

# Toxic Discourse and Indigeneity in *Strange as this Weather has Been*

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## Abstract

**Ann Pancake's novel *Strange as This Weather Has Been* is a fictional catastrophic disasters novel invoked upon the landscape and its inhabitants by mountaintop removal mining. The author blends elements of her own upbringing in Appalachia to tell the tale of a present-day coal mining family. "Toxic discourse" is a form of environmental literature, which aims to achieve ecological warning by telling the harm of man-made chemical poisons to people and society. In *Strange as This Weather Has Been* The author describes poisons throughout the whole text. The gradual spread of poisons in geographical space makes the protagonist realize the seriousness of environmental pollution, The severe crisis of surviving environment and the protagonist's sense of "indigeneity" finally make her realize the awakening of ecological consciousness and take part in the way of environmental protection.**

## Keywords

**Strange as this Weather has Been; Toxic Discourse; Indigeneity; Ecological Consciousness.**

## 1. Introduction

Ann Pancake is an American fiction writer and essayist. She has published short stories and essays describing the people and atmosphere of Appalachia, often from the first-person perspective of those living there. While fictional, her short stories contribute to an understanding of poverty in the 20th century, and well as the historical roots of American and rural poverty. Much of Pancake's writing also focuses on the destruction caused by natural resource extraction, particularly in Appalachia, and the lives of the people affected.

Ann Pancake's debut novel *Strange as This Weather Has Been* is a fictional disaster novel about mountaintop removal mining, Pancake blends elements of her own upbringing in Appalachia to tell the tale of a present-day coal mining family. Set amid the turmoil of West Virginia, the novel's characters are thrust into one of the most dangerous regions of the country, where strip mining has devastated the landscape and destroyed the ecosystem.

When human society entered the Anthropocene, with the development of industrialization and capitalism, human activities have caused certain damage to the global ecosystem, and a large number of harmful substances exist in various forms in the air, soil and water, threatening the human living environment. With the deepening of human consumption desire and the expansion of capital in the global scope, ecological crisis has intensified. Poisons spread across the earth's surface as a result of numerous human activities, including climate change, catastrophic accidents, drifting poisons, radioactive consequences of war, and ocean acidification. *Strange as This Weather Has Been* tells the life of people in the mining area of West Virginia. South West Virginia is rich in coal resources and has a long mining history. MTR mining activities have brought great changes to the local environment and the life of local people. The landscape has been devastated, with toxic waste from mining strewn all over the mountain. Soil

erosion, vegetation destruction, water pollution and other problems are very serious, the author applied toxic discourse throughout the full text to show readers the real situation of the mining area. This paper intends to analyze the toxic discourse in *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, explore the causes and effects of poison, analyze the injustice suffered by the local residents, the awaking of ecological consciousness of the protagonists, and the protagonists' sense of indigeneity. Advocating people's awareness of environmental protection and pay attention to the social life of people in poor areas.

## 2. Toxic Discourse in *Strange as this Weather has Been*

"Toxic discourse" is a form of environmental literature, which aims to achieve ecological warning by telling the harm of man-made chemical poisons to people and society (Deng 1). One of the important critics and leading figures in the field of ecocritical studies - Lawrence Buell believes that "toxic discourse" - the topic of environmental pollution, expresses people's anxiety about environmental deterioration. It has become the theme of common concern of mankind with the threat of environmental crisis to human beings at the end of the 20th century. The description of toxic items reflects people's "engagement" attitude of consciously returning to society, paying attention to social problems and assuming social responsibilities (Li, 33). Buell believes that: "The success of all environmentalist efforts finally hinges not on "some highly developed technology, or some arcane new science" but on "a state of mind": on attitudes, feelings, images, narratives" (Buell 1). Toxic discourse can provide readers with an imagination that connects them with the human and non-human experience and suffering described in the work; Can connect readers with places they have been or have not been; Readers can be guided to conceive the future, pay attention to the reality of nature, and feel the condition of survival, feel the "endangered world", so as to urge readers to find a solution.

The narrative focuses primarily on Lace See and her daughter, Bantella, the author using multiple perspectives to tell the family's struggle of living in the West Virginia hollows. The chapter from the perspective of Bant mainly tells her growth story. From the perspective of her life, the author presents us the strained family relationship of the whole family and the threat of environmental deterioration in their hometown.

The second chapter of the novel is from the perspective of Bant. At the suggestion of her mother Lace, Bant plans to go to the hollow with her father to have a look at the real situation of the hollow. Lace tells Bant that the environmental degradation on hollow is so serious that the coal company is hiding it from everyone. It is difficult to achieve sustainable development in a seriously deteriorated living environment. Bant and his father Jimmy broke the lock of the gate and slipped into the mountain area to see the situation. Ironically, Although the coal company now owns this portion of the mountain, Bant's family has lived here for generations but has no right to go up the mountain to see the real situation. On the mountain, they saw the sediment ponds, the kind that Bant had seen in other hollows when she was out with his grandmother, that were used by the coal mining company to catch the runoff. But the mining company Lyon Energy isn't tending to the sediment ponds, which were filled to the brim, and the rundown ponds are contributing to the floods. And now the sides of the hollow is "More naked and scalped, more trees coming down, and up above, mostly just scraggly weeds, The ground deep-ribbed with erosion" (Pancake 16). This is the first time Bant has seen the mine rim, which has changed from "should be Green" to "sudden dead spots" (Pancake 19). Even hearing explosions at home that night wasn't enough to prepare Bant for the shock scene. "The top of Yellowroot was just plain gone. Where ridgetop used to be, nothing but sky." (Pancake 19). The main reason why Yellowroot's lush mountain and good environment was deteriorated is because of the mountaintop removal mining.

MTR (mountaintop removal) is a surface-mining practice used to obtain coal located in seams situated near the tops of mountain peaks and ridges. Considered to be a cheaper, more practical, and higher-yielding alternative to deep mining, MTR was first practiced in the coalfields of the Central Appalachian. MTR coal mining began gradually replacing subsurface mining operations in Appalachia in the 1990s after an amendment to the Clean Air Act lowered nation-wide emissions standards. The method was developed as an economically viable means to extract cleaner-burning, low-sulfur coal abundant in southern West Virginia. Ironically, the local environmental costs have been drastic, as MTR has been blamed for the “decapitation” of a once lush, hospitable mountain region. Forests are clear-cut, topsoil is stripped, and underlying earth and rock are blasted intensively to remove overburden, which is then placed into a fill, an area used for waste disposal (Burns 6).

And because extraction disproportionately takes place in communities marginalized along the lines of race, class, or ethnicity, such communities are often relegated to an afterthought, subject to a heightened risk of environmental degradation and economic volatility related to underenforced environmental regulations, a lack of institutional oversight, and volatile energy markets. These communities often become “sacrifice zones.” (Henry 405). The impacts of this MTR are wide-ranging: in addition to rampant violations of the Clean Water Act through illegal dumping, one of the most pointed effects of MTR has been erosion and water contamination. Digging, blasting, and the construction of temporary infrastructure such as access roads and drainage ditches turn large loads of sediment and chemical waste into watersheds, elevating stream pH to dangerous levels. The fills, typically often located on top of mountains and can easily cause flash floods in extreme weather, which will spread the hazardous material further. In addition to seeing the environmental damage firsthand on the mountain, the real damage caused by mountaintop removal on the top of the mountain made Bant even more shocked. Media coverage of Love Canal, drew on similar images of community disruption, showing “visuals that seemed to signify ‘normalcy,’ (Buell 35), which triggered a public awakening. Just as Lois Gibbs finally realized the bad condition of her living environment: “even though I was in the midst of it, I still couldn’t believe the contamination had reached my house” (Buell 36). Bant is also shocked when she saw a black-and-white picture of a mountaintop in the dessert shop where her mother works. The picture is placed on the counter by her mother’s environmentalist friend Loretta. Bant has never seen the mountain top removal in reality, she has only seen it’s edge on the road. Bant describes the picture this way: “A dead terraced the whole width of the frame. Hacked gray stumps where mountain peaks had been, and flung all over, skinless white snakes. Roads. A gigantic funnel, sloppy and dark, running down off it, funnel big as the mountain itself, is the mountain itself, then fill, it made a dry place in my mouth” (Pancake 58). Looking at the picture, Bant quickly recalled the gasps of her boss, who had a respiratory disease, and a feeling of “just a-smothering to death all along” (Pancake 58), and the sight of her grandfather in a wheelchair on a breathing tube when she was a child, then tears began to flow unconsciously. The image was so shocking that she thought looking at it was like “looking at pictures of naked people. Like looking at pictures of dead bodies” (Pancake 58). Toxic discourse is both always immoderate and yet always being reinforced by unsettling events (Buell 34). However, these words enable readers to combine their own imagination to understand the content, so as to have a deeper understanding of the text. As Buell said in his book that people: “an awakening to the horrified realization that there is no protective environmental blanket, leaving one to feel dreadfully wronged. Then follows a gamut of possible reactions: outrage, acquiescence, impotence, denial, desperation” (Buell 36). Bant was distressed when she saw the images of pollution. The mountain they had lived in for generations was now devastated, Bant felt an “ecological grief”- “the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change” (Cunsolo & Ellis 275).

The environment on which generations of people have lived is in jeopardy. After the flood, toxic trash spread all over Yellowroot, the creek near Bant's home was previously too deep to wade in, but has become shallower in recent years, and the water still "with a bad odor to it, even though it was two years ago all the fish and crawdads died." (Pancake 28). Except for the creek, even the Bant's backyard is heavily polluted. "Where nothing ever wanted to grow and now the flood trash doomed anything brave enough to try" (Pancake 41).

Poisons not only pollute the environment, the poison environment also harm people in turn. Bant's grandfather was a miner who inevitably inhaled some "cancer causing dust" during his years of work (Pancake 83), which led to lung problems and died when Bant was very young. In Bant's memory, his grandfather was always in a wheelchair, relying on a machine to provide oxygen to survive. In addition, the outbreak of floods not only caused losses to many residents' property, but also seriously affected their daily life. Mrs. Taylor's neighbor Lucy's well was flooded, and the chemical pollutants carried by the flood directly polluted the drinking water source, thus Lucy's family had to borrow water from the neighbor to support themselves (Pancake 69). Because of the serious water pollution, people no longer use the water from the pollution source (like the runoff from the mountaintop) to gardening, and it is now dangerous for children to play barefoot in the water (Pancake 202). The bad living environment has seriously affected people's life. The dilapidated environment not only brings ecological grief to the local people, but also further promotes the awakening of people's ecological consciousness. As a young generation, Bant has been foraging to make a living in the mountain with her grandmother since childhood. After seeing the deteriorating environment on the mountain, she decided to follow her mother's footsteps and continue to stay in the place where she grew up, pay attention to the local ecological environment and advocate environmental protection.

### 3. Indigeneity of Place

An awakened sense of physical location and of belonging to some sort of place-based community have a great deal to do with activating environmental concern (Buell 56). In the novel, Bant's idea of protecting her hometown become stronger and stronger after she saw the serious environment pollution in her hometown. Bant loved the land so much, she used to forage in the woods with her grandmother when she was a child. Bant's full name is Bantella Ricker See, Ricker being her grandmother's last name and See being her grandfather's. Lace had to change her surname after she got married, but she retained the surname Ricker for Bant. The Ricker name meant most because it has been used in the area for more than two hundred years. Living where the local stream bears her family name, Bant, Lace and grandmother feel profound emotional connections to a surrounding landscape that serves as a constant reminder of their family history and their religious beliefs (Stimeling 1). Bant's view of mountain and nature was largely influenced by her grandmother, who often told her, "You can live off these mountains (Pancake 35). Grandmother taught Bant not to throw garbage on the mountain, and all plants and animals on the mountain have their own growth rules and should not be damaged at will. Even the snake should not be brutally hurt if it does not attack you. "Go around just killing stuff, it'll eventually come back on you. It throws things out of whack" (Pancake 39). Grandmother's education towards Bant has made her built a deeply attachment towards this land since she was young. Bant is "different" from other children, she enjoys walking in the woods, observing nature and feeling it. Therefore, with a certain understanding of the rapidly deteriorating environment, Bant's ecological consciousness awakened and she was willing to take actions to protect the ecological environment of her hometown and prevent the recurrence of disasters. Lace and her whole family have moved away from their hometown once. At that time Jimmy was laid off from his well-paying mining job. Then he found a job in Raleigh, he moved the family to North Carolina (Pancake 191). Lace tried to make it work there, but she hated the lack of

woods and the way the local people looked down on her. Placeness implies physical site, though site alone does not constitute place. It also implies affect, “a deeply personal phenomenon founded on one’s life-world and everyday practices” (Buell 70). Lace always missed her hometown when she was in North Carolina, missed the place that carried all her memories. After more than a year of living unhappily in North Carolina, Bant’s uncle Mogeey called to say that Lace’s mom died of a heart attack, so they immediately went back to West Virginia. While cleaning up her mom’s trailer, Lace told a resentful Jimmy that she wouldn’t go back to Raleigh. Once back, Lace realized how bad things are getting. In the creek by their house, crawdads and the fish were dying. The youngest son Tommy got a dead fish from the creek behind their house, Lace screamed and let him through it away, and quickly cleaned his hand with soap for fear that there will contain poison matter in the stink mud (Pancake 264). Rhondell, a friend at work, explained to Lace, “Poisons in the runoff got em” (Pancake 266). After coming back, Lace has met many friends who care about the ecological environment of her hometown, and has joined their anti-MTR activities.

Lace, Bant, and grandmother are all have a sense of “indigeneity” towards their place, ecological scientists often define “indigeneity” as a species’ ecological nativeness to a place. A species is indigenous or native when its presence in a region stems from natural processes and not human ones (Whyte 143). As local people who live in Appalachians for generations, Lace, Bant and grandmother all carry a sense of regional identity, their affection for hometown is unwavering. Humans who identify themselves as indigenous often seek to express a prior or more original claim to a place in contrast to individuals they consider to be settlers or newcomers. Such claims are often expressed through place-based descriptions of relationships (Whyte 144). As a “scab” in the novel, Bant’s boyfriend R.L is a miner from Ohio. He regards Yellowroot’s pollution crisis as an inevitable development. Working as a miner, he earns good money. And he would lose his job if he joined Bant in opposing strip mining. Outsiders have no affection for the landscape in Yellowroot and do not cherish the environment here. Local people Lace and Bant have a certain affection for the landscape here. Facing the environmental crisis, Lace actively participates in the environmental protection movement, and Bant helps her mother to explore the real situation of the mountaintop.

At the end of the novel, Corey, the second son of Lace, died after stealing a four-wheel drive and losing control of the car into a chemical pollution pool, which leads the Family go separated. The father Jimmy has found a job in another place and has chosen to leave Yellowroot. Bant’s two brothers have chosen to continue living with their father. Bant has chosen to stay here with her mother and fight for the environment of their hometown. The question that Bant had been searching for was finally answered: there are “four good-sized sediment ponds” (Pancake 353) on the mountain that would flood again when extreme weather came, and that her house, the closest, would be the first to be consumed. When Bant find the sediment ponds on the mountain, she wants turning home to her mother with news of the discovery so that they can take action to prevent another disaster. At this time, although Bant is only a little girl of 15, her thinking was already mature. The crisis of the living environment gradually prompted Bant to become mature enough to shoulder her responsibilities and work hard for the environment of her hometown. The author’s description of poisons in the novel not only reminds the characters of the novel, but also makes the protagonists realize the seriousness of environmental pollution step by step, gradually awaken their ecological consciousness, and finally walk towards the way of environmental protection and fight for their own living homeland. In the reading process, readers can also sense the crisis through imagination, and carry out ecological awakening with the protagonist, improve environmental awareness, pay attention to the ecological environment, and pay attention to the social justice in poor areas.

## 4. Conclusion

Faced with the serious destruction of the ecological environment and the impending ecological disaster, people's ecological consciousness gradually awakens. The ecological consciousness coupled with the "indigeneity" of people growing up here, Bant, Lace and some local friends of Lace stand up together to fight against mining companies and destructive strip mining, and fight for the environmental safety of their hometown. Toxic discourse begins with the exposure of living environment pollution and reflects the analysis and criticism of the relationship between man and nature. The description of toxic items reflects people's "engagement" attitude of consciously returning to society, paying attention to social problems and assuming social responsibilities. In the novel, the author's description of poison permeates the whole text, constantly revealing the dangerous environment to readers, making readers gradually realize the seriousness of the crisis, and carrying out an ecological awakening with the heroine Bant. So as to appeal to people to improve environmental awareness, pay attention to the ecological environment, and actively take the responsibility of environmental protection.

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