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A Review of Anthony J. Viola's *All Lies Begin With Truth*



VIOLA, ANTHONY J. *All Lies Begin With Truth*. Black Rose Writing, 2022. ISBN 9781684339600, 223 pages.

If a person seeks solace or solitude in a much-loved place that is being desolated, then she or he will also suffer distress. In both contexts there is anguish or pain (aligid). Therefore, I suggest "solastalgia" to describe the pain or sickness caused by the loss of, or inability to derive solace from, the present state of one's home environment. Solastalgia exists when there is recognition that the beloved place in which one resides is under assault (physical deso-

lation). This can be contrasted to the spatial and temporal dislocation and dispossession experienced as nostalgia. Solastalgia is the lived experience of the loss of value of the present and is manifest in a feeling of dislocation, of being undermined by forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived from the immediate and given. In brief, solastalgia is a form of homesickness one experiences when one is still at home.¹

-Glenn Albrecht, "Solastalgia"

The Appalachian and Pennyroyal Plateau localities that Anthony J. Viola's ecofiction inhabits are spaces that I have grown up in and have lived in my entire life. *All Lies Begin With Truth*, Viola's second novel, takes place in the fictional town of West York, Kentucky. Though this town doesn't exist, I *know* this town. My drinking water also comes from the Ohio River and I have certainly experienced the heartbreak of witnessing the destruction of the land and water I love: "It was all gone, no longer tangible. Like hearing that an old friend had died a while back without being given the opportunity to say goodbye."² And so, my experience with the novel was like holding up a mirror to what was around me.

¹ Albrecht, Glenn. *Alternatives Journal*; Waterloo. 32.4 (2006): 34-36

² Viola, Anthony J. *All Lies Begin With Truth*. Black Rose Writing, 2022, pg. 46.

The novel is told through the perspective of its three main characters: Eris Carroll, a feminist and eco-activist; Lionel Boone, a former miner riddled by survivor's guilt; and Cass Taylor, a local waitress and life-long West York resident. Set from 2014-2016 at the arrival of a fracking company at Whitehead Falls, the story begins with Eris traveling by bus to meet up with concerned citizen Lionel Boone. Eris, as an outsider ignites in Boone the dogged determination it takes to fight the powerful "entity" that is the extractive industry. Cass's character represents those communities that persist even as they are exploited and abused. That allegiance to place is strong: "her roots deeply planted...West York was her home and would remain her home until it was her turn to have someone bury her underground."³ Cass, as the eye of the town, observes Eris, Boone, the workers, the law, and the townspeople throughout the novel. She undergoes a stark transformation by the story's end in hopes of regaining "truth."⁴

Viola's novel and form seem to follow in the tradition of Sherwood Anderson's interconnected stories of *Winesburg, Ohio*. Anderson's book opens with a map, and though Viola's novel does not, the geography of West York is so well actualized and depicted a map scarcely seems necessary. Anderson's map shows readers the places that matter to his story: the roads, the buildings, the homes. Reaching past Anderson's map, Viola's West York extends beyond human-made places, and resides in the old growth sycamores and glinting waterfalls. These natural places are not after-

thoughts but embodiments of the emotional realms of West York's residents. Viola cleverly weaves Kentucky's 120 county names into his narrative, the novel's language grounded in place: there is a feeling of recognition and care when stumbling across familiar landmarks, local dives, and even the county I currently live in, Boyd. Viola honors these places and imbues them with dignity and significance.

It is no coincidence that the novel takes place in 2014. Boone, a survivor of a mining catastrophe, notes Freedom Energy "who strip-mined Clay Mountain so fast they created makeshift slurry impoundments, one of which contaminated the town's drinking supply,"⁵ an allusion to the very real negligence and environmental crimes of Freedom Industries, who discharged pollutants into the Elk River; later, a massive storage tank leak contaminated the drinking water supply for Charleston and surrounding West Virginia residents.⁶

The first half of 2023 has been a painful ecological time and reading Viola's novel points toward these dystopian elements of our reality. On Feb. 3 East Palestine, Ohio experienced a toxic train derailment; later, disaster response officials elected to release a large volume of the chemical vinyl chloride from inside the derailed cars, a decision made to reduce the possibility of a chemical explosion. The controlled burn sent phosgene and hydrogen chloride into the air—toxic chemicals that were used

³ Viola, pg. 69

⁴ Ibid. 61

⁵ Viola, pg. 23

⁶ "Freedom Industries and former Freedom Industries plant manager sentences for roles in chemical spill" United States Attorney's Office, Southern District of West Virginia. Justice.gov. Feb. 4. 2016.

during World War I.⁷ Shortly after, it was discovered a billion cubic feet of methane leaked in Jackson Township, Pennsylvania.⁸ The facility responsible, Equitrans Midstream Corporation, have only recently had permits approved for another ambitious project: the Mountain Valley Pipeline, a mega-pipeline that will cut through over 1,000 streams and wetlands.⁹ Even as I am writing this, The West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR) released data detailing that 19 drinking water systems contained detectable levels of forever chemicals, PFOAS.¹⁰ Viola's seemingly innocuous and deftly named "Ecological Services" serves as a stand-in for all of this negligence and destruction.

The interconnected form not only serves to familiarize us and endear us to Viola's well-rendered characters, but brilliantly surveys the emotional topography of the place. Over a hundred years after *Winesburg, Ohio*, West York, Kentucky is also experiencing Albrecht's solastalgia, homesickness felt even as you are home. Anderson then was responding to the rapid changes of industrialism, to now, when Viola grapples with the economic after-

⁷ Orsagos, Patrick Seewer, John. "Crews Release Toxic Chemicals from Derailed Tankers in Ohio." Associated Press, Feb. 6, 2023.

⁸ US Community in Shock After Record Methane Leak, *The Guardian*. March 6, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/mar/06/us-methane-gas-leak-fracking-jackson-township-pennsylvania>

⁹ Friedman, Lisa. "Biden Administration Approves Key Permit for West Virginia Gas Pipe. May 16, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/16/climate/biden-mountain-valley-pipeline.html>

¹⁰ DHHR and DEP Announce Drinking Water Test Results, May 12, 2023. <https://dhhr.wv.gov/News/2023/Pages/DHHR-and-DEP-Announce-Drinking-Water-Test-Results.aspx>

math of extractive industries and the Frack Boom.

The coming of industrialism, attended by all the roar and rattle of affairs, the shrill cries of millions of new voices that have come among us from overseas, the going and coming of trains, the growth of cities... now in these later days the coming of the automobiles has worked a tremendous change in the lives and in the habits of thought of our people of Mid-America. Books, badly imagined and written though they may be in the hurry of our times...¹¹

—Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*

At the center of *Winesburg, Ohio* is George Willard who stands as a *step*, either forwards or backwards--the plight of the town's restricted and confused desires becomes the seat of heartache and loss, and the moves that George makes suggest either growth or stagnation—much like Boone, whose growth throughout the novel hints to potential political and cultural change for West York. Anderson's book links characters through landscape. As noted, at its opening we see a map of the town: the farms, church, main street, New Willard's House, *Winesburg Eagle*. All these places cement connections between sections and stories. Characters are recalled, and tonally the book maintains a consistency that creates a textured and complete world. In this tradition, Viola uses our main characters' distinct perspectives to help find and define "truth."

In Anderson's "The Book of the Grotesque," the opening story stands as a lens for not only how to read his novel, but en-

¹¹ Anderson, Sherwood. *Wineburg, Ohio* (B.W.Huebsch, 1919) Gutenberg.org

riches our understanding of Viola's novel title, as well:

That in the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts, but no such thing as a truth. Man made the truths himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts. All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful...It was the truths that made the people grotesques...the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.¹²

Throughout both Anderson and Viola's work, desperate people search for truth, and they search at a time of change which is beyond their control. Viola's Boone and Cass characters experience trauma, intense loneliness, and abandonment. In both Anderson and Viola's narratives these *truths*, while reached for, remain inarticulate and *vague*. There is a longing for connection where thoughts are captured on the page, but not conveyed directly. One key moment of this inarticulation occurs between Boone and Eris. Boone's avuncular affection for Eris is clear, but even as Eris leaves West York to take care of her true uncle Wayne, Boone has difficulty expressing that love: "Boone drove her to the bus station, and they barely spoke...At the depot, he handed her a battered journal—one of his when he was a kid."¹³ Eris, of course, can express that affection; however, Boone's alexithymic tendencies speak to the trauma experienced during the mine collapse. Throughout the novel, Boone

dips in and out of memory, of his wife and of the family lost during the collapse:

He paused to stretch his back, and when he looked up, the light from his helmet illuminated something miraculous. A web of roots twisting through the soil, spiraling in various directions, disappearing and reappearing, knotted within the rich, chunky soil. The network of leathery vines serves as host for beetles and grub worms, long-legged centipedes, and a variety of ants. He reached and pinched the thicker veins, caressing them along the dirt ceiling.¹⁴

Boone's reveries often end with him startled back into the present. Viola's attention to temporality and the past plays a crucial role in the story's attention to the town and its history. The diary Boone gifts Eris includes detailed accounts of the Chickasaw nation. This is one of the more reflexive moments of the novel. The history of the colonizing of Iyyi' ashka' issi is a heartbreaking interjection of settler genocide.¹⁵ The chapter which addresses the loss of the Chickasaw nation is juxtaposed with a chapter which details the political machinations of ORSANCO (the Ohio River Valley Water Sanitation Commission) in relation to Ecological Resources. In so doing Viola illustrates the ongoing cost of "progress." Paralleling too, the extractive industry's "bartering" of the construction of the YMCA and jobs as a placation to the town, or--as Boone refers to it--the industry's "psychological operations": "a strategy to influence a community's way of thinking."¹⁶

The novel also asks *how* to be an activist. Eris, Boone, and Cass fall into different camps: "he [Boone] preferred Eris's method of civil disobedience and organized, grassroots resistance,

¹² Anderson

¹³ Viola, pg. 178

¹⁴ Viola, pg 107

¹⁵ Viola, pg 179

¹⁶ Viola, pg 91

not monkeywrenching...¹⁷ however, it is Cass Estill, her name changed by the end, the widowed lifelong West York resident that resorts to “monkeywrenching.”

Just as Anderson’s novel expressed the “physical desolation” of turn of the century industrialism, Viola’s novel’s interconnected solastalgia speaks to small town resilience and evolvability. It also, however, celebrates the rogue individual, willing to push against the norm, in pursuit of the truth, “in doing the right thing.”¹⁸

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¹⁷ Viola, pg 90

¹⁸ Viola, pg. 213