

Slow Violence in  
Contemporary  
American  
Environmental  
Literature



# Slow Violence in Contemporary American Environmental Literature

By

Erden El

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	vii
Abbreviations .....	viii
Introduction .....	1
Chapter One.....	43
The Question of Industrialization and Its Costs in Richard Powers’s <i>Gain</i>	
The Narratives in <i>Gain</i>	
The History of Clare: The Birth of Capitalism in Lacewood	
Slow Violence in <i>Gain</i>	
The Invisibility of Slow Violence in <i>Gain</i>	
Inattention to The Lethality of Toxicity	
The Suffering Caused by Slow Violence	
Chapter Two .....	77
<i>Strange as This Weather Has Been</i> : Ann Pancake’s Novel on Slow Violence in Appalachia	
Information On Appalachia, The Land Shaped by Mountaintop Removal	
The Language and Narrative in <i>Strange as This Weather Has Been</i>	
Slow Violence, Environmentalism of The Poor and Writer-Activism in <i>Strange as This Weather Has Been</i>	
Chapter Three .....	123
<i>Gray Mountain</i> : A Book on Slow Violence in the Aftermath of Nixon’s <i>Slow Violence</i>	
Big Business and the Way Coal is Mined	
The Issue of Slow Violence in <i>Gray Mountain</i>	
Slow Violence in Everyday Life in <i>Gray Mountain</i>	
The Long-term Wreckage That Goes Unnoticed: The Invisibility of Slow Violence in <i>Gray Mountain</i>	
The Major Environmental Illness: Black Lung Disease in <i>Gray Mountain</i>	
The Effects of Slow Violence on the Disempowered	

Conclusion..... 174

Bibliography..... 185

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## ABBREVIATIONS

ALF	Animal Liberation Front
AppalReD	The Appalachian Research and Defense Fund of Kentucky
ARC	Appalachian Regional Commission
ATSDR	The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry
CWP	Coal Workers' Pneumoconiosis
DDT	Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane
DEP	Department of Environmental Protection
ELF	Earth Liberation Front
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
MTR	Mountaintop Removal
NASA	The National Aeronautics and Space Administration
NIOSH	The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health
NTP	National Toxicology Program
OVEC	Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition
PETA	People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals
POWER	Partnership for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization
SES	Socioeconomic Status
UDHHS	U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
VOC	Volatile Organic Compounds



## INTRODUCTION

The renowned ecocritic Rob Nixon published his *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* in 2011 and gave voice to a hitherto unexplored problem: the long-term environmental wreckage that escapes the public eye. In this timely book, Nixon asserts that environmental tragedies caused by climate change, toxicity, deforestation, oil spills, and others are often invisible as they take place over a large span of time. Indeed, the violence that Nixon speaks of goes unnoticed in many parts of the world as it mainly hits the disempowered. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, in which he takes up the literature of the global South, Nixon exposes how writers draw attention to environmental emergencies unfolding over a long period of time. Just as Nixon examines writers from the global South, the aim of this study is to explore the scope of Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" in three novels written in the United States of America before and after the publication of *Slow Violence*. The study will argue that slow violence is one of the defining causes of the suffering that emerges from prolonged environmental catastrophes. This study examines the novels *Gain* (1998) by Richard Powers, *Strange as This Weather Has Been* (2007) by Ann Pancake, and *Gray Mountain* (2014) by John Grisham, through the lens of Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence." The analysis thus spans a period of almost two decades, during which slow violence has become more visible both in the United States and around the world.

A study of the novels will not only reveal the suffering that emerges from long-term environmental disasters but will also show that such environmental literature is a powerful means of exposing worldwide the activism of the poor communities who suffer from environmental catastrophes. Human-induced environmental problems are caused by multinational giant firms, industry giants, coal mining companies, and energy companies. Extinction rates on a global scale are on the uptick and environmental illnesses have risen dramatically. As Thomashow states in *Bringing the Biosphere Home* (2002), "the planet is on the verge of its sixth mega extinction, a devastating and irreparable loss to the intricate fabric of global ecosystems and the diversity of life" (1). According to Thomashow, the best way of teaching the forthcoming dangers of the sixth mega extinction is to make "informed speculation[s]" (62). By informed speculation, he means an investigation

“employing the ‘facts’ of ecology and global change science” (62).

Thomashow’s term, informed speculation, applies to the novels under focus in this study. The writers, Powers, Pancake, and Grisham, deliver meticulous documentation of environmental hazards and the ensuing health problems on the local and global levels. As Thomashow states, “to address an issue with full urgency requires a good measure of foreboding, but to sustain commitment and resolve, one must summon hope” (62). Powers, Pancake, and Grisham address various environmental threats with full urgency, raising a timely awareness of the slow wreckage wrought on an indiscriminate scale by the giant companies. Simultaneously, however, they also summon hope. All three novels draw attention to “the environmentalism of the poor,” as Nixon calls it, by creating a storyline in which determined environmentalists fight against multinational companies supported by politicians.

The first novel under focus in this study, *Gain* (1998) by Richard Powers, reveals the history of the Clare Company, a fictional company that came into being in the early eighteenth century, with the advent of the Industrial Revolution. The company transforms from a small-scale, environmentally-friendly local company into an industrial giant, a development parallel to the long-term impacts of the Industrial Revolution in the United States of America. As time passes, the company commences mass production and starts using cheaper ingredients, which are also toxic. Therefore, *Gain* is a good example of the long-term wreckage caused by slow violence. In Ann Pancake’s *Strange as This Weather Has Been* (2007), both the characters (kept anonymous) and the setting are drawn from real life. As Pancake is a writer, lecturer, and environmental activist from the region, her work is significant in its embodiment of Nixon’s writer-activism. *Gray Mountain* (2014) by John Grisham reveals the astounding links between policy makers and rich businessmen. As Grisham is a lawyer by training, the importance of his novel lies in its depiction of legal gaps and how multinational companies exploit these legal gaps. The connection among the three novels, spanning a period of two decades, reveals what has been happening in the United States in terms of slow violence. Grisham narrates how slow violence has become a threat in Appalachia by illustrating the connections between wealthy businessmen and politicians. His novel sheds light on the poverty in the Appalachian region, a poverty which enslaves people and prevents them from fighting for their rights. Despite the pessimistic portrayals, all three novels have a tone that summons hope. All three novels address the environmentalism of the poor and are significant in terms of raising awareness for the environmental wreckage that has gone unnoticed over the decades.

The first chapter of this study analyzes *Gain*, a novel on the history of a family business that grows into a worldwide corporation over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The growth of the Clare Company is analyzed along with environmental health issues, principally Laura Bodey's fight with cancer. It is important to point out that the Clare Company deliberately chose Lacewood because the local people are disempowered and unable to defend their rights. The chapter also examines the health issues caused by the company, as well as the slow wreckage, dispersed over time, which escapes public attention.

The second chapter analyzes *Strange as This Weather Has Been* from the perspective of Nixon's slow violence, and lays bare the long-term wreckage brought about by mountaintop removal in the Appalachian region. As the novel was inspired by the interviews and conversations Ann Pancake made with the local people and the coal miners, the chapter will reveal the scope of coal mining in the region and its outcomes. The study deals with cancer-causing agents used for coal processing, ponds which are filled with toxic water, floods that take place in the region, and the overall damage mountaintop removal causes in a vast area in the Appalachian region. The chapter points out that the multinational coal company attacks the local people and the land in multiple ways. It does not only affect the health of the people and the land, but it also affects their culture. As the local people of Appalachia are deeply attached to the mountains in economic and cultural terms, blasting a mountaintop and clear cutting a forest means attacking the local people's cultural heritage and economic freedom. The coal mining company wins the local people over by promising them well-paid jobs. Once they accept the offer, however, they neither receive high salaries nor have their healthy environment. The company enslaves the local people's once healthy lands, healthy bodies, sustainable economies, and eco-friendly culture.

The third chapter on *Gray Mountain* is an analysis of how the law supports and perpetuates environmental violence. The chapter examines the ways in which rich companies and policymakers cooperate. It also shows how environmental degradation affects people's lives in a multitude of ways. The chapter examines coal workers' rights, coal-related occupational diseases, the destruction of land through mountaintop removal, coal mining and its corollary economic dependence, legal dimensions of coal mining, and the environmentalism of the poor in Appalachia. The chapter also deals with black lung disease, an affliction which is arguably related to coal mining.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Environmental Justice stands for “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies” (“Environmental Justice”). Clashing with the EPA’s definition, all three novels under focus portray a gap between the wealthy and disempowered in terms of environmental justice. Although the EPA’s definition of environmental justice focuses on race and color, none of the novels puts forward the view that discrimination stems from color or nationality. However, the third element, income, creates a gap in terms of environmental justice. Income, in particular, is a defining factor which hinders environmental justice in the novels under focus. All the three novels have story lines in which poor local people face discrimination in terms of environmental justice. Multinational companies’ stance, after all, is that they can easily suppress any resistance from poor people.

Overall, the study will reveal that there is, indeed, a connection between the rise of corporations and the degradation of environmental health, influencing the human and environmental well-being in the United States. The conclusion will cover the findings of the research on the three novels in relation to slow violence.

## **How Did Ecocriticism Arrive at Environmental Justice?**

The eminent ecocritic Lawrence Buell posits that the history of ecocriticism includes two waves. He defines the first-wave of ecocriticism in his book *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005) as follows:

For first-wave ecocriticism, “environment” effectively meant “natural environment.” In practice if not in principle, the realms of the “natural” and the “human” looked more disjunct than they have come to seem for more recent environmental critics—one of the reasons for preferring “environmental criticism” to “ecocriticism” as more indicative of present practice. (21)

Buell holds that the first wave of ecocriticism concentrated mostly on the natural environment, observing that there was a gap between nature and human beings. These critics dealt with the nostalgic past, lamenting the loss of natural landscapes—they were the pioneers of ecocriticism. Subsequently, ecocriticism evolved, becoming political as well as interdisciplinary, a step that culminated in the second-wave of ecocriticism, one that deals with political as well as transnational issues. The second wave of ecocriticism

attached importance not only to the beauty of nature but increasingly often focused their attention on the environmental hazards.

The second wave of ecocriticism recognizes the fact that natural and constructed environments have intermingled, blurring the boundaries between nature and culture. “Urban and degraded landscapes” were now taken seriously (Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* 22), and integral parts of second-wave ecocriticism became urbanization, the urban landscape, and ensuing environmental problems. Ecocriticism gained a new perspective. The discipline now aims to demonstrate how literary texts display environmental issues and human environmental malpractice. Merely displaying the malpractice, though, will not suffice. The ecocritic has the responsibility to raise awareness of the environment by analyzing works from a nature-oriented perspective. As Glotfelty has put it, “if we are not part of the solution, we are part of the problem” (*The Ecocriticism Reader* xxi).

Buell sees natural environments as having dramatically changed, developed environments as having replaced most of the idyllic landscapes. As natural environments have been mostly replaced by built environments, it is impossible to separate the two.

Second-wave ecocriticism has tended to question organicist models of conceiving both environment and environmentalism. Natural and built environments, revisionists point out, are long since all mixed up; the landscape of the American “West” is increasingly the landscape of metropolitan sprawl rather than the outback of Rocky Mountain “wilderness.” (*The Future of Environmental Criticism* 22)

As Buell mentions, there is a difference in the scope of the first-wave and second-wave ecocriticism. Second-wave ecocritics point out the impossibility of separating natural and built environments from each other since nature and culture are intermingled in modern life. That is to say, the environment does not necessarily mean the natural world. According to Terry Gifford, “ecocriticism is concerned not only with the attitude to nature expressed by the author of a text, but also with its patterns of interrelatedness, both between the human and the non-human and between the different parts of the non-human world” (*Pastoral* 5). Hence, the non-human world has gained importance and its connection with the human world has been studied widely. Jane Bennett refers to the interaction between the human world and non-human world with the statement “there was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to

ignore” (*Vibrant Matter* 31). As Bennett mentions, the interconnected structure of the human and the non-human world is one of the most important concerns of science and humanities.

The way science and humanities examine the environment and related health issues has dramatically changed in the last three decades. The material world has gained importance and the human-centered approach that was previously in use has been abandoned. Science and humanities have come to focus on the material world and its interrelated connection to the human world. Stacy Alaimo states in her work *Bodily Natures* (2010) that “two particularly striking movements of the late twentieth century—environmental justice and environmental health—mark significant material interchanges between human bodies and the environment” (3). As Alaimo claims, there is a continual exchange between the environment and human beings; therefore, human health is directly linked with the environment. Matter, as Alaimo argues in *Bodily Natures*, is “the vast stuff of the world and of ourselves” (1). To this end, Alaimo objects to a simplistic model of perception of nature which sees the environment as a commodity belonging to human beings (1-2). Alaimo states that “the environment has been drained of its blood, its lively creatures, its interactions and relations—in short, all that is recognizable as ‘nature’ — in order that it become a mere empty space, an ‘uncontested ground,’ for human ‘development’” (1-2). The perception that human beings are part of the environment instead of its owner has gained momentum with the material turn. Human beings’ relationship with nature has been brought into question.

Ecocriticism is a theoretical approach which questions human beings’ perceptions of the environment and aims to reconstruct human beings’ relationship with the environment. By focusing on a literary work from an earth-centered perspective, ecocriticism makes it possible to realize the current environmental issues and the human factor. According to Donald Worster,

We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them. Historians, along with literary scholars, anthropologists, and philosophers, cannot do the reforming, of course, but they can help with the understanding. (21)

Worster draws attention to the flawed relationship of human beings with nature, advocating a reform in human beings’ ways of thinking. Historians,

literary scholars, anthropologists, and philosophers should collaboratively struggle for a new ethical system towards a renewed understanding of the human and the non-human worlds (Worster 21).

Being earth-centered instead of human-centered is an important principle of ecocriticism. Glen Love states in his *Practical Ecocriticism* (2003) that “ecocriticism, unlike all other forms of literary inquiry, encompasses non-human as well as human contexts and considerations” (3). As Love mentions, ecocriticism is different from other schools of literary criticism and does not evaluate a literary text from a human-centered approach. Ecocriticism is a school of literary theory which gives wide coverage to the non-human world. According to Barry,

[Ecocritics] turn away from the 'social constructivism' and 'linguistic determinism' of dominant literary theories (with their emphasis on the linguistic and social constructedness of the external world) and instead emphasise ecocentric values of meticulous observation, collective ethical responsibility, and the claims of the world beyond ourselves. (264)

As Barry put it, the egocentrism of human-centered observation of literary texts is here abandoned and a new understanding, with a democratic and ethical outlook on literature, is developed.

Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence* also deals with the human-centered attitude of nature and its long-term consequences. By redefining violence, Nixon has proven that long-term changes in the material world can lead to unexpected consequences. Nixon has expanded the definition of violence made by Galtung, who had also expanded the concept, referring to violence as something which is not limited to physical contact between people (Nixon 10–11). Just as Galtung extended the definition of violence by coining the new term “structural violence”, Nixon extended Galtung’s definition, by creating the term “slow violence.” According to Galtung, “structural violence is silent, it does not show - it is essentially static” (Galtung 173). Nixon defines slow violence as a slowly progressing type of violence, which makes it difficult to recognize (*Slow Violence* 2011).

According to Rob Nixon, slow violence is a type of “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). In the novels within the scope of this study, there are numerous examples of slow violence. In *Gain*, for instance, the multinational corporation Clare causes environmental degradation and health problems over such a long span – from the 1830s to the 1990s – that environmental

degradation caused by the company goes unnoticed. Backed even by the law, the multinational giant corporations both suppress the people and abuse the land. Nixon states that the environmentalism of the poor (which is also the subtitle of his book) is significant in that “communities typically have to patch together threadbare improvised alliances against vastly superior military, corporate, and media forces” (4). Nixon states that “the poor is a compendious category subject to almost infinite local variation as well as to fracture along fault lines of ethnicity, gender, race, class, region, religion, and generation” (4).

It can be inferred that multinational corporations choose those parts of the country inhabited by poor people, a profoundly influential dynamic which occurs in all the novels examined in this study. It is a purposeful choice rather than a coincidence that the giant companies choose the impoverished parts of a country because of the vulnerability of the disempowered to resist the multinational companies. There is a disproportionate discrepancy between the firms and the local people, and the companies hold not only an unfair advantage but, essentially, all the cards, over the disempowered. Both figuratively and literally, the companies wage war against the land and the people. According to Nixon, “confronted with the militarization of both commerce and development, impoverished communities are often assailed by coercion and bribery that test their cohesive resilience” (4). In all the novels examined in this book, the multinational companies consistently and harshly suppress their opponents through use of the media and the press, not to mention the support of law. The companies also silence others by providing them with well-paid jobs and keeping them close with bribes. In all three works, multinational corporations target lesser developed areas of the country, which this study considers as an act consciously carried out by the companies. Nixon states that “slow violence affects the way we perceive and respond to a variety of social afflictions—from domestic abuse to post-traumatic stress and, in particular, environmental calamities” (3). In the novels studied in this study, one can see the traces of slow violence in the form of post-traumatic stress as well as environmental calamities caused by long-term environmental abuse.

Human beings have generally regarded nature as a generous supplier of food and other necessities and have assumed that it will last forever. McKibben asserts in *The End of Nature* (1989) that there is a common belief that “nature takes forever,” and it “moves with infinite slowness” (3). However, McKibben insists that people have reached a threshold heralding the end of nature (7). Since the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the world has changed dramatically (4). With the widespread use of fossil fuels and with



the increase of carbon dioxide and methane levels in the air, the once healthy lands are disappearing. According to McKibben, it is true that evolution has taken billions of years, “but that does not mean that time always moves so ponderously” (4); hence, “over a year or a decade,” some “big and impersonal and dramatic changes can take place” (5). As McKibben mentions, the world is prone to gigantic catastrophes. McKibben correctly observes that slow violence progresses slowly and invisibly and, further, that this semi-transparency does not mean that the consequences will be invisible. Therefore, more attention needs to be paid to slow violence since the consequences of ignoring it can be fatal.

Dramatic changes have taken place globally in the last century because of human intervention with the processes of nature. The unearthing of petrol and coal alters nature in two ways. Firstly, people unbury a substance that has been in its natural setting for billions of years and make an immediate and dramatic change that would have otherwise taken much longer (McKibben 9). Secondly, people release huge amounts of carbon dioxide into the air. The increase in carbon dioxide causes global warming and climate change. The change, in turn, causes evaporation in oceans, and the evaporation causes methane release. McKibben also states that human beings have “increased the amount of carbon dioxide in the air by about 25 percent in the last century” and it is supposed that the increase in the amount of carbon dioxide will be doubled in the next century (16). While drawing attention to the unprecedented changes human beings have made, McKibben mentions that the changes that would have taken longer have happened due to human intervention (16). The underlying forces of the environmental disasters are overpopulation, technology, and “the economic activity of human beings” (Speth 9).<sup>1</sup> The economic activity of people focuses on consuming natural resources and producing toxic waste. According to Speth, “features of capitalism, as they are constituted today, work together to produce an economic and political reality that is highly

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<sup>1</sup> James Gustave Speth examines the extent to which capitalism devastates nature in his book *The Bridge at the End of the World* (2008). Speth argues that the global growth economy damages nature and natural sources and that it simultaneously brings our planet to an end. The changes which have taken place recently are unprecedented, and the costs of these changes are enormous. Deforestation, climate change, and extinction of species occur rapidly. The extinction of species happens so quickly that, in fact, “the planet has not seen such a spasm of extinction in sixty-five million years since the dinosaurs disappeared.” (1-2) Human effects on the ecosystem are relatively stronger than the impacts of natural systems (2). The ozone layer has become thinner, and the earth’s ice fields are melting.

destructive of the environment” (10). As Speth mentions, capitalism and its by-products are entirely hazardous to the environment. Speth argues that despite the common belief that climate change will be gradual, it will happen suddenly and irreversibly (35). Therefore, it is time to act before the irreversible effects take place; it will be too late once they occur.

Given that climate change and ecological crises threaten the world, the mission of ecocriticism is vital. Ecocriticism will shed light on the relationship between the human and the environment and reveal the fact that a flawed relationship will do harm on the human and non-human world simultaneously. Richard Kerridge explains the working methodology of the ecocritic in the “Introduction” to *Writing the Environment* (1998), the ecocritic should unearth the representations of nature in a literary text and reread the text from an eccentric perspective (5).

The ecocritics want to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear, to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part-concealed, in a great many cultural spaces. Most of all ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis. (5)

Therefore, the mission the ecocritic undertakes is very significant because the ecocritic seeks to unearth the environmental issues in a written work. The messages the writers convey may sometimes be very latent. It is the ecocritic’s duty to connect theory with the written work. The ecocritic studies with a scrutiny which is similar to that of an archaeologist working in an ancient site. The ecocritic should try to convey the environmental messages and environmental issues in a written work and, by applying the data, should work to develop a broader awareness of them in the society.

David Mazel presents his opinion on what the aim of ecocriticism should be as follows:

Our reading of environmental literature should help us realize that the concerns are not exclusively of the order of “Shall these trees be cut? Or shall this river be dammed?”- Important as such questions are- but also of the order of “What has counted as the environment, and what may count? Who marks off the conceptual boundaries, and under what authority, and for what reasons? Have those boundaries and that authority been contested, and if so, by whom? With what success and by virtue of what strategies of resistance?” These are the levels on which I would like to see ecocriticism theorize the environment. (143)

According to Mazel, the ecocritic should reveal the power relations in a literary text. The ecocritic should avoid a shallow environmentalism and deepen the research to the level of questioning and deconstructing the meta-narratives that shape human beings' understanding of the environment. Mazel calls on literary critics to blur the boundaries between the human and the non-human world and to question the extent to which the boundaries are logical and accurate. Mazel also rejects the human-centered approach to the environment and questions what exactly the environment stands for and what it does not. Is the environment what surrounds human life or is human life only one small part of the environment? It is the duty of the ecocritic to question the authorities who draw the boundaries between the human and the non-human world while theorizing the environment. As both Kerridge and Mazel maintain, as do many other ecocritics, an eco-centered way of looking into literature is necessary to establish a better relationship with nature. The current state of ecocriticism "implies a move toward a mere biocentric world-view, an extension of ethics, a broadening of humans' conception of global community to include nonhuman life forms and the physical environment" (Branch et. al xiii). An eco-centered attitude will hopefully help human beings understand the vital necessity of the environment for human life.

This vitality has been a defining characteristic of the environmental justice movement since its founding. As mentioned before, Alaimo states in her *Bodily Natures* that environmental justice and environmental health are interrelated (3). Since human life cannot be considered separate from the material world (Alaimo 1-2), the material world around human beings has a direct impact on their health. However, this fact is often ignored, and people are exposed to high amounts of toxicity. The fact that disadvantaged populations suffer more densely from toxicity is one of the central concerns of environmental justice

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary field which is in the making. Scott Slovic had pointed out in "Ecocriticism: Containing Multitudes, Practising Doctrine" that "ecocriticism has no central, dominant doctrine or theoretical apparatus—rather, ecocritical theory [...] is being re-defined daily by the actual practice of thousands of literary scholars around the world" (161). The state of interdisciplinarity has enabled ecocriticism to deal intensely with issues of environmental justice recently. Tallmadge and Harrington praise the interdisciplinarity of ecocriticism, mentioning that "ecocriticism, as an emerging methodology, remains open, flexible, capacious, and loosely constructed, capable of supporting the most diverse and sophisticated researches without spinning off into obscurantism or idiosyncrasy" (xv).

The interdisciplinary structure of ecocriticism is defined by Buell, Heise, and Thornber as follows:

Literature and environment studies—commonly called “ecocriticism” or “environmental criticism” in analogy to the more general term literary criticism—comprise an eclectic, pluriform, and cross-disciplinary initiative that aims to explore the environmental dimensions of literature and other creative media in a spirit of environmental concern not limited to any one method or commitment. (418)

As Buell, Heise, and Thornber state, ecocriticism is not limited within a matrix; on the contrary, there is room for freedom in ecocriticism to cooperate with various fields to work on a variety of different texts and media. This corporation is carried out in an eco-centered approach rather than placing the human being at the focal point. Given the interdisciplinarity of ecocriticism, scholars from all fields engage in ecocriticism, an ad hoc formation that exists alongside the more structured collaboration of several specific fields to develop the emerging discipline. Focally, the structure of recent ecocriticism is closely related with the issue of environmental justice. As Buell mentions, recent developments in ecocriticism and the interdisciplinarity of ecocriticism have enabled “nature-oriented literature and on traditional forms of environmental education to take into account urban as well as rural loci and environmental justice concerns as well as nature preservation” (7). Thus, environmental justice is studied within the context of ecocriticism.

## Slow Violence

Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) has changed the concept of environmental catastrophes. In *Slow Violence*, Nixon examines the interlocking connections that environmental issues share with colonialism, neoliberal policies, and race. He defines slow violence as “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). For him, slow violence is a type of violence which is not easy to determine unless specific attention is paid to it (2). The invisibility of slow violence is encouraging for those who apply it because of the inherent difficulty in distinguishing whether the act actually involves violence or not. As slow violence is an attritional type of violence, its effects are not recognized immediately. It advances so slowly that it is not, by its nature, easily recognizable. Therefore, slow violence is “a different kind of violence,” which is “rather

incremental and accretive” (Nixon 2). Nixon argues that “the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence” should be examined (2). To this end, this study intends to examine the ways in which slow violence manifests itself in the novels studied and how the writers overcome the above-mentioned challenges.

Nixon starts his book by criticizing the policies of the World Bank, locating blame on it for the injustice between classes regarding environmental health. In a speech by then president of the World Bank, Lawrence Summers, on December 12, 1991, Summers claimed that there is inequality in the air quality of developed countries and Africa, and that Africa is unfairly under polluted (Qt. in Nixon 1). Summers claimed that the World Bank should encourage developed countries to establish dirty industries in developing countries (Qt. in Nixon 1). Summers thought that if developed countries establish their dirty industries in developing countries, this would satisfy the environmentalists of developed countries, and the damage in Africa would escape the public attention (Qt. in Nixon 1). Summers also believed that the inequality of the air quality is a disadvantage for the developed countries and that developing countries should suffer from equal pollution (Qt. in Nixon 1). The argument that an inequality in the air quality exists and therefore less polluted countries must be equated in terms of pollution is nonsensical. It means sacrificing Africa for the benefit of the developed countries. Summers defended his “poison-redistribution ethic as offering a double gain: it would benefit the United States and Europe economically while helping appease the rising discontent of rich-nation environmentalists” (Qt. in Nixon 2). This argument is a total misunderstanding of environmentalism. Summers ignores the fact that environmentalism is a transnational movement and acts for global issues. Charlene Spretnak points out the impossibility of toxic distribution without ill effects. According to Spretnak,

The entire planet is now imperiled by climate destabilization and ecological degradation, resulting from the modern assumption that highly advanced societies could throw toxic substances “away” somewhere and could exude staggeringly unnatural levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into our atmosphere without ill effect. (*Relational Reality* 1–2)

As Spretnak points out, advanced societies believe that they can get rid of toxicity without experiencing its ill effects. One of the methods to dispose toxicity is by redistribution. However, the pollution of local environments causes the pollution of the whole planet gradually, which is an example of slow violence.

Another ethical problem of poison-redistribution is that although the consequences of the planning that was underway would mainly affect Africa, the African people had not been asked for their opinion. In this case, the priority is for whatever benefits America and Europe, while the greatest harm is given to Africa. Thus, Nixon criticizes the environmental policies of the developed countries. The fact that the people mostly affected by the environmental disasters are not asked for their opinion on the matter is evident in all three novels studied in this study. It will be seen that in all of them the multinational companies choose their setting according to profitability, without considering the health of the people and the land.

Summers's ideas also represent a profit-centered outlook on nature. If Summers had defended the idea of waging war against Africa with weapons, it would have been perceived as real violence and an unacceptable imperial invasion (Nixon 3). However, the distribution of toxic materials to other countries is itself a different type of violence. In the long run, slow violence can kill as many people as a bombardment does.

A host of [...] slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes present formidable representational obstacles that can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively. The long dyings—the staggered and staggeringly discounted casualties, both human and ecological that result from war's toxic aftermaths or climate change—are underrepresented in strategic planning as well as in human memory. (Nixon 2,3)

As catastrophic as the events explained above are, because they do not appear instantaneously, they are not perceived as catastrophic. Therefore, strategic planning does not take them into the depth of consideration that they deserve. And this is because the results of the above-mentioned incidents can be as fatal as an instantaneous event. According to Nixon, if Summers had “advocated invading Africa with weapons of mass destruction, his proposal would have fallen under conventional definitions of violence and been perceived as a military or even an imperial invasion” (3). However, when Summers suggested that developed countries should dump their toxic waste in Africa, claiming that Africa is under-polluted, it was perceived as a developmental plan (Nixon 3). Regarding the indifference of human beings to the significance of slow violence, Nixon poses the question, “how can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention?” (3). In fact, literature can be a useful device to raise awareness of slow violence.

*Flight Behavior* (2012) by Barbara Kingsolver is significant novel, dramatic enough to have roused public sentiment. It is, therefore, a good example of how literature can be a useful device in warning people about climate change and environmental catastrophes. *Flight Behavior* narrates the story of Dellarobia Turnbow, a young wife and mother of two, who experiences an epic encounter of orange butterflies covering a mountain and its trees (2). The butterflies have swerved from their optimal flight trails, an analogy for the diffusive threats of global warming. Kingsolver narrates that the butterflies migrated from their natural habitat in Mexico due to ecological sabotage which resulted in flooding and mudslides. Although many people are fascinated with the butterflies, the fact is that they display a “disastrous manifestation of a changing climate” (7). However, the species in its new habitat not only faces threats of extinction from the forthcoming cold winter but also deforestation by the character Bear, who in a bid to negate his financial losses signs a logging contract to clear-cut the whole mountain. The locals are ignorant about the causes of climate change and believe that butterflies are a divine sign from God. Pastor Bobby Ogle’s warnings and the inputs of Ovid Byron, a scientist who studies the monarch’s migratory patterns, eventually convince Bear to cut off the contract and save the natural ecosystem of the mountain and the endangered monarch butterflies. Ovid as a scientist informs people that the advent of the butterflies is a symbol of catastrophe, although they look marvelous (2). Ovid Byron interprets the dramatic change in the flight behavior as a “bizarre alteration of a previously stable pattern” (2). Dellarobia’s encounter with Ovid enlightens her on the plight of climate change, flooding, and mudslides caused by logging.

The butterflies try to adapt their migratory schedule in the new environment. However, the monarchs encounter a sudden climatic difference with an intense snowstorm but miraculously, to Dellarobia and Ovid’s great relief, some survive and resume their new flight patterns. The environmental awakening and desire to increase her knowledge of the world around her, prompt Dellarobia to consider ending her marriage and moving with her kids from the farm to pursue a college education. Kingsolver ends the story on the positive note that both Dellarobia and the butterflies will successfully adapt to their new flight paths. Therefore, the enlightening becomes a *flight* and an ascent for Dellarobia.

This ascendancy is similar to the task climate change fiction attempts to motivate people to carry out, to become enlightened. This is the function of the discipline’s aim to warn people about what is going to happen unless rapid action is taken, in a manner which Thomashow calls “informed

speculation” (1). *Flight Behavior* is significant because it is based on scientific truth as well as (a necessary) “informed speculation”, shown in the destruction of weeds by pesticides changes the flight patterns of monarch butterflies (Thomasow 60). As mentioned in the beginning of the paragraph, *Flight Behavior* is a good example of how literature can be a device to warn people because it is “dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment” (Nixon 3), and it blends scientific facts with fiction.

To return to *Slow Violence*, it should be emphasized that Nixon deals with the problem of the widespread lack of comprehension of slow violence. Nixon states that the problem with developing awareness of the fact that slow violence exists stems from human beings’ tendency to hold spectacular events in high esteem and to undervalue times or experiences that are unspectacular (6). The fact that catastrophes occur slowly does not mean that they are inconsequential. Nixon gives the example of radioactivity to reveal how slow violence affects the human body in an irremediable way, remaining unnoticed and often untreated. Nixon states that “chemical and radiological violence, for example, is driven inward, somatized into cellular dramas of mutation that—particularly in the bodies of the poor—remain largely unobserved, undiagnosed, and untreated” (6). Since economically disempowered people receive less health care, their illnesses related with slow violence, such as those induced by chemical and radiological toxicity, go unnoticed. However negligible it may seem; slow violence arguably bears fatal consequences.

Nixon also deals with the environmentalism of the poor in *Slow Violence*. He particularly emphasizes the poor because they are the people most affected by environmental disasters. The reason why Nixon attaches significance to the environmentalism of the poor is that they are the people who experience the difficulties, and, because of their inbuilt economic disadvantages, they are seen as vulnerable people who will surrender in the end. Capitalists believe that the poor can easily be silenced with bribery. A good example to the fact that rich companies attract poor people with well-paid jobs is Ana Castillo’s work *So Far from God* (1993). *So Far from God* depicts the story of a Mexican woman named Sofia and her daughters Esperanza, Caridad, Fe, and La Loca. The life and career of the character Fe set an example for the phenomenon of slow violence. Fe works for a bank and, although she devotes herself to her work, fails to get a promotion (177). After a girl Fe meets at the bank tells her about a new job opportunity, Fe decides to leave her job and work for Acme International (177). The new job appeals to her because she can earn twice the amount of her bank salary, and she will receive salary increases and promotions in parallel with her



performance (177). It turns out, though, that there is a downside. The company forces their workers to work with toxic, highly fatal material. After various health problems surface caused by the toxic materials, the company goes on to deny the truth. Nixon points out in fact in *Slow Violence*, that companies responsible for slow violence deny their responsibility (163). The company in *So Far from God* also tries to get out of their responsibilities by denying the truth, that they force their workers to handle toxic material. The company nurse keeps claiming that the symptoms seen in the company workers “had nothing to do with working with chemicals” (178). Despite her misgivings, Fe is convinced and continues to work for the company. Her duty is to clean aircraft parts. The company uses a toxic chemical which they claim to be harmless. Fe contracts cancer and later understands that the material which the company claims is harmless is in fact a lethal toxin. The plot of *So Far from God* reveals that some powerful companies flout the law and take no notice of – in fact, *devastate* – public health.

The pathetic character Ana Castillo has created in *So Far from God* befits the portrayal Nixon draws in *Slow Violence*. Vulnerable people who need money and are unable to resist rich companies, become prey for the companies. Castillo successfully draws the portrayal of Fe’s suffering. After Fe accepted the job, she buys the household goods she had always dreamt of buying. Her new household items were an “automatic dish-washer,” a “microwave, Cousinart and the VCR” (171). These items are certainly not a luxury; however, she had not been able to own them before, even though she needed them. She was unable to buy even very basic items. That is why she could not resist the job. That new job that she got, however, slowly killed her (171).

The same tragedy applies to people around Fe. They were not aware of the fact that the environment was killing them slowly. They either have no idea of the environmental slow violence around them or they intentionally ignore it. The intentional indifference, which likely stems from lack of power, is very apparent because people seem to have turned a deaf ear to the catastrophes. They do not seem to comprehend the significance and the grandeur of the catastrophes even when they see “dead cows in the pasture” or “raining starlings” which “dropped dead” (172).

The conditions under which Fe works are horrendous. The company forces her to do a toxic job which slowly kills her. In other words, Fe becomes the disposable heroine of the story; she is literally meant to be killed by the company, in whose eyes she has no value. The company’s lack of care for

its workers becomes evident when Fe complains that she has not been provided with a mask. It is true that even if the company does provide her with a mask, it may not be effective because of the high toxicity level of the material. However, the fact that they do not even bother to give her a mask shows how worthless the workers are in the eyes of the company. The staff, whom the narrator calls “the useless and ineffectual rotating foremen,” are not eager to help the workers (183). Fe finds a mask for herself, which she admits will not be helpful but wears it just to feel better. The foremen provide her with orange gloves which melt after being exposed to ether. The extent of the damage in her hands is so great that she loses most of her fingernails and is given special gloves after the incident (183).

Fe’s disillusionment takes place after an issue with one of the supervisors of the company. She pours the chemical substances into the drain just like the other workers. One morning, a supervisor sees her pouring the chemicals into the drain and gets angry with her. Although she was simply following the instructions given by other supervisors, this supervisor tells her to leave the chemicals to evaporate after using them. Fe reflects that if the chemical is harmless, there is nothing wrong with pouring it into the drain. After that she understands that she has been fooled by the company (184).

The company does not only ruin Fe’s health, but it also lays the guilt on her when authorities determine that they are pouring toxic material into the drain. Although Fe was simply following the company’s instructions, the company pretends not to know about the incident, and acts as if Fe had decided to pour the chemicals in the drain on her own (184). This incident shows how sinister companies can be, a refrain repeated throughout Nixon’s book.

Fe’s suffering is depicted very vividly by Castillo. She contracts cancer, and the cancer advances very quickly. Although it is clear that the toxic chemical exposure in Acme International is the cause of Fe’s cancer, lawyers hesitate to sue the company because she already had skin cancer before she started working for the company (185). The support in the law itself for the strong companies, a reality that Nixon repeatedly gives examples of, is evident in the case of Fe. Before her death, Fe refers to the medical treatment she received as torture. The treatment was so wearing that “there was so little left of Fe to be buried” (185). Fe’s illness shows how much suffering slow violence causes despite its gradual structure.

To return to the book *Slow Violence*, poor communities are much less powerful than capitalist firms, who are supported by the media and

government for the sake of growth. In such a context, if the disempowered fight for their rights, it is a valuable resistance. Nixon states that “if the neoliberal era has intensified assaults on resources, it has also intensified resistance,” and adds that the struggle takes place “whether through isolated site-specific struggles or through activism that has reached across national boundaries in an effort to build translocal alliances” (4). This is to say; the environmentalism of the poor local people is a necessity as neoliberalism targets environmental activism as well as natural resources. As Nixon mentions, an unexpected side effect of the assaults has been the environmentalism of the poor (4), and this struggle is addressed as the victory of the disempowered in the books examined in this study.

Another concern of Nixon’s book is writer-activism. Writer-activism raises awareness of slow violence. In writer-activism, the writer draws attention to slow violence and engages in environmental activism to raise awareness of environmental disruptions. Nixon’s aim here is to point out the “inattention to calamities that are slow and long-lasting” as such calamities fail to reach the attention of the media (6). Slow violence escapes public attention, as it is gradual and unspectacular. However, in the long run, the damage incurred by slow violence will be equivalent to that of a spectacular instantaneous event.

Nixon makes a comparison between slow violence and indirect or structural violence. The gap between the rich and the poor can be a kind of structural violence (10). The fact that the poor have limited access to health care reflects such structural violence. A systematic hindrance of someone’s self-realization can be a type of structural violence. A wide range of situations can be considered structural violence as structural violence stems from disproportionate access to opportunities. Structural violence and slow violence share a common ground. Both have incremental effects that do not appear instantaneously. However, the difference between the two is that “structural violence is a theory that entails rethinking different notions of causation and agency with respect to violent effects,” whereas slow violence “might well include forms of structural violence, but has a wider descriptive range in calling attention, not simply to questions of agency, but to broader, more complex descriptive categories of violence enacted slowly over time” (11). Nixon seeks to engage the geological changes that take place as well as technological experiences.

The term Anthropocene implies an intrinsic relevance to Nixon’s geological concerns. Crutzen coined the term “the Anthropocene Age” for the current age. Crutzen stated that the era after Holocene, which marks the post glacial-

epoch, which lasted ten to twelve thousand years, must be called “The Anthropocene.” According to Crutzen, advancements in health care and medicine have increased human life expectancy and led to an increase in the population (14). As a result of the changes humans have caused on Earth, “greenhouse gases, in particular, CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub>” have started to rise dramatically (14). The reason why Crutzen refers to the era as the Anthropocene Age is that the new era is shaped by human-induced climate change. “During the past three centuries human population increased tenfold to 6000 million,” and the enormous growth in population increased the need for food supplies which has led to “growth in cattle population to 1400 million” (14). In direct proportion to the growth of the population, “urbanization has even increased tenfold in the past century” (14). As a result of urbanization, people started to live in apartments, and the density of people per square meter grew enormously. The fact that the density of people intensified led to the growth of human waste and the waste increased too much to be tolerated by nature. As a result, “the release of SO<sub>2</sub>, globally about 160 Tg/year to the atmosphere by coal and oil burning, is at least two times larger than the sum of all-natural emissions, occurring mainly as marine dimethyl-sulfide from the oceans” (14). These factors have led to an unprecedented change in nature – and the reality of human-induced climate change.

Developed countries’ perception of toxic distribution is flawed. These countries believe that they can keep clear of the negative effects of toxic waste by dumping it in poor countries. According to Spretnak, the flaw of advanced societies in terms of toxic distribution is the “assumption that highly advanced societies could throw toxic substances ‘away’ somewhere and could exude staggeringly unnatural levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into our atmosphere without ill effect” (1–2). Advanced societies believe that they can dump their toxic waste in poorer lands and in the poorer parts of their own countries and protect themselves from the hazards that stem from it. However, as Spretnak also mentions (along with many others), such a view of the human world is flawed as all entities are inextricably intertwined (4). Therefore, advanced societies suffer—as is currently on clear display in our time of climate change—since any hazard given to nature will damage the whole ecosystem rather than just one single part of it.

To connect the Anthropocene to slow violence, it would be appropriate to state that Crutzen’s concept of the Anthropocene also characterizes slow violence. Although the damage resultant from human produced changes on Earth is inflicted slowly, its consequences are grand. It is important here to

consider the nature of our perception of violence, a construct greatly affected by the singularly cataclysmic expressions of violence punctuating the twenty-first century. To accept an event as violent, people expect it to be imposing, even monumental (Nixon 13-14). The collective memory of the post-traumatic society has come to perceive an event as visible enough as long as the event is spectacular and instant. Casualty in the first place became the criterion of a tragic event (13). However, it is not obligatory for an event to be instantaneous to be significant. The twentieth century witnessed environmental disasters which progressed very slowly but caused dramatic consequences (13-14). One such disaster is the drying up of the Aral Sea. The desiccation of an entire sea did not occur overnight. It was spread over time, unfolding gradually. The reason for the desiccation was the harmful agricultural policies in the region. Given that the Aral Sea was the fourth biggest lake in the world after the Caspian Sea, Lake Michigan, and Lake Victoria (the Aral Sea is usually referred to as a sea because of its width; however, it is in fact a lake), the loss of this body of water should be classified as a huge event. However, as the environmental degradation occurred gradually, meting out its destruction day by day, month by month, it was not – at least suddenly enough – marked as a grand event. This catastrophe proves Nixon's argument that environmental disasters do not have to be rapid in order to be categorized as violence. The long-term consequences of the desiccation of the Aral Sea are not less devastating than those of an instantaneous event. The reason for the sea's vanishing is the overuse of the water from the Oxus and Jaxartes rivers for irrigation before they enter the sea (Yilmaz 95). That is to say, the rivers which used to feed the Aral Sea can no longer do so sufficiently because of human intervention. Artificial canals built for cotton agriculture make it impossible for the water to reach the sea. With the increase in cotton agriculture, the demand for water increased, causing the desiccation. Although the damage unfolded slowly, it resulted in the loss of the fourth largest lake in the world.

The fate of the Aral Sea is an example of slow violence leading to dramatic results. As Nixon discusses in his book, the very concept of violence must be questioned. In order, then, to evaluate slow violence from another perspective, considering whether a dramatic event or its aftermath is more significant, an analysis of a book associated with an instantaneous environmental catastrophe may be instructive, as it demonstrates that even a spectacular event can be an outcome of slow violence. It is thus worth mentioning *White Noise* (1984) by Don DeLillo, whose spectacular event, the Airborne Toxic Event, devastated people's lives in the story. The Airborne Toxic Event represents the effects of environmental catastrophes in the first place and in the long run. *White Noise* shows that more attention

must be paid to the long-term consequences than the initial casualty. In *White Noise*, the characters ignore the environmental pollution until it results in a big explosion. The grand event which takes place in *White Noise* is an instantaneous event which people rapidly recognize. However, the characters in the novel sound unaware of the fact that the event is a consequence of slow violence. There is too much technological waste in the area, and the outburst of toxicity causes an unexpected disaster. The Airborne Toxic Event is just the tip of the iceberg and the ensuing consequences are typical of slow violence. Therefore, *White Noise* is a significant work because it gives the message that it is essential to accept slow violence and its dangers.

*White Noise* is the story of Jack Gladney, a college professor who serves as the chair of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill in a small American town. Gladney lives with his wife, Babette, and their children from their earlier marriages: Heinrich, Steffie, Denise, and Wilder. Their lives change dramatically after a train car derails and causes the central issue in the novel: the airborne toxic event. *White Noise* is a very significant work by the post-modern writer DeLillo, in which he examines environmental issues developing rapidly as a result of industrialization. There are two major narratives in the novel: The Airborne Toxic Event and the study of a new psycho-pharmaceutical called Dylar. The two narratives intertwine when Gladney decides to take the unlicensed drug to cope with his post-traumatic fear of death. The reason for the trauma is the airborne toxic event, which causes Gladney to feel the need to use Dylar, which is also a toxic material. That is to say, the type of psychological violence experienced by the character is post-traumatic slow violence.

Gladney's interaction with the material world is an example of trans-corporeality, a term used to explain the interconnection of bodies, the environment, and toxicity, and how they overlap. According to Alaimo, "trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the environment" (*Bodily Natures* 2). Therefore, the human world cannot be separated from the non-human world. *White Noise* is a good example of the attempt to understand the human world both individually and separately; however, it is understood in the end that human agencies are not independent of non-human agencies and human will is not superior to non-human agencies. Alaimo also states that "trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures" (2). The interaction among bodies is seen in *White Noise* as interconnections between human bodies and non-human agencies such as