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Britani W. Baker  
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EXPLOITATION OF LAND AND LABOR IN APPALACHIA:  
THE MANIPULATION OF MEN IN ANN PANCAKE'S *STRANGE AS THIS*  
*WEATHER HAS BEEN*

by

Britani C.W. Baker

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate School,  
the College of Arts and Letters,  
and the Department of English  
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for the Degree of Master of Arts

August 2017

EXPLOITATION OF LAND AND LABOR IN APPALACHIA:  
THE MANIPULATION OF MEN IN ANN PANCAKE'S *STRANGE AS THIS*

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August 2017

Approved by:

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Dr. Katherine Cochran, Committee Chair  
Associate Professor, English

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Dr. Charles Sumner, Committee Member  
Associate Professor, English

---

Dr. Martina Sciolino, Committee Member  
Associate Professor, English

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Dr. Luis Iglesias  
Chair, Department of English

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Dr. Karen S. Coats  
Dean of the Graduate School

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## ABSTRACT

EXPLOITATION OF LAND AND LABOR IN APPALACHIA:  
THE MANIPULATION OF MEN IN ANN PANCAKE'S *STRANGE AS THIS  
WEATHER HAS BEEN*

by Britani C.W. Baker

August 2017

Ecofeminism is traditionally interested in the relationship between the patriarchal domination of women and nature. Ann Pancake's novel *Strange As this Weather Has Been* critiques the way the coal mining industry has affected the Appalachian people and land. The novel reflects natural ecofeminism, which views the connection between women and nature in essentialist terms. This outdated mode of ecofeminism leads to a reinforcement of gender stereotypes and a misrepresentation of the relationship between gender, nature, and culture. This study of Pancake's novel employs a material ecofeminist approach to both critique and develop the novel's gender politics. Material ecofeminism, even as it integrates some forms of early ecofeminism, precludes a reinforcement of stereotypes and more adequately addresses both men's and women's connections to ecology and culture. This paper shows how the author's ignoring the material and cultural conditions that create and maintain the relationship between men and industry results in a double exploitation of the men in Appalachia: once by the capitalist system, and a second time by a natural ecofeminist representation of them that places them in opposition to the environment.

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## DEDICATION

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## CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

In *Strange as this Weather Has Been* (2007), Ann Pancake explores the effect of coal mining on a West Virginia family and community. The novel focuses especially on 15-year-old Bant, and her mother, Lace, but also includes chapters focused around Bant's brothers and uncle. The story is informed by the 1972 Buffalo Creek Flood, the result of a coal slurry impoundment's collapse, which flooded Buffalo Creek Hollow with "more than 100 million gallons of black sludge" and killed more than one hundred people (Westerman 159). At the time of the novel, about the year 2000, the Yellowroot Hollow community in West Virginia faces the impending destruction of their mountain home by Mountaintop Removal (MTR) strip mining<sup>1</sup>, and Bant and her brothers grow up in a world of felled trees and junk washed down the mountain by the mining floods. While portraying the environmental destruction caused by MTR, Pancake inadequately addresses the impact of mining on the men living in Appalachia. Her novel reflects natural ecofeminism, which furthers an environmentalist agenda that incompletely shows the consequences of capitalist industries in the region. This study of Pancake's novel employs a material ecofeminist approach to both critique and develop the novel's gender politics. Pancake's novel echoes an outdated, stereotype inducing form of ecofeminism that misrepresents the relationship between gender, nature, and culture. Material ecofeminism, even as it integrates some forms of early ecofeminism, precludes a reinforcement of stereotypes and more adequately addresses both men's and women's

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1950s, mountaintop removal surface mining, also known as MTR, began to replace underground mining as the most efficient and widespread mining practice. MTR is a method of mining whereby trees and brush are first cleared from mountainsides, holes are dug, and then explosives are detonated in the holes, blowing off the tops of the mountains to reach the coal seams underneath ("What is MTR Mining?").

connections to ecology and culture. I will show how the author's ignoring the material and cultural conditions that create and maintain the relationship between men and industry results in a double exploitation of the men in Appalachia: once by the capitalist system, and a second time by a natural ecofeminist representation of them that places them in opposition to the environment.

Ecofeminism as a movement arose in the 1970s and 1980s (Gaard 26). However, according to Elizabeth S.D. Engelhardt in "Placing their Feminism in the Southern Appalachian Mountains," Appalachian women writers were expressing ecofeminist thought in their novels at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Engelhardt argues that the novels of Grace MacGowan Cooke and Emma Bell Miles celebrate the Appalachian landscape while also considering "the web of human and nonhuman relations binding communities" (11-12). Engelhardt calls their concern for nature-human connections "ecological feminism," because Cooke's and Miles's works propose that it is only through the recognition of these interconnections that feminism is effective (11-12)<sup>2</sup>. She goes on to state that the "ecological" perspective "moves away from seeing place as background (that is the 'environment'), separate from human beings, into viewing place and human beings as inextricably entwined (that is, as both elements of 'ecology')" (17). Like those early Appalachian writers, Pancake places the Appalachian landscape at the forefront of many of her works, while also highlighting the male-dominated hierarchies of capitalist industry in Appalachia.

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<sup>2</sup> The term ecological feminism or "ecofeminism" was first coined by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 (Miles). Engelhardt uses the term "ecological feminism" simply as a contrast to "environmental feminism." She attempts to show how early Appalachian women writers were exercising a form of ecological feminism, even before the term had been coined.

Ecofeminism is often concerned with men's domination of women and how this is reflected in society's domination of nature. The relationships between forms of domination is one of the main principles of ecofeminism articulated by Ynestra King. Other widely accepted principles include the opposition between industrialized society and nature and the subsequent oppression of women, the importance of ecological diversity, and a questioning of the nature-culture dualism (Gaard and Murphy 3-4). In the *Encyclopedia of Environment and Society*, Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel states that "Ecofeminism posits that the same masculinist habits of thinking and behavior that devalue, oppress, and exploit women also do so to nature" (Natadecha-Sponsel). Although ecofeminism as a whole is concerned with the interconnections between patriarchy's domination of women and the environment, natural ecofeminism more often leads to reductionist and essentialist analyses of gender. By reflecting natural ecofeminist thought in her novel, Pancake stereotypes gender and therefore fails to portray the material reality of Appalachian men.

Natural ecofeminists<sup>3</sup> view the nature-human connection as predicated in an ideology of difference. Women and men are essentially and naturally different, and as such women are ahistorically connected to nature, and men are connected to industry and science (Sydnee and Beder 281). According to Anne Stephens in *Ecofeminism and Systems Thinking*:

central to nature ecofeminism is the idea that women are better placed than men to identify with nonhuman beings, ecological processes and the larger whole, because of the following claims: (a) That there is a special link

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<sup>3</sup> Also called essentialist, affinity, or spiritual ecofeminism.

between women and nonhuman nature because of their reproductive/nurturing capabilities; and (b), women, like other nonhuman beings, are oppressed in patriarchal societies. (6)

Natural ecofeminists articulate a connection between capitalist patriarchy's domination of women and of nature. Women have a "special link" to nature through their "woman-ness as mothers, life-givers, nurturers, [and] carers" (Mellor 109). In *Strange as this Weather Has Been*, Pancake echoes a naturalist ideology to associate women with nature and men with industry and the destruction of nature. She depicts women as spiritually connected to nature, and thus specially positioned to nurture and protect nature. Pancake's novel reinforces gender binaries and biases by showing the connection between women and nature and men and industry, without revealing the material conditions that place them in these positions.

In response to natural ecofeminism, material ecofeminism "shifted from exploring associations among objects of oppression to addressing the structure of oppression itself, exposing the 'logic of domination'" (Gaard 31-32). By focusing on the structures of oppression, material ecofeminism can avoid a reinforcement of artificial binaries and begin to move towards solutions to current ecological and biological oppressions. According to Mary Mellor in "Feminism and Environmental Ethics: A Feminist Perspective," "Women are not closer to nature because of some elemental physiological or spiritual affinity, but because of the social circumstances in which they find themselves, that is, their material conditions in relation to the materiality of human existence" (Mellor 114). The opposite can be said of men; men tend to be distanced from nature due to social circumstances and material conditions. In Appalachia specifically,

the capitalist reinforcement of gender binaries—associating men with machines and industry and tying masculinity and economic independence to certain kinds of work in industry—leads men to participate in the coal mining industries that are destroying nature. By attempting to undermine essentialist representations of gender and by analyzing the systemic causes of exploitation, material ecofeminism allows for a fuller understanding of men’s inclusion in capitalist industries.

Although material ecofeminism focuses more on the way male domination and exploitation is created and sustained, it is also prone to accusations of essentialism.

Sydnee and Beder argue:

by effectively removing women from ‘Culture,’ that is the acculturation and socialization processes entailed in the work ethic, and corporate and consumers cultures, materialist ecofeminists actually fail to break apart the dualism of Culture/Nature. The implication that men are subject to culture and women aren’t is a form of essentialism, the very problem a material ecofeminism attempts to address. (Sydnee and Beder 301)

Material ecofeminism can create dualisms that it attempts to redress by alienating men from nature and women from culture<sup>4</sup>. Male labor is seen as “removed from nature,” while women’s “reproductive labor remains in nature” (Sydnee and Beder 282). This leads to a conflation of men and capitalist patriarchy and generalizations about men’s connection to cultural and biological oppression. Sydnee and Beder point out that “men

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<sup>4</sup> Maria Mies also argues that the very separation “between ‘essentialist’ and historical-materialist-Marxist views on women and nature is, in [her] view, a continuation of the same dualistic paradigm of thinking that we [Mies and Shiva] criticize” (Mies and Shiva 160).

are also exploited and damaged under capitalism,” and an essentialist separation of men from nature prevents an understanding of ecological, cultural, and human relations (302).

To correct the issue of essentialism, Mary Mellor proposes an integration of natural and material ecofeminism (qtd. in Mies and Shiva 160). Val Plumwood argues that to integrate these approaches, we should view men and women as “continuous with, not alien from, nature” (qtd. in Slicer 54). Deborah Slicer elaborates on Plumwood’s idea, arguing that the way to integrate these two branches of ecofeminist thought is to “not deny women’s continuity with nature or to embrace it uncritically but to make these categories more permeable—women create culture, too, and culture is not radically discontinuous with nature” (54). My goal in this paper is not to disavow the woman-nature connection that Pancake portrays in her novel, or to dissociate women from culture, rather, to show how a purely essentialist approach to the problems of exploitation in Appalachia leads to an inadequate understanding of men’s complicity in environmental destruction.

Without showing the material conditions that necessitate Appalachian men’s inclusion in capitalist industry, Pancake’s binary portrayal of gender is stereotyped and reductionist. In addition, the novel portrays the men as unsympathetic co-conspirators in Appalachian destruction through shifting points of view. As a result, while attempting to criticize the environmental destruction of Appalachia caused by surface coal mining, the novel ignores that the capitalist coal mining industries affect not just the Appalachian landscape, but also the men who live there. While attempting to represent Appalachian exploitation, *Strange as this Weather Has Been* reflects an obsolete form of ecofeminism

that presents a misleading representation of the men's role in Appalachian land destruction, thus perpetuating gender biases.

## CHAPTER II – MEN/WOMEN BINARY

“[Men’s] intellect is for speculation, and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest...But the woman’s power is for rule, not for battle – and her intellect is not for creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision...”

-John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (1865)

*Strange as this Weather Has Been* reflects essentialist constructions of gender that contribute to an incomplete rendering of Appalachian men’s complicity in capitalist exploitation of the land. Before I can discuss how this binary is utilized throughout the novel, however, it is beneficial to look at the historical construction of gender binaries and their connection to ecofeminism. The men/women binary that exists in Western ideology consolidates several other binaries that express traditional ideas about the differences between men and women, such as public sphere/private sphere, rational thought/emotion, and industry/nature. The industry/nature dualism specifically informs this analysis of *Strange as this Weather Has Been*. According to Mary Mellor in “Women, Nature, and the Social Construction of ‘Economic Man,’” dualisms in Western society trace back to the “Greek division between the ‘free’ unlimited world of the mind and the ‘unfree’ death-limited world of the body” (129-130). Because of women’s reproductive capabilities, they have historically been inextricably linked to the human body, and thus to the cyclical systems that symbolize the reproductive process – life and death, the lunar cycle, and the revolution of the seasons. Women are therefore associated with nature, while men are allied with the cerebral, non-physical realm of human existence. Mellor states that “economic, rational, and scientific man are all manifestations of the dualisms that are central to western society and culture” (“Women, Nature” 129). With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, men’s connection to rationality extended



further into the realms of science and industry, as manifested through the notion of separate spheres for men and women that dominated thought about gender roles from the 18<sup>th</sup> through late-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, cementing the men/women binary in an ideology that had social and economic implications (Marsh)<sup>5</sup>.

Although women's increasing presence in the workforce during the twentieth century challenged the notion of separate spheres, the connection of women with nature and the home, and men with industry is still pervasive in Western thought, as evidenced by accusations of essentialism in ecofeminist ideology. *Strange as this Weather Has Been* utilizes traditional gender binaries to associate men with the conquest of land, industry, and machines and women with nature and home—Yellowroot Hollow—reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes. Upon returning home from college Lace states, “I’d learned the smallness of me in the away. I understood how when I left, I lost part of myself, but when I stayed, I couldn’t stretch myself full” (10). When she goes away to college Lace no longer feels the “specialness” that she felt while living in West Virginia. She had felt as though Yellowroot Hollow was “just a holding pen” for her, and that she was meant for greater things (3). But when she goes to college she realizes how small and insignificant she is, as the lonesomeness of isolation sets in away from her Appalachian home. It is only when Lace leaves her mountainous Appalachian home that she realizes her deep connection to Yellowroot Hollow and the nature therein, to the extent that it has become a part of her; when she leaves the hollow, she feels like she has lost a part of

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the social and economic implications of separate spheres ideology see Andrea L. Miller’s and Eugene Borgida’s “The Separate Spheres Model of Gendered Inequality” and Linda K. Kerber’s “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History.”

herself. Bant, Lace's daughter, is similarly connected to nature and place, further reinforcing gender stereotypes.

In fact, the novel contextualizes women's connection to nature as a sort of matriarchy, whereby their relationship to nature is passed down through the female line. Natalie Sypolt in her review of *Strange as this Weather Has Been* briefly mentions this matriarchy, stating that "The legacy of the women in Bant's family is to take care of the land and expect it to take care of them in return" (Sypolt). The novel thus portrays the women as having an interdependent relationship with nature, a relationship which natural ecofeminism often emphasizes. Furthermore, Bant is given her mother's last name, Ricker See, rather than her father's last name, Turrell. Ricker is Bant's maternal grandmother's maiden name and See is her maternal grandfather's surname. Bant feels a stronger kinship with her "Ricker" heritage, stating that "while See was better than Turrell, I also knew it was the 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" (my emphasis, 33-34). Not only does the Riker name connect Bant and the other women to nature, but it also connects them to the concept of place and home. They are not just connected to Cherryboy but to a specific "piece of ground" that their family has lived on for more than two hundred years, and that they therefore identify as their home. In addition, the name Ricker also emphasizes the women's connection to nature; a rick is a large pile of hay, beans, barley, or corn ("rick, n.1"). Bant, Lace, and Lace's mother all carry some version of this Ricker name, showing the legacy of women who are connected to nature in the novel.

Throughout the novel Bant has a deeper connection to nature than her brothers do, stating that at times she “never felt [herself] separate from it” (100). Both Bant and her mother refer to nature as a part of themselves, reflecting natural ecofeminist ideology. When Lace first becomes pregnant with Bant, she becomes depressed, and it is only by digging for roots up on the mountain to sell in town that she regains her zest for life. Lace’s connection to nature nurtures and revitalizes her. Lace’s mother teaches her how to hunt for roots and plants on Cherryboy mountain, and Lace in turn passes down this knowledge to Bant. Furthermore, Bant and her mother feel a deeper affinity than the men towards the land and Appalachia as their “home.” At the end of the novel, the men leave Appalachia to pursue job opportunities elsewhere, leaving Bant and Lace to defend their home. Although I do not reject women’s historical connection to nature and environmental protection, Bant and Lace’s connection to nature and home is problematic because the novel does not reveal the material conditions that lead to this relationship and men’s oppositional relationship to nature and home.

In contrast to the matriarchy in the novel, *Strange as this Weather Has Been* sets up a patriarchy that aligns men with industry, machines, and the conquest of nature, despite the men’s age or their actual involvement in the coal mining industry. Not only did Jimmy Make, Lace’s husband, work in the coal mining industry, but he brags about his job, showing the pride he has in a job that the novel sees as so detrimental to Appalachia (20). Perhaps one of the best examples of Jimmy Make’s connection with machinery and coal mining is when his 10-year-old son Corey, admires his truck: “Then there’s the way his dad can drive. Can that man handle a truck, you better just get in and hang on. Dad could power that truck over any terrain, using nothing but two-wheel ninety

percent of the time, Dad could drive it over anywhere, shit, Dad could drive it over nowhere, that's how good Dad could drive" (61). Jimmy's ability to drive a truck, and even his simple ownership of the truck, makes him more masculine and worthy of admiration in Corey's eyes. Furthermore, Jimmy's ability to drive "over any terrain," thereby conquering nature, is of particular importance in identifying the origin of Jimmy's masculinity, and further equates him with the coal mining industry that uses large trucks to tear down mountains. The emphasis on Jimmy's ability to drive a truck draws attention to the absence of women driving trucks or working any sort of machinery. In fact, we find out that Lace gets a ride to and from work: "By the time Lace's ride dropped her off from the Dairy Queen, the rest of us had long been in bed [...]" (78). Through small details such as this, Pancake reinforces the connection between men and machines and ensures that the women of her novel have no such associations.

Even when it seems as though Bant may be mimicking Jimmy Make's destructive nature, she ultimately ends up realigning herself with the female desire to protect the environment, further bolstering men's affiliation with machines and industry while aligning women with nature. Bant recalls a time when her grandma whipped her for killing a snake. She states that "By that time, I'd been up to the snake ditches with [Jimmy] a good bit, I was acting out the Jimmy Make part of me" (38). By killing snakes, Jimmy Make is physically mastering nature, an act that mirrors his association with the coal mining industry. Bant begins to appropriate Jimmy's desire to destroy nature when she kills a snake, only to return to female interests in protecting it. When Jimmy Make is leaving for the city, Bant tells him "I'm staying here, Daddy" (350). And, immediately after Jimmy and her brothers leave Yellowroot Hollow, Bant climbs up Cherryboy

mountain: “All the clumsy [she] felt around people, and buildings and pavement and flat, [...] it fell away” (355). Bant’s connection to nature is reaffirmed as she feels graceful and whole on the mountain at the end of the novel. Yet, despite the novel’s reaffirmation of Bant’s affinity to nature, her earlier desire for domination reveals itself as a threat to the environment that is all the more sinister because of the possibility for it to be passed down to the next generation.

This threat manifests itself in Corey’s admiration of Jimmy Make, emphasizing the novel’s patriarchy connected with machines and concerned with domination. This patriarchy is especially evident when Corey is described doing things “just like Jimmy Make would” or as a “Jimmy Make copycat” (154). Dane characterizes Corey as “full of metal, a little steel-made man” (108). Just like Jimmy Make, the novel portrays Corey as unconcerned with the destruction of nature, and more concerned with its domination. Throughout the novel, he is almost never seen without his bicycle, a parallel to Jimmy Make’s truck. While Corey rides a bike, he often imagines himself riding his neighbor Seth’s four-wheeler. When the flood comes, he imagines himself “driving a boat,” and when Corey visits the coal mining site with Bant, he makes “motor noise[s]” with his mouth, imagining himself operating the big trucks (66, 166). Following in the footsteps of Jimmy Make and Corey, 6-year-old Tommy is learning to place importance in machines. Tommy, Bant and Corey’s younger brother, insists on following Corey around. In one scene, Bant sees the two brothers sitting in the road “with their bike and trike upside down, resting on the handlebars and seats. They called it working on their cars” (153). Through gender constructions, the novel thus represents young characters like

Corey and Tommy as linked to machinery and therefore complicit in environmental destruction.

Corey perceives the environment as something to be used and exploited. When going across the hollow to see if one of their neighbors has found his family's porch that the flood swept away, Corey sees some of the damage it has done to the community: "The flood ripped and rearranged the neighborhood, and from here in the creek, behind the houses, you can see how people's property has changed. Some yards are smaller now, like theirs, while others have been stretched longer and higher with rock and trash and the dirt off the yards of the people who lost theirs. Corey likes the change" (26). Even while witnessing how the flood has wiped away people's homes and land, Corey likes the flood damage because it provides him with the materials he wants to build a speedwagon, showing his complete disregard for the environmental destruction that the coal mining industry wrought in his community:

Because with all the stuff people had dumped up the hollow above their house before the gate was put in, added to everything the company threw over the edge of the mine. Well, if you unfocus your eyes right—and Corey can—wading the creek is like walking the aisle of a Wal-Mart made for Corey, with all the price tags saying free. [...] Corey will collect as many parts as he can carry. (25)

The flood allows him to gather parts and pieces of metal that have floated down into the hollow. Corey views the devastation as a materialist boon, much like the coal companies who have turned to more destructive methods of mining "in the name of corporate expedience" to increase profits (Reece 42). Many supporters of MTR argue that mining is

actually refining the environment and making the land more useful (Scott 83-84). Corey thus represents the pro-mining ideology that is destroying the Appalachian ecology. His lack of concern with the environmental devastation and property damage wrought by the flood links him explicitly to the environmental destruction caused by the coal mining industries.

The novel exposes the binary between men and women perhaps most clearly when Bant takes Corey up the mountain, intending to make him sympathetic towards the environmental destruction mining has wrought. When they reach the ridge, they encounter bulldozed trees “dangl[ing], their roots spooky, hairy, and dirt-clotted. Waiting to wash down on top of somebody” (159). Rather than being troubled by the devastation, Corey thinks about how he can take advantage of the bulldozed trees noting that, “You could make a good fort out of them there” (159). Once again, Corey views the land as a material acquisition, disregarding the environmental devastation caused by a materialist mindset, connecting him to the coal mining industries. And in the following scene when Corey is confronted with all the damage that coal mining has done to the mountain, he gives his whole attention to the giant coal mining machines, imagining himself sneaking onto the mountain in the dead of night and sitting in and driving the “vast mountain-handling [...] gorgeous machinery” (164). In contrast to Corey’s complete lack of sympathy for the devastation he sees, Bant is emotionally touched by the “shades of dead and gray” of the land (165). Corey’s repeated disregard for nature and the recurring imagery of his attempts to conquer nature connect him more than any other character with the coal mining industry and the capitalist system’s long history of exploitation in Appalachia. And while the novel could appear to be critiquing the way capitalism

inculcates its values in young men, the shifting points of view invite readers to be unsympathetic towards the male characters, and thus the text fails to create the sort of separation between the men in the novel and capitalist industries that would support and strengthen this critique.



### CHAPTER III - SHIFTING POINTS OF VIEW AND UNSYMPATHETIC MEN

“Narration is perspective in action. It is the ‘delivering’ of perspective to the reader or listener. That delivery system bears the unique stamp of the narrator’s sensibility and his motley set of biases and agendas.”

- Christopher Castellani, *The Art of Perspective: Who Tells the Story*

The novel’s female characters’ clear connection to nature and the home, and their concern with protecting the environment, when analyzed in conjunction with Pancake’s use of shifting points of view, reveals the novel’s disparagement of the male characters. During her discussion of *Strange as this Weather Has Been in Landscapes of Labor*, Westerman points out that the novel has shifting points of view, however, she overlooks the full implications of these shifts. Westerman states: “Although individual chapters are powerfully narrated by single characters or by an omniscient narrator, those chapters told by Lace See and her teenaged daughter, Bant—and their telling about Grandma See—lend the novel its greatest strength and together create a unified female voice that actively resists social and environmental injustices associated with MTR coal mining” (160). Westerman identifies that the chapters narrated by the female characters “lend the novel its greatest strength,” without considering what this means for the omniscient narration that focalizes the male characters. She also notes that the “female voice [...] resists [...] environmental injustices,” still without addressing what this implies about the male characters. Pancake’s narrative strategies alienate readers from male characters while fostering reader identification with and sympathy for female characters.

In his book *The Art of Perspective: Who Tells the Story*, Christopher Castellani discusses the effect on readers of different narrative strategies. He states that “there is an inherent intimacy that comes pre-packaged with first-person narration [...] In general, a

reader can't help but feel a closeness with anyone who refers to herself as "I" and tells us a story [...] That very same narrator in third person seems to speak to us from a remove" (31). I argue that Pancake's use of first person narration when writing her female characters encourages the reader to sympathize with those female characters and the environmentalist agenda that they and Pancake endorse. By contrast, the novel creates a sense of distance between readers and the male characters through third person narration, leading readers to dislike the men who are aligned with industry and machines.

This interplay of gender, sympathy, and narrative distance reveals itself when Lace's interest in joining an environmentalist movement leads to conflict with her husband Jimmy Make, who previously worked for the very coal mining industry that Lace wants to combat. At the conclusion of the novel, Lace decides to stay behind in Morgantown, while Jimmy Make leaves the mountains for Raleigh. Significantly, Bant opts to stay with her mother in nature, while Tommy and Dane accompany Jimmy Make to the city after Corey dies. Jimmy Make's desire to leave for Raleigh can be viewed as a critique of the male characters. Jimmy wants to leave Yellowroot Hollow because of the impending threat of another mining flood. He asks Lace, "If you're so goddamned certain that fill's coming down, then why the hell don't you let us leave out of here?" (84). While Jimmy is concerned about his family's well-being, his refusal to protect the environment reads as shortsighted self-absorption, especially in comparison to Lace, who states that she will "die trying" to fight against the industries that are destroying their home (84). Although Lace appears to be compromising her ability to protect her children, the novel instead makes Lace seem heroic because she is willing to sacrifice herself to protect the environment. Pancake's use of first person makes the reader more sympathetic to Lace

and thus to the environmentalist cause that she and Pancake promote, while making the reader unsympathetic to Jimmy Make, who is aligned with the destruction of nature, reflecting how readers view all the male characters.

In addition, Bant and Lace's experiences of men in the novel make the male characters even more abhorrent to readers. Bant recalls times in her childhood when Lace and Jimmy Make would argue while she was lying in bed at night: "Then, after not too long, she'd start complaining about Jimmy Make. That was worst of all, me lying there, needing to hear what mattered, but scared to hear, desperate for her to get to it and over with, and she'd have to run through her Jimmy routine. Because yeah, Jimmy Make irritated and disappointed and confused me too" (82). Even 15-year-old Bant can recognize how Jimmy Make is a disappointment. Because he doesn't work, Jimmy fails as a father to provide for Bant and her siblings. However, he is also a disappointment because he refuses to stand up for the land and join an environmentalist group like Lace. And because readers sympathize with the female characters due to the novel's use of first person point of view to narrate their sections of the text, readers are encouraged to also view Jimmy as a disappointment. Bant and Lace also repeatedly call Jimmy spineless (82, 131). And at one point in the novel, the women regard the men in infantile terms. In the midst of her first romantic relationship, Bant recalls Lace's words:

They never have to grow up, [...] stay babified. Never have to because the women always take care of them, first their mothers, then their wives, and then they die. The women always wait and die later, [...]. Everybody around here is raised to take it and take it, [...] to put up with it and take it, that's what makes us tough, but especially the girls, the women, are

tougher than the men, because the men just take it from the industry and the government, and then they take that out on the women. So the women are tougher, because they take it from the industry, the government, and the men, which means the women are stronger and for sure older, because the men never have to grow up because..." (133)

Lace describes men as infants for whom the women are constantly caring. And while the novel does recognize that "Everybody [...] is raised to take it and take it," meaning that everybody in Appalachia, both men and women, are raised to endure hardship, it goes on to undermine this equalizing statement by saying that "especially the girls, the women" are raised to endure adversity. And there is even an implication of domestic abuse when the men "take that out on the women," meaning their frustrations with the industry and government. Readers are thus encouraged further to dislike the men in the novel, viewing them as infantile, spineless, and abusive.

In addition to the language, the degree of interiority afforded characters due to shifting points of view establishes readers' intimacy with or detachment from the characters. Within the chapter narrated by Bant, we not only receive Bant's interiority, but we are also given access to Lace's thoughts. The sort of exact recall that Bant exhibits is highly improbable, if not impossible, meaning that what Bant is really telling us is Lace's thoughts and feelings. Even though this sort of word-by-word recall is improbable, we are led to believe and trust in Bant's memory because of the understanding and closeness first-person point of view creates between readers and characters. This sort of intimacy is something readers are never allowed with the male characters. In a chapter focused on Dane, a third person narrator states:

Tommy and Dane have to go to bed earlier than Corey and Bant because Tommy and Dane are the youngest. Even though Dane is twelve and Corey is ten, Jimmy Make explains that Dane is younger in his mind than Corey is, so Dane needs more rest. In truth, Jimmy says this is because Tommy won't go to bed by himself, and Corey will fight Jimmy Make about going to bed, while Dane will just sulk. Still, Dane has to go to bed. (109)

While the narrator is focused on how Dane perceives the bedtimes, we are never given any of Dane's interiority. We perceive the unfairness of the situation not because we feel close to Dane, but because we see the ridiculousness of Jimmy's excuse as to why Dane has to go to bed earlier. We don't feel the same intimacy with Dane that we do with the female characters. And, while we are told what Jimmy said, we are never told what he thought about the bedtimes. Unlike Bant's narration where the reader is given both Bant's and Lace's thoughts and feelings, the third-person narrator in Dane's chapter tells the reader only what Dane sees and hears, leading readers to feel more narrative distance from the male characters.

By aligning the female characters with environmentalist causes and the male characters with the industry that is destroying the environment, and by portraying the men as cowardly and infantile, the reader feels less sympathy for Appalachian men's conditions in the exploitative capitalist system. Although Appalachian women do suffer at the hands of capitalist industries, Pancake neglects to give men the same interiority that would afford them fair representation. As a result, the novel reflects charges of essentialism in natural ecofeminist ideology and does not give the reader an

understanding of the complex inextricability of human exploitation and environmental exploitation in Appalachia.

## CHAPTER IV – HISTORY OF EXPLOITATION IN APPALACHIA

“Mountaintop removal affects more than just the environment. It affects the people, culturally and spiritually, who live near the mountain that is decapitated.”

-Ashley Judd in *We All Live Downstream*

While Pancake’s environmentalist agenda in *Strange as this Weather Has Been* is impressive, through depictions of gender and shifting points of view, the novel inaccurately reflects how, historically, the people living in Appalachia are just as exploited as the land. Appalachia is often characterized as distinct from the rest of the United States and from the rest of the South, with its own culture and customs. In the 1870s and 1880s local colorist writers, such as Mary Murfree, began to exploit the region’s “otherness” to add interest to their stories (M. Williams 88). In a discussion of Appalachian “otherness,” Larry J. Griffin and Ashley B. Thompson state that “when gauged by American self-idealizations [Appalachia and the people in Appalachia] represented (or were thought by most or at least by influential Americans to represent) serious cultural, political, or moral problems for American identity, unity, affluence, and civic virtue” (297). These problems included poverty, feuding, unemployment, and inadequate social services (J. Williams 383). According to Henry D. Shapiro in *Appalachia on Our Mind*, Appalachia was “seen to be characterized by the persistence of rude and primitive patterns of social and economic organization [...] Appalachia was simply ‘behind the times’” (115). The region’s anachronistic economic, social, and cultural characteristics, represented in literature and widely-read travel accounts, legitimized its otherness.

*Strange as this Weather Has Been* shows how this stereotype of “backwardness” and “otherness” attributed to the region by the rest of the United States is appropriated by

people living in the region. While in high school, Lace is convinced that she will never make anything of her life if she remains in Appalachia. She understands the region's otherness through television depictions of the rest of the United States, and she comes to feel as though the lives she sees on television are "realer" than the lives she sees around her in southern West Virginia. She states that "only outside of here would I, Lace See, live real life" (3). She goes on to assert that "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*" (my emphasis, 3). Thus, not only has Lace appropriated the stereotype of "backwardness" and "otherness," but she knows that others in the region have as well.

We also see the concept of Appalachian otherness when Avery, the son of Dane's employer, Mrs. Taylor, comes home to visit from the city. Avery tries to get his mother to move to the city away from the dangerous coal industries, yet he recognizes why Mrs. Taylor refuses to move. He states, "It is a matter of you yourself being perceived as dirt. 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). Avery recognizes the stereotypes of backwardness and otherness attributed to Appalachia, and knows that by leaving Appalachia, his mother will have to face these stereotypes and give up her dignity and respect. Furthermore, we can see Avery's recognition of Appalachian stereotypes in the way he carries himself. Dane thinks that "Avery looks like Cleveland, but he talks like home, at least until Dane heard him call his wife, who is not from here. On the phone, Avery talks like he's away from here, too. Avery can talk both ways" (200). When Avery speaks to his wife on the phone, he



becomes aware of his otherness and changes his speech patterns to match those of city-dwellers.

Because of depictions of Appalachia as other and backwards, growing interest in the region resulted in an influx of educators and missionaries beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Griffin and Thompson state that Appalachia was “thought to have warranted ‘outside’ intervention to right the regional wrongs, to solve the problems, and, generally, to bring the regions into (or back into) the “American national family” (297). With the incursion of educators and missionaries, it soon became apparent, however, that greater infrastructure was needed in the region in order to develop it culturally and economically. In the search for a national identity, ideals such as economic independence and capitalism rose to the forefront of the U.S. consciousness. By bringing wage-earning jobs to the region, industries insisted that they were allowing Appalachian communities to become economically independent, and thus less backwards (Scott 100-101). Construction of railroads, roads, and power lines in Appalachia began in earnest, fueling more tourism and the industrialization of the timber and mining industries. The industrialization of these businesses led to the increased exploitation of the land and people of Appalachia, as speculators realized the large amount of untapped natural resources in the region (M. Williams 88). We can see the effect of land exploitation on Appalachian people when Mrs. Taylor discusses the ecological practices of Lyon Coal Mining:

And they throw just anything in them ponds [...] Broke-down equipment and logs and chemicals, just anything they're too lazy to carry off the mountain, just push it in the ponds. So who knows what all's in that water when it comes through here. Even when its not that deep, you know, it's

still poison. You want that in your garden? [...] And seeping in your well water, and kids walking in it barefoot. (202)

Not only are Lyon's coal mining practices harming the environment, but they are creating unsafe living conditions for the people living in Appalachia, poisoning their water and polluting their water sources.

As industry in Appalachia grew and the federal government took their lands for the extraction of natural resources and further expansion of these businesses, not only was the environment harmed, but increasing numbers of Appalachian families were displaced from their homes. According to Hal Crowther in "Midnight Madness," "The well-documented history of coal mining in Appalachia is full of the violence and intimidation that was necessary to keep miners and their communities subservient to the corporations" (71). In the novel, Mrs. Taylor refers to these intimidation tactics when she states, "But you see, Dane. That's exactly what Lyon 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" (49). Despite the fact that "There have always been Ratliffs" in Yellowroot Hollow, and according to Mrs. Taylor, her "father bought these two lots in 1928, and we *worked* for what *we* have," the coal industries are still attempting to displace her family from their land (49). In the 1930s even more families were displaced from their homes with the establishment of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The construction of this park led to the displacement of almost a thousand Appalachian families from their homes and farmlands, ironically in the name of protecting the environment. The capitalist interests that profited from the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and forced removal of people from their homes caused and

profited from the increased exploitation of the Appalachian landscape (J. Williams 94). The capitalist greed that drove the expansion of industry and construction in Appalachia is referenced in the novel when Jimmy Make states that what's driving the coal industry is "*greed and they-don't-give-a-damn. It's money*" (102). As corporate ownership of lands increased in Appalachia, company-owned towns were set up for the displaced families, who now worked for the coal companies, to live. In these "coal camps," previously self-sufficient communities relied on the coal companies for their livelihoods (Shackelford and Weinberg 194).

Pancake portrays this process of deterioration and the results of Appalachian displacement in *Strange as this Weather Has Been* when Bant observes the local town of Prater:

we drove back through town past 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. I remember when there was...* A movie theater. Three clothing stores. A Ben Franklin, a real hotel [...] In the old IGA lot, weeds pushed high and thrashy out the pavement cracks. (55)

Prater, a once thriving community, has become abandoned. The FOR RENT and FOR SALE signs exemplify the displacement of Appalachian families by the coal industry, while the list of local businesses that have been abandoned portray the lack of job opportunities outside of the coal industry, and the increasing reliance of Appalachian families on the industries that are destroying their homes and livelihoods.

Through depictions of capitalist greed, environmental destruction, Yellowroot Hollow flooded with trash, and towns, such as Prater, abandoned due to the encroachment of the coal mining industries, *Strange as this Weather Has Been* hints at how, historically, the exploitation of land is directly linked to and paralleled in human exploitation in Appalachia. However, in her pursuit of an environmentalist agenda, Pancake reflects an essentialist conception of gender. Although the novel shows community-wide exploitation, it neglects to show the particular burden that Appalachian men bear when faced with national and societal expectations that can only be met through a complicity with the capitalist system that is destroying their homes.

1.

## CHAPTER V MASCULINITY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

“The men were the breadwinners in the mining camps and when [a man’s] son got big enough to work he followed his father’s footsteps. Back in those days nobody thought of being anything but a miner when he was a young man.”

-from *Our Appalachia*, edited by Laurel Shackelford and Bill Weinberg

The men in Appalachia are affected by the encroachment of capitalist industry in a particular way; without participation in the coal mining industry, Appalachian men are emasculated and excluded from a U.S. national identity. David Harvey in *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* points out that “an analysis of nature is incomplete without labor “for it is class relations rather than capital alone that transform and are transformed by nature” (qtd. in Westerman 5). Because of the way nature, labor, and the economy mutually inform one another, we must consider how the history of labor and the environment transform national and cultural narratives, including our understanding of gender. The interaction of nature and labor in Appalachia informs cultural conceptions of gender in the region. It is important to look at the progression of labor in Appalachia to understand the complex relationship between men and the coal mining industry, a relationship often inadequately addressed in *Strange as this Weather Has Been*.

Working in the coal mines became one way for men to distance themselves and their families from the Appalachian stereotypes of “backwardness” and “hillbillies,” that was so entrenched in national conceptions of the region, and to become a part of the larger U.S. community. In the coal camps that arose after the increase of industry and construction in Appalachia, the gendered division of labor seen throughout the rest of the United States was especially prominent. Historically, coal mining and other jobs in resource extraction or heavy industry have generally employed almost exclusively men

(Scott 9). According to government records cited in *Coal Towns*, “In the United States, women did not enter underground mining until 1973” (Shifflett 81). Additionally, jobs in the coal industry afforded the highest wages, which were especially higher than feminine-coded jobs, such as Lace’s job working at the local Dairy Queen in *Strange as this Weather Has Been*. The gendered division of wages made employment in the coal industries even more imperative for men who had families to support. Thus, while the emergence of coal camps displaced whole communities, men especially were affected by the encroachment of capitalism in Appalachia. Even though the coal companies employed the language of economic independence to gain local cooperation, Appalachian men remained dependent on the capitalist system of production and consumption of energy and high-wage jobs offered by the coal companies.

The gendered division of labor in Appalachia not only made work in the coal industries even more of a necessity for the men living there, but it also created an association between coal mining and masculinity, an association that is depicted in *Strange as this Weather Has Been*. Men who do not work for the mines are called “nonworkers” in Appalachian vernacular (Scott 90). “Nonworkers” are associated with the Appalachian stereotype of poverty-stricken families reliant on government handouts, thus coding men not working for the mines as failures at providing for their families and failures at fitting into a U.S. national identity. Common vernacular in the mines calls both the machines and the mineworkers “the boys” or “the men,” once again showing the association of mining with masculinity. Even outside of the coal industry, men in Appalachia are expected to provide their families with not only an income, but also with their inclusion in a U.S. national identity, by dissociating their families from the

stereotypes of backwardness that keeps Appalachians separate from the rest of the United States. When Rebecca Scott, author of “Removing Mountains: Extracting Nature and Identity in the Appalachian Coalfields” asked what other jobs were available in depressed coal communities, two coal workers listed only masculine-coded jobs, such as “a rebuild shop, they rebuild motors...the local Caterpillar dealer, that sells equipment,” suggesting that only masculine manual types of labor afford men the independence that separates them from stereotypes of backwards and from the “nonworkers” (Scott 103-104).

We can see this perception of masculine-coded jobs and the relationship between masculinity and coal mining in *Strange as this Weather Has Been* through the character of Jimmy Make. Four years prior to the events that Bant narrates, Jimmy Make is laid off from his job working for the coal mining industry at Wichter Run (85). Years later he is “all the time bragging about how he’d worked in the industry for years,” showing how his sense masculinity is tied into working for the coal industry. When he is laid off from the coal mine, after a work-related injury, Jimmy refuses to get a job elsewhere, stating, “I will starve to death before I make pizzas” (85). We are told that a “weedeater and lawnmower were the only work Jimmy Make had [when the flood struck]” (18). Jimmy’s willingness to perform manual labor, contrasted with his resistance to working in a pizza parlor or at the local Dairy Queen where Lace is employed, exemplifies that certain jobs men do are coded as masculine, allowing them to see themselves as masculine providers. But rather than present Jimmy Make as a sympathetic character whose masculinity is threatened by his termination at the coal mine, and who is struggling with redefining his position in a society that “others” those Appalachians not associated with the coal industry, the novel denigrates Jimmy Make by presenting him as an unsympathetic, lazy

man who is reliant on his wife for support. Because of Pancake's use of shifting points of view, the novel leads readers to sympathize with Lace, and like her, question why Jimmy refuses to work, without considering men's complex relationship with the coal mining industry and masculinity.

As previously stated, Pancake critiques Appalachian men through her conflation of men and machines, like Jimmy Make's truck and Corey's bike. As mechanization of the coal mining industry increased, this conflation presented itself in Appalachian vernacular, strengthening the connection between masculinity and machinery. A machine called the continuous miner was introduced in the 1950s. Shackelford and Weinberg describe this machine as "a huge piece of equipment that contains dozens of steel teeth capable of gnashing and ingesting an entire face of coal in seconds, eliminate[ing] the need for blasting, undercutting, and hand-shoveling." The continuous miner is so widely utilized today in the coal mining industry that it is referred to as simply "the miner" (298). The name of this device equates machine and man, thus showing the close association between men, machinery, and masculinity. This connection is the same one Pancake utilizes in *Strange as this Weather Has Been* to critique the coal mining industry. Just like with the naming of this device, Pancake often conflates the coal mining industries and men—Corey is called a "steel-made man" (108)—portraying them as complicit in the environmental destruction caused by MTR.

However, as industrialization of the mining industry increased, and men became more reliant on the industry for jobs, self-inclusion in a U.S. national identity (not "others" or "backwards"), and identification as masculine providers, the industry became less dependent on men for labor. The mining industry's decreased need for human labor



made male complicity in environmental destruction even more necessary, as the jobs available to men decreased. Since the beginning of surface coal mining in Appalachia, “the number of miners has decreased by about 80 percent” (Scott 23), and after 1975 the number of coal mining employees decreased from 55,000 to 20,000, “with coal production levels as high as they’ve ever been,” due to MTR. (Scott 4). This decrease in available jobs, even while Appalachian communities remain reliant on the coal companies for economic stability, increases the urgency for men to acquire jobs in the coal mining industry. In fact, according to Shackelford and Weinberg, unemployment is currently the largest problem in Appalachia (344). Pancake illustrates the unemployment crisis not only through the closed stores Bant sees in Prater, but also through Jimmy Make’s unemployment; one of the reasons Jimmy Make wants to move out of the mountains is because of the few job opportunities available. According to Erik Reece in “Moving Mountains,” “coal-related employment has dropped 60 percent in the last 15 years” due to mining’s increased mechanization (43). Jimmy tells Lace, “there ain’t no work around here and you know it” (85). Lace insists that Jimmy could get a job if he wanted to, stating: “A coal company’s not going to run me out of my house and off of my land. If you had any spine, you’d fight em with me. [...] Oh, you could get a job around here. You’re just too good for em [...] You’re just like the rest of em. Too chickenshit to fight anything but their wives” (84-85). We automatically sympathize with Lace over Jimmy Make; however, even if other jobs are available to Jimmy, because the coal industry encourages the association between coal mining jobs and masculinity, Jimmy is unable to work outside of the industry without feeling emasculated and “other.” Jimmy’s cultural heritage and identity, like all male laborers in the region, is tied to the coal

companies; Lace's denigration of Jimmy extends to all men, when she states that Jimmy is "just like the rest of em." Therefore, even while acknowledging the unemployment problem in Appalachia, the novel neglects to acknowledge the complex relationship between men and the coal mining industry and instead portrays them as deplorable and indolent.

While MTR is associated with the modern masculine ideal of conquering and improving nature, as portrayed by Corey's interest in building a speedwagon, it has also created a job-versus-environment framework that forces men to align with the coal companies against environmentalists. One 2008 billboard by the West Virginia Coal Association featured "local heroes" like the former coach of the West Virginia University football team, Marshall University's former football coach, and a pro-bass fisher, all ideal-masculine figures, meant to create sentimental feelings of masculinity and local pride. In the language of MTR, environmentalists are portrayed as having no local pride. One coal miner's wife stated in an interview that environmentalists, "come in, get all upset, and they throw our men out of work" (Scott 90). Therefore, Appalachians may often view environmentalists as neglecting and injuring their communities by fighting against MTR. In opposition to the masculine-coded coal mining industry, media like the billboard encourage Appalachians to code environmentalism as a feminine concern: "aesthetic, unrealistic, and irrational" (Scott 90). Pancake makes this relationship between environmentalism and women apparent in her novel, specifically through Lace's involvement with environmental groups. It is the women in her novel who appreciate how the land is being damaged by MTR. When Bant sees pictures of MTR sites for the first time she states that it was "like looking at pictures of naked people. Like looking at

pictures of dead bodies” (58). Bant recognizes that the land is being exploited like “naked people” on display in the photographs. She is referring to the way MTR strips the trees from the land and literally blasts the tops from mountains; in the past few decades “an area the size of Delaware has been flattened” (“What is MTR Mining?”). The novel repeatedly describes this environmental destruction caused by MTR: “the top of Yellowroot was just plain gone. Where ridgetop used to be, nothing but sky. Under that sky, what looked from this distance like raw colorless gravel but must have been piled-up rock. And beyond that, nothing at all” (19). This quote not only speaks to the “nakedness” of the land, but also underscores Bant’s description of the land as no longer thriving, but “dead” due to coal mining. Because environmentalism is coded as feminine, it is more acceptable for women in Appalachia to show concern over the destruction of the land than men, further revealing Pancake’s problematic portrayal of genders.

While Pancake depicts men as complicit in environmental destruction, she does not address the larger economic framework that perpetuates their participation in the coal mining industry. Although environmentalists such as Pancake and her female characters point out the damage being done to Appalachia, the coal mining industry argues that MTR is the most efficient way to obtain coal, “keeping electricity, steel production, and other costs down” (Morrone and Buckley 15). According to Allan Schnaiberg’s treadmill of production theory, the owners of the means of production, pursuing greater profits, drive the growth of production and consumption. This results in a “cycle of production necessitating more production, because all sectors of society [...] depend on continued economic growth to solve problems, such as unemployment generated by mechanization, which are created by growth itself” (York). Because modern society uses energy and raw

materials at a greater rate than any previous time, consumption necessitates greater production, which leads to decreased concern over the environmental destruction caused by meeting these needs. The unemployment problem in Appalachia due in part to increased mechanization of the coal mining industry to meet increasing energy demands, forces Appalachian men's greater participation in the coal mining industry as those become the only jobs available. Foucault argues that "power is not simply repressive; rather, power is generative and creative, of subject positions, identities, desires, pleasures, and resistance" (qtd. in Scott 12); the power of the coal mining industry in Appalachia has created identities for both the men and women living in the region that align with and promote their capitalist concerns. In order to be perceived as fulfilling their cultural mandate and as providing economic stability and a stable reputation for themselves and their families, Appalachian men are placed in a position of compliance and cooperation with the coal industries, by which women are typically less encumbered.

In *Strange as this Weather Has Been*, characters are unable to escape from binary gender identities. Because women's identities are tied into protecting the environment, the novel does not show them attempting and failing to escape from their identities in the same way the men do. Therefore, Pancake portrays the women in the novel as compliant with the binary gender identities the capitalist system has created, reflecting a natural ecofeminist essential understanding of gender. The few male characters in the novel who try to escape from their gendered capitalist-created identities are ultimately unsuccessful. Men's identities and cultural heritage are dependent on the capitalist system. For this reason, they are unable to escape from these identities without surrendering aspects of themselves perceived to be necessary to their gender. Pancake's representation of men as

unsympathetic conspirators is unreasonable due to the coal mining industry's forced participation of men and the larger capitalist framework that perpetuates this complicity.

The only man in the novel to whom Pancake gives a first-person narration, engendering reader sympathy, is Uncle Moge. Unlike the other men in the novel, he is concerned about the destruction of the mountains and is connected with nature. However, Moge is also described in feminine terms. Bant says, "Gentle, Moge was. Gentler than women. Gentler than dogs. The gentleness in him was the gentleness of trees" (36). Furthermore, Moge carries the "Ricker" name that is otherwise associated with the novel's patriarchy. The novel thus denies Moge a masculine identity because of his deep connection with nature. At the time of the novel, Moge is also ill. When Bant goes to visit his house Moge's wife, Mary, tells Bant that Moge is "so bad today he can't get out of bed" (41). Moge is thus dependent on his wife, and therefore, the novel denies him the provider role that is so essential in Appalachian male identities.

The other complicated male character is 12-year-old Dane, Bant's younger brother. Throughout the novel Dane oscillates between a female and male identity. The novel describes him as feminine in appearance: "Hips, waist, thighs, swelling to a bigness without any length, and his body not bothering to grow at all above his waist. The bottom of his body out of proportion to the top, leaving him...Dane fears it so bad it'll barely bubble into words. Leaving Dane. Strangely woman-shaped" (110-111). He is also the weakest in his family, even weaker than Bant, although she is "nothing but a girl" (49). And Mrs. Taylor states that Dane is "even more thorough than any girl I've ever had"; Dane feels ashamed to think that he is "even more girl than girl" (44). Dane's shame at looking like and being compared to a girl emphasizes his discomfort with gender binaries

as Appalachian culture forces him to choose between a masculine or feminine identity. Like the women in the novel, Dane feels connected to Yellowroot Hollow as his home: “Cleveland. Just to taste the word, the foreign citiness of it, makes a homesickness thicken in the back of his throat” (49). When Dane thinks of leaving Yellowroot Hollow, he feels homesick. Yet, even while Dane feels this connection to the hollow, he longs for the safety of Cleveland, away from the mining floods. Like Jimmy Make, Dane is unwilling to compromise his own safety for the safety of the environment.

Although Dane feels uncomfortable with the feminine identity ascribed to him, he also finds masculine identity oppressive. Unlike other men in the novel, Dane is uninterested in mechanics. Because of his disinterest and his feminine characteristics, Dane is labeled homosexual. When Corey competes in a dangerous biking contest, Dane tries to stop him. Corey wins the contest, but the neighbor boy, Seth, won't give him his promised prize. Corey gets mad: “You sonofabitch! You promised, you sonofabitch! You lyinsackashit!” To which Seth responds, “At least I ain't got a faggot for a brother” (252). Dane turns red with embarrassment but reflects that “he's been called a faggot more than once” and he is mainly embarrassed at the other boys hearing it. Dane's embarrassment suggests that being a homosexual is emasculating, further emphasizing the importance of masculinity in Appalachian culture. Corey, embarrassed by Dane being called gay, and upset about not receiving his prize, turns to Dane and hisses: “You goddamned homo” (253). Dane's emasculation and his tentative connection to the feminine realm, suggest his discomfort with both male and female identities. Because Dane does not comfortably fit into gender binaries he is called gay, indicating that Appalachian capitalist culture has created a binary gender system that not only stereotypes but allows no room for overlap.

Although Dane is uncomfortable with both gender identities, he ultimately surrenders to a capitalist-created male identity at the end of the novel, revealing the men's inability to escape from binary gender identities. While Dane is younger than Bant, he has a job before her, and although his job is domestic (he is the caretaker for Mrs. Taylor), the mere fact that he has a job emphasizes the provider role that men are expected to take in the family. Even though Dane is uninterested in mechanics, he still possesses a tenuous connection to the male relation to machines and metal. Dane has a lunchbox of keepsakes that includes an acorn, the "broken-off leg of a plastic horse," and a paper torn from an old magazine (115). However, what is significant in this analysis is where he hides the lunchbox – in an old television. Dane keeps a piece of himself hidden inside the metal TV, revealing that Dane views his own masculinity as broken. Because of his feminine characteristics, Dane believes his "mind is not growing right" (110). And, just as he sees himself and his masculinity as broken, he places symbols of himself inside a broken machine, which represents masculinity. And at the end of the novel, when Dane must choose between a masculine and feminine identity, he relinquishes his access to the feminine realm by leaving the mountain for the city with Jimmy Make. Before he leaves for the city, he takes his lunchbox from the TV and buries it on the mountain, letting go of his connection to the female realm by returning those pieces of himself to nature. Because he no longer keeps a piece of himself in a broken machine, the suggestion is that once leaving behind these pieces of himself, and moving to the city, his masculinity will be restored. Thus, despite being uncomfortable with a female or male identity, the novel forces Dane to choose between two gender roles, with no option of escape.

By the end of the novel, it becomes clear that the only way for men to escape the coal mining industries is by leaving Appalachia or by dying. Uncle Mogey is in a slow decline, suggesting an eventual death, and Corey is dead due to a four-wheeler accident: “The machine flips over backwards with Corey under it and crashes into the catchment pond. A blurb and sucking in the water. The empty air where the engine used to be. The slime already drawing back over” (343). Corey is crushed by the very machines that he values so highly and consumed by nature as he is sucked under the water. *Strange as this Weather Has Been* conceives of Jimmy Make, Tommy, and Dane’s escape as appalling, disregarding the difficult position that Appalachian coal mining and gender conceptions have on the men who live there. Once in the city, Jimmy Make will no longer be considered a “nonworker,” will have more job opportunities, and will no longer require a connection to the coal industry to maintain his masculinity or status as not “other.” Dane’s masculinity will be restored, as he relinquishes his connection to the feminine realm. Even so, Pancake’s use of shifting points of view aligns readers with Bant and Lace, who opt to stay in Yellowroot Hollow and fight for the land and their home, thereby suggesting that the men are at fault for not doing the same. Although Pancake portrays an essentialist conception of gender that may align with gender binaries created by Appalachian capitalist culture, she neglects to show the material conditions that create and maintain these binaries.



## CHAPTER VI – CONCLUSION

By denying most of her male characters the connection with nature that the females in the novel possess, or, as is the case with Mogeey, making them choose between nature and an accepted male identity, Ann Pancake causes her male characters to seem unsympathetic to environmental concerns. Through shifting points of view, *Strange as this Weather Has Been* encourages readers to identify with the female characters against the men, and thus to take up the environmentalist cause that the women support. The male characters' close association with the coal mining industry and machinery makes them complicit in the environmental destruction coal mining wreaks in Appalachia. However, the long history of exploitation in Appalachia and the way that capitalism constructs identities for men complicates their complicity, a point that Pancake does not acknowledge in her pursuit of an environmentalist agenda. In order to be viewed as masculine, economically independent, and included in U.S. national identity, Appalachian men are forced to take jobs in the coal mining industry. The gendered division of labor and wages excludes most women from having to make the same concessions. Appalachian men are therefore caught in a system of exploitation, exacerbated by a consumerist economy and gender-stratified heritage. *Strange as this Weather Has Been* ignores the way capitalism manipulates men in order to present its readers with an environmentalist text. So, by focusing on environmental exploitation, Pancake exploits a gendered conception of men to further her eco-critical agenda.

It is important to avoid essentialist conceptions of gender by recognizing the material conditions that create ecological subject positions of both men and women. However, it is also important to not separate women from culture or men from nature,

and once again fall into the trap of reductionist thinking. By avoiding charges of essentialism, through a convergence of natural and material ecofeminist thought, ecofeminism can better defend the rights of all people, without discrimination, to a healthy environment. In seeking environmental justice for marginalized groups, it is important not to disregard the conditions that force the men in Appalachia specifically to participate in a destructive capitalist industry. By portraying the men in a more sympathetic light, whether through changes in narrative mode or inclusion of the history of labor exploitation in Appalachia, Pancake's novel would more accurately represent the interconnectedness of gender, nature, and culture, while precluding a perpetuation of gender biases that contribute to Appalachian labor exploitation.

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