

"We cannot create what we cannot imagine":

Appalachian Novels as Cultural Activism

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University

in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts in the Department of English

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August 2017

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Abstract

This thesis applies Bakhtin's concepts of alterity, French feminist linguistic theory, and Marxist criticism to the study of two works of Appalachian literature to uncover the transformational power of its narratives for the region. This study proposes that regional literature has the potential to reveal a ruling class's oppressive practices, deconstruct social contracts built on paternal discourses, and emancipate marginalized classes trapped in capitalist structures. Analyzing two modern novels written by Appalachian authors, *Strange As This Weather Has Been* by Ann Pancake and *Trampoline* by Robert Gipe, determines whether first person narrators in regional literature are accomplishing what Kristeva considered a function of literary creation: subverting the dominant languages of power to bring about a liberation both political and linguistic. Finally, the thesis concludes that Appalachian novelists, telling stories through intimate narration drenched in semiotic language, do introduce into social discourse imaginative possibilities for new ways of being within their society.

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Dedication

For my grandmother, Glada Dunlap Thomas, who would be proud.

Acknowledgements

I wish to present my special thanks to those whose support made this project possible. My thesis advisor, Dr. Theresa Burriss, has been extraordinarily patient and supportive through my trials and tribulations. Her passion for and understanding of Appalachia made an enormous contribution to my academic pursuits in the field of Appalachian Studies. I also owe a debt to my committee members, Dr. Moira Baker and Dr. Rick Van Noy, who prepared me for the thesis process with challenging courses and valuable insights into literary theory and criticism, sustained research, and American literature. Additionally, I thank my children with my whole heart for their patience with my thesis-ing. You are my sun, moon, and stars. For my parents, this accomplishment is as much yours as it is mine. I am endlessly grateful that you instilled in me a desire for knowledge and the determination to pursue it. To my sister, thank you for all the times you have sat on the edge of ruin with me and talked. Finally, to my husband, your continual encouragement and unwavering belief in my abilities made this achievement attainable. It's been a journey that has taken me down many roads; thank you for walking every one of them with me.

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Introduction

The novels *Strange As This Weather Has Been* by Ann Pancake and *Trampoline* by Robert Gipe have character-bound narrators living in a world of unthinkable destruction. In her first novel, *Strange As This Weather Has Been*, Pancake's young narrator Bant experiences the consequences of extraction industries' environmental and social injustices. In *Trampoline*, Gipe's first novel, his adolescent narrator Dawn tells the story of a life impacted by mountaintop removal mining in a myriad of personal, social, and economical ways.

Described as an author who sees "with a lover's generous heart, with a prophet's steel-hard gaze," Pancake writes with a poetic language that plays as "background music" to the narratives of her six characters — family and community members living with the ravages and threats of mountaintop removal ("Conversation" 4). Gipe's unique narrative voices, like Pancake's, recreate life in a rural Appalachian town under the same constant environmental menace. Speaking of Gipe's debut novel, Pancake herself heralds *Trampoline* as a compelling work of contemporary fiction. The best hope he holds for this work, Gipe says, is for Appalachians to see their own lived experiences in Dawn's stories (Mullins).

Analyzing modern Appalachian novels, like *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and *Trampoline*, using dialogic, French feminist, and Marxist theories is an exploration into regional literary art's capacity to decenter dominant discourses. Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin's literary criticism demonstrates how heteroglossic discourse, in fiction and in society, brings self into dialogue with other. Bakhtin argues the novel is the ideal genre to open the reader to alterity through its polyphonic consciousness and its "zone of maximal contact" with present reality. This capacity, he says, is the brilliance of the novel form (13).

Bakhtin's dialogic theory informs Julia Kristeva's strand of French feminism, influencing her early work with his unfinalizability of language and dialogic self, which underpins her theory of the subject-in-process. Kristeva, also drawing on principles of psychotherapy, suggests that self is recreated endlessly by influences from inside and outside forces of "culture, history, context, relationships, and language" (McAfee 2). Her idea of subjectivity, like Bakhtin's heteroglossia, disrupts hierarchies of power by rejecting the Western concept of self: independent, finalized, and governed by reason. Kristeva concludes that language is the creator of the subject, rather than a tool for its use. In the process of becoming, the subject accesses the semiotic part of language where previously s/he was bound to the symbolic; this linguistic shift, she says, "make[s] and unmake[s]" the subject's relations to self and others. The emotional, creative, and fluid characteristics of the semiotic explodes exclusively symbolic language (*Reader* 265).

Analyzing Pancake's and Gipe's novels, with an eye toward the implications on cultural realities of heteroglossia and the semiotic subject, connects to Marxist cultural and literary critic Raymond Williams' "creative practice" (206). Williams contends that literary art must not merely reflect a culture but also "point out the injustice of that society," depicting its inequities, imbalances of power, and manipulation (Dobie 93). Fiction models social justice, Williams writes, when it represents class conflicts being confronted and injustices righted; therefore, authors should write political fiction with the goal of cultural transformation (210-11). Bakhtin's dialogism and Kristeva's semiotic theorize how novels using character-bound narrators are ideal for achieving alterity, modeling dialogism, accessing the semiotic, and depicting subjects-in-process as they resist the neoliberal paradigm, in which everything is marketable, subjects are blended into one, "made uniform by the market, the media, and the Internet," and incapable of

imagining a more equitable society (Taylor qtd. in Holaday). In this thesis, I posit that as creative practices, *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and *Trampoline* open new possibilities for transformation in Appalachia.

In Chapter 1, I look at the meaning-making of first person (character-bound/experiencing *I*) narrators and analyze the ways Pancake's and Gipe's choice of mediacy creates space for dialogue and alterity that encourage ethical actions. Sharing Bakhtin's conviction of the novel's reflection of the polyglossia of the modern world, I maintain that adolescent narrators' stories of navigating power structures with very little agency of their own bring readers intimately into the Other's life. In this way, the compelling voices of two teenage characters encourage the "ethical power" of literature to effect "positive social action" (Hale "Fiction" 188).

In the second chapter, I examine how semiotic language generates a "subjective agency" opposing the symbolic language's demand for order (Singer 175). Kristeva conceives of the imaginative semiotic language as a challenge to power hierarchies, especially of capitalist systems that order and control individuals according to their "exchange values" (Clark 3). Central to Kristeva's theory are political and economic structures' privileging of the symbolic, disallowing the potential of unfinalizability and in-processness. As Kristeva writes in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, "linguistic changes constitute changes in the *status of the subject* — [its] relation to the body, to others, and to objects" (15). Through Pancake's and Gipe's striking play of voice, metaphor, imagery, and sound sense, Bant's and Dawn's semiotic narration shapes them as subjects-in-process whose transformation, along with the readers', includes developing awareness of and resistance to dominant power structures.

After analyzing the links between mediacy, language, and the subjectivity, I turn in Chapter 3 to Raymond Williams' concept of creative practice and how it pertains to *Strange As*

This Weather Has Been and *Trampoline*. Since the dominant culture's system of "meaning and values" orders and controls society, power relationships color our interpretation of experiences (Higgins 147). However, creative practice of the literary arts foregrounds the exclusive and oppressive nature of societal power relations, introducing a "newly possible consciousness" (R. Williams 212). Narrative, an active composing of the self as well as the social, provokes "a 'new formation' of the material elements of culture" (211). Pancake explains how to apply this theory:

Art can be a stimulus for direct political action ... I've concluded that the only solution to our current mess is a radical transformation of how people think and perceive and value....and such revolutionizing is exactly what art can do better than anything else at our disposal. I believe literature's most pressing political task of all in these times is envisioning alternative future realities. I now feel charged to make stories that invent more than represent, that dream more than reflect. ("Creative" 414)

Appalachian fiction's first person narrators, like Bant and Dawn, generate a discourse counter to society's regulatory power. To bring about cultural change, this power must be challenged by revolutionary ideas, which can be introduced through literary productions (Robinson).

Literary art that works for political change reaches beyond Appalachia's constructed borders to bring together parallel regions similarly oppressed by economic and political structures. In his piece "A People Waking Up," renowned Appalachian poet, scholar, critic, and teacher Jim Wayne Miller calls for a thoughtful examination, through literature and criticism and the academy itself, of the meaning of region within a national and global context. He conceives of a new regionalism, one in which the individual, a subject-in-process, remains preeminent in responses to local problems that exist globally (71). Miller also appeals for literature that is a "genuine expression of life in Appalachia," writing that reflects our own lives, both in local and

traditional lifeways as well in the modern world, lives “illuminated and clarified by such writing” (72). Miller believes this happens when an “intellectual and cultural” mindset promotes writing by and for regional inhabitants. When publishers distribute these works, when critics produce “accessible” discussions of them, and when readers demand authentic texts about life, fiction “approach[es] the life of the region as a medium of expression, not as the message itself” (72). Contemporary fictional works by Appalachian authors such as Pancake and Gipe accomplish Miller’s ideals in both of their critically acclaimed novels.

This thesis adds to the conversation about “how” literary art means in Appalachia. I believe that Appalachian writers, following authors like Ann Pancake and Robert Gipe, can construct new realities for our society, and those parallel to it, in both micropolitical and macropolitical ways (McAfee 112). Pancake eloquently writes:

The Appalachian crisis is just one instance in a larger global context crackling with intensifying life-threatening crises, from global warming to mass extinction to the breakdown of economic systems... We must have a revolutionizing of people’s interiors. And such revolutionizing is exactly what art can do better than anything else at our disposal... (“Creative” 411)

Thus, literary works of “cultural activism” transform not only societal constructs, but also and most importantly, individual consciousnesses. As creative practice, these texts further global regionalist perspectives in Appalachia and other environmentally and socially exploited regions. The late Judy Bonds, a remarkable Appalachian environmental activist, once said concerning the perceptions of environmental destruction, “Once you know what I know, you can’t un-know it. There’s no going back to ‘normal.’” Pancake’s and Gipe’s character-bound narrators confront

readers with this principle, using language that, as Bonds explains, speaks “human, living parts...the language of a living breathing world.”

Chapter 1: Mediacy, Alterity, and Ethical Response

The novel represents an artistic discourse unlike any other, exceptional in its polyphonic nature and combination of speech and voice that form its “artistic system” (Bakhtin 262). To define the novel genre is to recognize this heterogeneity of “social speech types” and diversity of “individual voices, artistically organized” (262). The uniqueness of the novel, according to Bakhtin, lies in its aesthetics of the “specific life that discourse leads” (266). This specific character comes from the identity of the narrator and the ways and to what degree this identity is indicated in the text (Stanzel 19). Indeed, the mediacy of a novel sets it apart from poetry and epic, genres characterized by their monologism; only the novel contains the multitude, a unique intertwining of individual voices, a union that creates its own language structure.

A number of Appalachian works by renowned regional authors have powerful first person narrators: James Still’s *River of Earth*, Gurney Norman’s *Divine Right’s Trip*, Lee Smith’s *Fair and Tender Ladies*, and Denise Giardina’s *Storming Heaven* and *The Unquiet Earth*. Ann Pancake’s *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and Robert Gipe’s *Trampoline* move this narrative tradition forward through their character-bound narrators’ reported dialogues, internal resonances, reflective perspectives, and concrete visuals. In Pancake’s novel *Strange As This Weather Has Been*, various characters tell their stories, while in Gipe’s *Trampoline*, Dawn speaks through both text and drawings. Here, I will take a closer look at how these novels’ innovations in first person narrative structure create a space for discourse and invite readers into alterity and toward ethical response.

Character-bound Narrators and the Confessional Increment

In the wide and developing field of narrative theory, critics argue that a character-bound narrator is the most genuine of storytellers, a personal voice of the experiencing self or her

backward glance from some future time — an individualized perspective of a reality. This attention to subjectivity, is, in fact, a basic tenet of narratology (Bal 22). Broadly defined, a fictional narrator is either external to the story or a character-bound *I* within the story with her own “narrative rhetoric of truth” (22). *Vision* and *point of view* are metaphorical terms for how a story is conveyed, what a narrator chooses to foreground, and what kinds of information are available to the narrator under the “norms” of a narrative situation (Niederhoff; Barry 224), and, with a limited perspective of reality, a first person narrator can only present her own “visual field...and experience” (Banfield 517). There is never a way narrative truth can be evidenced except through the lenses of its narrator, and modern authors find with character-bound narrators more room for innovations in presenting that truth, which are, as Stanzel says, “as ingenious as they are daring” (84).

Pancake’s and Gipe’s narratives are mediated through the limited perspectives of character-bound narrators, through whose mental and visual perspectives a reader experiences the stories. Like all character-bound narrators, *Strange As This Weather Has Been*’s and *Trampoline*’s are positioned in a time and place, and as part of the social and cultural context, project socially constructed models of the world onto “objects of perception and cognition” (Berg 47). What readers see and know from these character-bound narrators are constructions of the social values of the story worlds. The worlds portrayed in both *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and *Trampoline* center around generational trios of interdependent women. In *Strange As This Weather Has Been*, Grandma, Lace, and Bant — grandmother, mother, daughter — share a love of the wild beauty of their place. The grandmother’s reverence for the land and the natural life it nurtures is her legacy to Lace and Bant, and that responsibility is their blessing, curse, and story. *Trampoline*’s trio of women mirrors Pancake’s. Mamaw, Momma, and Dawn knock up

against one another like billiard balls; though Dawn is the novel's single character-bound narrator, characters also speak in reported dialogue as Dawn tells her own and her family's stories about broken mountains and broken people.

The character-bound narrators in *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and *Trampoline* present the world as they experience it in what Stanzel calls "uncorrected subjectivity" (11), and fiction provides an author with a broad canvas to "explore and portray the interior terrain of a range of people," Pancake explains, writing of her own narrative choices ("Creative" 409). In *Strange As This Weather Has Been*, Pancake brings an equilibrium to the "subjectivities and divergent values" of her characters within their different chapters, refusing to allow any single character's voice to represent them all (Wanat 166). Her first person narrators Lace and Bant do have authority of their stories; still, according to Bakhtin, all narrative voices have viewpoints, existence, and importance to the story, forging dialogue even in first person narrative. Pancake's complex multi-voiced narrative blends external and character-bound voices. In an interview, Pancake speaks of the origin of these voices:

The language of the characters in the novel is my home language, their voices the voices of my childhood in West Virginia. For me, the impetus for a piece of fiction is usually a voice I hear in my head. ...With all six speakers in the novel, I heard a voice, the voice of each individual, in my head. (qtd. in Spiers)

Bakhtin writes, "I live in a world of others' words," and the novel, he contends, "should be a mirror of that world" (*Problems* 143). Through just such a mirror, Pancake's use of multiple perspectives in *Strange As This Weather Has Been* "submerge[s her] readers" in the immediacy of the internal and external experiences of her characters ("Creative" 409).

In *Trampoline*, Dawn Jewell's adolescent Appalachian voice resonates with exactness in both language and visuals. It "represents a new kind of novel," a critic describing *Trampoline*'s style says, in the way it combines both drawn images and textual voice (Taylor). Gipe calls it a "lazy man's graphic novel"; however, the text intricately unfolds Dawn's experience in an incorporation of inked images within her contemporary story of resistance. The novel could have functioned just as well without the graphics; however, the way in which the story moves back and forth between them and the prose is a postmodern "fragmented narrative" in which the reader has to take a more involved part in "interpretation and inference" (Neufeld qtd. in Taylor). Comics, says Neufeld, an author of graphic nonfiction, speak in a much more "intimate voice" (Taylor). Gipe also infuses his work with regional voices, influenced perhaps by his own immersion in local oral histories with the regional media collective, Appalshop. In an interview, Gipe explains his style of narration: "I was interested in the reader experiencing the book as a story told by somebody live, something that is being spoken to them. I was interested in playing with the idea that...there really is a voice speaking within it" (Amidon).

One particularity of a first person narrator telling her story is that what she reveals is always existentially connected to her. There is no true correspondence to this revelatory effect with an external narrator. A "confessional increment," in which the import of what the narrator confesses effects an "intensification of meaning," imbues with significance everything she includes in the narrative (Stanzel 98). Stanzel offers an explication of this phenomenon:

This added significance may be minor, of course, depending on what he tells us. For example, "He was born nineteen years ago in San Diego, California," and "I was born nineteen years ago in San Diego, California," are almost equivalent because there is nothing especially noteworthy about a person telling us where and when he was born. ...

But if the informant is a woman, and the age is forty, and the place has a slightly lurid connotation...the confessional increment begins to operate ... Assume that an author tells us “He was born nineteen years ago in San Diego, California. His mother was a whore.” An I-character giving us the same data becomes the kind of person who calls his mother a whore. ... That becomes a much more important characterizing element than the lineage itself ... In this way, selected and shared by the experiencing self, each aspect of a narrative has significance simply because the narrator is choosing to tell it. (98)

The increment is a critical purpose for character-bound narrators since such confessions intimate a novel’s “generating principle” (B. Smith 194). A first person narrator uncovers the meaning of the narrative by what she says and what she withholds.

The force of revelation creates “immediacy” for the reader, a sense of the “unedited and the spontaneous” and shapes what the narrator selects to share of all possibilities available (Stanzel 126-127). For example, in *Strange As This Weather Has Been* when Bant chooses to reveal certain interior dialogues, anxieties about her place in a world out of her control emerge:

“Skin you alive,” that teacher’d say, and sometimes it wasn’t the kid on the barbed wire fence I’d see. Sometimes it was me. Sometimes it was my own arms and legs, skin naked, the blood beating through thick blue and red cords. And I knew —Lace having forgotten, Jimmy Make never having known...my grandma would expect from me certain things.

The thing was, in the past year or so, I was starting to wonder if I was really that different from everybody else after all. (Pancake 42)

In the violence of this imagined scenario, the burden of Bant’s responsibilities, the confusion over her identity, and the limitations of an adolescent perspective become clear — limitations that further the novel’s principle investigation of societal power imbalances. This generating

principle is one anticipatory reply to the reader's perpetual question: "So what?" An example of a thematic revelation developing from a narrator's confession occurs in *Trampoline* during Dawn's attendance for a mountaintop removal mine permit hearing:

I stood up. I pointed back at the woman.

[in a graphic panel]: I said, listen, you little heifer,

I said, "You don't need to be telling my mamaw what her business is. You don't know my mamaw. You aint got no right to talk to my mamaw."

"Young lady," the state man said, "you are speaking out of turn."

I wasn't done. "What do you want us to say? 'Go ahead and tear up the world. We'll just get out of the way while you destroy ever thing our friends ever had? Here, take my house; I'll just live here in this hole in the ground. Yeah, go ahead and set that big yellow rock on our heads. We'll be fine.'" (Gipe 15-16)

This section early in *Trampoline* discloses, in dialogic prose and a graphic image, competing ideologies, fearless resistance, and family loyalties. In this way, first person narrators remind the reader that lived experiences create meaning, an understanding necessary for applying literary truths to social contexts. Narratives construct subjectivities in the process of interpreting lived experiences. In her confessional increments, Dawn's impulsivity, frustration, rage, and rebelliousness materialize, traits that underpin her lived experiences. Thus, interpreting Dawn's actions and discourse reveals her "way of being in the world" (Clark 10).

A reader's entrance into the thoughts and experiences of a first person narrator creates an intimacy that enriches participation in the narrative; we "literally take [her] part, which is of course our own as well" (Roemer 27). Gipe confirms the intimate phenomenon of incremental revelations:

I have done a fair amount of work with oral history and am very interested in the decisions people make about what to tell strangers. Dawn is an exploration of the choices narrators make about what to share when they are aware that they don't have any control over who will hear/read their words. (Mullins)

When underage Dawn deadens her emotions with hard liquor or Bant exchanges her virginity for access to a strip mine, readers, privy to Bant's and Dawn's "innermost motives," are compassionately disposed toward the characters, despite morally questionable behavior (Stanzel 128). Pancake believes an intimate understanding of the lives of characters comes about from a reader's considerable investment in a novel, and, she writes, "such an experience can generate great compassion" ("Creative" 408). This affinity to a fictive other ushers readers into an alterity in which, through character-bound narrators' revelatory choices, we "become insiders even as we remain observers" (Roemer 27). Pancake explains her belief in narrative's ability to engender empathy and resist what she calls "psychic numbing":

It's not easy to actually feel, with our hearts, with our guts, overwhelming abstract problems that don't directly affect us...and it's tough to sustain compassion for the nameless souls struggling with those catastrophes. But we do have great capacity to empathize with the personal stories of individuals...literature is one of the few arenas where an individual can actually "live the life" of a person who is a subject of injustice. ("Creative" 408)

Indeed, regional author Wendell Berry affirms this force of intimacy in Pancake's novel, as he describes it as "one of the bravest novels...its completeness is made possible by its full acceptance of the heartbreak of its subject" (qtd. in Wanat 165).

Alterity and Ethical Response

A novel's breaking down the barriers between Self and Other, an "infiltration of otherness," or as Berry called it, the acceptance of a subject's heartbreak, is best achieved by a character-bound narrator in a particular culture's marginalized sector (Wall 48; Singer 173, 175). A definition of the complex concepts of Other and otherness will be helpful here. In psychoanalytic theory, the Other is necessary to consciousness as a means of distinguishing Self. According to Kristeva, what is projected on the Other is that which we find "undesirable" in ourselves (qtd. in Krumer-Nevo and Sidi 300). A sociological understanding of the Other, however, refers to "Otherness as the process of attaching moral codes of inferiority to difference" (Pickering qtd. in Krumer-Nevo and Sidi 300). Hence, othering becomes "the critical discursive tool of discrimination and exclusion used against individuals on the basis of their belonging to marginalized groups" (Boreus and Riggins qtd. in Krumer-Nevo and Sidi 300).

Otherness, in both the psychoanalytical and sociological senses of the word, has the connotation of undesirability. Otherness becomes an "oppressive force" because it creates a border line for exclusionary purposes, sending the others into "symbolic exile" (Hall qtd. in Krumer-Nevo and Sidi 300). Basic aspects of the relationship between Self and Other include "value judgments (the Other is perceived as good/bad), social distance (the Other is perceived as distant psychologically and physically), and knowledge (the history and culture of the Other is relatively unknown)" (Todorov qtd. in Krumer-Nevo and Sidi 300). The process of Othering requires a diverse group be seen as a single category; even if the Self knows the Other as different from the homogenized group, that knowing "does not affect the perceptions and attitudes the Self holds with regard to other members of that group who continue to be marked as different" (Riggins qtd. in Krumer-Nevo and Sidi 300). The Othering of an entire group is

carried about by the “rules of behavior and the mechanisms of discourse, interpretation, and performance” set up by the dominant group (300). A sense of “alienation and social distance” results from sending a group into the exile of Otherness, disallowing any connections with the Other because they are our “antipode,” one “we do not want to be and ... we never will be” (300). Othering has a political significance in that it impacts a sense of self that “occurs in the arena of hierarchical social order” (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi 307).

One aspect of the novel’s power lies in its potential to transcend this human estrangement of social stratifications. And, Bakhtin writes, the novel exists for just such a purpose: revealing class hierarchies and creating discourses to subvert them. Bakhtin’s concept of the novel as a type of social discourse provides a way of discussing the ethical meaning of “real” human agents and not just their “implied” artistic shadows (qtd. in Hale *Social Formalism* 116). As narratologist Cohn asserts, the novel has the ability to reveal the conscious selves, which she writes is “the genre’s most distinctive potential” to model real “social and ethical relations” (97). The novel is distinguished as a literary genre, as a discursive form, by its special capacity for fostering the appreciation of alterity, a social function no less important than its aesthetic one (112).

The novel’s discourse has limitless potential to exert an “ethical power” over those who consume it, with two primary outcomes: first, creating a theory of the “positive social value” of literature and, second, giving agency to the reader and the author to effect “positive political action” (Hale “Fiction” 187-188). Social formalist critic Dorothy Hale analyzes these “ethical effects of rhetorical practices,” considering the force of a novel to confer moral values and its role in the ethical training of the reader (187). Hale notes Trillings’ belief in the power of the novel as expressed in his “Manners, Morals, and the Novel.” The novel, he says, places within

the reader a respect for social alterity such that he can recognize others “who differ from [himself] in everything but the broad fact of being struggling [and] erring human creatures” (qtd. in Hale 190). This emotional response to the novel’s alterity esteems what the reader does not and perhaps cannot know of the Other (Hale 197).

A narrative text should leave a reader with more than she possessed before she encountered it — a perspective that, while not completely comprehensible, enlarges her with the sense of the Other without and the Other within (Hale “Fiction” 195). Unfortunately, a “fascination with ‘the Other’” as explored in literature “seldom penetrate[s] the veneer of Otherness” and is often demarcated by self/other binaries that circumscribe a reader’s emotional connection to characters who remain defined by their differences (Powers qtd. in Miller 56, 62). While the first person narrative is typically “complex and difficult,” it is the only form in which marginalization and “estrangement” can be accurately represented (Stanzel 10). A complex piece of literature challenging established representations of a region or group through a character-bound narrator relates reader and Other in a way unparalleled in other modes of narration. Such a novel requires the reader to determine her experience of the novel and compose a “readerly self” through her response to it. Bakhtin explains the triune actors comprising the force of aesthetic literature:

“The artistic” in its total integrity is not located in the artifact and not located in the separately considered psyches of creator and contemplator; it encompasses all three of these factors. It is a special form of interrelationship between creator and contemplator fixed in a work of art. (qtd. in Hale *Social Formalism* 133)

When the agent of narration is the “social Other” created by the author’s narrative structure and by the reader’s willingness to participate in the possibilities of the encounter, an opportunity to know the Other through differences and on the Other’s “own terms” results (Hale “Fiction” 195).

The reader’s encounter with the Other in the form of a character-bound narrator provokes a deeply personal realization that social stratification has closed the reader off to dialogue essential to “human flourishing” (Hale “Fiction” 195). However, the transaction between the reader and the narrator creates the “possibility of possibility,” which is the novel’s revolutionary context (194). By humanizing characters with their voices and images, *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and *Trampoline* narrow any “social differences” (Scott 21). Instead of affirming the reader’s distance from the problems Bant and Dawn face, their stories compel an identification with the characters’ circumstances, give agency back to the narrators, draw the reader in, and lessen the “fundamental differences between ‘these people’ and ‘us’” (21). Instead of narratives of a “strange land and peculiar people,” *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and *Trampoline* are rooted in specific times and places: contemporary Eastern Kentucky and southwestern West Virginia (22). These novels empty the significance of the “logic of differential worthiness,” presenting instead the coal industry and its practices, unfettered capitalistic greed, and an extractive economy as the cause of ills usually attributed to cultural deficiencies of the unkempt hillbilly, the white trash populating the desolate and devastated coalfields (Scott 13, 22).

A reader’s willingness to identify with the Other can create many social possibilities (Hale “Fiction” 199-201). Ethical reformation can take place only when the reader assents to recognize the Other, a self-binding response to a text made freely by the reader. The degree to which the reader accepts the text’s “non-colonizing” explanation of difference determines the novel’s positive contribution to the real “ethical action” foundational to positive social change

(190-191). Thus, according to Hale, reading novels that present the social Other is one precursor for “positive social change,” and acknowledging difference derives more from the efficacy of reading as an individual exercise than it ever would from government policing (189). Such individual transformation transcends the influence of power structures; only the reader’s imagination allows her to interpret the Other’s lived experiences and adjust her assumptions even after the narrative experience ends. Similarly, dialogic discourse across differences requires a shifting of self; effecting change in hegemonic structures occurs precisely as the reader sees a “reality...with entirely ‘other’ eyes,” which is how narration “occupies an exceptional position in contemporary fiction” (Stanzel 85).

A difficulty with regional fiction is that, instead of the reality of lived experiences in a place, it can easily be populated with one-dimensional caricatures perpetuating a view that “genteel” society has already constructed (Miller “People” 65). In such instances, the depiction of marginalized groups in regional fiction — their lives and their locales — are not a challenging revelation; the text merely reassures readers by showing them who they are not (65). For example, in various mediums Appalachians are often defined in capitalist terms that concern their sense of style, their habits of consumption, their image as an “army of unwashed who live in mobile homes, drive school busses [sic], have woefully restricted horizons, hopes, aspirations, and who make feeble attempts to escape their own banality” (63). However, I argue that complex first person narrators such as those in *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and *Trampoline* subvert this limited view of the Other and resist stereotypes by removing all narrative distance and presenting not simple caricatures, but living subjects.

In *Trampoline*, Gipe includes details that have often been used to stereotype Appalachians — pickup trucks held together with bondo, trailers up on blocks, Dawn’s mother

stealing Mamaw's checks to buy drugs — while at the same time revealing people such as Mamaw, Denny, Willett, and Dawn, who embody “intellectual and emotional depth” (Miller qtd. in Roggenkamp 33). By taking control of these stereotypes of Appalachia, Gipe requires the reader to look beyond “external markers” of a social Other, an encounter necessary in order for the experience of alterity to produce the ethical impact of the novel (Hale “Fiction” 202).

Conclusion

The very heart of art, the rendering of the “familiar in an unfamiliar way,” presents the reader with a subject she thinks she recognizes and then strikes her with newness of discovery, and regional literature with character-bound narrators allows this encounter (Roemer 70). Through narrative intimacy, the reader enters the text in ways impossible with a “distanced” voice (Bakhtin *Dialogic* 32). Bakhtin writes that “discourse in art can only be understood as part of discourse in life” (259); the readerly act of alterity overcomes alienation through the equalizing effect of dialogue between real and fictive life (Day). Dawn says in *Trampoline*:

There was a light in the woods, but I couldn't tell where it came from. It seemed it came from the mountain. The total amount of water in the mountain began to freak me out. I did. I freaked out about the water. Stupid. I sat down on a fresh-fallen log. The wind crackled through the leaves clinging to the limbs. Sounded like a clutch of old women whispering at the back of a cold, empty church. The light was dwindly and low, and I wished you were there. Who?

Answering her own question within a graphic image: “*You, stranger*” (120). So, although it is impossible to foresee a narrative's full emotional and ethical impact upon a reader, introducing alterity in literary art does link different worlds — the character's and the reader's — and, by doing so, opens a space for change (Harth 96).

The social dialogue of the novel moves the reader beyond what is comfortable in order to find the limitations of her ways of knowing. With the discovery of these boundaries comes the anxiety about and promise of what can transpire if the reader moves beyond them. If reading is, as Hale explains, a concrete and specific encounter (Hale “Fiction” 191) — what Miller calls being “face to face with the words on the page” — the reader’s free assenting response to the text solidly establishes her as an “ethical subject,” making judgments about fictive situations that cannot be justified by logic alone. The reader must make what Miller calls “leaps in the dark” to accept, as part of binding to the novel, the responsibility for making ethical choices the novel demands (J. Miller qtd. in Hale 195).

Chapter 2: Semiotic, Subjectivity, and Subversion

A novel is newly formed with each reading as its discourses arc out in dialogue with other subjects, times, and contexts. A genre with unique potential, the novel can be characterized by three traits: its three-dimensional representation of the modern world; its ability to effect “radical change” in the historical time in which it is received; and its “zone of maximal contact” with an unfinished present reality (Bakhtin *Dialogic* 11). The novel’s open-endedness is a continual “rethinking and re-evaluating” of not just the past, but also the future, and the text’s meaning and consequence are continually reconfigured as the experiential context of the work is ever-changing, moving toward an unknown and unconstructed future (30-31). Narrative says, *Here is the experience of one particular kind of subjectivity*, and thus, within a story a reader perceives the complexity of the subject’s many possibilities. In Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic, novels have this “question of the self” at their centers, and semiotic language in literary art reflects how the self is “fluid, mutable, multiple” (Clark 1). In *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and *Trampoline*, Bant and Dawn begin to encounter their societies’ truths — hidden strip mines, corrupt politics, deceitful industries, and shifting family loyalties. They must negotiate conflicting desires to both know and not know the causes and extent of natural and social destruction in their communities. As these narrators react to circumstances, a reader experiences their struggles with newly introduced questions of the self. This “unfinalizability” of fictional characters’ subjectivities creates an endless and shifting social discourse comprising the text’s meaning-making for the narrators and for the reader (Bakhtin *Dialogic* 45).

The Semiotic and the Symbolic

Julia Kristeva, along with French feminists such as Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, developed literary, linguistic, and psychoanalytic theories “explor[ing] the dynamic of signs, the

signifying practice” in aesthetic as well as social discourse (Junker 425). One of a group of post-structural theorists and philosophers to come out of 1960s France, Kristeva synthesizes the intellectual influences of Bakhtin’s dialogism as well as the acclaimed philosopher and psychoanalyst Lacan’s imaginary and symbolic in language. One theory in her prolific and varied works is that of the semiotic’s power to subvert dominant discourses. Kristeva’s scholarship is grounded in Lacan’s theory that the symbolic language ability is acquired when an infant breaks with the mother and adopts the Law of the Father. Before this split, and even within the womb, infants dwell in the imaginary, undivided from their mothers’ bodies. Once babies pass out of that realm, they become subjects governed by rules of symbolic language (Junker 426). Creative possibility depends on a recovery of this semiotic beyond symbolic acquisition, and, breaking from Lacan, Kristeva posits that the imaginary is always accessible and “discernible in the semiotic mode of signification” (Branham 37).

Kristeva develops Lacan’s idea of the symbolic as well as introduces her theory of the semiotic in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. The authoritarian symbolic makes up the formal structure of language, governs syntactical arrangement, and demands as part of the “social contract” an adherence to the prescriptive rules of language (Bove 14). The semiotic language system, however, works in ways that symbolic cannot. While not independent of the symbolic, the semiotic does infiltrate it. The semiotic aspect of the signifying process reveals what is just under the speaking being’s surface (McAfee 20). Therefore, within the dominant symbolic are found the traces of its articulations, “rhythmic” and “melodic” (Kristeva *Future* 259). Writing is a creative act in which imagination sets free the “instinctual discourse” of the semiotic. Fiction, especially the novel, has a libratory effect, resisting the “tyranny of the patriarchal” symbolic through “musicality and indeterminacy...that negates the syntax and grammar of the traditional

language of the law” (Terzieva-Artemis vii). The sounds and rhythm, the “repetition, the displacement, the substitution, the elision,” even the silences are instances of the semiotic’s traces in language (viii). Kristeva argues that, opposed to the symbolic restrictions, the “signifying economy of poetic language” is fluid “[with] no boundaries, no beginnings and endings...” (*Desire* 134). According to Kristeva, these semiotic traces appear especially in psychoanalysis and avant-garde literary art.

Subversive Potentials

Kristeva’s own novels — *Murder in Byzantium*, *Samurai*, and *Old Man and the Wolves* — demonstrate the genre’s potential to represent diverse subjectivities, propose new conceptualizations of place-based identities, and embed thinking on the political through writing the semiotic in a “free and associative way” (Bodin 31-32). Her fiction is mediated by first person narrators and incorporates lyrical prose. Like Pancake’s and Gipe’s novels, Kristeva’s do not offer easy understandings, and their shared approach to fictional pieces illuminates how literature asks questions that can “reshape and reformulate” the dominant view of a culture (41). Indeed, Kristeva warns us not to be taken in by the seemingly harmless word *text*. She wants the reader to realize “how much risk there is in a text, how much nonidentity, non-authenticity, impossibility, and corrosiveness it holds for those who [choose] to see themselves with it” (*Revolution* 86). Through the readerly act of alterity, the novel precipitates an identification with its contexts and characters that grants them and the reader freedom from the conventional discourse of neoliberalism. The disruptive potential of the semiotic rests in this ability to contravene the “structures of official thought” (Kristeva *Desire* 65). In “Word, Dialogue, and Novel,” Kristeva expounds on her premise informed by the works of Bakhtin: “The poetic word,

polyvalent and multidetermined, adheres to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse and fully comes into being only in the margins of a recognized culture...challenging official law” (65).

Kristeva’s choice of texts for her critical scholarship reveals her interest in art that depicts the marginalized and oppressed. She sees poetic language as an aspect of the signifying process that “destabilizes” the logical, symbolic, and orderly structure of signification. For example, in her critique of French poet Mallarme’s works, she analyzes how his poetry from 1848-71 concerns the disaffection of the working classes. Mallarme’s poetic language is one example, according to Kristeva, of semiotic language that subverts a capitalist conception of the unified self (Bove 13, 28). Mallarme’s poetry unearths conflicts that are otherwise suppressed by exploitation on both the “psychic and economic” level and exposes how a capitalist structure’s ideology stifles the self by positioning her as an object of exchange (17). His works, according to Kristeva’s assessment, also demonstrate how, through conflicting interactions with societal institutions, the subject becomes unfinalizable, freed from the politics of a language hiding its drive to exclude a certain class of people from discourse (Mol 173).

Literary works have often been part of the establishment of new social discourses. African American poets and authors challenge racism, queer artists question heteronormativity, and women writers disrupt patriarchal constructs. Even Kristeva’s own novels address complex concepts like sociopolitical discontents and relational intricacies, and *Strange As This Weather Has Been*’s and *Trampoline*’s revisionings are also “transgression[s] of...conventional borders” of narration, of marginalized characters, of time and spatial relations, and of fixed identity (Bodin 42). In Pancake’s and Gipe’s novels, Bant’s and Dawn’s stories of being trapped in othered communities and caught up in a neoliberal system step outside narrative borders to show the need for more equitable social arrangements.

The Semiotic in *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and *Trampoline*

In *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and *Trampoline*, Bant's and Dawn's experiences of unjust social structures are described in semiotic language, both spoken and internal. In an interview with Robert Gipe in *Appalachian Journal* some years before *Trampoline* was published, Pancake discloses how her developing style was influenced by how Kristeva's theory of the semiotic gave her "permission to trust that part of my writing." In fact, Pancake wrote the short story "Sister" after studying Kristeva and says the theories "broke her open," giving her "license to experiment with voice and sound," pushing her interest in rhythm of language, and allowing her to do "whatever the hell [she] wanted in terms of language."

Pancake claims she is most proud of the sound of her writing, and in her narratives she strives to get the "rhythm, the cadence, the music of it" right to her own ear. When drafting her stories, she explains in an interview with the Willow Springs Journal, it is the musicality of the language that first comes to her, its "poetics and lyricism of the voice." Moreover, for this West Virginian author, the semiotic often manifests itself in the Appalachian dialect:

I think the language in Appalachia is more elastic than Standard English. Maybe partly because people there aren't as formally educated as people tend to be outside, the grammar isn't as strict and there's more flexibility—to both make up words but also to change and play with syntax. There's a great freedom in joining words together, compounding words, so when I make up words in my novel like "speak-taste" and "leaf-wait," it's not that I've heard those exact words used by somebody back home, but I grew up hearing people make up their own words, along with more commonly used compounds like "gray-headed lady," or "pitiful-looking," or "big-bellied," words like

that. Also nouns and adjectives are sometimes used as verbs, like “I’m doctoring with that Indian man over in Winchester,” or “They mounded up the dirt real high,” and in my work that pattern shows up in sentences like “They rumored that dam to bust every spring” in *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and “his longjohn shirt whitening a space in the dark” in *Given Ground*. Syntax, too, is looser in Appalachian English than it is in Standard English, so you can play with the structure of the sentence in ways that I think are more poetic and fit rhythm and cadence the way that I hear them.

Perfecting the musicality and lyricism of her writing, Pancake revises her stories “to get the throb right or thrum right...I want the story to feel like it has background music...kind of like a refrain in a song or a bass beat.” Through poetic language, narrators speak to the reader, rather than at her, and in doing so access the reader’s unconscious and enliven her emotional response to the text.

Pancake’s and Gipe’s novels’ narrators describe their connections to place with semiotic language. Bant personifies the land as it is being ravaged:

...and then it dawned on me exactly what I was standing under — Yellowroot Mountain, dead...after they blasted the top off the mountain to get the coal, they had no place to put the mountain’s body except dump it in the head of the hollow. So there it loomed. Pure mountain guts. ... Yellowroot Mountain blasted into bits, turned inside out, then dumped in Yellowroot Creek. (*Strange* 20)

Here, metaphor humanizes the ruin of the mountains as well as illustrates the force of what is lost and the grief that loss precipitates.

In *Strange As This Weather Has Been*, the maternal and the semiotic are clearly linked as Bant characterizes her attachment to the land existing even before her birth. She describes walking a path to a neighbor's house:

...I'd been running this path since before I was born. I'd started running this mountain when I was still inside Lace...and they carried me back up just weeks after I came out. If I said it out loud, Lace would say I couldn't remember, but I could, the ground moving below me, dead-leaf-colored, how many colors of brown. The smell of November rain on beginning to rot leaves. I helped my Grandma from the time I could walk. (34)

On the next page, Pancake links the life-giving, fecund shelter of a maternal body and the same protective womb of undisturbed nature through her metaphor, word-play, sound, and sensory descriptions:

Like the heart of the rhododendron thicket, the limbs bendy and matty and strong, it was like being inside some kind of body there. It felt animal live. The rock overhangs in the winter, how icicles would make off them, great scary masses, the rocks making faces, angry and beautiful. I'd feel closest in spring, before the leaves came all the way out, when the mountains show their hope with little color patches, redbud and dogwood, dogwood and redbud, the roll of the words in your mouth. And if you look real close, how all the leaves are tightly curled, bulging just a little beyond bud — leaf-wait, I'd call it.... I was in truly deep now, all mountain and no sight of people, of things people-made, and down below me, this soft loft of heavy-leafed branches, and above me, the underside of the same. (35-36)

Bant's relationship with her grandmother perhaps most of all represents the pure symbiosis of human and nature, which Pancake depicts as more powerful than the symbolic:

She [Grandma] wasn't a talker. When she did talk, it was to tell you how to do something or tell you something that had happened before you were born...What she liked to touch were wood things, things that came out of the ground. But even without the talking, she taught me to let into my insides the real of this place. From her I learned the deep of here.

(36)

While Grandma wastes few words, she speaks through the quiet, through her touch, of the depths of the land's meanings.

Gipe, too, writes the semiotic. With her lyrical and frank voice, Dawn has a direct manner and unconventional personality that yet conveys the "beauty and nuance of mountain life" in a novel that critics have called a "new American masterpiece" (Taylor). Part of this remarkable subtlety in Dawn's story includes the poetic voice of those with the most influence in her life. For example, Dawn's grandmother, like Bant's, tells her narrative to impress upon Dawn the natural world's bearing on her identity:

"That's where they're going to strip," she said, nodding at the crest of Blue Bear Mountain. "They'll start mining on the Drop Creek side. But they'll be on this side before you graduate...You watch."

Mamaw linked her lean arm through mine and told me about growing up on Blue Bear Mountain. Her stories smelled of sassafras and ran with gunfire, and the sound of her voice was warm as railroad gravel in the summer sun, but the stories flitted through my mind and never lit. (1)

Gipe's poetic language to characterize the intricacies of places and people puts the reader into these intimate moments. Regarding the penetrating complexity of his characters, he writes:

At some level, for me anyway, *Trampoline* is about how hard it is to know what has happened, who a person is, or even what we feel about a thing. ...I hope the book is particular enough that people who are interested in the complexity of things will get some pleasure in reading it. ("Ohio Today")

Trampoline's prose reflects Dawn's struggles grasping difficult truths about her existence. At the center of this narrative, her "protagonist Self" grapples with the decision to either be an "active agent," "passive experiencer," or "vehicle" of her destiny (Lamarque 404).

Subjectivity

Embedded in her theory of the semiotic is Kristeva's concept of the "nature of human subjectivity," and the novel is an ideal genre for this inquiry (Singer 174). Both within the discipline of literary criticism and without, *subject* has multiple denotations, but two are pertinent to this study. One is the *psychological* subject as the "center of consciousness, of voluntary action, and perhaps the center of the unconscious" and counter to the object (anything outside of itself) (Clark 3). Second is the *narrative* subject, a self who can assume different subject roles, variously and even simultaneously as the central character of a story. Often identified as the "topic of statements," the narrative subject has specific characteristics and is generally the center of the "action and experience" (3). Any treatment of subjectivity must also address different cultural interpretations of the concept. Subjectivity as Kristeva describes it is quite different from the Western view of a self that possesses a complete awareness of motivations, takes autonomous actions, makes choices based on logic and facts, and acts independently of outside influences (McAfee 4). As a post-structuralist critic and novelist, Kristeva revises this American ideal of self with subjects instead conditioned by the "vicissitudes of history...and other shaping forces" (7), entities not independent and isolated, but shaped by

many circumstances of “culture, history, context, relationships, and language” deeply impacting their development (14).

Subject-in-Process

The way in which both fictive and real subjects make meaning out of lived experiences and the context from which meaning is derived is also a consideration of Kristeva’s theory of subjectivity (McAfee 26). It is this meaning-making that creates what Kristeva calls a “subject-in-process.” Language, Kristeva writes, is the system wherein the “subject *makes* and *unmakes* himself” (*Reader* 265). So, because language is a process, subjects, both real and fictive, are also *in process* — signifying and being composed of signifying practices (McAfee 7-9). In this way, Kristeva’s theory of subjectivity is inextricably linked with her theory of language; the subject talking or writing or creating cannot be in isolation because her “own living energy” imbues language with meaning (15). While the economic forces in their communities may see people as “isolable, static entities” incapable of independently making meaning of their lived experiences (14), Bant and Dawn do evolve. “The subject never *is*,” Kristeva writes, “the subject is only the signifying *process* and he appears only as a signifying practice” (*Reader* 215). In the same way that we create our reality in the narratives of our lives we tell ourselves, through their stories Bant and Dawn come to be. In sum, because there is no awareness of self before we have the language to construct it, any subject is an “effect of linguistic processes,” shaped by engaging in the signifying process, of which the semiotic is crucial to her unfettered development (McAfee 29).

The subject is always part of a social makeup, so the political is necessarily inherent in her continual becoming, and Pancake’s and Gipe’s narrators are adolescents fashioned by societal ills as well as family structures (McAfee 124). The foundational conflicts in Bant’s and

Dawn's process of becoming involve accepting or rejecting a neoliberal individualized and monologic identity, one that rejects indeterminacy and separates subjects into easily controlled individual units in a system that prefers a "single ethical world-view over a much more complex reality" (Phillips 10). However, in *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and *Trampoline*, Bant and Dawn are attempting to resist such confines. The two narrators also illustrate how the resulting conflict may require relinquishing power in one structure in order to gain power in another (74). This compromise is clarified in Bant's and Dawn's mountaintop removal activism and familial relationships as well as in Dawn's attempt to subvert hierarchies in the educational institution. Bant is forced to make the very adult choice to stay in Yellowroot with her mother rather than fleeing with her father to North Carolina. Dawn opts to become involved in activism, which changes her identity within her family and her community. In their stories, they begin to be cognizant of their subjectivities. In addition, as they dialogue with other characters, the exchanges also influence their becoming (Sedehi and Salif 56). The subject-in-process is thus not a stable one but a subjectivity in revolt against the symbolic order (the paternal) and absolute identity (A. Smith 24).

Strange As This Weather Has Been's and *Trampoline's* narrators contend with power on many social and institutional levels to try to resist or repair inequalities in social structures whose members have little or no access to power. Speaking for their unrepresented (or incorrectly represented) culture, the adolescent narrators offer insight into how hierarchies of power control access to "agency and authority" (Day 82). In an interview with WV Public Radio, Gipe discusses Dawn's negotiation of her status in society as a subject-in-process:

If her default is just being aggravated, that she's having to process all this, and she's in that whole push pull of wanting somebody to talk to about it and just being resentful that

one, you need somebody, and two, you're afraid to rely on anybody. On some level you're fearful of confiding in anybody. You want contradictory things in the same moment a lot of times.

Bant and Dawn are characters full of inconsistencies and often depicted as on the edge of something — mine sites, adulthood, awareness. Kristeva explains this tension: “In our reality of crisis, many believe they can ‘get out of it’ by subscribing to an ‘identity,’ preferably the most fundamentalist, the one that replaces individual questions with solutions for the mass, the clan. ‘I do not know who I am, but I belong with them’” (qtd. in Gambaudo 22). The societal and familial strains in *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and *Trampoline* stemming from the coal industry’s controversial mountain-top removal illustrate ways individuals behave in such existential crises. In the novels, relational discourses implode when the drive to *be* opposes the desire to *belong*, “to adhere to a group, to an ideology, to a sect” (Pollock 8). Bant and Dawn describe this strain as the feeling of an impending explosion. Bant says, “...I’d feel about to smother. All summer, that double pressure. Something’s about to give, or bust. Flood or flame” (*Strange* 84). And, from Dawn, “A thing boils up, I thought. It isn’t there and then it is” (*Trampoline* 156). Nonetheless, their narratives prove that explosive times of crisis can, when the smoke clears, reveal previously hidden alternatives to the “quagmire of choices the contemporary era has handed us” (McAfee 17).

Revealing paths toward regeneration is a central theme in Pancake’s and Gipe’s novels, even though both Bant and Dawn voice doubts about that possibility in seemingly disintegrating places. For example, questioning her life in the midst of destruction, Bant says, “The end of something. It just always was. And what was it to grow up in this ending place, butting always against that, what? I’m only fifteen” (*Strange* 317). Dawn expresses a similar view when she

asks the reader, “Do you remember what it was like to be fifteen? Do you know what it is like to grow up in Kentucky? Either you do or you don’t. Aint no use explaining if you don’t. Fuck you” (*Trampoline* 76). Against this hopelessness, however, is the assurance that to be in-process “gives us a vision,” Kristeva says, “of the human venture as [one of] innovation, of creation, of opening, of renewal” (qtd. in Branham). And, as the narratives unfold, Bant’s and Dawn’s transformations include a hope for something new.

Because literary texts are produced by subjects, portray subjects, and are received by subjects, these creations are bound to have an impact on the “subjectivity of both writers and readers” (McAfee 120). The “unruly drive” of the subject in narrative sets free the writer and the text (and by extension the reader) to seek such a creative renewal (E. Miller 101). Pancake explains her perspective on this power of the unconscious, how it drives the subject-in-process, and how that is represented in fiction:

Pushing a little deeper into the relationship between literature and the imagination, I want to point out, too, the way literature—both the reading of it and the writing of it—can reunite an individual’s conscious and unconscious... I would argue that many of our contemporary ills are caused or exacerbated by our culture’s rending the conscious from the unconscious, then elevating the conscious—the intellect, rationality—to the complete neglect, if not outright derision, of the unconscious. This is disastrous not only because such psychic amputation cripples people, contributing to feelings of emptiness, insatiability, depression, and anxiety, but also because within that castoff unconscious—in intuition, in dreams—dwell ideas, solutions, and utterly fresh ways of perceiving and understanding that we need urgently in an era of unraveling and transition. I, like all writers, know the power of the unconscious because it’s where I’ve gone for decades for

my fiction writing. I know how boundless that realm is, how explosive with energy and light; I know my unconscious is eons ahead of my intellect, worlds larger in vision than my rational mind. This is exactly where we'll find the materials and the fuel for that transformation of psyche I'm talking about. And our very business as artists is trafficking between the conscious and the unconscious; indeed, we are one of the very last groups in this culture who have a sanctioned day-to-day relationship with our unconscious, with our dreams and intuition. ("Creative" 412-13)

Losing touch with creative power evidently makes us less capable of transforming and flourishing as human beings...However, authors as "dissidents," experimenting with linguistics and interpreting subjectivity, imagine ways to "overturn, puncture, and proliferate ideas of...sexual, racial, national normativity" (Kristeva qtd. in Bari). Poetic writing, then, undermines neoliberalism's fixed self necessary for its functioning and "shatter[s] the unified or atomistic subject" power produces (Bove *Language* 17). To Kristeva, the semiotic within the symbolic is the only way for the many "unnamed, unrepresented, or denied subjectivities" to be expressed (Bari).

The Novel as Revolution

The novel reflects the "spontaneity of the inconclusive present" (Bakhtin *Dialogic* 27-30) and marginalized regions such as Appalachia are ideal material for innovative novelistic representations like Pancake's and Gipe's that have characters in conflicts not always of their own making (Erdinast-Vulcan 99). Their stories reflect historical and social contexts and expose the class and family conflicts that result from rigid "social hierarchies and inequitable power relations" (Bove *Language* 25). In fact, in his book review of *Trampoline*, author George

Singleton writes that Dawn is trapped in an “Appalachian Gregor Samsa kind of way, surrounded by loved ones [who are] at times difficult to love” (ohioswallow.com).

Although this may be true, a novel’s representation of subjects-in-process in unfinalizable contexts can reconfigure how we think about seemingly fixed socioeconomic realities. Thus, because language is necessarily sociopolitical, boundary transgressing literary art is a “revolt against the fixed meaning of symbolic discourse” through its use of “semiotically charged” language (Kristeva *Revolution* 113). Kristeva advances the text as a means of disruptive action akin to political revolution because all literary text is at its deepest level an artistic representation of a culture, a mirror of a society (17). This is one way regional literature emancipates a subject, even if the story itself may not give the reader a ‘happy’ ending (Bove *Language* 29). A regional author’s “cultural activism” is an aesthetic and political act with the “identical ideological function of dissidence,” a revolutionary performance that contends with hegemonic systems (Bari). While dominant discourses uphold the “patriarchal status quo” and industry’s public discourses, policies, and structures oppose imaginative transformation, the semiotic found in the dialect and description of *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and *Trampoline* bridges binaries (Bove “Politics” 221-2) and dances around the confines of the symbolic with a poetic playfulness that allows for “radical change” (Junker 427).

Conclusion

The modern world is replete with single-voiced systems of power that must be interrupted by dialogic “insurrectionary acts” of which literature is one (Robinson). When dialogues intersect, all subjects can exist and speak without oppression, fresh realities are produced, and perspectives can be continually renewed (Robinson). Only through a struggle against single-voicedness can a subject be in process. Thus, “revolt becomes the essential gesture

in the constitution of individuality (Lechte qtd. in Sedehi and Salif 64). Whether *Strange As This Weather Has Been*'s and *Trampoline*'s narrators navigate power successfully or fail spectacularly, their stories contextualize the subject-in-process within the novels' larger critiques of neoliberal policies and their impacts on mountain societies, as well as contribute to a dialogue about who holds the power to determine the best life possible.

Though Kristeva asked over two decades ago, "Quelle révolte aujourd' hui?" ("What revolt today?"), at its core, her critical theory of subjectivity and the semiotic is an optimistic and achievable one, and like the field of Appalachian studies itself, trusts that oppression and exploitation can be overcome through a "transformation of the human race" (qtd. in McAfee 114, 126). Narrative discourses help to understand the "roles of self and the modes of subjectivity, and, because the 'outer limits' of subjectivity are unknowable, in neither narrative nor reality can discourse of the individual be isolated nor can its boundaries be defined" (Clark 192). Real and fictive subjects are in contact with ever-shifting ideological utterances, and this open-endedness provides constant interactions that suffuse the text with limitless opportunities for coming together and "branching apart" (Wall 45). The "micropolitics" of subjectivity is necessary to impact the "macropolitics" of a society, and Kristeva's revolt is a "cultural and psychological" one that, she believes, is the only kind that can bring about enduring and transformative social changes (McAfee 106, 112). Kristeva believes that a new sort of society is possible through a transformation of the individual, a society in which each person is free to be in-process while remaining part of her "tribe" (McAfee 114). Kristeva's theory of revolution through language, in sum, is that we have the freedom to be unfinalizable subjects, constantly renewed and recreated in all our signifying processes, including the artistic and the literary, in ceaseless engagements that disrupt the symbolic's limiting influence.

Chapter 3: Representation, Dissent, and Advocacy

Narrative and culture are tightly interwoven, and, by introducing the self to the Other, storytelling has a persuasive social role. Raymond Williams, a Marxist cultural and literary critic, whose theories are also influenced by Bakhtin's writings, explains in "Creative Practice" that "human creativity and self-creation" are essential to representing social structures and inherited understandings of social relations (206-9). Creative acts, Williams says, address power relations both as perpetuated in society and internalized by individuals — the dominant system of "meaning and values" ordering and controlling society that color our interpretation of experiences (Higgins 147). Because Marxism sees society as a structure in need of change, creative practices promote becoming multivoiced, in relationship to others, and part of new cultural meanings through narratives that countermand the "self-legitimizing discourse" of capitalist ideology (Higgins 150-1; Jameson 125). In this way, Appalachian literature as creative practice of resistance has the potential to "deconstruct outside definitions of who [we] are" by replacing a socially constructed Appalachian identity with a postmodern discourse of Appalachian subjects-in-process (Fisher "Claiming" 60). By way of narrative, then, an active composing of the self has the potential to produce "a new view and 'new formation' of the material elements of culture" (Williams 211).

Exposing Inequalities

The most transformative art is an answer to a societal struggle (Snyder 344). Since narrative reflects society, we must question such aspects of a story as "'whose voice is this,' or 'who speaks' ... as well as the most important query, 'To what is this a reply?'" (Leith qtd. in Bal 222). As creative practice, the novel responds to structures in which the powerful are not abiding by discourses of "justice, fairness, and equality" (Levine 647), and determining who is speaking and

why reveals what the narrative wants us to believe or see, to “hate, love, admire, argue against, shudder before, or stand in awe of...” (Bal 224). As middle-class society’s “problematic individual[s],” artists critique and oppose in order to resist “bourgeoisie consciousness,” tied as it is to the market and its values of power, money, and individualism. The novel in its ability to be “critical and oppositional” is the ideal form for this resistance (Goldmann 167). Although the arts promote the status quo when controlled by the ruling class, working class narratives are catalysts for changing our adherence to that class’s ideologies. If, as critics assert, literature is political, then it has power to instigate this kind of revolution (Fetterley).

Any society driven by economics, particularly the forces of production, must be critiqued through the lens of the material and historical as the power derived from controlling production extends to politics, government, media, and all parts of the culture that can be manipulated in order to maintain that power. As creative practice, literature’s political influence is not only its documentation of power at work or in imagining other realities, but also in its potential to “reshape our most basic ideas about social and material determinations” (Mieszkowski xiii). By giving “form, shape and sense” to lived experience, putting readers in a place to experience that reality, narrative “identif[ies] the various visions of suffering our culture makes available to us” (Gibson 72). Anchoring a novel to culture makes the work a “product of a negotiation between a creator, a communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institution and practices of society” (Greenblatt qtd. in Mieszkowski 3). In central Appalachia, the coal industry is politically, economically, and culturally embedded, and convincing in its normalizing discourse. Pancake’s *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and Gipe’s *Trampoline* make visible the entrenched hegemony and expose the consequences in natural environments and personal lives of capitalist ideology. Because readers see society with more clarity in fiction than in life, these novels pin down “large

regions of reality” for us to process; though fictional works cannot be said to be “true,” they do bring before our consciousness the sweep of lived experience (Gibson 73).

Strange As This Weather Has Been and Trampoline as Creative Practice

Creative practice clarifies the connection between exploitative practices and community problems, a realization necessary in building a postmodern society where all members participate in determining equitable structures (Fisher “Claiming” 60; Banks et al. 293, 295). Through dark, sometimes cynical and comedic styles, character-bound voices, arresting descriptions, lyrical language, and critiques of dominant power structures, Pancake’s and Gipe’s novels close this distance between readers’ and narrators’ understanding of “environmental and economic disaster” and transmute their narrators’ lived experiences into a critique on social injustices (Barnes 25). Literature recognizing and subverting hegemonic narratives “resist[s] erasure and distortion” even in the face of ideologies that want to “smother and silence” marginalized voices (24). In *Trampoline*’s chapter appropriately titled “Smother,” Dawn describes her accidental plunge into an old mine shaft: “...the ground beneath my feet broke in on itself, made a hole narrow and deep. Once I was in, it felt like the ground closed up over me. ... I rolled back over on my back at the bottom of the hole. A hole narrow and deep” (Gipe 33). This scene is one of many that symbolize how Dawn’s socioeconomic conditions — poverty, substance abuse, dysfunctional relationships — nearly annihilate her.

In a similar way, Pancake shows how environmental destruction results from industrial abuse (Wanat 148). In the first chapter she narrates, Bant explains learning about the extent of mountaintop removal’s carnage:

The edge of the mine top towered several hundred feet right over our heads, a straight gray line...the top of Yellowroot [mountain] 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. (*Strange* 19)

Both instances in the novels are examples of the sense of erasure that neoliberal systems cause. The narrators who are so wedded to their places, the environment and the community, tell us they are being obliterated.

Strange As This Weather Has Been and *Trampoline* illustrate capitalism's exploitation of people and land for financial gain, as their narrators reproduce class conflicts, socioeconomic inequities, and the politics of a time and place. Demonstrating injustices perpetuated by the dominant class, an external narrator in Pancake's novel says, "This sacrifice of land...is nothing new, it has been regularly slaughtered for well over a hundred years..." (238). Such conflict is inevitable in a society with a wide disparity between who works and who profits. Ensnared in the dominant system, members of the working class become trapped by a conviction that resource extraction is economically healthy for society and foundational to a home and family identity, despite how the "coal trucks got bigger as the towns got smaller" (211). Pancake, describing a hollow as "freshly wrecked," shows the destruction of homes and communities, and Bant's consideration of the expression "Coal's all we got around here" reveals how hegemony excludes innovative solutions (211). Such striking revelations make these novels into social artifacts, artistic and potentially revolutionary.

Societal inequities' impact on human lives is made clear in Dawn's story as well. As her home landscapes are falling to ruin, she sees "places that weren't anything anymore, weren't nature, weren't human, just places left behind" (Gipe 39). The mountains, Dawn says, "talk sense into me" and she "need[s] them close and always." She will not "let that get torn down" (225). When a work of art critiques the stifling effect of capitalism in this way, it battles "the prevailing unfreedom...thus

breaking through the mystified (and petrified) social reality, and opening the horizon of change (liberation). In this sense, every authentic work of art would be revolutionary, i.e. subversive of perception and understanding, an indictment of the established reality.” (Marcuse qtd. in Gardiner 308)

By telling Bant’s and Dawn’s stories, Pancake and Gipe have written novels that are political efforts against “dominant forms of ideological and cultural production” (Harlow qtd. in Barnes 4). Resisting the material conditions of a marginalized society, *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and *Trampoline* reveal the configuration of societal power relations necessary to introduce a “newly possible consciousness” of Appalachia (Roggenkamp 212). Moreover, as aesthetic creations, these novels fight the confinement of the status quo by “making the petrified world speak, sing, perhaps even dance” (Marcuse qtd. in Gardiner 308).

Authors as Cultural Activists

The representation of “people like this, relations like this” is the heart of the novel’s force (R. Williams 210). In fact, Kristeva argues that creative practice is the primary aim of literary art, making the reader “feel — through abstraction, form, color, volume, sensation — a real experience” (qtd. in Hogberg). If, as Marxists believe, language is the basis for social relationships and shifts in discourse overthrow these relations, then literature goes beyond imagining potential changes (Williams 209). The possibility of change inherent in literary art emphasizes its surprising practicality. In narrative, human nature is shown to be changeable, in process, “dependent on specific political-economic relations and at the same time as capable of changing them” (Marx qtd. in Mieszkowski 11). Therefore, if socioeconomic relations are conditional rather than inevitable, then things could always be “otherwise” (Mieszkowski 11). If, regardless of its complexity or rigidity, any political or social reality “can never be more than one option among others,” and all

contingencies are equally possible, then fiction can subvert the incontrovertible reality of the status quo by revealing revolutionary ideas changing, not just the present circumstances, but an entire way of conceiving societal conditions (11). In reproducing the “present state of things,” literary creative practice is more than an image of what might be; it provokes and participates in the transformation of society into that image through the example of characters not just thinking but doing, whose voices re/present place, ecology, and community (Kristeva “Interview” 166). In our time the range of destruction is so great that the circumstances are ripe for “sweeping systemic change” (“Creative” 412). Fiction sparks the imagination of both the creator and the audience, and Pancake believes that “in our culture imagination is impoverished and misdirected at a time when we desperately need new vision and ideas” (412). Once social discourses have been imagined by authors and subsumed by readers, the literature itself becomes a model of societal relationships. As an act of revolt, the novel decenters the unified *I* and the norms it carries, blurring the line between “political engagement and the communication of the interiority” in its narrative (Kristeva qtd. in Hogberg).

In her essay, “Creative Responses to Worlds Unraveling,” Ann Pancake explains that as cultural activists Appalachian writers sense the “unraveling” of their societies, and their works are uniquely situated to effect changes by illustrating, as writer Don DeLillo writes, “the impact of history on interior lives” (Pancake “Creative” 409). Certainly Pancake’s doctoral work on class roles and the working class novel, as well as her application of post- and neo-Marxism to Appalachian social hierarchies, strongly influence her fictional writing (Gipe “Straddling” 185). Dominant power structures “organiz[e] bodies, words, and objects” in a society by transcending disorder, in the individual and the system, through binary thinking and the monologic symbolic (Levine 629, 630; Bakhtin “Novel” 370). In *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and *Trampoline*,

the narrators' social systems and defined roles affect their ability to exercise control (Day). For Bant and Dawn, their narrow choices are either/or: either save themselves or save the mountains; either leave and prosper or stay and struggle; either be devoted to family or to self. Pancake's and Gipe's novels reproduce these dualistic constructions as choices of real individuals, not just "implied artistic shadows" because political and economic realities require real, not just imagined, solutions (Hale 116).

Characters as Dissidents

When they contend with dominant institutions, characters represent ways a community might resist or repair inequities. Bant's story in *Strange As This Weather Has Been* primarily concerns how her persistent goal to discover what is happening on Yellowroot Mountain is repeatedly thwarted. In order to learn the cause of recent flooding in her town, Bant determines to climb the site of the mining operation. She is aware of the physical hazards the site poses for her, as well as the constant danger of being caught by one of the armed guards, both of which reflect the coal company's omnipotence, but "the destruction," she says, "kept calling me to see it" (Pancake 102). When she eventually reaches the vast mountaintop removal site, its impact is both physical and emotional:

I all of a sudden got dizzy, so many times in my life I'd walked up this hollow, followed the creek, and back then, you couldn't see the top of anything...But then, finally I did feel the hurt for myself. I understood. It was like they were knocking down the blocks that hold up your insides, kicking until what the blocks kept up falls and leaves you empty inside. (103)

Bant continues to explore the mine, cautious of being discovered, when a guard suddenly appears, a personification of the coal industry's stealthy power: "*And where in the world did he come from, I thought for a second, but right after that, I knew — of course that was how he would come*" (103).

With his black sunglasses, the guard maintains an anonymous presence, “his eyes so gone it seemed it was his mouth that was staring at me” (104). Bant wants to know if there is a slurry impoundment where the mountaintop used to be. “‘Now honey,’ he finally said, ‘We wouldn’t put nothing up there to hurt you-all,’” the nameless guard explains, telling her the only thing putting her in harm’s way is trespassing on a dangerous mining site. Bant holds in the backtalk that “surged quick to [her] tongue,” angry but too powerless to contradict him (104). He goes on to “reassure” her that no one likes having to mine the mountaintop, but that the miners have to provide for their families and that afterward they will clean up the site better than it was before.

Here Bant is wholly entangled in the power of the industry — caught by a wielder of its power, listening to its false discourses, afraid to reject its deceptive narratives. Finally, though, in this crucial moment, Bant makes her hands into fists, finally ready to accept as reality what she had once only dared to suspect:

I raised my face to the mine. Before, when I’d looked up at that dead mountain, I just wasn’t able to see it as real...my mind didn’t have any way to hold the dead ones. But right then, the guard still rambling...I stared my eyes into Yellowroot, I opened my eyes so wide they burned, and *show me*, I thought. Pushing my hardest towards the real. *Show me*. And sudden, like waking up, my mind did let it in. My mind opened and let it past my eyes. (106)

Accepting the reality of her lived experiences gives Bant a newfound agency within this power system. In the same way, a willing reader of Bant’s narrative enters that alterity and experiences the oppression of injustice.

Like Bant, as a subject-in-process confronting authority, in *Trampoline*, Dawn also navigates the institutional power structures. Toward the beginning of *Trampoline*, Dawn grapples with contradictory feelings toward family, politicians, and coal company representatives involved in

the mountaintop mining controversy. Her troublesome interactions with school authorities also typify complicated relationships with hierarchies of power. In Chapter 7, “Hominy Heart,” after a night walking aimlessly, mourning her long hair lost to her mom’s drug-fueled makeover and avoiding her irrational uncle Hubert, she says, “I wanted to be in school. Not my school. Some other school. A school that was all pencil necks pushing glasses up their noses, sniffing their fingers, smiling to see me come in the room, smiling to see me safe” (Gipe 119).

What happens next emphasizes how unjust power structures intersect in her life. Her family is so dysfunctional that Dawn ends up spending the rest of that night sleeping face down in her school’s parking lot. She is woken by the school’s maintenance man, Furl, one of a very few people within a power structure who see her and her potential: “‘I seen you around here,’ Furl said. ‘They say you’re smart. They say you do good on them testis [sic]’” (125). Despite students not being allowed inside the school so early, he brings her into his small workroom, and offers her hot chocolate and an opportunity to discuss her newly dyed green buzz cut hair. The principal, Mr. McCarty, arrives, though, to enforce his arbitrary regulation, and as Furl attempts to explain, he refuses to hear out the maintenance man. A co-worker has betrayed Furl’s act of humanity. Evidently having broken this rule before, Furl is fired from his position on the spot. Dawn recounts, “I was still standing in the long hall when Furl come by slo as church. McCarty came to the door. ‘Not exactly coming back on the right foot, Dawn,’ McCarty said” (126-7). Later, Dawn says, “Of course, from there, it was back to McCarty’s office with its giant ‘Friends of Coal’ stickers and a lecture about how I was pissing away my talent. He thought if he said ‘piss’ it would get my attention, I guess” (128).

In this brief episode, Gipe illuminates the arbitrary and inhumane structures with which Dawn must contend, and her difficulties, at this point, in resisting them. Oxycodone addiction, brought on by the pharmaceutical industry’s exploitative practices, is to blame for Dawn’s mother’s

deplorable behavior toward her family. The educational system (“Friends of Coal”) is under industry’s influence, and Dawn knows she will never get fair treatment there. The principal imperiously dismissing Furl clearly represents the coal industry’s unfair and capricious actions. Bant and Dawn, especially as character-bound narrators, “submerge” a reader in these “interior terrain[s],” and as a result, the reader can better understand the impacts of “social injustice and environmental disaster” and feel the urgency for ethical response (Pancake 408-9).

In *Strange As This Weather Has Been*, through Pancake’s fluid, rhythmic, semiotic language and her playful and musical incorporation of Appalachian voice, she also gives social meaning to her novel; recapturing her unconscious connection to intuition and imagination, she “invent[s] more than represent[s]” a call for new futures for Appalachia and its people (Pancake “Creative Responses” 414). Gipe’s novel also performs the realities of the community in which he lives and works, in a way similar to his efforts with Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College’s community play *Higher Ground*. His aim with *Higher Ground*, he says, is “addressing issues, rather than endlessly naming them” (qtd. in Tavernisemay). In *Trampoline*, he has a similar goal; by “dealing with the monumental problems facing the area — drug abuse, strip mining, dwindling populations of young people” — he forms a discourse seeking solutions to seemingly insurmountable issues in the Appalachian region (qtd. in Tavernisemay). Through their character-bound narrators’ perspectives, Pancake’s and Gipe’s activist art progresses this revisioning of extant societal configurations.

Regional Writing Globalizing the Region

Writing by and for regional inhabitants reflects their lives — “illuminated and clarified” — in local and traditional lifeways as well as in the modern globalized world (J. Miller “Waking Up” 72). However, there is little agreement on the meaning of the term *Appalachia*, one that has been

used more often “to oppress than to liberate.” Because being Appalachian is dependent on individual lived experiences, to “create a collective description of the region that is truly ours,” regional artists must tell its varied stories (Fisher *Transforming* 59). For example, as regional authors, Pancake and Gipe choose first person narrators who, through speaking with their own voices, have “power over [their] own images,” which link them to others within and without the region (59). In global capitalist societies, where people have become increasingly placeless and cultureless, regional fiction forges necessary connections between the individual and the universal. Widely recognized Appalachian author Darnell Arnoult speaks to this possibility, describing *Trampoline* as “geographically anchored, yet universally relevant” (ohioswallow.com).

Kristeva writes in *What Revolt Today?* of the “abuses of the current globalization.” As a counterpoint, the sometimes messy and noisy “coexistence” of subjects-in-process is the context in which social relationships are transformed (261). Place-based fiction engages the forces that make people who and what they are in stories that locate customary lifeways in modernity and whose regional characters echo those of all humanity, regardless of place (Roemer 70). Ron Rash, a southern Appalachian writer, ascribes to a “theory of universality.” He writes, “The best regional writers are like people drilling for water; you go deep enough into a place - you have to go deep beyond just the surface, the local color - and you’ll reach the universal” (qtd. in Vernon 112). Jim Wayne Miller calls this theory “cosmopolitan regionalism,” in which regional authors are influenced by their lived experiences, while at the same time contextualizing the local in a global view and honoring small stories within the great narratives of humanity. Accordingly, Appalachian literature as creative practice is positioned to globalize the regional with its narratives that resonate with communities around the world living parallel existences.

Advocating for Regional Artists

Unfortunately, market forces also inevitably affect publication of regional writers, and the competitiveness of Appalachian literature is called into question at the same time that essentializing and sensationalized works like J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* are promoted. Ann Pancake speaks to the impact of the market, explaining that political fiction is not generally celebrated by publishers. However, she says, it is imperative that artists continue to address the political in their fiction:

The truth is, this kind of runaway loss - usually in more subtle and insidious forms [than mountaintop removal] - is happening everywhere right now, on the level of the environment, of economics, and of human rights...As artists witness this accelerated unraveling, more and more of them are compelled to treat politics in their art, many for the first time. ("Creative" 407)

It follows that Appalachian artists must not be consumed by rejecting the inevitable title "Appalachian writer." When we become less concerned with making Appalachian literature equal to other literary art and more attentive to "finding a way of understanding and appreciating the products of mountain hands" both here and globally, the debate over competitiveness shrinks in importance (J. Williams 68). In fact, our regional works do continue to be published as novels, in anthologies, and in academic journals, and innovative and potentially impactful fiction still seeks and deserves publication. Therefore, readers must advocate for innovative texts about regional life, publishers must brave printing them, and academia must engage in "accessible" discussions of this narrative art, so that creative practice can "approach the life of the region as a medium of expression, not as the message itself" (Miller "Waking Up" 72). As groundbreaking contemporary writers like Pancake and Gipe take linguistic and political risks in novelistic

discourses, other regional artists will without doubt follow their example, and an Appalachian fiction ushering in the possibility for cultural transformation will move into a wider consciousness.

Conclusion

As the novel is a living genre limited only by authors' imaginations, its form and iterations, meanings and modes, voices and perspectives are boundless, creating open-ended possibilities for dialogue. The novel creates and speaks worlds, entangles voices, opens space for the other, permits the becoming of its subjects, and enables transformation; Bakhtin believes that the novel holds the future of all literature, and the endless variety of the novel's modes of discourse is the "essence of narrative" (Aghaei 195). Though its potential only emerged with the modern world, the novel provides a new "heroic sphere" (*Dialogic* 40). The complexity of contemporary reality and more clarified understanding of our world place more requirements on human judgment, "mature objectivity," and critical thinking. All these aspects will shape how the novel develops to incorporate the new realities of lived experiences (40).

The esteem in which Bakhtin holds the novel as, he writes, the "leading hero in the drama of literary development," derives in part from the "positive and active roles" that the novel's characters play in Bakhtin's thinking and writing about literature (*Dialogic* 7; 52). Character contains an open area of social voices in a personalized entity that comes into a new being with every reading. The study of character as the "essence of dialogue" in the genre has supplanted the concept of a narrator as one overarching voice with one ideological view and gives the novel a multi-voicedness that brings us closer to truths yet to be discovered (Wall 53). The novel, itself an ideologeme, and structured as it is by social discourse, is imagined within a "dialogic background" of cultural dialogue. The uniqueness of the novel as a genre, Bakhtin concludes, is in its aesthetics of discourse and the "specific life that discourse leads in the novel" (*Dialogic* 266). While other literature, such as poetry and the epic, is characterized by its single-voicedness, only the novel contains the multitude (264).

Strange As This Weather Has Been and *Trampoline* are examples of regional novels that have established a new discourse through their narratives voices, particularly those of adolescent narrators. The narrator is a central concept in textual analysis; the identity of the narrator, the ways and to what degree this identity is indicated in the text, and the choices that are implied all give the text its “specific character” (Bal 19). Analyzing narrators “imputes agency” to the subject of narration (11). As Bal states, “as soon as there is language, there is a speaker who utters it” (22). Thus, when signs form a narrative text, a narrating subject comes into being as well. Narrative practice ruptures the law of the social contract of language by chronicling the never complete process of the subject becoming (Bove *Language* 23). With their choices of mediacy in *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and *Trampoline*, Pancake and Gipe are especially successful in depicting subjects-in-process creating and uncreating themselves. These speaking subjects, Bant and Dawn, begin new discourses that present unfinalizable selves resisting the languages of power. In this way, their narration functions as a critique of hegemony and works to destabilize authority.

The ideal human agent for Bakhtin is the novelist, who is able to practice the appreciation of alterity, to realize his own identity by displaying the linguistic identity of others, by giving voice to the social voices in language (*Dialogic* 201). Although it is impossible to foresee the impact of a narrative on a reader, she may experience an “aesthetic epiphany” that both divides and joins the textual world and the reader’s world to form a space of new understanding between both (Harth 96). The intricacy and intimacy of an aesthetic experience is an important aspect of its influence. *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and *Trampoline* expose how the unhealthy, dysfunctional, and hopeless lives in Bant’s and Dawn’s communities are social consequences of an exploitative extraction economy (Casemore qtd. in Roggenkamp 3). Pancake writes, “If the

writer can evoke these...lives with complexity and compassion, the reader's understanding of social injustice and environmental disaster is dramatically broadened and deepened" ("Creative" 409). By overlaying the socioeconomic truths of the region onto its stereotypes, the individual reading Appalachia as a place "scripted by the non-Appalachian" is forced to come to terms with her own "perceptions and complicity" in essentializing a society to a "set of simplistic caricatures" (Blee and Billings qtd. in Roggenham 198). The transformative work leading to a change in hegemonic structures occurs precisely as the reader opens himself up to alterity, and sees a "reality...with entirely 'other' eyes," which is how narration "occupies an exceptional position in contemporary fiction" (Stanzel 10).

The novel as a mode of communicating ethical values, the very real life of the novel — Judith Butler's "evanescence" — exists because of its potential to produce and fashion ethical values in partnership with its freely willing reader (Hale "Fiction" 202). It is incumbent upon novelists, particularly those of marginalized peoples, to concern themselves with how their fiction acts "politically beyond bearing witness" (Pancake "Creative" 412). This ethical action of literature is its influence on both the writer's and the reader's "power to exercise, develop, and revitalize the imagination" (412). The willing reader emerges from her experience with the text "deeply imprinted" as a result of how vigorously her imagination was absorbed in the act (412). The novel, more than any other text, can foster ethical action since, as Fisher and Smith state in *Transforming Places*, "We cannot create what we cannot imagine" (288).

The novel's eventual furthering of ethical response is, finally, in the hands of the reader, an unknown to the author. If the artist can manage a work that induces the reader to enter a storyworld, then the reader becomes an explorer keen to reexamine his "particular conceptions of life" and the contradictory ideas he also holds (Harth 98). In addition, the more complex a text,

the more thought-provoking impact it will have upon the reader. How might a complex narrative world be created? According to Harth, through the use of the “semiotic play of language, indeterminacy and contradiction, cadence and design, bias and assumption, jest and ethics” (98). In discovering, in part through accessing the semiotic, the “dynamics hidden in the formal structure,” literary art like Pancake’s and Gipe’s novels may revolutionize the subject and her society (Bove *Social* 16). A novel with innovative uses of poetic language such as metaphor, metonymy, unsettled syntax, stream of consciousness, and language play represents just how “dynamic” subjectivity is through the semiotic (McAfee 7).

Innovative writing of the poetic, especially in texts revealing the formation of a subject-in-process within structures of power, acts politically as a societal revolution that brings about transformation of entrenched hierarchies in Western societies (Bove *Social* 33). Bant and Dawn are revealed by their narratives to be subjects-in-process refusing to be neoliberalism’s “self-transparent unit[ies]” (McAfee 124). Such versions of the self are to be found in narratives, within the various ways narratives can be conceived by philosophers and storytellers. In order to understand the self, we must look to narrative, and, to fully comprehend the narrative, we must look to the self (Clark 179). Narratives such as *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and *Trampoline*, through their revelation of the self not as unified but as in-process, enrich the concept of self beyond the binary of self and other, subject and object. In fact, the question of narrative should always be “What kind of self? What kind of other?” (179).

Literary art, through accessing the creativity of the semiotic and bringing about an openness to differences, reimagines organizational discourses and practices and broadens concepts of ways of being in the world (Bullis and Glaser 52). This new consciousness opens discourses that resist neoliberalism’s claim to universality. Ann Pancake writes, “Art’s beauty

can make an audience yearn for a different kind of reality,” and literary creations as “cultural activism” promote fresh imaginings of sociopolitical and ecological relations leading to more equitable ways of being in the world (“Creative” 410; Englehardt 25). In Bakhtin’s study of Dostoevsky’s novel, he notes the writer’s “ability to express neither his own voice or the voice of any one character but rather in his ability to understand the social reality, the objective social conditions of his era” (*Problems* 170). Place-based fiction, then, engages forces that make people who and what they are, producing stories that locate customary lifeways in modernity and whose “regional” characters echo those of all humanity, regardless of place (Miller “Waking Up” 70). Such a cosmopolitan concept of regional ways of life examines their junctures: economic, religious, literary, political (Miller 71). Bant’s and Dawn’s stories present their lives as ground zero for these societal intersections.

Accordingly, the novel makes visible injustices suffered by marginalized peoples, and like Pancake’s and Gipe’s works, can displace writing that exploits a region with writing that comes from a “knowledge of a place and a people.” As a “strategy of empowerment” regional fiction may employ Appalachian tropes as fictional types “reinhabited” in “knowing and ironic ways” (Miller 69). The novel is a “privileged signifier...far from being a minor, marginal activity in our culture ... represents the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and most serious apocalypses” (Kristeva *Desire* 208). Thus, the intimate and extended narratives in the novel arouse “sleeping and numbed imaginations” in a way that challenges a reader’s understanding of certain realities in such a way that she feels, in a “deep, organic way” the need to right societal inequalities (Pancake “Creative” 409). Wendell Berry is quoted as describing inequities such as those Pancake and Gipe present in their works as a “dangerous commotion,” one of industrial destruction in which places and people are “dismembered” and “dislocated”

(Wanat 168). Regional novelists can recall those “severed” connections in order to “restore sense amid the noise” (168). Restoring this sense may not necessarily mean an auspicious conclusion to the novel; there are, in fact, “powerful forces aligned such endings” (Wanat 162-3). Therefore, while *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and *Trampoline* taken together hint at an ablution for Appalachia — Bant’s narrative begins with a flood; Dawn’s ends with a baptism — neither set forth concrete solutions to the region’s many troubles.

Pancake writes of her own frustration with the difficulties writing fiction that determines alternatives to entrenched power structures. She explains how representing societal circumstances is far simpler an effort than offering new directions, or “dream[ing] forward” (414). Showing things getting “torn to pieces” is of course less complex than considering how to put them back together again (Gipe *Trampoline* 89). Pancake and Gipe, however, recognize a “burning urgency” to do so. Although the challenge is great, novelists — particularly regional ones — must themselves imagine new realities that far from offering “idealism...fantasy...or utopia” actually can upend the actual “current paradigms” in real places such as Appalachia (Pancake “Creative” 414). The two regional novels considered in this thesis, in addition to those I could not address within the confines of this study, are examples of how fiction fights back against the construction of Appalachia to consider the “agency of identity” and how that agency is implemented in the building of improved lives by and for the people and place known as Appalachia (Vernon 63). Through writing the genuine and significant reality of the region in language that identifies the self with the other, Appalachian novelists Pancake and Gipe are examples of writers meeting the imperative of which Paulo Freire, educator and philosopher, wrote: to “speak one’s own word” for and about this place we call Appalachia (qtd. in Robinson).

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