” (163) that becomes visible in places like Appalachia, places “critical to the continuing function of the machinery of industrial institutions” and which simultaneously, despite their “industrial” worth, are deemed “expendable” (163). *Strange* makes painfully visible how the people living at Yellowroot, their livelihood, and their lives are expendable for the sake of the hills’ resources that are—in

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the end—also expendable, being stripped for profit and power. Even names are expendable, as Yellowroot is renamed “Bitex 4” (132) and is thus stripped of its history and identity. Historically, one strategy to justify human expendability has been to mark specific groups as the “Other,” a label based on categories such as race, gender, sexuality, or religion, to name a few. In *Strange*, the expendability of human life and nature creates the vulnerable position of Pancake’s protagonists; at the intersections of class, place, gender, occupation, health status, and race, these white mountaineers lose their “worth” for mainstream American society.

So far, I have used “mountaineers” to describe the novel’s characters, yet the proximity and “surrender” to the hills also suggest a different terminology that ties into notions of expendability and vulnerability: “hillbilly,” a dominant stereotype that has

historically stigmatized “rural, mountain people” as being “at best primitive and exotic and at worst backward and dimwitted” (Cox 74). For Anthony Harkins, the “hillbilly” is an “American icon”; he traces the development of this icon that has, ever since its first circulation in the early 20th century, been (ab)used to ridicule, or at least to mark, “rural mountain people” as distinct from other Southerners and other Americans. The epithet is used to formulate and thus create a group identity for specifically white “mountain people” who are not quite as white as they should be. The interplay of class, race, and place have created what Harkins calls the “white other” (7). With reference to Matt Wray, the “hillbilly,” much like “white trash” and other disparaging terms, function as “stigmatizing boundary terms that simultaneously denote and enact cultural and cognitive divides between in-groups and out-groups, between acceptable and unacceptable identities, between proper and improper behaviors” (23). Within the system of American whiteness, people constructed as hillbillies are the “out-group.” Their unacceptability is based on the image of the “hillbilly” as “backward,

lazy, and dangerous” (Hartigan 158). The “hillbilly” is separated from the white mainstream and designates a regionally rooted whiteness.

“Hillbilly” is a classist and regional slur that captures the pitfalls of whiteness, and mirrors the classism of American society and the unstable position of Appalachia (and the American South) in the national imaginary. It functions as a reminder of pre-capitalist and pre-neoliberal times, but also of times in which racial identifications were imagined as stable. It is therefore also embraced as a valuable cultural identity, as Hartigan has shown with regard to “hillbilly music,” specifically one that is “removed from a broader identification with the ‘mainstream’ of the white middle class” (124).³ The “hillbilly” complicates whiteness in that it makes it visible and fallible. Barbara Ellen Smith has argued that the analysis of hillbilly iconography and history has almost become a “sub-field within Appalachian Studies” (47). Yet this sub-field, she suggests, needs to avoid naturalizing or sidetracking Appalachian whiteness while it also needs to go beyond the mere critiquing of stereotyping and the subsequent proposition that “hillbillies” are an oppressed minority (43, 48). The “racial innocence” of Appalachia (Smith 42) has remained a powerful myth that has obscured the fact that “the making of Appalachia has been simultaneously the making of whiteness” (43).

Pancake writes back to this history of marginalization while holding on to the roots and the exceptionalism of Appalachian mountain culture. She does not make use of the term “hillbilly,” yet the humanity and resilience she writes into her mountaineers clearly responds to the cultural implications of the “hillbilly.” To circumvent these implications, I will use the term “mountaineer” to refer to the characters in Pancake’s novel, a term that was particularly used in the late 19th century (cf. Isenberg) and which is not as stigmatizing as “hillbilly,” because it generally “reflects the fact that the majority of the Appalachian people do live in the mountains and have been affected by their isolation and environment there” (Miller 16). The “isolation” of Appalachia is actually more complicated than Miller formulates it. As Straw explains, “although Appalachia certainly did not always interact with all aspects of American life, it was not completely set apart, either” (5). Smith points out that mountaineers are usually defined “in terms of their class and region (and occasionally gender)” (43), while their whiteness is rarely recognized “unless they are ‘not white’” (43). While Pancake’s protagonists are never classified as white,⁴ there is rather what Sara Ahmed has termed the spatial orientation “around” (133) whiteness: “We do not face whiteness; it ‘trails behind’ bodies as what is assumed to be given” (133).

In the novel, what is “assumed to be given” is the protagonists’ whiteness as Appalachians. The assumption becomes particularly evident when one considers the way the only character of color is narrated. Pancake’s narrator specifically points out that “Rabbit” is different from the rest of the mountaineers. For example, his real name is not offered, because “Rabbit” apparently is “just” what he is being called (63). Corey, Lace’s son, is fascinated by him, not

only because of the found objects—“trash or parts” (62)—he collects behind his house, but also because of his racial ambiguity: “Rabbit is thought a little crazy, and, further, nobody can tell what color he is and he himself won’t let on. If he was definitely white, nobody’d care, and if he was definitely black, most wouldn’t care, but you just couldn’t tell by looking at him, and you couldn’t tell by his last name, either” (63). Through his childish eyes, Corey does not see the connection between Rabbit’s “mysterious” racial make-up, the rumor that he is “crazy,” and the ways in which he is ostracized in the community. Interestingly though, he does understand the different status of Black and white, claiming that only “most” locals would not care if Rabbit was Black. This suggests that even the youngest members are aware of racial hierarchies, without fully understanding why. Yet this is the only mention of race relations, as the narrative does not further engage with race and the history of Black and white Appalachians.

One of the credos of Critical Whiteness Studies is that whiteness is so precariously powerful and desirable because it is deemed invisible, albeit “only invisible for those who inhabit it,” as Ahmed explains (133). Yet whiteness is visible, even for whites (cf. Wray). It is indeed a “system of privileges accorded to those with white skin” (Babb 9), but—as is suggested in Pancake’s novel—there are different “kinds” of whiteness. In *Strange*, for instance, the privileges of upward mobility, of being able to escape surveillance and regulation, of being accepted as a self-evident standard against which all differences are measured, collapse when applied to mountaineer Appalachians. They collapse because their whiteness intersects with other vectors, like class and place, that—together—create a position in which *these* white Americans are vulnerable to concrete and symbolic violence. Based on Kimberlé Crenshaw’s work on intersectionality, in which she has shown that discrimination need not be understood “as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis” (140) but rather along multiple axes, recent developments in Critical Whiteness Studies argue that “no absolute conflation of whiteness and power can be made since the equation modulates and becomes distorted through intersections of whiteness and class, ethnicity, or gender” (Levine-Rasky 109). Whiteness, as demonstrated by the cultural history of the “hillbilly” and its linguistic kin, for example, is not equally experienced; it intersects with other “axes of differentiation” (cf. Brah and Phoenix), ranging from class, ethnicity, and gender, to place.

White Vulnerability

As mentioned before, the novel addresses a vulnerability that is specific to the mountaineers. Pancake’s protagonists are deemed vulnerable, which means they are “prone to or susceptible to damage or injury” (Wisner et al. 11). Vulnerability signifies “the characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard (an extreme natural event

or process)" (11). Judith Butler understands vulnerability as "a mode of relationality" (130) between bodies and the "infrastructural and environmental conditions" that determine peoples' "living and acting" (65). It is the result that puts intersecting positions of specific groups more at risk than others. As a concept, vulnerability is helpful in making visible the constructedness of supposedly "natural" catastrophes and asking uncomfortable questions about human responsibility.⁵ The Ricker See family is constantly vulnerable because they are poor (despite being white), from the coal region of Appalachia, and attached to "home": the hills. When Bant goes up Yellowroot to witness the full extent of destruction caused by mountaintop removal mining, trespassing on land she is not allowed to access anymore, this vulnerability is illustrated in almost apocalyptic ways.⁶ Not only does she find "dead trees," "bulldozed trees, hundreds of them" (352), but also "four good-sized sediment ponds" (353). These pose an immediate danger because, as Bant fears, a hard rainfall would overflow them and lead all "water, muck, and poisons, more trees and trash" down Yellowroot Road: "Our house would be the first to go" (354). This realization comes after Bant has decided to stay home with her mother and not follow her father and her brothers to North Carolina. In *Strange*, leaving is not represented as a viable option for those who are most vulnerable.

The mountaineers are exposed to the "infrastructural and environmental conditions" (Butler 65) of the mountains and the greed for its resources, and thus live with the risk of "fly rock crashing into people's houses, chemical leaks in sediment ponds. Drownings in flash floods, people breathing cancer-causing dust" (Pancake 83). They are injured, physically and psychologically. Uncle Mogeey, as Bant shares with the readers, was injured by "a kettlebottom, one of those petrified tree trunks that sometimes drop out of mine roofs, ... couldn't work anymore, and ... was never the same in other ways, too" (39). Lace's father lost two fingers in a mining accident (5), displaying a gap that—as Lace admits—has always embarrassed her. His granddaughter Bant only remembers "Pap wheelchair-bound and drawing breath through straws in his nose": "When I was little I never even questioned it, I'd just thought that's how old men got their air ... until I grew up and found out most old men didn't and Pap wasn't that old anyway" (58). The bodies of these men have been disabled by what is meant to sustain them and their families—their work on and in the mountains. Coal is killing the Ricker See family in other ways, too. While Lace, her mother, and her daughter see the relationality between vulnerability and coal, Jimmy Make believes that "men got to feed their families" (105) and that coal is all the people "got around here" (106). Lace observes "the operations were getting bigger than anyone'd imagined"

The bodies of these men have been disabled by what is meant to sustain them and their families—their work on and in the mountains.

and regrets not realizing the harm for land and people earlier, “as those tons and tons of coal went out ... laid-off miners and their families went right along with them” (186).

The exploitation of the land is destroying the local community and people’s homes; Moge’s house is, as he describes, “falling apart”: “Blasting’s cracked my Sheetrock, cracked the walls in my bathroom, cracked the cinderblocks under my house ... it split my concrete porch in two” (174). Mountaintop removal mining and the consequent floods have “ripped and rearranged

Pancake’s protagonists are what white Americans should not be in a nation that was built on white supremacy, namely expendable.

the neighborhood” (26) and have created a “confused new shape of the land” (16). The loss of the mountain and its resources is treated like a perversion of the order of the world. Bant compares the sight of “hacked gray stumps where mountain peaks had been” to “dirty pictures” or “pictures of dead bodies” (58). She compares Yellowroot to a human body that is “turned inside out” (20), whose guts are cut out. Usually, as Ahmed claims, “whiteness allows bodies to move with comfort through space, and to inhabit

the world as if it were home” (136)—this comfort is clearly upset in Pancake’s narrative.

The dying hills need to be read as a sign of a dying culture, a mountaineer and thus white culture, which the colonial presence of the coal-mining industry has rearranged like the landscape. Pancake’s protagonists are what white Americans should *not* be in a nation that was built on white supremacy, namely expendable. Pancake’s novel demonstrates the intersectionality of whiteness; her protagonists (except Avery Taylor) do not have access to power and privilege per se and are what Ange-Marie Hancock would call “the intersectionally disadvantaged” (10) because they are poor and live in a region that has historically been imagined and treated as the Other to the nation. Avery is said to have never realized “until he left out ... how much the other people, at least the other white people, in this country, perceived, expected, desired” (Pancake 235).⁷

Avery has had the means, namely a college education, to escape the risks of his home by moving to Ohio; compared to other characters, he is successfully mobile. His function in the novel is quite interesting; Pancake offers only one chapter to his story, narrated from a third-person point of view, but this chapter is crucial because Avery inhabits a liminal position within the novel’s matrix. As both outsider and insider, he can be read as a mediator between the two spaces, Appalachia and the “outside.” Yet he struggles with this position: “To leave home is not just to leave a piece of land and family and friends, it is to leave your reputation, the respect you’ve earned from others, your dignity, your place” (215). Torn, he lives in two worlds, with two knowledges, which is

best exemplified, as the narrator reveals, in the “two Englishes” Avery speaks: “the hard sharp language spoken by the educated, clever language” and “an English smooth and wet, soft and loamy” (216). College educated, he has studied “their history,” that is, the Appalachian history that was never taught in history classes in high school. In high school, “they learned the Pledge of Allegiance every morning” (235) instead, and other rituals that are meant to teach obedience and loyalty to the nation, a nation Avery is very critical of as it systematically exploits his home while pushing its people to the margins.

Avery recalls how severely aberrant behavior by the “poorest kids” was punished in school, as a warning to the rest:

look what will happen to you if you don't work hard, do as you're told, expect little, American poverty Appalachian-style: the shanties and decaying trailers, the retarded and the crazy, those without plumbing reeking on school buses, the ringworm and scabies and the lice, your daily meal the free one at school, your clothes somebody else's first and everyone can tell ... and almost every one of their bodies as white-skinned as your own. That's what they learned. (235-36)

“They” denotes the other white students who are taught to distance themselves from those who might look like them, but whose class, decorum, and lifestyle differ. Avery very clearly formulates what Vivian M. May calls the “systemic patterns of asymmetrical life opportunities and harms” (3) that lead to the vulnerability of his people: “This sacrifice of land, what [Avery] stands in now, is nothing new, it has been regularly slaughtered for well over a hundred years ... the whole region had been killed at least once” (238).

Lace, like Avery, struggles with the inside/outside binary and the desires she has for “home” and any place outside of Appalachia. She has tried to leave her home twice, but both attempts ended with an urgent need to return. As Lisa Hinrichsen argues in her reading of *Strange* and affect, the book explores “the ambivalence of home” (23). And indeed, leaving home is shown to restore one’s safety, but simultaneously destroy one’s soul. Before leaving for West Virginia University, she has dreams of living in what she calls the “outside”: “I’d decided I was newer than all this here. Here was fine for Mom, Dad, and Sheila ... but only outside of here would I, Lace See, live real life” (3). Lace has understood the marginalized position “here” has in the larger scheme of things: “Growing up here, you get the message very early on that your place is more backwards than anywhere in America and anybody worth much will get out as soon as they can, and that doesn’t only come from outside” (3). As a teenager she has internalized this perception, wanting to be

“Growing up here, you get the message very early on that your place is more backwards than anywhere in America and anybody worth much will get out as soon as they can, and that doesn't only come from outside.”

—Lace Ricker See

*“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 ... Listen here, it says. We exist.”
—Lace Ricker See*

“newer,” meaning more modern, progressive, better, instead of “backward.” Homesickness overcomes her though, and she returns “just for a weekend ... no failure in that” (4). She does not return for the people only, but also for the land. Pancake repeatedly stresses the importance of the land and the ways in which it roots people. At college, Lace is often caught looking out the window, “watching the ridges in the distance”: “I was all the time feeling like I wasn’t touching nothing, and wasn’t nothing touching me back ... they had hills in Morgantown, but not backhome hills, and not the same feel backhome

hills wrap you in” (4). This sentiment is repeated through Mogeys’s memory of leaving home after being drafted, and experiencing admiration because “hillbilly boys” (173) can shoot well, but always wanting to return to his own hills, not caring for other mountains.⁸ Mogeys is aware of being perceived as a member of what Wray has called the “out-group,” a “hillbilly” in a world he feels doesn’t belong to him.

Return, initially understood as failure, turns out to be a means of survival as well. While the hills are perceived as tight, a place in which Lace cannot “stretch [herself] full” (10), she confesses that losing the hills is like losing a part of herself or, as Mogeys puts it, “Our love for land was not spectacular. Our mountains are not like Western ones, those jagged awesome ones, your eyes always pulled to their tops. But that is the difference, I decided... *We live* in our mountains. It’s not just the tops, but the sides that hold us” (173, emphasis in original). Though the love might not be spectacular, it is extraordinary because it surpasses vulnerability and a possible loss of home and life. Lace repeatedly mentions being touched, embraced, taken in by the land, particularly the hills; there is a sensuality and intimacy that cannot be found “outside.” Pancake’s mountaineers display an extraordinary sense of place and bodily connection to the hills, one that binds and comforts.

During a brief period of living in North Carolina, Lace feels the loss of such comfort: “Down there, you just can’t get any grip on the land. No traction. No hold” (190). North Carolina is experienced as a counter-place to the hills in West Virginia, full of noise, traffic, and detached from nature: “Couldn’t even get in trees, in brush, much less get into hills ... and sometimes I’d miss backhome woods so bad I’d feel land in my throat” (193). This is very powerful imagery; the need for the hills suffocates Lace, yet she needs them to breathe. This paradoxical condition is never solved in the novel—mountaineer life is shown to be inherently fatal.

Away from the hills, Lace and her family are conspicuous to others: “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" (194). As a white woman, she should be able to move freely and invisibly through the world, yet in the "outside" she imagines being dismissed as a "redneck woman with so many kids she can't even keep track of them" (197). "Redneck," another classist slur to mark Southern whiteness, is clearly used here as demeaning and creates a mis-recognition of her self. Again, the hills prove to be essential for survival and the perseverance of the self. Yet they not only have a symbolic and emotional importance for the identity of people living in them or coming *from* them, they offer concrete nourishment for survival. As Lace's mother taught both her daughter and her granddaughter, "*you can live off these mountains, ... And in bad times, meaning layoffs, strikes ... we did*" (35, emphasis in original). While pregnant and without a steady income, Lace earns some money by selling what she digs up or collects in the hills, "cohosh, seng, sassafras, black walnuts, hickory nuts, butternuts, pawpaw" (139) and eating what was left over. This self-sustainability is undermined by the privatization of the land, which costs mountain people their independence.

Pancake's narrative does not equate vulnerability with victimhood though—Pancake displays attempts at resistance. Some attempts are shut down, like Moge's repeated calls to the Department of Environmental Protection that never lead to anything (177). Lace becomes active in an environmental group, speaking out publicly against the failing government regulations. She becomes what Jimmy Make dismissingly calls a "shit-stirrer," which is not innocuous, because oppositional forces are often violently shut down by the companies (131). Lace is unimpressed: "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" (314). Lace, vulnerable to "them," reacts to her place's "colonialization" by staying and refusing to sacrifice what she perceives to be hers.

Ownership of Place

"This is our place" (Pancake 314): this and other nativistic (to borrow Hinrichsen's term) expressions of ownership of the land are repeated throughout the novel, with Lace and Moge formulating them most explicitly. For Moge, the closeness to the land has a religious component, since "to walk in woods was a prayer" (168): the hills are his church. When his pastor proposes that the land is there to be dominated, Moge states his belief in the union between humans and nature: "I knew we wasn't separate from it like that" (168). Yet after the industry's intervention, what used to be "everybody's places before" (185), as one member of the community puts it, now belongs to the companies, shutting out locals "from more and more land" (185). Pancake suggests that her protagonists are particularly vulnerable because they cannot be separated from the land, and they do not want to be. Lace's father, despite having black lung disease, despite "his lungs ... being buried by it, by coal, which is earth, which is this place,"

cannot imagine being anywhere else. He “wants nothing but to be out in it” (151), out in the hills.

Lace tries to figure out why she always returns to a place that is precarious for her and her family. She explains this desire through blood and heritage:

How could only me and my thirty-three years on that land make me feel for it what I did? No, I had to be drawing it down out of blood and from memories that belonged to more than me. I had to. It must have come from those that bore me, and from those that bore them. From those who looked on it, ate off it, gathered, hunted, dug, planted, loved, and bled on it, who finally died on it and are now buried in it. Somehow a body knows. (199)

The mountaineers in Strange do not make a distinction between inner life and outer world, as the mountains, are in them; it is the world beyond that is alienating and fragmented.

She formulates a somatic epistemology: A body knows where it belongs. This body, a white woman's body, claims an ancestral blood connection to the land. This perception can be traced back to long-established essentialist narratives about Appalachian womanhood and nature that suggest “a woman's impulse is to protect and save nature” or that “mountain women love the land and long for the security it provides; land is perhaps nature's chief manifestation, and the mountain woman is almost inseparable from both nature and the

earth” (Miller 5, 7). Lace realizes that in order to fully understand what it is that makes mountaineers “feel for” their hills as they do, she concludes that “you'd have to come up in these hills to understand.... Grow up shouldered in them, them forever around your ribs, your hips, how they hold you, sit astraddle, giving you always, for good or for bad, the sense of being held” (99).

This passage is exemplary of an Appalachian sense of place that is defined by exclusivity and inwardness; outsiders cannot comprehend the love for the hills and the necessity of their preservation. This sense of place is created through the confluence of land and the white body. Despite being a recurrent motif in Southern literature and related scholarship, “sense of place” is a difficult concept to grasp. Timothy R. Mahoney and Wendy J. Katz, with reference to the humanist geography of Yi-Fu Tuan, have proposed that “sense of place” provides “individuals with a sense of the coherence of inner lives with the outer world, a reassuring sense that selfhood and culture are interrelated (rather than the world as alienating)” (xvii). The mountaineers in *Strange* do not make a distinction between inner life and outer world, as the mountains are *in* them; it is the world beyond that is alienating and fragmented. Barbara Ladd proposes that “a sense of place provides a sense of relative permanence” (46), that it centers people. In the midst of the destruction of what should be permanent—the hills—and of what centers people—home, family, jobs—the formulation of a sense

of place is shown to be a powerful method for dealing with vulnerability. Hinrichsen suggests that “Pancake raises intriguing questions about the future of a southern ‘sense of place,’” making it “strange,” because it is not sustainable when facing “the growing ecological sacrifice and segregation of people along economic and geographic lines” (24). Indeed, Lace, Moge, and Bant’s attachment to the hills seems strange, but Pancake repeatedly proposes that leaving is actually what is not sustainable. “The real of this place ... the deep of here” (Pancake 36), as Bant formulates it, forces her and the others to stay. The “closeness to nature and the land; authenticity and purity” (Harkins 6) associated with mountain societies is both overpowering and empowering.

It is especially these characters’ self-perception as natives of the land that is represented as empowering and that leads to resistance. Mrs. Taylor, for instance, will not move to Cleveland: “This is my house! ... There have always been Ratliffs in this hollow! My father bought these two lots in 1928, and we *worked* for what *we* have!” (49, emphasis in original). Even Bant, who belongs to the new generation of Appalachians, feels this ancestral connection. Assessing the “value” of her two last names Ricker and See, she concludes that “Ricker meant the most because Rickers had been on this piece of ground at the foot of Cherryboy, west of Yellowroot, for more than two hundred years” (34). Both mountaineers’ sense of belonging to Yellowroot is declared to be a birthright. These enunciations of belonging are particularly expressive of Appalachian whiteness when compared to the fact that the last name of the only character of color—Rabbit—is not revealed; he is merely somebody people in Yellowroot “stay away from” (63).

The emphasis on names, heritage, and belonging corresponds to Yancy’s powerful observation that whiteness is “a form of inheritance” (8), which white people expect *and* accept. Ahmed specifies whiteness as “what is behind bodies: their genealogy, which allows [white people] to enter different spaces and worlds” (137). The mountaineers, despite being depicted as immobile and stuck, use genealogy and inheritance to overcome their disenfranchisement, to demand ownership of the mountains and the freedom to move around on this land. *Strange* criticizes the ways in which capitalism intervenes with a supposedly natural ownership of land, an ownership that is contextualized within mountaineer whiteness. “Outside” interventions into white ownership and white belonging are ultimately represented as corrupting the authenticity and purity of mountaineer whiteness, a strategy that is problematic with regards to the region’s history

Strange criticizes the ways in which capitalism intervenes with a supposedly natural ownership of land, an ownership that is contextualized within mountaineer whiteness.

and white entitlement. White ownership of land is, in the novel, manifested and justified through genealogy.

In addition to the novel's conflation of land and the white body, this points towards an indigenization of the novel's Appalachian community. According to Stephen Pearson, indigenization is "a vital element of the prominent colonialism model of Appalachian exploitation," namely, "that White Appalachians—positioned as the region's 'Indigenous population'—are the victims of a form of colonialism" (165). Since the 1980s, readings of Appalachia as an internal colony go back to Helen Matthews Lewis, Linda Johnson, and Donald Askins's *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case* (1978), in which they argue that "Appalachia is a good example of colonial domination by outside interests. Its history also demonstrates the concerted efforts of the exploiters to label their work 'progress' and to blame any of the obvious problems it causes on the ignorance or deficiencies of the Appalachian people" (2). The authors describe Appalachians not necessarily as passively "accepting" exploitation, but rather as supposedly displaying "subcultural' traits of fatalism," which need to be understood as "adjustive techniques of the powerless" (15).⁹ Pancake's mountain community feels the fatality of its vulnerability and displays different adjustive methods: Jimmy Make leaves Yellowroot with his sons and does not see this as a loss or as resignation; Avery tries to educate others about his home's exploitation; and the rest resist powerlessness by staying and organizing.

Utilizing the colonialism model is an effective way to make visible the vulnerability and precarity of Appalachians. As Pearson explains, "indigenization provides settlers with identities that imbue their lives with meaning, render their situations sensible, valorize their existence, and provide models that increase their status within settler society" (166). "Mountaineer" is an identity that valorizes the people insulted and marginalized as "hillbillies," while offering a site of resistance to capitalism and the coal-mining industries. Indigenization, while effective, is, however, problematic considering the history of settler colonialism in Appalachia, since it "allows Appalachian Whites to maintain their whiteness while obscuring the privileges that whiteness bestows" (Pearson 167). The processes of indigenization need to be understood as signs of entitlement: to the region's history and the land itself. Pearson argues that indigenization romanticizes anticolonial struggle (167), yet there is nothing romantic about the vulnerability and the struggle Pancake narrates. What is romanticized, in the tradition of sense-of-place writing about Appalachia (cf. Whitson), are the detailed descriptions of the mountaineers' relationships to Yellowroot, which are interwoven with loss, but also convey the wholesome, pastoral, and nurturing existence of white Appalachians alongside and in nature. Their values—hard work, family, and dissent—eventually make them more "American" than the mountaineers assume they are; Pancake writes them as deserving white Americans to counter the processes of Othering they are exposed to.

Solidarity: A Conclusion

In the tradition of social ecology, defined by Murray Bookchin as “the domination of nature by man [that] stems from the very real domination of human by human” (65), *Strange* attests to an ensemble of power relations that places Appalachians in precarious and vulnerable positions. The book clearly demonstrates that there are limitations to the argument that Appalachia is merely an “idea.” Certain ideas about the place that have been circulated since the 19th century have indeed fostered the cultural imagination and fabrication of such stereotypes as “hillbilly,” but the concrete vulnerability of the people there is not imagined, as this piece of ecocritical literature suggests. Pancake’s characters might have their own ideas about their home, ideas that fuel their attachment to place and their activism to save it, but the effects of mountaintop removal mining deem these ideas obsolete and expendable in the end.

The solutions offered to counter experiences of expendability, vulnerability, and precarity are at times disappointing because they are limited to intraracial scenarios. Pancake offers no space to the stories of Black Appalachians who joined the coalfields of Appalachia from the 1880s on (cf. Inscoe) or to the legacy of European immigrants who were recruited to come to Kentucky and West Virginia’s mining camps.¹⁰ Indigenous Nations, such as the Cherokee, that originally lived on the lands that became Appalachia (cf. Cook; Finger; Taylor), are erased for the sake of white indigenization. These erasures create a limited and limiting image of Appalachian people, as much as they ignore the fact that some vulnerabilities, for instance, those created by mountaintop removal mining and the resulting ecological disasters, are shared across the assumed borders of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, nation, and heritage. Writing about precarity, Butler has suggested that this particular vulnerable position can offer the possibility of creating unexpected alliances: “it is the rubric that brings together women, queers, transgender people, the poor, the differently abled ... but also religious and racial minorities” (58).

One such alliance is addressed by Carter Sickels in his autobiographical essay “Bittersweet: On Transitioning and Finding Home.” In this text, he relates his experiences of being trans, queer, and thus marginalized by *his* Appalachian community to experiences of marginalization faced by anti-coal environmentalists in their own communities, similar to what Lace experiences in her failing marriage to Jimmy Make, who voices a

... some vulnerabilities, for instance, those created by mountaintop removal mining and the resulting ecological disasters, are shared across the assumed borders of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, nation, and heritage.

pro-coal position. hooks specifically calls for alliances beyond the borders of Appalachia. She addresses people like Avery, those who have left and those who live off the region's riches. Outspoken about the devastating consequences of mountaintop removal mining, she demands solidarity, especially from the "outside":

Mountaintop removal ... robs the folk who live in the cultural wasteland it creates of their self-esteem and divine glory. Witnessing up close the way this assault on the natural environment ravages the human spirit, the anguish it causes folk who must face daily the trauma of mountaintop removal, we who live away from this process are called to an empathy and solidarity that requires that we lend our resources, our spiritual strength, our progressive vision to challenge and change this suffering.

(hooks 28)

Pancake's narrative does not focus on the "outside," whether it is people outside of coal regions, or Appalachians outside of whiteness.

Pancake does briefly reference the shared vulnerability of coal communities when Avery does research on disasters in "Letcher County, Kentucky, 1923; Crane Creek, West Virginia, 1924; Buchanan, Virginia, 1942; Aberfan, Wales, 1966" (236). Yet this is one very brief moment in the midst of a narrative that formulates an "exclusionary politics of community" (Hinrichsen 30). Hinrichsen reads this passage as a hint towards a possible "new politics of solidarity" (33) and transnational relationality, as for example represented in Tom Hansell's project *After Coal: Stories of Survival in Appalachia and Wales*.¹¹ Scholarship that offers more inclusive strategies is collected in *Beyond Hill and Hollow: Original Readings in Appalachian Women's Studies* (2005), editor Elizabeth S.D. Engelhardt, presenting a conglomerate of diverse Appalachian women's voices, in activism and beyond.

"Mountaineer" identity is constructed as a site of "resistance to capitalist exploitation" (Pearson 165), yet in *Strange as this Weather Has Been*, this identity is situated within whiteness. Despite the powerful and convincing illustration of the vulnerability of families like the Ricker Sees and the Taylors, the strategies of exclusion and indigenization (employed through heritage and the white body) turn this narrative into a representation of a particularly white vulnerability that ultimately stabilizes whiteness. We see this regional, historically Othered, and marginalized whiteness through stereotypes such as the "hillbilly," but Pancake clearly calls for the protection of white mountaineers instead of creating a cross-racial scenario that unites Appalachians or the ecologically vulnerable in their attempts to resist the capitalist (read: white) exploitations of their homes.

Notes

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1. See *The Intersections of Whiteness*, edited by Evangelia Kindinger and Mark Schmitt (2019).
2. In the early years of the conceptualization of intersectionality theory, the impact of place was not explicitly factored in, yet this has changed in recent years, see for example the special issue of *Signs* edited by Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall and dedicated to *Intersectionality: Theorizing Power, Empowering Theory* (2013), *Intersectionality: A Foundations and Frontiers Reader* (2014)—a reader that brings together existing scholarship on the intersections of place and other categories, edited by Patrick R. Grzanka—and *Identities and Place* (2020), edited by Katherine Crawford-Lackey and Megan E. Springate.
3. For more on hillbilly music and the development of this phrasing, see Nadine Hubbs's *Rednecks, Queers, & Country Music* (2014), in which she argues that “the music’s name change to ‘country and western’ in the 1950s recognized *hillbilly*’s derogatory status, but it was not a complete image makeover. Country audiences are still associated with white working-class, provincial, and southern identities, as well as ignorance and, in recent decades, bigotry” (23-24).
4. Only Avery Taylor, the sole character who has left Yellowroot, names whiteness when he speaks of the shared whiteness of poor Appalachians (236) and other students in high-school classrooms or about “other white people” (235) and their desires.
5. I am grateful to the reviewer of this text for specifically pointing this out to me.
6. Wanat actually reads Pancake’s book as “apocalyptic speculative fiction and historical reality” (163).
7. “Left out,” here, means leaving the region.
8. This is one of two references to “hillbilly” in the novel; the other one is Lace listening to “hillbilly music” (82) when homesick in North Carolina.
9. As Pearson points out, “The most influential of the studies exploring the connections between land ownership and power in Appalachia is probably John Gaventa’s *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*” (180).
10. See Drake. See also Ronald L. Lewis’s “Beyond Isolation and Homogeneity: Diversity and the History of Appalachia.”
11. See also Sarah Robertson’s comparative reading of coal mining novels from Wales and Appalachia, in which she argues that “both places are othered within wider national discourses, with Appalachia bearing the weight of hillbilly stereotypes and Wales regarded, particularly during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as backward by its English neighbours” (504).

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