Chapter Two: “You Don’t Need a Weatherman” in Appalachia: Region and Gender in *Strange as This Weather Has Been* and *Sula*

“The summer strangely cool and wet following a warm snowless winter, that winter following the worst drought summer in sixty years. Anymore, seemed there was either too much water or too little, the temperature too high or too low. ‘Strange as this weather has been,’ people would say, or, ‘With this crazy weather we’ve been having.’ And I knew Lace believed the weather was linked to the rest of this mess, but I wasn’t sure how.”

--Bant in *Strange as This Weather Has Been*

“What was taken by outsiders to be slackness, slovenliness or even generosity was in fact a full recognition of the legitimacy of forces other than good ones….They did not believe Nature was ever askew—only inconvenient. Plague and drought were as ‘natural’ as springtime….The purpose of evil was to survive it and they determined (without ever knowing they had made up their minds to do it) to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance.”

--*Sula*

In April 2010 an explosion in Montcoal, West Virginia, killed twenty-nine miners. Designated by President Barack Obama as “America's worst mining disaster in forty years,” the Upper Big Branch Mine blast dominated public attention and news reports.[[1]](#endnote-1) Immediate suspicion was directed toward Virginia-based Massey Energy.[[2]](#endnote-2) Speculations that the miners’ deaths were a result of Massey’s negligence were reinforced by nationally-broadcast details which revealed Massey’s failure to implement standard safety measures: “Massey Energy Co. has racked up millions of dollars in penalties in recent years. [Upper Big Branch Mine] received 458 citations from federal inspectors in 2009, and more than 50 of those were for problems that the operators knew about but had not corrected, according to federal mine safety records.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Massey’s dereliction directly affects Appalachian ecosystems: “Federal regulators accused the company of violating its Clean Water Act permits more than 4,500 times between January 2000 and December 2006, sometimes discharging more than 10 times the allowable amounts of metals, sediment and acids into rivers and lakes in those states.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Region plays a crucial role here. It matters that this kind of devastation continues to occur on such an immense level, largely unchecked, *in Appalachia*.

While picked up by the majority of media outlets for its sensationalist mix of politics, mystery, and tragedy, a catastrophic event such as the Upper Big Branch Mine explosion and its attendant circumstances are not so sensational for West Virginians. Erik Reece, in an article detailing activists’ call to utilize wind power instead of coal power, astutely argues that socio-cultural stereotypes of a people directly affect local environment, landscape, and community:

When the rest of the country thinks about…Appalachia, it often thinks of the past—of backwardness even. That image benefits the coal industry immensely, making it much easier for companies like Massey to justify irreparable damage that would never be tolerated in, say, the Adirondacks. These West Virginians were tired of living on the receiving end of that attitude….Now they had a plan, a blueprint for how to disentangle the region from the world’s most toxic industry. (2009, 65)

Shirley Stewart Burns (2009) seconds Reece’s point that stereotypes of the region’s inhabitants as backward, dangerous, and ignorant are a major factor in facilitating the region’s exploitation. Especially since the mid-twentieth century, Appalachian communities and environments have been and continue to be threatened by devastating effects of the coal mining industry in particular and prejudice, political corruption, and environmental degradation in general.

Environmental harm caused by mountaintop removal mining (MTR)[[5]](#endnote-5) is immediately visible, even to those only driving through Appalachia. Observers frequently remark on how mountains devastated by MTR look like they have been raped, denuded, stripped bare of vegetation. Similar landscapes are visible in the Southwest. Matthew J.C. Cella observes how “[t]he story of the [mining] industry’s environmental degradation…is writ large on the landscape by hundreds of other ghost towns that lay in ruin across the West, surrounded by gutted-out hills, dredged-out rivers, and dug-up valleys” (2009, 776). It is not coincidental that the remarks above are gendered in terms of sexual violence most often committed by men against women. These gendered metaphors illustrate symbolic and literal interconnections among region, gender, and environment.

Ecofeminists have studied how ecosystems play important roles in formations of and challenges to gendered identities and, conversely, how deployments of gender can reify or contest long-standing perceptions of environments. As Janice Monk argues, the “often unspoken social and cultural beliefs, that is the ideologies which people hold about gender, are important in shaping landscapes. In turn, landscapes set the contexts within which men and women act and reproduce gender roles and relationships” (1992, 123). For example, nature has traditionally been gendered female (i.e., “Mother Earth” and “virgin land”), which in Anglo American patriarchal society demarcates its subordination and facilitates male domination. By challenging the assignation of nature as feminine and subservient, ecofeminists argue for the dissolution of the man/nature power differential.

Feminist regionalists, in turn, draw connections between regional demarcation and oppression. Fetterley and Pryse “argue that regionalism marks that point where region becomes mobilized as a tool for critique of hierarchies based on gender as well as race, class, age, and economic resources. Here we would point to the parallels between the process of creating regions and the ideological construction of ‘separate spheres’ for men and women” (2003, 14). Barbara Ellen Smith offers an example specific to Appalachian history:

The chief protagonist in the history of Appalachia, at least as it’s been written for the past 30 years, is a valiant working-class (or small landholding) man, who struggles against planters, land speculators, coal operators, condescending missionaries, local colorists, and disparaging academics to assert his dignity and power. The implicit metanarrative of Appalachian historiography is thus deeply gendered: “mountaineers” (and their academic advocates) act to defend the female Appalachia—symbol of land, hearth, class interests, and personal integrity—from assault. (1999, 4-5)

I argue that Ann Pancake’s *Strange as This Weather Has Been*[[6]](#endnote-6) (2007) and Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973) help reverse this tradition by writing chief women protagonists who act to defend Appalachian land and people from disfranchisement. Narrowing its focus from the first chapter’s description of physical, imaginary, and psychic parameters of Appalachia, this chapter highlights central and northern Appalachia, specifically West Virginia and southeastern Ohio, as they are portrayed in *Strange* and *Sula*. While “[m]igration and freedom of movement often receive the most attention,” according to Danielle Russell, “the importance of a home (literal or longed for) is also vital to the definition of American fiction” (2006, 2). Before exploring movement between Appalachian and Southwest spaces in the fourth chapter, I consider texts in which characters remain mostly in their region of origin.

**“You Don’t Need a Weatherman…”**

Feminist scholars have investigated at length interconnections among land, environment, and people; to these I add weather as a feminist issue.[[7]](#endnote-7) Weather affects all of us on a daily basis: “[w]e literally breathe the weather. It affects what we wear, what we eat, how we feel, where we live, how we spend our time. The weather is a major character in the drama of our culture” (Thurlow and Adler 1999, viii).[[8]](#endnote-8) The title of this chapter borrows from Bob Dylan’s lyric—“You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows”[[9]](#endnote-9)—to emphasize literally that one does not require technical training to observe, discuss, or assess weather’s effects and to suggest metaphorically that specialized training can be unnecessary. The importance of meteorology notwithstanding, George Freier, a nuclear physicist specializing in atmospheric physics, seems to agree with Dylan. Freier claims that “[s]ophisticated equipment and television often tell us the same thing we can find for ourselves from a weather proverb and careful observation of nature” (1992, vi), and he emphasizes that “everyone other than practicing meteorologists gets most information about weather by simply watching and listening…” (1992, 138).

Stories and proverbs help us process personal and communal experiences of weather.[[10]](#endnote-10) Thurlow and Adler suggest: “Imagine reading a history of mankind [sic] from a meteorological perspective….Did a winter storm rattle the window in Bob Dylan’s room when ‘Blowin’ in the Wind’ first popped up on his guitar?” (1999, viii). They “guess, with some confidence, that the weather played some part on those landmark days and millions of others in human history. And we can explain the weather mechanics that can lead to moments of terror, appreciation, or epiphany. What we need are stories that somehow bring the two together” (Thurlow and Adler 1999, viii). *Strange* and *Sula* begin to bridge this gap.

Their plot lines feature quotidian and extreme weather and account for the multitude of ways that characters are affected by it. For instance, weather can foster or fragment actual and imagined communities of people who reside permanently or temporarily in the same location.[[11]](#endnote-11) In reference to an extreme weather event, Leszek Koczanowicz states that “[a] natural disaster can reveal suppressed and hidden conflict and make visible the tensions that exist in a society….the natural asks questions about the sense and validity of human society’s existence” (2007, 755). In *Strange*, Mrs. Taylor notes that the flood changed not only how Buffalo Creek looked but also “how people acted” (Pancake 2007, 207), and the flood has an effect on her son Avery, not “of invincibility, but a consciousness of your own vulnerability, of your own insignificance, an awareness so profound it shakes hands with suicide. There were lots of people, Avery learned, who didn’t want to live after Buffalo Creek” (Pancake 2007, 238). Avery’s thoughts reflect debilitating despair and isolation, and these feelings in large part prompt him to leave the Buffalo Creek community.

Characters in these texts consistently understand and experience gender and region, as inflected by various identity vectors, in terms of weather, and vice versa. Janet Pérez links the importance of weather as a universal concern to its textual deployments:

[H]istoric and literary commemorations of climate attest to the ubiquitous nature of a phenomenon whose extremes may vary but whose presence is inescapable and whose long-term changes, even if minimal, may have disastrous effects (cf. global warming, the ‘greenhouse effect,’ and the hole in the ozone). These considerations plus climate’s power over humanity’s food supply suffice to make it a universal concern. Humanity’s collective experience, reflected in language, has resulted in numerous figurative and colloquial expressions involving weather and climate. (1995, 1-2)

Yet the transparency of weather can be obscured by its very commonness. Koczanowicz maintains that “[w]eather is probably the most capricious and elusive aspect of the natural world. It is also the natural phenomenon most connected with people’s everyday lives” (2007, 755). Dominant norms work similarly. Weather can affect people in the same region and community differently; playing on Dylan’s gendered “weather*man*”, gender, as it is inflected by race and class, figures prominently in determining various experiences.

In addition to employing weather as a plot device, the authors of these novels invoke metaphor. According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, “*The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another*” (1980, 5). Obviously, weather and region and gender are not the same. But, all three are “partially structured, understood, performed, and talked about in terms of” each other (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 5). In order to account for this complexity, I analyze the interrelationships among characters’ identity processes, weather events and patterns,[[12]](#endnote-12) and community formation.

Weather serves as a suitable way to read regionally gendered identities in light of and against Butlerian theories of performativity because it highlights challenges to and reifications of standardization by showing how variations both unmask and uphold the norm. As explained in chapter one, I complicate Butler’s assertion that “*gender* is not a noun” (2006, 34) by showing how *region* is not a noun in these cases. I explore how region and gender *can be* performative, demonstrating that no inherentidentity *must* exist behind their expressions or within actual and imagined communities formed out of regional ties. The words “can be” and “must” are italicized to emphasize that I do not claim that these characters’ identities are always only socially constructed; rather, the “identity formation” of these characters “locates the enacting of self at precisely the point where the discourses of essentialism and constructivism short-circuit” (Muñoz 1999, 6). Indeed, some of these characters reject social standards of “desirable” behavior in order to enact what they believe to be their “natural” identity. By resisting such pressure, the characters feel they are enacting a regionally gendered identity with which they are most comfortable, even if others are made uncomfortable. Through the familiar motif of weather, *Strange* and *Sula* depict how region, gender, and various vectors of identity intersect within Appalachian communities and in which ways these identity vectors foster and fragment community formation.

***Strange as This Weather Has Been***

Pancake’s novel, based loosely on actual events, tells the story of a small southern West Virginia community trying to protect their homes, livelihoods, and sanity from the floods and the constant threats of flooding caused by MTR-related destruction inflicted by the coal company, Lyon Energy.[[13]](#endnote-13) We follow Lace See from her teenage years, when she meets Jimmy Make Turrell on her visit home to Prater from Morgantown, through adulthood. Together Lace and Jimmy Make struggle to earn enough money to survive, maintain their marriage, and raise four children: a daughter (Bant) and three sons (Dane, Corey, and Tommy). Lace and Jimmy Make pique Bant’s suspicion that Lyon is hiding the extent of their destructive mining practices. They tell her that Lyon caused the May flood by installing and subsequently neglecting maintenance of sediment ponds and slurry impoundments and by deforesting hillsides. Upon seeing the sediment ponds, Bant agrees: “I told myself, yes, this is where the floods come from. From the busted ponds and the confused new shape of the land. From how the land has forgot where the water should go” (Pancake 2007, 16). Bant’s attention is now directed toward the unchecked mining practices and flooding that devastate the land and economy.

Lace’s family and other residents of Prater and surrounding areas experience MTR and its attendant devastation differently, but all are profoundly affected by it. Desperate for regular, decent-paying work, Jimmy Make moves the family to Raleigh, North Carolina, but Lace becomes despondent, and they return to West Virginia. Many residents believe Lyon’s MTR activity must be stopped in order to secure a future for the town. Unlike Lace and Bant, Jimmy Make argues that there is nothing the residents can do to stop Lyon. This difference ultimately affects the family in a way none of them would have predicted. The characters make decisions that significantly change their relationships to family, community, and place. Through weather, regionally gendered performativity and concomitant formations of community are illustrated.

Lace and Bant challenge expectations of Appalachian women’s identities, desires, and work. *Strange* opens with Lace recalling the uneasy relationship she had with her central Appalachian hometown in her youth. Dominant cultural stereotypes of Appalachia as a less than desirable, if not outright repulsive, place largely affected her then. In first-person narrative, she remembers how she felt before going to Morgantown for college:

By then I’d decided I was newer than all this here. Here was fine for Mom, Dad, and [her sister] Sheila—you could take one look at them and see how they fit—but only outside of here would I, Lace See, live real life. Ages one to eighteen were just a waiting for that. Nothing on TV, nothing in books, nothing in magazines looked much like our place or much like us, and it’s interesting, how you can believe what’s on TV is realer than what you feel under your feet. Growing up here, you get the message very early on that your place is more backwards than anywhere in America and anybody worth much will get out soon as they can, and that doesn’t come only from outside. (Pancake 2007, 3)

Recognizing in hindsight how internalized prejudice works, Lace recounts her conviction that she would be the one to achieve in life by leaving Prater. These feelings are reinforced by a school guidance counselor “from away from here,” who assures Lace of her “own specialness” and that “southern West Virginia was just a holding pen for [her]” (Pancake 2007, 3).

 Lace’s confidence (perhaps arrogance), boosted by the counselor’s, increases: “the day I graduated high school, May 1983, I told myself once I got to WVU, I’d never look back” (Pancake 2007, 4). She wants to leave an actual Appalachian community, but only a month into her first term at West Virginia University (WVU), she suffers from “a kind of lonesomeness [she’d] never known there was” (Pancake 2007, 4). Lace does not realize how much she depends on the hills of southern West Virginia until she is in Morgantown. She recalls sitting on her dorm windowsill, “watching the ridges in the distance,” thinking: “I wasn’t touching nothing, and wasn’t nothing touching me back, and yeah, they had hills in Morgantown, but not backhome hills, and not the same feel backhome hills wrap you in. I’d never understood that before, had never even known the feel was there. Until I left out and knew it by its absence” (Pancake 2007, 4).

In addition to discovering her attachment to the landscape, Lace first realizes her affinity with southern West Virginia seasons and weather while in Morgantown: “October made [homesickness] worse” (Pancake 2007, 4). She remembers the “sky never clearer any time of the year, keen mornings and warmish afternoons, sharp color in the hills, and the threat of winter making everything more precious. I’d be sitting in a lecture hall, in the library, trying to take notes, trying to study, and there’d come to me October things I’d thought I’d left behind when I left being a kid” (Pancake 2007, 4). As she matures and as the October sky makes everything clear while the threat of winter makes it dear, she recognizes and values her place in regard to the hills. Lace’s recognition of her close connection to Prater’s landscape and weather proves strong enough to carry her home.[[14]](#endnote-14) Before moving to Morgantown and subsequently returning to Prater, she envisions herself as separate from and better than those who live in Prater, thereby rejecting central Appalachian identity and community. But through a burgeoning appreciation for Prater’s climate and landscape, she *develops* an Appalachian identity and *becomes* a member of the community into which she was born.

For the first few months after finding out she is pregnant with Bant, she does not leave her parents’ house. Finally, Uncle Mogey asks her to dig ramps (wild leeks) in the woods with him, and she reluctantly agrees. At first she experiences being outside as “a squint with [her] whole body” (Pancake 2007, 91), but after being holed up in her childhood bedroom for three months, she feels alive again in a way that she can only convey as related to the sky: “The sky a fresh-washed watery blue and the clouds on the move, and as I stood out there under it, waiting for [Mogey], my insides felt like that sky. Thin clouds blowing through me” (Pancake 2007, 91). She soon finds herself digging with a passion of which Mogey makes her aware. She continues digging with Mogey and experiences a transformation: “But now, whether he’d meant to or not, Mogey had shown me a way I should have seen from the beginning. Hadn’t because of how stuck I still was pretending I was different” (Pancake 2007, 94). She is also frustrated, however, because she is having difficulty finding ramps, molly moochers, and morels. Although she “had plenty of practice” finding them as a child, she “wondered how much [she] must have just followed along as a kid and done what [she] was told” (Pancake 2007, 94). She is coming out of her depression and into an awareness of herself as rooted in these hills, but still she “wondered how much might have been washed out of [her] by those years of looking hard away” (Pancake 2007, 94).

Lace is uncertain whether she has any knowledge or instinct from which to draw, but she continues looking for mushrooms because she is “hardheaded” and felt she “couldn’t give up” (Pancake 2007, 94). She feels she must work either to remember what she made herself forget or to learn what she never knew. Her determination and perseverance could be considered evidence supporting the stereotype that all Appalachians have an innate and absurd attraction to the hills, but Lace’s is neither. Rather, she “develops an ecological sensibility that begins with a reorientation to her native place” (Westerman 2009, 153).

Lace begins to go into the woods with her mother. At first these expeditions seem isolating to Lace, who remembers them as her mother “moving ahead of” her while Lace was “dragging behind,” and in her memories she “see[s] everything as heavy and on a steep slant…in grays and browns, no green” (Pancake 2007, 95). But “after the first few weeks, Mom would shift. And we’d be grownups together for a while. Then, once in a while, I could again see the beauty of the place. I’d see the beauty quick and sharp, and as we moved into summer, despite the haze, the heat, I started seeing it more often” (Pancake 2007, 96). Place, beauty, and interpersonal connection are all interlinked for Lace, and she begins to experience them in Prater for the first time in the woods with her family. “It was also in the woods where the baby first moved. May,” Lace recalls, “and I’ll always remember the spot, I’ve shown it many times to Bant since….I felt something like a gas pain….I heard myself make a whimper. Mom looked back at me, saw my hand on my belly, and right away she knew. She smiled at me. And if I didn’t feel myself smile back. There Bant made herself real for the first time” (Pancake 2007, 96). Lace forges her way into the central Appalachian community she once wanted to abandon by conceiving an Appalachian identity for herself while being an active participant in the natural world with her family members.

Bant believes she simultaneously has an innate Appalachian identity and place in the Prater community *and* has developed this identity and community membership. While taking a shortcut to Uncle Mogey’s, she expertly navigates the trail despite dense overgrowth because she had “been running this path since before [she] was born. [She’d] started running this mountain when [she] was still inside Lace…and they carried [her] back up just weeks after” she was born (Pancake 2007, 34). Bant realizes how claims to an innate sensibility are often doubted or viewed suspiciously, but she does not falter:

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. *Good little helper, Bant. Such a good helper*, creasies, Shawnee, poke, ramps, molly moochers in spring, blackberries in summer, mayapple and cohosh, then ginseng and nuts—hickory, black walnut, butternut, chinquapin, beech—in the fall. Yellowroot after the sap went down. Sumac and sassafras in November, come Christmas, holly and greenery. I knew these things before I could read. (Pancake 2007, 34-5)

From her grandmother (Lace’s mother), Bant learns the importance of place and feeling:

But Grandma never said anything about how the places might make you feel. She wasn’t a talker, especially not about things like that. […] She wouldn’t touch you much either. What she liked to touch were woods 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. (Pancake 2007, 36)

Bant’s and Lace’s identity processes disrupt any neat essentialist or social constructivist binary and remind readers of Bant’s poignant statement discussed in chapter one: “I didn’t want to be different, but I was, either born or made that way or both” (Pancake 2007, 40).

Bant challenges norms of desire in ways that are influenced by Lace’s appreciation for and awareness of place. Both “women are rooted within…agrarian landscapes, where gathering wild plants, gardening, and canning are associated with family health and personal identity, and where disruptions in this way of life by industrial forces are associated with ruin” (Westerman 2009, 152-53). Bant becomes involved with a miner (referred to by some as a scab) from southeastern Ohio named R.L. She is conflicted about her feelings for him because of her stance on mining and his job and wants to ask him (but never does): “‘Some hills in Ohio look like these here, how can you?’” (Pancake 2007, 261). Over the course of their relationship, however, Bant expresses to R.L. her grave concerns about the slurry impoundment she fears will break and destroy their lives. She recalls asking him about Yellowroot directly: “’Shit,’ he’d say. ‘I don’t know what’s behind that fill. I don’t even go near there. That’s not what I do, that part of the site’” (Pancake 2007, 262). Bant thinks: “Southeast Ohio boy. Talked more like West Virginia than the workers from other states did, walked more like West Virginia, motioned his hands like men here did. Familiar, it would lull you. Make you trust” (Pancake 2007, 262). Lace pulls her out of this hypnotic-like lust; as Bant remembers: “Then I’d go home, hear the destructing overhead, Lace talking, and I’d come back to myself. I’d come back full to myself, it wouldn’t be just the him parts ruling me, and I’d think, how can you? *Now, Bant, you know bettern that*…Ohio scab-boy. He’s up there right now. You know he is” (Pancake 2007, 262). She checks her attraction for R.L. by reminding herself that he works for Lyon and is in many ways her enemy. Instead of becoming consumed by the prospect of romantic love, Bant re-directs her desire toward saving Prater.

These passages, in which Bant describes R.L., are primary examples of how region and gender are simultaneously performed. It might be noted that, since southeastern Ohio and West Virginia are in close geographic proximity to each other, R.L.’s ability to imitate West Virginian mannerisms is not much of a stretch; yet they are distinct places. While Bant sees West Virginia in R.L., she also differentiates between southeastern Ohio and West Virginia by consistently using “Ohio” as a modifier when referring to him. In doing so, she delineates intra-regional difference and suggests that not all residents of a common area have similar motivations, perspectives, desires, beliefs, and deportment. As an “Ohio scab-boy,” R.L., despite or perhaps because he performs a West Virginia identity convincingly, is a threat to sustaining her homeplace.

Class also plays a significant role in how identities are interpreted and can be transformed. When Jimmy Make moves the family to Raleigh, North Carolina, Lace is keenly aware of how class status affects her as a woman, and she questions how her association with a state alters her regionally gendered performativity. She is regarded differently in North Carolina than in her small West Virginia town. She notices “the way people looked at us, regardless of how much money they had. Somehow people knew we were different from them, even before we opened our mouths, although I couldn’t for the life of me see how we looked much different from anybody else. It took me back to Morgantown again, the way the out-of-state students saw us, the way some professors did” (Pancake 2007, 194). Implications of class, region, and gender are highlighted in this example, as she ponders what it means it be a West Virginian woman in North Carolina, or even at WVU.

Interestingly, Jimmy Make seems to pass in North Carolina, while Lace is unable to do so: “I was nothing in North Carolina, nothing or nobody I knew counted for anything in North Carolina, while Jimmy Make, he could pass in and out of that North Carolina world. He didn’t love it, but he could move in it. Jimmy Make got a little bigger in North Carolina, while I got a whole lot littler” (Pancake 2007, 195). Outside his region of origin, Jimmy Make falls back on and manipulates his privileged position as a white man and is able to activate a regionally gendered performativity that allows him to pass. Lace, as a woman, cannot, and in her comments we see her despair, isolation, and diminution. She knows she has to leave North Carolina in order to feel at “home” again, and she and her family return.

Back in Prater, Bant’s and Lace’s involvement in MTR activism challenges traditional ways women are positioned in relation to work, public and private spheres, and community formation. Bant and Lace simultaneously employ factual information, concern for the environment, courage, stubbornness, and first-hand experiences in their activities. Bant bravely climbs up to the Lyon site to see the ponds and impoundments. The day she decides to go she “woke up and saw the sky clear as a shout. No haze, deep blue, kind of sky we didn’t often get around here in July, and the temperature unseasonable cool” (Pancake 2007, 100). Bant muses about a reciprocal intimate relationship with the weather: “And it was like this day knew about me—no threat of rain, fewer gnats, less sweat, and maybe the slope would be drier, simpler to handle. Climbing weather” (Pancake 2007, 100). While ascending the mountain, Bant considers seriously just how strange the weather has been:

The sky so blue it had a hardness to it, like you might reach up and hit the underside of a blue-domed skull. Usually in July, this time of morning, the sky’d be taking on a haze, and by noon, the whole thing would be milky. Come August, the sky would whiten up by nine AM, sometimes with a tinge of poison yellow, but this year it seemed the seasons were running backwards. The summer strangely cool and wet following a warm snowless winter, that winter following the worst drought summer in sixty years. Anymore, seemed there was either too much water or too little, the temperature too high or too low. “Strange as this weather has been,” people would say, or, “With this crazy weather we’ve been having.” And I knew Lace believed the weather was linked to the rest of this mess, but I wasn’t sure how. (Pancake 2007, 101)

Immediately following these ruminations is Bant’s description: “Then I was in the part where the trees were sliding down the hollow sides, I was passing those sediment ponds, simmering in themselves, so green with God-didn’t-even-know-what I couldn’t see a quarter inch under their surface” (Pancake 2007, 101). Her observation of trees sliding down hillsides in conjunction with coal company-created sediment ponds, filled with frighteningly unnatural green sludge, explicitly links the deformed landscape, strange weather, and the coal company, and Bant knows Lace’s suspicions are correct.

Once Lace starts working at the local Dairy Queen—the community’s “main gathering place” (Pancake 2007, 268)[[15]](#endnote-15)—her environmental activism is jumpstarted by observing customers: “The Dairy Queen was one of the few places in town where people could gather anymore, and while Lace was working, she was told an awful lot, and on top of that, she eavesdropped, she overheard” (Pancake 2007, 82). As her maiden name suggests, she also *sees* evidence supporting activists’ warnings. For example, she catches Tommy holding dead fish in a murky creek that used to be filled with healthy fish swimming in clear water (Pancake 2007, 265). Lace tells her work friend Rhondell about the dead fish; Dunky, Lace’s nineteen-year-old co-worker, overhears and insists that “[p]oisons in the runoff got em” (Pancake 2007, 266). Dunky knows exactly which poisons because her mother-in-law, Loretta Hughes, “learned about it” (Pancake 2007, 266). Lace asks Dunky to introduce her to Loretta and her co-conspirator, Charlie Blizzard, and when they meet, Lace sees that “Loretta’s face wasn’t scared of nothing” (Pancake 2007, 267). Loretta, Charlie, and Lace learn from each other and other activists too, “like Patty McComas, and Jim Corbin and his wife Mavis, and Jeannie Thurst” (Pancake 2007, 268). Thus, the activist community in Prater challenges the “implicit metanarrative” Barbara Ellen Smith mentions by showing how a group comprised mostly of *women* acts to protect Appalachian land “from assault” committed by coal companies (1999, 5).

Women in *Strange* not only defend Appalachian land but also themselves from assault against the symbolic Appalachian “mountaineer”. Like the strange weather they experience, their actions are considered unusual and even threatening by some in their community. After overhearing at Dairy Queen what people say about the weather, flooding, and coal, Lace becomes even more convinced that Lyon must be stopped.[[16]](#endnote-16) She recalls: “By then, I wasn’t any longer just listening at the Dairy Queen. I was talking. I spread the word whenever I could, lots of people didn’t really understand what was happening, just like I hadn’t, because of how the industry kept it hidden up over our heads” (Pancake 2007, 300). Her activist work now is widely noticed and not unanimously embraced: “Some people would laugh at me, and some would wave me away with their hand, and a few would get mad” (Pancake 2007, 301). Lace’s life is even threatened in a convenience store. As she walks out of the restroom a man blocks her way down the hallway “with his whole leg and [he] pulled out enough of the gun that [Lace] could tell what it was” (Pancake 2007, 305). He moves aside, and she passes. She is terrified but tells no one other than Loretta. While she has made enemies within and outside Prater, she recalls that “the more people I talked to, the more I came to understand that most people, they thought just like me” (Pancake 2007, 301).

Lace’s regionally gendered performativity serves as a counterexample to the general theory that “[t]he domestic landscape…can be seen to reinforce identities as well as the subordination of women or the mobility of men” (Dowler, Carubia, and Szczygiel 2005, 7). Her job at Dairy Queen propels her involvement in the community and activist endeavors, and by working outside the home and being the breadwinner, Lace reverses gender roles. Jimmy Make, whose employment is sporadic at best, eats junk food and lies on the couch watching television; he gains weight, apathy, and distance from his family and community in correlative amounts. He belittles Lace’s intelligence by turning his acknowledgement of it into an offhand joke: “(‘My wife’s smarter’n me, I’m not ashamed to admit it,’ Jimmy Make would snicker. ‘Smart enough to marry me, wasn’t she?’)” (Pancake 2007, 83). He also demonstrates internalized prejudice by deploying the stereotype of Appalachians as ignorant and provincial:

*Evil*, Lace called it. *All of it*. *Calculated evil*. Jimmy Make’d roll his eyes. *It’s* *not evil*, he’d say. *How can a woman bright as you are be so goddamned backwards? It’s just greed and they-don’t-give-a-damn. It’s money*. *Greed and money and they-don’t-give-a-damn* are *evil*, Lace would say. (Pancake 2007, 102)

He accuses her of “backwardness,” but she is the one moving forward, actually doing something. Instead of lying on the couch all day watching television, she directs her energy toward combating MTR destruction. And instead of focusing her attention on her husband’s depression, Lace uses her intellect to link climate conditions with coal mining and spur public protest against Lyon.

Jimmy Make, however, resigns himself to hopelessness and passes off any sense of civic duty or responsibility onto what he believes to be a futile fight—Prater residents against the might, money, and apathy of the coal industry. In one of their biggest fights he again plays on both regional and gendered stereotypes to try to undermine Lace:

Jimmy Make: *If you’re so goddamned certain that fill’s coming down, then why the hell don’t you let us leave out of here?*

Lace: *Because a coal company’s not going to run me out of my house and off my land. If you had any spine, you’d fight em with me.*

JM: *It ain’t a matter of spine, it’s a matter of common sense. I’ve worked for em. I know you can’t fight em. You won’t never win.*

L: *At least I’ll die trying.*

JM: *Yeah, you and the kid, too, not to mention me.*

L: *Thought you believed we wouldn’t ever get washed out?*

JM: *I’m talking about starving to death. I’m talking about how there ain’t no work around here and you know it.*

L: *Oh, you could get a job around here. You’re just too good for em.*

JM: *Well, I will starve to death before I make pizzas. Not when there’s jobs going begging in North Carolina.*

L: *You’re just like the rest of em. Too chickenshit to fight anything but their wives*.

JM: *And what the hell are you doing to fight? Making phone calls nobody answers? Running your mouth down at the Dairy Queen? Why don’t you go on up there and lie down in front of one of them dozers, you’re so keen?* (Pancake 2007, 84-5)

Lace’s position as head of the family is demonstrated in Jimmy Make’s first statement. She responds by vocalizing her determination to stay in Prater and fight for justice. He immediately deploys common stereotypes that women lack common sense and act on feckless emotion to make her appear irrational and sentimental, charges that she promptly refutes throughout this conversation and the entire novel. She accuses him of thinking he is “too good” for Prater, and his weak attempt to couch his reasoning in classist opinions of labor confirms her accusation. She points out his sexism and lack of courage by reproaching him for only fighting with his wife because he assumes she is easier to overpower. Lastly, he disparages her activism, but what matters is that she *does something*. Jimmy Make upholds standard norms,[[17]](#endnote-17) and Lace’s efforts to point these out to him are unsuccessful because he refuses to re-consider such norms. Instead, he leaves for North Carolina.

Each final decision—Lace’s and Bant’s determination to stay in Prater and Jimmy Make’s departure—is associated with the autumn season. October, the month when Lace felt compelled to leave WVU and return to Prater, is when Jimmy Make comes back and offers to take whoever wants to go with him to North Carolina. Bant decides to stay with her mother, and the clarity and optimism of her decision are reflected in the sky: “October’d always been the month I loved the best. The mountains blooming good-bye, and how the sky pulls away to show you itself in October. Beautiful blue like we don’t often get around here, and it no longer crouching down on you as it sometimes does” (Pancake 2007, 347). As soon as her father and brothers leave, Bant goes to the “[b]utchered hollow shocking full of that October sky, so few trees left to block it, [she] was completely exposed, anyone could see. But [she] no longer cared” (Pancake 2007, 351). Bant believes she has crafted an Appalachian identity for herself that is recognizable to all those around her, and she considers her confidence and determination to remain in Prater the indications of her success. Lace’s narrative ends similarly.

At the end of the novel, Jimmy Make and Lace separate physically (if not legally). Lace believes that staying in Prater is one of the most effective means of activism against Lyon: “What I do know, after almost two years of not even getting anybody to listen, much less take action, is this: the best way to fight them is to refuse to leave. Stay in their way—that’s the only language they can hear. We are from here, it says. This is our place, it says. Listen here, it says. We exist” (Pancake 2007, 314). As an Appalachian woman, Lace’s bold assertion that she and the people of Prater exist defy regional and gender norms that imply the opposite. By deciding to stay in Prater, Bant and Lace reject social codes that determine their worth by their relocation from “backward” Appalachia to basically anywhere else. And by acting on their love for the hills but simultaneously challenging dominant cultural expectations that success is achieved by escaping them, they create a space to express their affinity for the region’s climate and landscape while also demonstrating how this desire, instead of precluding happiness, enables it.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Lace, Bant, and Jimmy Make offer a spectrum of ways in which regionally gendered performativity is enacted and ways in which it facilitates and impedes community. Lace and Bant reject traditional norms by refusing to submit to the idea that an Appalachian woman must either leave Appalachia or devote herself to a man in order to be prosperous and content. Their regionally gendered performativity is in part successful because a substantial segment of the community recognizes it as such and appreciates it in their shared struggle against Lyon. However, another segment of the community (those who do not want to openly or at all challenge the coal company, like Jimmy Make) rejects it, in some instances even threatening physical harm. *Strange* conveys intersections of region, gender, and class via weather in a predominantly white West Virginia coal-mining town struggling to survive.[[19]](#endnote-19) To compare regionally gendered performativity in rural Appalachia, I turn to a predominantly black community in the hills of southeastern Ohio.

***Sula***

Frequent references to “strange,” “crazy,” and “unusual” weather and subsequent occurrences, in both *Strange* and *Sula*, show how weather which deviates from regular conditions not only can cause events that are considered bizarre but also can instigate people to act in ways that deviate from the expected. *Sula*’s chief protagonists—Nel Greene and Sula Peace—are both born in 1910 in “the Bottom” area of Medallion, Ohio, and become best friends at the beginning of their teenage years (Morrison 1982, 52). They share the joys and pains of adolescence, but when Sula leaves their hometown to travel and attend college, Nel stays, marries Jude, and has children. Sula and Nel lose touch for ten years. When Sula returns, Nel at first is overjoyed to see her, but shortly thereafter Sula has an affair with Jude, and Jude leaves Nel for Sula. Sula eventually leaves Jude, but Nel remains devastated because she has lost her husband and feels betrayed by Sula. As a result, Sula and Nel do not speak for three years, but when Nel hears about Sula’s serious illness she visits her. On Sula’s deathbed they have a conversation about love and friendship, sex and intimacy, right and wrong. Upset, Nel leaves Sula to die alone in the house. Only after Sula’s death does Nel realize what, or who, she was missing all along.

Many of *Sula*’s descriptions of and references towards Medallion’s location insinuate its inclusion in northern Appalachia but remain vague. The indeterminate nature of place can encourage contestations of boundaries, which can reveal spaces of possibility amenable to performing region in ways previously not considered. (R.L.’s performance of being a West Virginian when he is actually from southeast Ohio is an example.) I approach the setting of *Sula*—described as “that little river town in Ohio” (Morrison 1982, 5)—similarly. Since Morrison does not pinpoint a geographic region, I propose that Medallion (the valley part of town where the white people live) and its “part of town where the Negroes lived, the part they called the Bottom in spite of the fact that it was up in the hills” can be considered as situated within northern Appalachia (near or in southeastern Ohio) and its residents an Appalachian community (Morrison 1982, 4); no extant criticism analyzes it as such.

My analysis might seem circuitous. I discuss the beginning and end of the novel while temporarily eliding the middle because *Sula*’s narrator first describes the town’s current state of annihilation and then recounts its heyday and how it came to be destroyed. The novel opens with an ominous focus on place. The first three words direct the reader to location and the following words to its devastation: “In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood” (Morrison 1982, 3).[[20]](#endnote-20) The description on this same page suggests that the neighborhood-turned-golf-course is located in an Appalachian area, where flora such as nightshade, blackberry bushes, beeches, oaks, maples, and chestnuts were abundant before development.

*Sula*’s narrator predicts that “[t]here will be nothing left of the Bottom (the footbridge that crossed the river is already gone)” (Morrison 1982, 3), before describing how it had been “lovely up in the Bottom. After the town grew and the farm land turned into a village and the village into a town and the streets of Medallion were hot and dusty with progress, those heavy trees that sheltered the shacks up in the Bottom were wonderful to see” (Morrison 1982, 5-6). Both Medallion and the Bottom communities follow a traditional line of progress—changing from an agrarian economy into a more commercial one. Barbara Ellen Smith’s story of her great-aunt Ellen Fridley corroborates my claim that we can locate “the Bottom” in Appalachia and gives an example of its participation in commerce. Fridley, a prominent member of the Big Ridge (“an ancient mountain that lies on the present border between West Virginia and Virginia” [B.E. Smith 1999, 1]) community “during the 1910s and 1920s” (1999, 9), and her husband Hezekiah sold goods to make money: “Hez did an especially brisk business in the Bottom, an African American neighborhood” (1999, 11). Even though Smith pinpoints the West Virginia/Virginia border, her reference situates a settlement named “the Bottom” within Appalachia.

The Bottom is a community, like Prater and so many other Appalachian towns, dependent at least in part on the coal industry for its livelihood. Several references to coal are found throughout the novel. While lying in bed sick, Sula remembers “the pink underlid of Hannah’s eye as she probed for a fleck of coal dust or a lash” (Morrison 1982, 147). Novels set in Appalachia often describe how coal dust invades all aspects of life, even bodies, as is shown here by Sula’s mother plucking pesky coal dust from her eye. The march down to New River Road, fueled largely by the people’s anger about unfulfilled promises by employers who were supposed to hire them to construct a tunnel, protests “[t]he teeth unrepaired, the coal credit cut off, the chest pains unattended, the school shoes unbought, the rush-stuff mattresses, the broken toilets, the leaning porches…” (Morrison 1982, 161). This passage suggests that these workers, employed in the mines or by the coal industry, used the company’s system of credit and debit instead of cash.[[21]](#endnote-21) The next chapter opens with Nel recalling how, in 1921, “[beautiful boys] hung out of attic windows, rode on car fenders, delivered the coal…” (Morrison 1982, 163). Whether these boys worked directly for a coal company or delivered coal-bins (Morrison 1982, 152) to neighbors, they, along with other members of their Appalachian community, participated in an economy in which the coal industry was or perhaps still is a major factor.

Joyce Dyer raises the always tricky question of what counts as “Appalachian,” and she echoes many opinions that Appalachia is not a definitive geographic location but rather a spirit. An interesting perspective she adds to conversations about Appalachian identity and affiliation comes from her conversation with Gurney Norman, who

reminded [her] to think carefully about Henry Louis Gates’s reassessment of the Harlem Renaissance. The concept of Appalachia, he wisely told [her], like the concept of the Harlem Renaissance, is no longer considered confined to a geographical region, to a neighborhood, to a decade (for Appalachia, the dominant association is, of course, with the Depression). It is, Norman said, best understood as a spirit, “a spirit that has leapt out of strict Appalachian ground.” (J. Dyer 1998, 5)

Dyer is quick to avert charges of essentialism or exclusion by asserting that “[t]here is not one clear pattern or a simple shape….There are many spirits that walk here, not just one” (1998, 6). In *Sula*, Tar Baby embodies this idea of spirit. A resident of the Bottom, he is described as “a mountain boy” who “sang with the sweetest hill voice imaginable” (Morrison 1982, 40). Following Norman’s line of reasoning, I suggest that we consider *Sula* an Appalachian novel, not only because of its location in the hills of southern Ohio, but also because it raises issues prominent in Appalachian literature such as: the importance of hills, coal, and Appalachian climate to people and their livelihood and the struggle to survive and sustain community despite significant attempts by others to destroy their ties to each other and to the hills. Reading *Sula* as an Appalachian novel allows us to consider issues of regionally gendered performativity as they are enacted in a close-knit African American community in the Ohio hills.

Racial lines are clearly drawn in Medallion*.* A comprehensive analysis of race and place cannot be undertaken in this project, but I want to point to the complex relationship between them. *Sula*’s narrator describes how “white people lived on the rich valley floor in that little river town in Ohio, and the blacks populated the hills above it, taking small consolation in the fact that every day they could literally look down on the white folks” (Morrison 1982, 5). In a clear case of geographic segregation based in racism, black people are relegated to what is considered less desirable land. For example, during a period of intense heat they anxiously await rain because “[t]he hills of the Bottom, as always, protected the valley part of town where the white people lived….So they set about their work early, for it was canning time, and who knew but what the wind would come back this time with a cooling rain” (Morrison 1982, 73). Residents of the Bottom suffer the heat wave in an unequal proportion because the geographic location in which they live protects the valley and its white inhabitants from experiencing the most severe weather. In this way, race and the hills of northern Appalachia are intertwined.

Cultural geographer David Sibley claims that “[t]he perception of minority cultures as being beyond the boundary of ‘society’ is associated not only with characterisations of the group but also with images of particular places, the landscapes of exclusion which express the marginal status of the outsider group” (1992, 107).[[22]](#endnote-22) Yet Sibley notes that “to remain hidden, out of sight of the dominant society, may also be to the advantage of the minority” (1992, 120). For a period residents of the Bottom manage to prosper in what is deemed marginal rural landscape and use their relative seclusion to engender a thriving black community. As bell hooks states: “the sense of oneness with nature which offered a transcendental sense of life wherein humans were simply a small part of the holistic picture helped agrarian black folk put notions of race and racial superiority in perspective” (2009, 207).

But, along with the change from agrarian to commercial economy, the Bottom is eradicated by Medallion’s expansion. Eventually

the white people were buying down river, cross river, stretching Medallion like two strings on the banks. Nobody colored lived much up in the Bottom any more. White people were building towers for television stations up there and there was a rumor about a golf course or something. Anyway, hill land was more valuable now, and those black people who had moved down right after the war and in the fifties couldn’t afford to come back even if they wanted to. Except for the few blacks still huddled by the river bend, and some undemolished houses on Carpenter’s Road, only rich white folks were building homes in the hills….The black people, for all their new look, seemed awfully anxious to get to the valley, or leave town, and abandon the hills to whoever was interested. (Morrison 1982, 165-66)

hooks’ views on nature and isolated hills as an ideal escape from “man made constructions” and “white dominator culture” (2009, 7) can be seen as problematic in light of the virulent effects of racism responsible for the Bottom’s demise. *Sula*’s narrator laments the loss of both place and community: “It was sad, because the Bottom had been a real place. These young ones kept talking about the community, but they left the hills to the poor, the old, the stubborn—and the rich white folks” (Morrison 1982, 166).

Consequences of racism in *Sula* show how race and place are interlinked, and their fictional depictions reflect actual circumstances. Many black communities in Ohio that existed during the early to mid-twentieth century folded largely because of racism, integration, and shifting perceptions of desirable land.[[23]](#endnote-23) Rebecca Aanerud explores shifting perceptions of race in regard to place, arguing that “the meaning of whiteness, like all racialized identities in the United States, is not monolithic. Instead, its construction and interpretation are informed by historical moment, region, political climate, and racial identity” (1997, 37).[[24]](#endnote-24) Fetterley and Pryse claim that critical work done on regionalism can “make a contribution to ‘whiteness’ studies. Regionalism as a discursive strategy as well as a literary mode makes regions themselves visible as already marked sites of both gendered interrogation and white critique” (2003, 27). Aanerud’s and Fetterley and Pryse’s assertions can be read as responses to Morrison’s questions in *Playing in the Dark*: “How is ‘literary whiteness’ and ‘literary blackness’ made, and what is the consequence of that construction?” (1992, xii). Interconnections among race, gender, and region are highlighted in *Sula*.

The novel revolves largely around Nel’s and Sula’s friendship and both of their positions in regard to the community. Sula complicates notions of independence, love, and community. But the extent to which these challenges are recognized as such by others is slight. On the contrary, Nel’s position as a member of the community is secure. The regionally gendered performativities of Nel and Sula and their experiences as Affrilachian (to borrow Frank X. Walker’s term)[[25]](#endnote-25) women are reflected in the weather of the Bottom, specifically wind and rain.

While they are young girls walking on a main street in town, “[a] hill wind….pushed their dresses into the creases of their behinds, then lifted the hems to peek at their cotton underwear” (Morrison 1982, 49). Metaphorically portrayed as making unwanted sexual advances, the hill wind instigates physical sensations not initiated by the girls. Men mingling on the street watch them as they pass, and Ajax “softly but definitely” speaks aloud what all the men are thinking: “Pig meat” (Morrison 1982, 50). The titillation is not lost on Nel and Sula, who “walked through this valley of eyes chilled by the wind and heated by the embarrassment of appraising stares”, yet “guarded their eyes lest someone see their delight” upon hearing Ajax’s remark (Morrison 1982, 50). They feel the cooling current in contrast to their body heat, which is raised by their acute awareness of the men staring at them.

Although here Nel and Sula experience the wind and sensuality alongside the men’s stares, they soon realize that they in fact do not need a weather*man* to create or assess these sensations. Instead, they can attain sensuousness themselves. They

ran in the sunlight, creating their own breeze, which pressed their dresses into their damp skin. Reaching a kind of square of four leaf-locked trees which promised cooling, they flung themselves into the four-cornered shade to taste their lip sweat and contemplate the wildness that had come upon them so suddenly. […] Underneath their dresses flesh tightened and shivered in the high coolness, their small breasts just now beginning to create some pleasant discomfort when they were lying on their stomachs. (Morrison 1982, 57-8)

By running, they simultaneously increase their body temperatures and put in motion a slight wind, which presses their clothes to their bodies and heightens the sensation of their skin. Alone, with only each other as fellow participant and observer, each girl delights in the pleasure she feels from the pressure created by her breasts pressing into the earth and the contrasting heat of the sun and chill of the breeze. Sula recalls this experience later as an adult, but for now this novel sensuality as figured by the wind, temperature, and earth is exciting and empowering. Each girl realizes that she can create the physical sensuality she felt on the street, without the involvement of men, but in the company of each other.

Their relationship changes when Nel marries Jude and Sula leaves to attend college. In the interim, Sula travels extensively, and Nel dedicates herself to being a mother, wife, and respected member of the community. Life changes for the Bottom community and Nel, however, upon Sula’s return. In fact, the people of the Bottom believe that her return—“accompanied by a plague of robins”—ushers in evil (Morrison 1982, 89). Unlike the residents of Prater, however, they approach “evil” in a way that acknowledges not only its existence but also the value in “let[ting] it run its course” (Morrison 1982, 89). For, “[in] their world, aberrations were as much a part of nature as grace. It was not for them to expel or annihilate it. They would no more run Sula out of town than they would kill the robins that brought her back…” (Morrison 1982, 118). The residents’ response to evil—and its interpretation by others not in their community—highlights ways in which behavior is largely affected by experiences with racism, regionalism, and weather:

What was taken by outsiders to be slackness, slovenliness or even generosity was in fact a full recognition of the legitimacy of forces other than good ones. They did not believe doctors could heal—for them, none ever had done so. They did not believe death was accidental—life might be, but death was deliberate. They did not believe Nature was ever askew—only inconvenient. Plague and drought were as “natural” as springtime. If milk could curdle, God knows robins could fall. The purpose of evil was to survive it and they determined (without ever knowing they had made up their minds to do it) to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance. (Morrison 1982, 90)

Unlike Prater residents, who view certain weather and its accompanying consequences as abnormal, residents of the Bottom regard Sula, like Nature, as an inevitable though disruptive nuisance rather than an aberration. But despite their generally accepting approach to evil and natural disaster, they exhibit lack of sympathy and even malice toward Sula.

Nel’s response, however, is drastically different than her neighbors’ reactions; she

noticed the peculiar quality of the May that….had a sheen, a glimmering as of green, rain-soaked Saturday nights….of lemon-yellow afternoons bright with iced drinks and splashes of daffodils….Even her own body was not immune to the magic. She would sit on the floor to sew as she had done as a girl, fold her legs up under her or do a little dance that fitted some tune in her head. There were easy sun-washed days and purple dusks… (Morrison 1982, 94)

At first Nel feels revitalized by Sula’s return, and her attitude is reflected in the child-like movements of her body and the dazzling moist, fertile environment around her. She is not surprised by nor does she view as abnormal the interconnection between weather and people’s actions: “Although it was she alone who saw this magic, she did not wonder at it. She knew it was all due to Sula’s return to the Bottom” (Morrison 1982, 95). At this point, Nel feels that she and Sula still share the close connection they had when they were young, but shortly after this, Jude leaves Nel for Sula, and Nel feels toward Sula the same way the rest of the community does. She regards her with distrust, dislike, and wary disinterest.

Readers wonder if Sula is a part of *any* community, real or imagined. Before, “[s]he had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both an other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same thing” (Morrison 1982, 119). While Sula has long been aware that the community does not embrace her, she had always believed that her regionally gendered performativity was recognized by Nel, for it was Nel who not only enabled her to explore “multiple convergences and divergences” of identity but also did so along with her (Butler 2006, 22). In fact, Sula recounts how “Nel was the one person who had wanted nothing from her, who had accepted all aspects of her” (Morrison 1982, 119), but “[n]ow Nel was one of *them*” (Morrison 1982, 120), i.e., an accepted member of the Bottom community. Sula considers herself to be different from the others, and the narrator confirms she is “distinctly different” (Morrison 1982, 118). Nel, on the other hand, sees her roles in life predominantly as mother, wife, and member of the complaisant (in Sula’s opinion) community. Perhaps undeservedly harshly, Sula accuses Nel of conformity, inertness, and indifference: “alive was what [the people], and now Nel, did not want to be. Too dangerous. Now Nel belonged to the town and all of its ways. […] It had surprised her a little and saddened her a good deal when Nel behaved the way the others would have” (Morrison 1982, 120). Sula believes that not even Nel can understand that her departure from the Bottom, her college education, her resistance to marriage, and her control over sensuality as she experiences it are all ways in which she challenges stereotypes.

As Russell observes, Sula reclaims her sexuality via direct involvement with a man. While having sex with Ajax, she silently informs him: “*I will water your soil, keep it rich and moist*” (Morrison 1982, 131). Sula subverts the dominant “literary practice of equating the female body with a sexually available natural landscape” by becoming the “element” (rain) “which defines the land (Ajax)” in a scenario in which Nel is absent (D. Russell 2006, 84). Sula also silently tells Ajax: “*I will put my hand deep into your soil, lift it, sift it with my fingers, feel its warm surface and dewy chill below*” (Morrison 1982, 131). By becoming the rain, Sula will be the force behind the “dewy chill” of Ajax’s soil. She yearns to feel the heat and then the chill, similar to what she experiences with Nel on the street and in the square of trees, and she learns that she can direct and determine who feels them, when they will be felt, and how these sensations will enhance her sexual experience. This passage shows how Sula alone is able to enact sexual desire and fulfillment by metaphorically becoming the rain and manipulating temperature. Nel is not her partner anymore, as she was when they were girls running to the shade of the trees. No similar example occurs for Nel without Sula’s involvement or presence.

Despite having been estranged for three years, Nel visits Sula on her death-bed. Sula, in excruciating pain, remembers when the two young girls first experienced pleasure via wind: “She closed her eyes then and thought of the wind pressing her dress between her legs as she ran up the bank of the river to four leaf-locked trees and the digging of holes in the earth” (Morrison 1982, 146). Sula believes this memory describes what love feels like; it is experienced expressly in an Appalachian space where the combination of wind, water, trees, and earth arouse her (Morrison 1982, 146). Recalling the breeze and the raw, youthful sensuality it encouraged her to feel, she initiates the following conversation:

“How you know?” Sula asked.

“Know what?” Nel still wouldn’t look at her.

“About who was good. How you know it was you?”

“What you mean?”

“I mean maybe it wasn’t you. Maybe it was me.”

Nel took two steps out the door and closed it behind her. (Morrison 1982, 146)

Sula’s last attempt to challenge dominant norms on which Nel’s assumptions are based is futile; these are the last words she speaks before dying. Butler (2005) and Fetterley and Pryse discuss how narratives emerge amidst, because of, or despite of pain and fear and how people require mercy and forgiveness in these scenarios. In this instance Nel does not offer Sula forgiveness, although arguably she does offer mercy in caring for her while she is sick.

 After Sula’s death, the community exhibits anticipation—“So it was with a strong sense of hope that the people in the Bottom watched October close” (Morrison 1982, 151)—and a sense of unburdening—“even the bubbles of relief that broke in the chest of practically everybody when Sula died did not soften their spite…” (Morrison 1982, 171)—instead of compassion and grief. After waiting for the white people to leave Sula’s funeral, black people arrive, singing “over the curved earth that cut them off from the most magnificent hatred they had ever known. Their question clotted the October air, Shall We Gather at the River? The beautiful, beautiful river? Perhaps Sula answered them even then, for it began to rain, and the women ran in tiny leaps through the grass for fear their straightened hair would beat them home” (Morrison 1982, 173). Nel views the rain as an act of Sula and interprets this act as Sula’s way of telling the community who had always rejected her that she does not want their dubious sympathy. In this way, the rain can be read as an agentive act on Sula’s part, causing the women to run away and exposing their spurious sentiment. On the other hand, the women’s dispersal can be read as one last example of the community’s rejection of Sula. The women would rather run from her funeral than let their hair get wet.

Russell reads Sula’s position in regard to the community as only partially detached. Expanding on differences between black and white communities portrayed in Morrison’s fiction, Russell states that black communities “can be read as sites of rebellion—collective rebellion. Survival for those who are economically and politically vulnerable is found in a group setting. Allegiance to the village does not necessarily translate into conformity; the communal identity is elastic enough to accommodate fringe characters (bootleggers, whores, and madmen)” (2006, 152). If Sula is a “fringe character,” she is not accommodated, unless accommodation is conceived as the absence of forced expulsion or physical harm. While some, like Shadrack, are considered strange, community members still enable their active participation in the community by allowing space for that participation to occur.[[26]](#endnote-26) On the contrary, the community has effectively shut down such spaces for Sula. Although she resides in the Bottom, she is not a member of its community. Morrison problematizes, via Sula’s ostracism, the notion of community and how it includes by exclusion. One wonders if Sula would have felt more free or more restricted if she had been an accepted member of Medallion’s community. Perhaps she would not have wanted to be a part of the community if membership required adhering to dominant norms.

Russell states that “the absence of a communal connection…is a threat to identity and survival in [Morrison’s] fiction” (2006, 154). The community’s, and in particular Nel’s, denial of Sula seems to be fatal, but the novel ends on a bittersweet note. Eventually Nel realizes what she has lost by losing Sula. While walking alone, she suddenly stops and whispers “’Sula?’” twice, “gazing at the tops of trees” (Morrison 1982, 174). Significantly, at this moment, a breeze stirs: “[l]eaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze” (Morrison 1982, 174). Overtaken by the loss and the familiar wind and place in which she and Sula grew up together, Nel exclaims:

“All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.” And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. “We was girls together,” she said as though explaining something. “O Lord, Sula,” she cried, “girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.” It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow. (Morrison 1982, 174)

Nel realizes it was not Jude she missed and mourned after the affair, but Sula.[[27]](#endnote-27) Although belatedly, Nel grasps how Sula subverted dominant expectations and appreciates the significance of their relationship.

Even though Sula’s position in the Bottom’s community is controversial at best, Morrison makes a place for her in *Sula* as a regional Appalachian novel. Fetterley and Pryse assert that “[r]egionalism offers unconventional, noncanonical, and counterhegemonic stories of female (and male) development across the life cycle….regionalism calls attention to the paucity of cultural locations in which women and nonwhite and nondominant men might find affirmation” (2003, 30). In telling Sula’s life story, the novel portrays the complexities of life in a small Affrilachian town and highlights the dynamic interplay of regional, gendered, and raced identities. Weather events, specifically wind and rain, largely influence and serve as metaphoric elements of Nel’s and Sula’s enactments of intersectional identities. The novel also emphasizes the necessity of respect and acknowledgment of difference in community formation. Throughout her life Sula continuously challenges stereotypes by forging her own identity, but the community in which Nel is undoubtedly a member rejects her.

**“…To Know Which Way the Wind Blows”**

Transgressions of regional and gender norms can be read across individual, communal, and locational levels. In both *Sula* and *Strange*, weather (as metaphor and plot device) facilitates readings of regionally gendered performativity in Appalachian communities. In both novels, characters’ daily lives and actions are influenced in large part by weather, and characters enact identity processes in terms of weather events. In *Sula*, instances of wind, temperature fluctuation, and rain illuminate regionally gendered performativity. During adolescence the wind signifies and assists Nel’s and Sula’s explorations of their bodies and experiences of sensuality; the rain also symbolizes Sula’s enactments of desire. At the end of the novel, Nel, who now knows which way the wind blows, understands her intimate relationship with Sula. In *Strange*, “odd” weather patterns point to complex configurations of identity and consequent effects on community formation. Lace and Bant succeed in enacting regionally gendered performativity in ways that not only enable them to be confident and happy but also help them to establish an activist community. Jimmy Make fails to challenge traditional norms. Lace and Bant embody some identities that are commonly stereotyped as “essentialist,” while Sula resists all such aspects of identity. Performativity as discussed here suggests that while no characteristic (of individuals, communities, or place) *mandates* a certain enactment of identity, it *may* influence or contribute to it.

My analyses are influenced by Morrison’s and Pancake’s comments on important interconnections among literature, literary devices, socio-cultural expectations, and identity formations. Morrison claims that “the alliance between visually rendered ideas and linguistic utterances….leads into the social and political nature of received knowledge as it is revealed in American literature. Knowledge, however mundane and utilitarian, plays about in linguistic images and forms cultural practice” (1992, 49). Similarly, Pancake analyzes how carefully-chosen metaphors influenced American perceptions of the Persian Gulf War and “takes into consideration the ways metaphor can shape a reader’s consciousness” (1993, 282). Both Pancake and Morrison explain how literature and metaphor influence and are crucial to political knowing and being, and Pancake’s argument about war and metaphor can be applied broadly: “As the metaphor restructures the reader’s conceptual understanding of *war*, it changes what is real for the reader about war. Because people act in terms of what is real for them, this new ‘reality’ has ramifications beyond the reader’s mere thoughts” (1993, 284). Likewise, novels reflect people’s enactments of and engagements with region and gender and vice versa. In both *Strange as This Weather Has Been* and *Sula*, weather metaphors and the implementation of weather as a prominent plot device guide readers to (re)consider how region, gender, and various vectors of identity intersect within Appalachian communities.

In this chapter I have shown how region and gender are performed by Appalachian residents. Since the overall project considers ways in which regional environments and topography affect intersections of region and gender, a comparative approach illuminates similarities and differences. Literary case studies of Appalachia and the Southwest facilitate the consideration of each region in relation to the other. The next chapter, then, turns to literature from the Southwest, and the fourth chapter will explore ways in which regionally gendered performativity migrates between each region.

1. “Obama Urges Probe into Mine Disaster after Last Bodies Found” at <http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/04/10/west.virginia.mine/index.html?hpt=T1>. The mine disaster forty years before, to which President Obama refers, occurred on 2 May 1972 at Sunshine Mine in Kellogg, Idaho, where ninety-one miners died in a fire. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Massey is “the fourth-largest American coal producer and the largest mine operator in central Appalachia. It churned out 38 million tons of coal in 2009, 1.2 million tons of which came from the Upper Big Branch South Mine, and reported earnings of $497 million” (“Mine Deaths Spark Criticism of Operator’s Record” at <http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/04/06/mine.disaster.safety/index.html?hpt=T1>.) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Burns describes MTR as “the latest and most extreme version of strip mining in which the tops of mountains are blown away to gain easy access to the coal. This became a predominant form of mining in the mid-1990s, when the Clean Air Act emission standards were strengthened.” See Burns for a concise explanation of MTR in “three distinct stages of power relations…among communities affected by MTR.” [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Hereafter referred to as *Strange*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Literary analyses of landscape are more common. For examples see: Comer (1999); Norwood and Monk (1987); Scharff (2003); and Westling (1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Like Freier’s monograph, Thurlow’s and Adler’s edited collection offers a humanities-based approach to weather. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. This line is from the song “Subterranean Homesick Blues” on the album *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. An example of a proverb particularly relevant to *Strange* is: “Underground miners can smell rain coming” (Freier 1992, 24) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. In his Appalachian Trail (AT) memoir, Bryson recounts how hikers see each other sporadically on the AT. Even though they may not be hiking together, they form impromptu and intervallic communities: “You become part of an informal clump, a loose and sympathetic affiliation of people from different age groups and walks of life but all experiencing the same weather, same discomforts, same landscapes, same eccentric impulse to hike to Maine” (1998, 50). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Consistent weather conditions form patterns—for example, the humidity of Appalachia as opposed to the dry heat of the Southwestern desert. Irregular conditions mark the disruption of a weather pattern. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Hereafter referred to as Lyon. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Similarly, hooks recounts her strong desire to leave Kentucky upon graduating high school. She “wanted to leave the fierce racial apartheid that governed the lives of black folks,” and she “wanted to find the place of freedom” (2009, 9). Hooks leaves but eventually comes back to make Kentucky her home. Her return surprises friends who thought that her “soul was too large…for Kentucky. California and New York seemed to them the places that were right for [her], the places that allowed one to be different and free” (hooks 2009, 219). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Adams corroborates the importance of public gathering places to central Appalachian community formation: “Let’s just say that the Dairy Queen in Hinton, West Virginia, is the center of the universe. Have a chili cheese dog and a Pepsi and listen to stories about coal mining and railroads and rivers” (2001, 157). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Lace does not call for the eradication of coal mining: “’my dad and granddad and husband were all miners. I just believe they can do it a better way, a way that would actually give us more jobs and not ruin everything we have’” (Pancake 2007, 300-1). A range of opinions exists regarding the coal industry’s relationship to and with Appalachia. For example, Jones (from West Virginia) seemingly praises strip mining. She remarks that beheaded mountains “have proved hospitable to everything from golf courses and wineries to high-tech service centers” and suggests that some changes “fall into the not-exactly-what-we’re-looking-for-but-we’ll-take-it category: three prisons in eastern Kentucky; Wal-Mart, which entered the region in the 1980s, today providing more jobs in West Virginia than any other single employer” (Jones 2005, 11).

Adams relays another perspective. He asked then-director of West Virginia’s Environmental Protection Department: “What would have happened if coal had never been discovered in the state?” (2001, 144). The director replied candidly: “’I’ve thought many times about what West Virginia would be like if Mother Nature or God had not put coal in these mountains, and I frankly have had to conclude that perhaps the state would have been better off without the coal’” (Adams 2001, 144). One more example: on cars in West Virginia, Scott notes bumper stickers which “range from ‘I’m Pro-Mountain and I Vote’ to ‘I Love Coal’” (2007, 486). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. See Scott (2007) for an extended analysis of racialized masculinity in Appalachian MTR communities. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. I disagree with Pendarvis’ claims that “Pancake is true to the world she depicts, where any idea of deliverance is muted to the point of suffocation” and that “Lace is a strong, smart but defeated woman” (2007, 26). Ray’s approach to *Strange*, calling it “a story of catastrophic loss and redemption” (2008, 76) which shows how, “[i]n different ways, [Lace and Bant] are coming of age” (2008, 77), is more accurate. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Although outside the range of this project, an analysis of whiteness in *Strange* stands to contribute important insights about race. Frankenberg acknowledges that studying whiteness bears the risk of recentering it, but she argues that not studying it—leaving it as the uncritical norm—is more dangerous (1997, 1). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. hooks describes how the place one calls home often is the target of destruction by those (in *Sula*, white people; in *Strange*, the coal company) who want to prevent people from forming community: “It is no accident that this homeplace, as fragile and as transitional as it may be, a makeshift shed, a small bit of earth where one rests, is always subject to violation and destruction. For when a people no longer have the space to construct homeplace, we cannot build a meaningful community of resistance” (1990, 47). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Corbin describes how a miner “was paid not in U.S. currency but in metals and paper (called coal scrip), which was printed by the coal company. Because only the company that printed the coal scrip honored it, or would redeem it, the coal miner had to purchase all his goods—his food, clothing, and tools—from the company store” (1981, 10). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. While Sibley (1992) focuses on Gypsy communities in Europe and North America, some of his conclusions have more general applicability. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. See the Ohio History Central entries for Berlin Crossroads, Black Fork Settlement, Paynes Crossing, and Poke Patch Settlement. By the mid-1900s, not one of these four communities was still in existence, due to, for instance, integration and the purchasing of land by coal companies. For example, “Berlin Crossroads had lost its identity as a separate community. With whites increasingly showing African Americans tolerance, many African Americans began to find acceptance in traditionally white communities. In 1970, construction of the Appalachian Highway resulted in the destruction of much of Berlin Crossroads.” The description of Paynes Crossing is particularly reminiscent of the Bottom: “The community was never incorporated as a town. Rather, it was a small hamlet, consisting of several farmsteads. Many of the African-American residents established successful lives, accumulating sizable amounts of personal wealth.” However, “[b]y the twentieth century, no remnants of Paynes Crossing survived except for the community cemetery.” [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. In *Strange*, for example, Avery’s whiteness both gains and loses stigmatization when he is in Cleveland, Ohio, and when he is in Prater, West Virginia. In *Sula*, Tar Baby’s race signifies differently depending on location and observer. To some he is a light-skinned black man; to others, such as Eva, he is a white man. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Walker is credited with coining the term “Affrilachian” in 1991 to recognize and celebrate dual African American/Appalachian heritage and identity often erased in the popular imaginary of Appalachia as a region inhabited only by white people. In the poem “Sara Yevo,” in the collection entitled *Affrilachia*, he writes: “I wanted to tell her / that the word Affrilachia / […] / …existed to make visible / to create a sense of place / that had not existed / for us / for any unwealthy common / people of color / now claiming the dirt / they were born in” (2000, 88). Many others employ the term “Affrilachian,” such as doris davenport (see “All This, and Honeysuckles Too”) and members of the Affrilachian Poets (see <http://www.affrilachianpoets.com/>). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Shadrack leads the people’s march onto New River Road (Morrison 1982, 159). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. In the well-known essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” Smith argues that *Sula* is a lesbian novel, not because Nel and Sula are lesbians but “because of the passionate friendship between” them and “because of Morrison’s consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institutions of male/female relationships, marriage and the family” (1985, 9). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)