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BREECE D'J PANCAKE, PERIPHERAL MODERNIST

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In this essay I discuss the short stories of the Appalachian and West Virginian writer Breece D'J Pancake (1952-1979) in order to reflect on the ways in which the experience of peripherality comes to be registered in literature. Taking a cue from recent articulations of world literature as the literature of the capitalist world system, I argue that Pancake is a peripheral modernist: the formal oscillation between a realism traditionally associated with regionalist writing and "irrealist" elements stands as a mark of his peripherality. Both the class focus of Pancake's stories and their broad environmental theme may be regarded as symptoms of the region's structural position within the processes of capital accumulation. I maintain that there is a utopian impulse permeating Pancake's fiction. It can be located in Pancake's descriptions of the environment and the temporal disjunctions present in his stories.

Keywords: Breece D'J Pancake, literary regionalism, capitalism, peripherality, modernism, utopia

I

In a 2013 book review, Thomas Frank commented extensively on what he terms the "social-disintegration genre" in American non-fiction writing since, roughly, the 1980s. Frank uses this label to refer to "books [...] describing the destruction of the postwar middle-class economic order and the advent of the shiny, plutocratized new one," as a result of a "slow-rolling economic transformation that has, over the last 30-odd years, made vast parts of America into a destitute wasteland while lifting a fortunate few to a kind of heaven on earth" (Frank 2013). Any student of the United States will recognize in these formulations a familiar and often repeated story of American decline. Frank's selection of popular books in the genre, which stress the social and economic "disintegration" in a "post-industrial" and "post-welfare" United States, represent one important kind of framing of this trend. The more world-systemically inclined takes, for which Giovanni Arrighi's *The Long Twentieth Century* represents an unavoidable reference point, might serve as another one. Considered within the perspective of the latter analytic, the "disintegration" of the US taken up in the literature reviewed by Frank represents a symptom of the gradually weakening position of the United States as the hegemonic nation-state within the capitalist world system.

While the dynamic between the core and the periphery broached above will be central to my argument, I am bringing up Frank's text for yet another reason. In order to speak of the "social disintegration" and decline of the United States, American authors have a regional label at their disposal: so, Frank speaks of the "Appalachification" of America. Aside from its more obvious meaning in the national context, namely that of a generalized impoverishment and social decay, the term points to the fact that the logic by which the social tissue of the American polity is being undone is one that has been always already present, and had done considerable damage to parts of the country even in the times of relative economic stability and prosperity, that is, before the inauguration of a "New Gilded Age" in the 1980s. The existence of "Appalachification" as a catastrophist designation makes any gesture of nostalgia for an industrial welfare state of the post-World War II era problematic, as it points to the unrelenting, and now only intensified and expanded structural forces at work in the "disintegration" of the American society. These forces have at their basis the same relentless logic responsible for the changing position of the United States globally, namely, the logic of capital accumulation. Such change of perspective—or a view from the internal periphery—necessarily foregrounds the implicit exceptionalist narratives that underlie the dominant chronologies of American decline, be it the ones that assume the past existence of an acceptable American capitalism, or the ones that imagine the US as being, up to this unfortunate moment, exempt from the socially destructive rule of capital—if we set aside the exceptional case of Appalachia.

My intention in this article is to consider the work of the Appalachian and West Virginian author Breece D'J Pancake (1952–1979), the "Hillbilly Hemingway" as he is sometimes referred to, as an instance of peripheral modernism. Born in 1952 and dead by suicide in 1979, Breece D'J Pancake wrote twelve short stories, of which six were published in his lifetime to much critical acclaim. He has been described as "a regional writer, one who rooted his personal vision of the world in his own experience of place" (Douglas 1994: 66), "deeply rooted in strong regional particulars" (Finnegan 1997: 89), and his writing as "deeply tied to the details of its Appalachian setting" (Michaud). His work is regularly included in overviews of the region and regional literature (see Straw and Blethen 2004).

The regionalist label has been consistently applied to Pancake even when critics would recognize that the regionalists of the 1970s and 1980s, such as Pancake and Pinckney Benedict, "were much more modernist (more minimalist and ironic and less nostalgic) than most short fiction by earlier writers from the region" (Olson 2004: 172). While this remark may lead us to qualify Pancake as a *regionalist* modernist, I consider a different approach more productive. In my view, Pancake may be best understood as a *peripheral* modernist—in the sense of a modernist on the capitalist periphery—as his writing bears formal marks of the experience of capitalist modernization as it played out in this particular world region. Pancake's ambitious modernist take on the contemporary realities of his home region speak of the continuities in the historical process of capitalist modernization that cannot be accommodated within the dominant exceptionalist narratives of progress in which the "social disintegration" mentioned above figures as a historical anomaly. Moreover, Pancake's peripheral modernism opens the door for a reconsideration of American literary regionalism in general, and its status within the literary field, as a literature of the capitalist periphery. I will develop this basic idea in the rest of this essay. But first, let us very briefly consider the problem of US literary regionalism from a world-systems perspective.

The suggestion that we redefine what is known in the US as "literary regionalism" and treat it as the literature of America's internal periphery is not an original one. Such a proposition has already been made about late nineteenth-century American regionalist writing by Mark Storey in his article "Local Color, World-System; or, American Realism at the Periphery". Storey's argument can be expanded to include later instances of regionalist fiction, such as Pancake's in the 1970s. In such world-systems refashioning of Pancake as a peripheral modernist, I am (like Storey) relying on the work of the Warwick Research Collective's on the combined and uneven development of world literature. In this theorization, "modernism" is not so much a literary historiographic category, but rather a mode through which the ruptures and shocks of capitalist modernization are registered. The argument is that modernist texts register these ruptures including "irrealist" formal features: "irrealist" elements function as "determinate formal registers of (semi-)peripherality in the world-literary system, discernible wherever literary works are composed that mediate the lived experience of capitalism's bewildering creative destruction (or destructive creation)" (Warwick Research Collective 2015: 51). So, for Storey, who argues that American nineteenth-century regionalist writing represents "a body of work collectively better understood as the cultural registration of 'peripherality' within [the] world-system," "this peripherality formally announces itself in the 'compromise' between a dominant form of realism and the persistence of nonrealist genres, so that an oscillation between realism and 'irrealism' provides us with a better model through which to position American regionalism in literary history" (Storey 2019: 102). The nineteenth-century nonrealist genres Storey has in mind include "sentimentalism, melodrama, the humorous story or tall tale, folk tales, the gothic, and many more" (Storey 2019: 106). He understands regionalism's "modal multiplicity" to be a "formal response [...] to the 'malign magic' of the competing forces at work within peripheral economies and cultures" (Storey 2019: 106).

As I will argue in more detail in the rest of this essay, Pancake's own writing is also marked by a formal "compromise" of sorts, and may hence be read within the analytical framework outlined above. However, the "irrealist" aspects of Pancake's fiction do not involve the adaptation of the nonrealist genres Storey found relevant for the literary regionalists of the previous century. Rather, the formal compromise characteristic of Pancake is one between an inherited realism as the canonical form of regionalist writing, and an "irrealist" tendency marked by departures from realist mimeticism. We could put this another way: Pancake's work might be understood as participating in that tendency of contemporary US fiction that McGurl labeled "lower-middle-class modernism" (McGurl 2009). Pancake, who studied creative writing at the University of Virginia under the tutelage of the short story writer Peter Taylor (1917–1994), was definitely a product of "the Program Era." The "lower-middle-class modernist" designation makes sense in relation to Pancake's own socio-economic background ("he was from the southern lower-middle class, his accent had certain associations" [McPherson 2013]), as well as in relation to the minimalist trait in his stories (minimalism being another name for "lower-middle-class modernism" in McGurl's theorization).[1] But the formal excesses of Pancake's fiction, or its "irrealist" elements, make the minimalist label appear insufficient. I will try to show that this is indeed so by reading these excesses as "irrealist" signs of peripherality in Pancake's stories. Before that, a couple of words on the peripheral position of the Appalachian region are in order.

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[1] In a review of McGurl's *The Program Era*, Fredric Jameson remarks that "lower-middle-class modernism" could as well be called lower-middle-class *realism* (Jameson 2012). Such terminological change would certainly benefit this attempt at formal categorization of Pancake's work.

II

The Appalachian region has historically been understood as a kind of exception to the mainstream of American life and in that sense it has been "set aside" in discussions of America. As Stephen Fisher and Barbara Ellen Smith write,

> [f]ramed within the cultural politics of American nationhood, Appalachia is an internal 'Other,' a repository of either backwardness and ignorance or, alternatively, the homespun relics of the frontier; in both cases, it is a place behind the times, against which national progress, enlightenment, and modernization might be measured. (Fisher and Smith 2)

Many other authors have noted the ambivalent status of Appalachia in the national imagination. Allen Batteau and Phillip Obermiller summarize the problem in the following way:

> The paradox of Appalachia is that it has always combined opposed images of America's self-definition: The Appalachia of William G. Frost combined Anglo-Saxon pioneer ancestry with devolution and degradation; the Appalachia of the poverty warriors in the 1960s combined the romantic appeal of bucolic self-sufficiency with the indignity of welfare dependence. Every succeeding statement of the identity of Appalachia has posed a challenge for the identity of America: A land of progress containing an entire region of backwardness and poverty, a metropolitan society of rapid mobility and footloose individualism, accommodating a subculture that insists on maintaining strong family ties and a sense of community. (Batteau and Obermiller 1983: 1)

Behind depictions of Appalachia as a place that irrationally resists the benefits of capitalist modernization, as well as those that romanticize it as "the living representation of the nation's egalitarian goals," there is the reality of the region as "one of the most impoverished and most ecologically damaged sections of the country" (Dunaway 1996: 4). The cultural work surrounding Appalachia can be fully comprehended only if we consider it in relation to the region's structural position. In other words, the peripheral status of this region in relation to the centers of capital accumulation has resulted not only in "economic woes," but also in the creation of Appalachia as a cultural phenomenon in the national imaginary. So, when Fisher and Smith liken Appalachia to "other resource-rich yet marginalized regions across the globe" (Fisher and Smith 2012: 1), they allow us to consider how the region's peripheral status goes hand in hand with a sort of colonial view of the region's culture and people, who become culprits in the story of the region's inability to accommodate "the 'modernizing' influences of global capital" (Fisher and Smith 2012: 2). By contrast, these authors maintain that Appalachian realities are not a consequence of its exclusion from the logics of capitalist development, but rather of "the stark impacts of globalization in both its contemporary manifestations and historical legacies" (Fisher and Smith 2012: 2).

My position in this essay is in line with the argument implied in the literature on the region quoted above: both the economic and cultural realities of Appalachia are grounded in the region's peripheral position in relation to US capitalism. This is not to say that images of impoverishment so persistently attached to Appalachia are mere cultural stereotypes divorced from reality, but that they are part of the very real historical legacy of capitalist modernization, which can then somewhat perversely be mobilized as a justification for the region's "failure" to "properly" modernize.

III

Appalachia's original entry into American culture took place in the latter part of the nineteenth century, "when sections of the region were undergoing a wrenching industrial transition" (Lewis 2004: 63). Quite in line with the observation that regions are "spatial units organized around production, or the extraction of profit from the coordinated workings of nature and labor," as Hsu puts it (2010: 165), the incorporation of Appalachia in the larger national project took place primarily in the form of extraction of the region's mineral resources as well as its lumber., making it into "an exploited periphery in the development of world capitalism that has spread since the fifteenth century" (Drake 2001: ix). It was the so-called local color fiction, or an earlier version of literary regionalism, that in the second half of the nineteenth century created "the myth of Appalachia as a place 'where time stood still'" (Lewis 2004: 63).

The decade in which Pancake wrote and published his stories, the 1970s, may be regarded as one of several transitional periods in his home region. As one commentator wrote, Pancake was "was part of the first generation of Appalachian writers to experience and benefit from the post-World War II industrial boom and its associated rise in standards of living, as well as to see the beginnings of its collapse" (Murphy 2017), during "a global era of economic restructuring by transnational corporations" (Reid 1996: 245). The industrialization that started in the late nineteenth century peaked in the 1950s when automatization of mining lead to a decline in employment ("a 31 percent decline in the number of Appalachian miners between 1950 and 1960," according to Lewis), and environmental devastation, especially by way of strip mining (Lewis 2004: 68). Hence, this periphery of American capitalism was in Pancake's time "associated with mill and mine closings, chronic unemployment, poverty, and out-migration [...]." (Lewis 2004: 59).

The years of Pancake's literary activity were also a time of a renewed interest in the region, its people and culture, which had begun in the early 1960s. This time around, the regionalist revival was part of the country's attempt to deal with the reality of American underdevelopment. In 1965, as part of the War on Poverty, the Appalachian Regional Commission was established and the region was for the first time defined in administrative terms in order to facilitate government's developmental activities. (Stoll comments that the Commission "regarded Appalachia as an underdeveloped country in need of foreign direct investment".) Michael Harrington's bestselling book *The Other America* (1962) took Appalachia as the starting point for an undertaking that aimed at countering the "social invisibility" of poverty in the US. The peculiarity of poverty in Appalachia, Harrington commented, were "the property-owning poor," their property being land.

But if we move further back in time, what appears peculiar is the very fact of land as a commodity. We may then situate the late nineteenth-century industrialization itself within a broader history in which it appears not as the beginning, but as the end of a longer process of the region's incorporation into the world capitalist system. This process involved a continuous separation of people from land as a means of subsistence. In his book on "the ordeal of Appalachia", *Ramp Hollow*, environmental historian Steven Stoll repeatedly asks the question: When did the Appalachian people stop growing their own food? What intervened in the human use of land for subsistence? A crucial event was the imposition of the whiskey tax in the late eighteenth century, an attempt "to force the backcountry into the Atlantic economy." This political act, Stoll writes, "reached into the relationship between mountain farmers and their land by requiring that they convert one very important product of their labor into money." He adds that the late nineteenth century "industrialization of the mountains" (based on extraction of coal and lumber) "extended and deepened this very process," separating "[highland folk] from land altogether, compelling them to turn all their labor into money. Mountain people became enmeshed in the national economy and the global division of labor" (Stoll).

What the above historical-environmental sketch suggests is that the capitalist modernization of Appalachia has been structured around a series of ongoing transformations of "landscapes and humans," which may be understood, in Jason Moore's terms, as involving the progressive commodification of both human labor and the work of nature; or a transformation of work, both human and non-human, into value for capital by way of exploitation and extraction (see Moore 2014). These repetitive transformations are driven by the logics of the rate of profit, investment cycles, and global commodity chains, but they have been historically articulated within the narrative of capitalist modernization not only as infrastructural integration and development, but as civilizational progress. All this also suggests that the moment of Pancake's literary activity stands as a sort of repetition: the moment of another re-discovery of Appalachia and its apparent re-integration into the larger economy, only this time by way of "open[ing] up market opportunities", as the Regional Commission put it, as well as a revived interest in the region's mineral resources in the wake of the 1973 oil shock. Henry Shapiro's claim about the ambivalence of the national incorporation of Appalachia in his classic (and much criticized) *Appalachia on Our Mind*—namely, that "[t]he 'discovery' of Appalachia after 1870 [...] followed from the recognition that the well-known realities of southern mountain life were not consonant with new notions about the nature of America and American civilization which gained currency during this period" (Shapiro 1978: xi)—could therefore also be made, with appropriate adjustments, about Pancake's Appalachia of the 1970s.[2] Michiko Kakutani's remark in her 1984 review of Pancake's posthumously published short story collection captures precisely a process of unfinished incorporation at work: "his stories", writes the reviewer, "are informed by an overwhelming sense of flux" and point to "cultural dislocations of today" (Kakutani 1984). The remarks about Appalachia's dissonant belatedness, and the consequent claims about the need for its assimilation into the matrix of "normal" American development, might also be understood as attempts at bridging the structural gap between the core and the periphery, a gap that relegates the region to a position of a perpetual "lagging behind," or to a state of interminable transition.

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[2] Shapiro is thinking of the idea "that America [...] ought to become a unified and homogeneous national entity, and that what characterized such an entity was a coherent and uniform national culture" (Shapiro 1978: xi). However, as a reviewer has remarked, Shapiro's book fails to address the question of how the cultural] discovery of Appalachia was related "to the contemporaneous economic transformation of the region" (Williams 1978: 351). The processes of spatial and economic, as well as cultural integration of the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century have been most influentially analyzed by Alan Trachtenberg in his *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (in which Appalachia is not mentioned explicitly).

A similar logic of unevenness is at work in the literary field in which regionalist writing appears, as Storey points out. While regionalist writing was immensely popular in the nineteenth century, it "tended to be sidelined in the Cold War's field-defining works of American studies, viewed as an artistically inferior and even antimodern version of a more committed, masculinized literary mainstream" (Storey 2019: 102). By the 1960s and 70s, regionalist literature was institutionalized within the literary field as a kind of minor literature, a "provincial subset" of national literature, "serving to reinforce or resist—depending on your view—the iniquitous power relations instantiated in those national hubs of capital" (Storey 2019: 103). In such social and institutional configuration, regionalist writers were often assuming the role of explicators of Appalachian life for national audiences, either as a matter of authorial politics or structural determination, and had to find ways of not only representing the region, but also the ideological work surrounding it.[3]

IV

Let these comments on the structural disjunction between the core and the periphery and its manifold social forms be the cue for my first claim about Pancake. Pancake's stories are almost without exception around various kinds of separation: about more or (usually) less successful departures, about dreams of escape, and about impossible returns. All of these involve separation from land, and may be read as repetitions or echoes of the original separation from land and nature as means of subsistence brought about by the advent and expansion of capitalism. For the most part disinterested in plot development and lacking in dramatic action, these stories nevertheless revolve around acts with dramatic implications: they are concerned with attachment to and removal from land, with ruptures in once established but now inaccessible ways of life, with the relentless intrusion of the commodity logic in spaces and experiences once governed by the logic of subsistence. From such an analytical perspective, one is tempted to speak of Pancake's opus as being first of all about "the injuries of class." But instead of the psycho-social focus that characterizes much of Sennet and Cobb's classic study of working-class life (Sennett and Cobb 1972), Pancake's work foregrounds class, a social relation (of exploitation for profit) and process (of extraction and appropriation), as a socially formative force with a total reach.

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[3] For an informed look into the origins of "othering" of the Appalachia(ns) in US local color fiction, see Wilson 1995. For later developments, see Satterwhite 2011 (chapter 4), and Billings et al. 1999.

So, the fractures in individual and collective experience that ceaselessly appear in these stories represent an instantiation of the logic of class and point to the continuation of the logic of exploitation and appropriation characteristic of capitalism. It should also be stressed that despite this pessimism of the literary intellect in Pancake we find neither a nostalgic look into the "good old days" nor attempts to recover some pre-lapsarian state of primitive communism or autarchic yeomanry. Instead, Pancake's stories provide us with hints of something else, something not entirely graspable in terms of motives and themes, but more readily apparent on the level of form. Pancake's writing is certainly governed by a mimetic impulse (in its focus on local dialect and customs; its sustained ethnography of everyday life in Appalachia) but it also points to some experience or event that cannot properly be represented in available realist language (or understood in terms of purely mimetic representation).

In order to further elaborate on these claims, I now turn to the stories themselves to consider how they incorporate the core/periphery class dynamic, how they move between realism and "irrealism", and how they restructure historical time and space.

V

Let me begin with the core/periphery logic in Pancake's "The Scrapper". In this short story, we follow Skeevy Kelly, an ex-boxer who lives in the mining community of Clayton, works in a machine shop during the week and sells bourbon at cockfights on weekends. It is Skeevy's limited point of view that offers us the panorama of Clayton:

> At the strip mine, Skeevy sat on a boulder and ate cold rabbit as he looked down on the roofs of Clayton: the company store, company church, company houses, all shiny with fog-wet tin. He saw a miner steal a length of chain from the machine shop where Skeevy worked during the week, promised himself to report it, and forgot it as quickly. Around the houses, he could see where the wives had planted flowers, but the plants were all dead or dying from the constant shower of coal dust. (Pancake 2013)

Extraction of fossil fuel, devastation of the environment, and life under the sign of "the company" frame the beat-up existence of this and so many of Pancake's other characters. As in other stories, not much happens here. The event towards which the action builds is the fist fight to which Skeevy will agree for purely financial reasons. But a more interesting conflict takes place while Skeevy is selling liquor at a cockfight. There, he encounters Cally, a local girl who left Clayton for college and is now visiting to collect material from local informants for "a paper for Psychology." Cally approaches Skeevy because he might be related to the legendary gangster Machine Gun Kelly, at once a figure of social deviancy and a romantic outlaw. A brief conversation ensues:

> "Where do you live?" Cally asked.
> "In the holler 'twixt Purserville an' Clayton."
> She looked puzzled. "But there's nothing there."
> "Sure," (Pancake 2013)

The curtness of Skeevy's reply stands in stark opposition to those descriptively rich passages in the story that present us with a view of the setting through Skeevy's own eyes: "The mountain looked like an apple core in the high sun," and who in the Appalachian hollow sees "wind-pushed clouds [...] blinking the sun on and off" (Pancake 2013).

I would like to point out two things in this scene. The first has to do with the difference between the two views of the land, the nature or the environment. Where Cally sees "nothing", Skeevy's mind creates an excess of meaning worthy of poetry, in one of many similar descriptive passages in Pancake. Cally, in fact, functions as the outsider here: not only do we learn that "college girls were all looking for rich boys", but we also see Cally "put her arm around [...] a longhair with a camera around his neck", connecting her thus both to an outside position of relative privilege, and to the technologically mediated act of seeing which, historically speaking, made economic and social deprivation, in Appalachia and elsewhere, legible to American middle-class audiences. This view across class boundaries, as the scene also suggests, puts Cally in a position similar to that of an ethnographer involved in an act of cultural othering and reification, as Skeevy feels he will become part of her "collection" of "maniacs". We could expand on this observation by adding that the inside/outside relation, in the case of Appalachia, has to do with the historical domination of absentee corporate owners over the region's land and natural resources. The relationship between the rural insider and urban outsider is here primarily a class relation, their difference one of class position. Therefore, this scene reads as a dramatization of the problem of region as periphery outlined in my introduction.[4]

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[4] The problem (and the logic of peripherality) finds a succinct expression in Brian Finnegan's observation that the region is "often treated by the rest of the country as a colorful third-world

If we acknowledge such workings of a class consciousness in Pancake's fiction, we should also note that it does not stop at the kind of staging or figuration of class that is present in the quoted scene. As much as Pancake's fiction inherits the realist tradition, it combines it uncompromisingly with what I think can only be described as a modernist poetics marked by a utopian impulse. In order to explain what I mean, I will turn next to two "irrealist" elements of Pancake's writing: his peculiar treatment of temporality and his transformative descriptions of the environment.

The problem of temporality in Pancake's stories has been noted in criticism, where we find remarks on the author's interest in "geological time", "the epochs and eras that preceded the present moment" (Michaud), or claims that "for [Pancake] the prehistoric is as real as the present" (Clay High 1985: 37). Such assertions have usually been made about the opening and probably most famous story of Pancake's book, "Trilobites". In it the prehistoric motif of a Paleozoic fossil makes it possible for the protagonist "to perceive relationships among geology, history, and himself", as one critic wrote (Clay High 1985 37). This is undoubtedly true, but the prehistoric or geological past is only one of the temporal layers that erupt in the present moment in Pancake's fiction. (It also stands as a special or liminal case, as I will argue in my reading of "Trilobites".) Pancake consistently hints at other times, other historical moment inscribed in the landscape: the pre-colonial inhabitants of the region, the Native American mound builders, or the early colonists of the frontier. These different past moments, instead of inhabiting a linear sequence, appear coterminous, they seem to overlap and clash, creating indeed an "irrealist" effect.

One example of such temporal superimposition is the story "In the Dry". There, Ottie, a truck driver, briefly returns home to his foster family (and a cousin, Buster for whose disability Ottie might be responsible):

> This hill-country valley is not his place: it belongs to Sheila, to her parents, to her cousin Buster. Ottie first came from outside the valley, from the welfare house at Pruntytown; and the Gerlocks raised him here a foster child, sent him out when the money crop of welfare was spent. (Pancake 2013)

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country whose raw materials, economic and cultural, exist to be extracted by the dominant culture and exported to more urban and informed regions" (Finnegan 1997: 89). Regarding the gender dynamics in the "The Scrapper" (as well as some other stories by Pancake), let me add here that Pancake was no stranger to excursions into a sort of Hemingwayesque machism, but for the moment, I would like to set the gender aspect of his stories aside, although it is certainly not irrelevant for the matter at hand (namely class).

The Gerlocks have in the meantime turned to another kind of cash crop, tobacco, "the bright yellow leaves that bring top dollar" (Pancake 2013). The story takes an unusual turn when Ottie finds himself participating in an ancient agrarian ritual in which the family patriarch, with a Bible in his hand and family guests ("outsiders") watching, blesses the family plow. To Ottie, the old and unused plow, that once "was first to break the bottoms of their valley", seems a thing "from an unreal time":

> He hears false power in the preacher's voice, sees outsiders pretending. Old fool, he thinks, new fools are here to take your place.
> Old Gerlock shouts to the hills: "For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?" Heads bow to the prayer, the unfixed wish, the hope offered up, and every head turns to Bus. "Godspeed the plow," they say. (Pancake 2013)[5]

This scene—in which a medieval ritual surfaces in the moment of postmodernity—shows how Pancake's fiction speaks of the present by juxtaposing moments of long-gone pasts with contemporary ones. More often than not, and unlike in the above scene, this irrealistic superimposition of temporal layers becomes accessible to protagonists by way of landscape: they can be seen and found in the land in the form of fossils, Native American mounds, failing farms and deserted coal mines. They converge in the present moment in which they appear side by side, and emphatically not on a teleological vector of progress.

How do we read Pancake's disjunctive temporalities? The first and most obvious interpretive gesture might be to regard them in relation to the problem of modernization hinted at above. This "irrealist" mark of Pancake's fiction shows how his take on the lifeworld of the American periphery is incompatible with notions of linear time presumably moving forward, on which the narrative of capitalist modernization as progress depends, and in which Appalachia appears as an anomaly and exception. Another way to approach the problem of "contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous" that Pancake's stories put on display—one that may bring us closer to the utopian problematic announced above—would be to focus on its function as a mark of peripherality itself. In the work of the Warwick Research Collective, such temporal disruptions have been described as "a condition that in part defines the very character of peripherality, in which 'realities' from 'radically different moments of history' uneasily and often incommensurately coexist" (Warwick Research Collective 2015: 12). This has been identified as one of the crucial features of another peripheral literary form, namely magical realism. I would like to point to certain affinities, as well as differences between this aspect of Pancake's writing and Fredric Jameson's theorization of Latin American magic realism, as elaborated in his "On Magic Realism in Film" (Jameson 1992). The following passage offers the gist of Jameson's argument:

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[5] The phrase "Godspeed the plow" may be found in an English folk song celebrating farmers' self-sufficiency, as well as in a medieval complaint about feudal tributes imposed on farmers (see Dean 1996).

> the possibility of magic realism as a formal mode is constitutively dependent on a type of historical raw material in which disjunction is structurally present; or [...] on a content which betrays the overlap or the coexistence of precapitalist and nascent capitalist or technological features. (Jameson 1992: 138)

For Jameson, the structural disjunction at work here is one between modes of production, "and in particular of a mode of production still locked in conflict with traces of the older mode (if not with foreshadowings of the emergence of a future one)" (Jameson 1992: 138). For Jameson "the articulated superposition of whole layers of the past within the present [...] is the formal precondition for the emergence of this new narrative style" (Jameson 1992: 139).

As suggested in the above remarks on the separations and fractures pervading Pancake's stories, I do think that they grasp a historical reality "in which disjunction is structurally present". The reference to feudal times certainly allows for the possibility that here modes of production clash. But the feudal and the capitalist mode are hardly contemporaneous in terms of the "raw material" of Pancake's stories. Appalachia of Pancake's time was already a "post-industrial" region, thoroughly shaped (and equally thoroughly devastated) by contemporary capitalism. When other modes of production erupt in the present time of Pancake's fiction (such as in the "Godspeed the plow" scene), they appear more burlesque than magical, as signs of an irrevocable past.[6]

The irrevocable nature of the historical past functions as an ironic antidote to any thought of nostalgia. But to state that the past is brought up as "irrevocable" also implies that some sort of directionality is still operative in the background of Pancake's temporal disjunctions. At this point we have to return to the prehistoric motives that appear persistently in Pancake. The pterodactyl, the fossils, the

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[6] The same could be said about the story "Our Honored Dead," in which a grandfather reprimands his grandson for digging up arrows from Native American burial mounds by performing a stereotype of the "Injun."

“ancient gases” and the “ancient sun”, these indeed seem to function by way of “articulated superposition of whole layers of the past within the present”, as Jameson would have it. Nonetheless, I find this kind of superimposition to be different from the magical realist one, and understand it as a kind of utopian gesture. Jameson has argued that we should understand the utopian text as

> a praxis that has less to do with the construction and perfection of someone’s “idea” of a “perfect society” than it does with a concrete set of mental operations to be performed on a determinate type of raw material given in advance, which is contemporary society itself—or, what amounts to the same thing, on those collective representations of contemporary society that inform our ideologies just as they order our experience of daily life. (Jameson 2008: 392)

He further elaborates on the “neutralization” of the real in utopias by way of the superimposition of a utopian “map” onto the “raw material” of history.[7] In Pancake’s “Trilobites” we find precisely this kind of superimposition at work.

The main protagonist of “Trilobites” is Colly, whose mother is about to sell the failing family farm to a real-estate developer, his memories of his dead father, and his attempts to reconnect, unsuccessfully, with his former girlfriend, Ginny, who has left the countryside for a life in the big city. The separations and fractures, the injuries of class so characteristic of Pancake’s fiction, are everywhere in the story, and they result in Colly’s personal sense of failure (as a farmer and son). As elsewhere in Pancake, only a kind of immediate experience of nature, often embodied in the practice of hunting, may bring temporary relief from the structural disjunctions of life in a class society. The impossibility of establishing meaningful relations to others that frustrates individual existences in the story is dramatized in a brief exchange between Ginny and Colly:

> “What is it, Colly? Why can’t we have any fun?” [asks Ginny]
> “When I was a young punk, I tried to run away from home. I was walking through this meadow on the other side of the Hill, and this shadow passed over me. I honest to god thought it was a pterodactyl. It was a damned airplane. I was so damn mad, I came home.” (Pancake 2013)

Clearly, what we have here is again an instance of temporal superimposition of the prehistoric kind. But the context in which it appears—in what seems

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[7] It should be noted that Jameson is here talking about actual utopias (Ursula LeGuin, Thomas Moore). Here, I am adopting Jameson’s idea to explore the utopian impulse in stories that do not belong to the utopian literary tradition or genre, but that still function as utopian praxis.

like a non-answer to Ginny's question about the unattainability of, let's call it, a more authentic existence—as well as its affective charge—Colly's disappointed desire for an actual pterodactyl—make this superimposition into an imaginary resolution of real contradictions. The logic of wish-fulfillment that is brought to light in this scene allows us to identify in Pancake's prehistoric-geological narrative superimpositions utopia as "operation" or "praxis" in Jameson's sense. This would mean that the prehistoric or the geological are different from other layers in Pancake's temporal palimpsests. There are reasons why this may indeed be so: they cannot be understood in terms of modes of production (perhaps even of history proper), and they tend not to appear in ironic or parodic registers. Moreover, unlike the superimpositions of tribal or feudal pasts and the contemporary capitalist moment, the prehistoric superimposition in "Trilobites" has a more total reach. We could say that in the story there is a kind of geological vision at work, which allows the protagonist to map the prehistoric landscape onto the present day one:

> I look at Company Hill again, all sort of worn down and round. A long time ago it was real craggy and stood like an island in the Teays River.[8] It took over a million years to make that smooth little hill, and I've looked all over it for trilobites. [...] [T]he highway built on the dry bed of the Teays. [...]
> I lean back, try to forget these fields and flanking hills. A long time before me or these tools, the Teays flowed here. I can almost feel the cold waters and the tickling the trilobites make when they crawl. All the water from the old mountains flowed west. But the land lifted. (Pancake 2013)

These passages certainly speak of historicity of nature, simply in that they point to geological transformations of (extremely) long duration. But the sheer temporal scale at work in the superimposition of prehistory onto history—the titular trilobites went extinct 250 million years ago (Fortey 2000)—makes it not only about time, but also space. The "raw material" of contemporary Appalachia is here obliterated in order for another, quasi-mythical land to appear. This temporal superimposition then also involves a spatial transposition: not merely a layering or simultaneous eruption of different historical moments, but the emergence of another space altogether. I would speculate that the critical fascination with this particular story might have to do not only with Pancake's masterful execution in a purely technical sense, but with the fact that "Trilobites" presents us with the most systematic and clear expression of Pancake's more general utopianism. If this is indeed so, that is, if we may indeed speak of "the Utopian as process and production" (Jameson 2008: 394) in Pancake's fiction, then we should return to the issue of descriptions in Pancake's stories and consider them with the same process in mind.

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[8] Pancake is referring to "the ancient preglacial Teays River, formed more than two million years ago. [...] Massive ice sheets buried the Teays, and numberless Pleistocene-era fossils" (Phillips 2020: xix).

Storey contends that regionalism displays "an awareness of the land and the environment as heightened determinations in the social and political life of the locality" (2019: 112). Pancake's work substantiates this claim. There are many instances in his stories in which land appears as the fundamental natural resource and basis of sustenance, although more often than not one that is threatened or outright destroyed by the forces of capitalist development (the flowers covered in coal dust from an earlier example are only one such example). But in Pancake land and the environment also take on themselves qualities that cannot be fully grasped in mimetic terms, as their descriptions seem to move beyond historical reference. Consider these examples from "Trilobites," "Fox Hunters," and "In the Dry":

> The fog curls little ghosts into the branches and gullies. [...]
> My father is a khaki cloud in the cane-brakes, and Ginny is no more to me than the bitter smell in the blackberry briers up on the ridge. [...]
> A gray ooze of light began to [...] sift a blue haze through the black bowels of linking oak branches. [...]
> [R]idges made brown fire by sun [which] makes an ivory scar in the sky behind the hills [...]. (Pancake 2013)

Most readers of these passages would likely agree that it is not an exaggeration or a misnomer to label these descriptions "poetic". One way to account for this effect is to note how Pancake's descriptions often move between the referential and the figurative or metaphorical, investing the observable reality with an exuberance of meaning, and through such gesture radically transforming the empirical reality. By this I mean that language in these passages functions according to "the strategy of language proper to poetry", to adopt Paul Ricoeur's formulation, as it "consist[s] in constituting a sense that intercepts reference and [...] abolishes reality" (Ricoeur 2003: 262). Description, usually regarded as "the territory of maximal reference and minimal significance" (Ronen 282), here moves precisely in the direction beyond reference. This, too, I find to speak of the utopian desire permeating Pancake's fiction, and understand it as a sensory and affective recreation, in aesthetic form, of a non-alienated relationship to land.

In the preceding pages I have tried to read the short stories of Breece D'J Pancake as an example of literature of the capitalist periphery. In these texts, the separation from land or nature is paralleled by an irreparable fracture in social experience. Both are predicated on a failed promise of progress ingrained in capitalist modernization. Its effects are perhaps most readily visible in the settings of these stories, which only seems logical considering the environmental consequences of practices such as strip mining and mountain top removal in Appalachia. The broad environmental theme in Pancake's writing is therefore a symptom of the region's structural position within the processes of capital accumulation. Following the world-systems reframing of literary regionalism, I have focused here on the "irrealist" aspects of Pancake's writing. Such focus, as I have argued, allows us to discern a utopian impulse in these stories. It would be possible and logical to situate Pancake's fiction in the context of the political radicalism of the 1960s and the 1970s, and to regard it in relation to the vitality of anti-systemic ideas and analytical models critical of American imperialism and capitalism of that time. In the significant body of literature on grassroots organizing in Appalachia, be it around labor or environmental issues, these two decades figure prominently (see, for instance, Fisher 1993; Montrie 2003). The scholarship on Appalachia in which the region is understood as an internal colony of the United States or a (semi-)periphery of the world capitalist system also has its origins in the same historical moment (see Williams 1979; Walls 1976). As capitalist development, with its manifold social and environmental consequences, has in the meantime only intensified, so the resistances and critiques of that developmental model continue. So does, we might add, the relevance of Breece D'J Pancake's work: in Pancake's fiction, the landscape is a palimpsest upon which capitalism has had only the last word.

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