

IN THE SHADOW OF “KING COAL”: MEMORY, MEDIA, IDENTITY, AND  
CULTURE IN THE POST-INDUSTRIAL PENNSYLVANIA ANTHRACITE REGION

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the cultural and lived experiences of economic abandonment in deindustrialized zones by exploring how residents of a former single-industry economy negotiate this process via communicative constructions of identity, class, and social memory. As this work examines the conflicts about economic decline, class, and memory that inform the predicament of the residents of small towns within Appalachia and beyond, it contributes to ethnographies of deindustrialization in advanced capitalist societies, in zones of mass mineral extraction, as well as to other work on the Appalachian Region. The analysis of these constructions is based on three sets of data: material gathered during two years of offline ethnographic fieldwork in the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania, autoethnography, and the collaboration with local participants *vis-à-vis* a multi-modal and multi-sited *public digital humanities collaboratory* called “the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania Digital Project” (the latter, a term I develop to expand the methodological vocabulary), to which community members contributed through communication forums about the history, culture, and media representations of the Coal Region.

Three narrative chapters analyze a series of lived experiences and theoretical concerns. The first of these chapters, chapter four, analyzes how place, identity, and memory link with past and present class, labor, and industrial dynamics, as well as landscapes left to ruin to demonstrate how, in the Anthracite Region “King Coal” maintains hegemony. Although the mining industry no longer exists as a viable form of employment, inhabitants still consider themselves residents of “The Coal Region,” and dialogue with modes of identification that evolved in the Anthracite Coal Region. These

identifications unite earlier diverse, pan-ethnic identities tied to Europe and are at the basis of the emergence of a new subjectivity—a *coalcracker*—one with family who worked in the mines literally “cracking the coal.” As the landscapes are left to ruin, I develop the term *environmental classism* to conceptualize the impact of the fallout from King Coal.

Chapter five examines dominant mediated imaginaries of Centralia, Pennsylvania, which have become cultural tropes for a modern ghost town. In these dominant narratives, the obliteration of Centralia, subject to an underground mine fire for 57 years, has been largely produced for the consumption, commodification, commercialization, and the aesthetic experience of either tourists or horror genre fans. I term this production *cultural extractivism* or the expropriation of cultural resources, memory artifacts, images, narratives, or stories extracted from a marginalized or forgotten community or culture for use by a dominant community or culture. The chapter shows local residents challenging such *cultural extractivisms*.

Chapter six examines the demolition of the Saint Nicholas Coal Breaker, the last anthracite coal breaker and the largest one in the world, a topic that surfaced on the *public digital humanities collaboratory* and compelled considerable discussion. Research on this discussion demonstrates that this structure served as a coping mechanism for community members. Local residents constructed labor-related identities tied to social memory around it.

These analyses of how Coal Region residents used their agency to create artifacts suggest that media can be a site of resistance. In addition to the artifacts presented on the *public digital humanities collaboratory*, community members submitted and curated their

own (unsolicited) artifacts. Theoretical flashpoints emerged, often resulting in local residents issuing challenges to dominant narratives and politics about the Coal Region.

This ethnographic research involves offline immersive contact with informants extending to online interactions that resulted in methodological and theoretical expansions which provide the basis for communication scholars and ethnographers 1. to rethink ideas about how they conceive online and offline spaces previously thought of in binary terms; and, 2. likewise to reconsider ethnographic research on economic abandonment in marginalized communities beyond urban and rural binaries.

To my both my grandfathers who toiled in the anthracite coal mines.

My “dziadzi” passed on his experiences as a miner for me to re-tell;

To my mother who lived these stories and remembered them.

To my father who lived “patch town” life.

And to the people of the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania,

who shared their culture, narratives, media, and artifacts.

Without these people, this work would not have been possible.

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The great Pulitzer Prize winning author of *The Grapes of Wrath* John Steinbeck had supposedly once said, “A writer out of loneliness is trying to communicate like a distant star sending signals. He isn’t telling or teaching or ordering. Rather he seeks to establish a relationship of meaning, of feeling, of observing. We are lonesome animals. We spend all life trying to be less lonesome.”

As the Steinbeck quote suggests, communication is how we create relationships; make meaning; observe; send signals, and react to these signals. Communication as a discipline is one where we can pursue various approaches to research. My approach was a multi-year ethnography. Such a project doesn’t take short cuts. It takes the long road. It uses terms like “thick description” and “sensitizing concepts.” And Steinbeck’s words connect strikingly to ethnographic work: Observation, meaning, and feeling are the hallmarks of the work of an ethnographer. As an ethnographer who grew up in her research community, I came equipped with particular relationships and reflections that assisted me in engaging those approaches.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This study considers the cultural and lived experiences of economic abandonment in deindustrialized zones by exploring how residents of a former single-industry economy negotiate this process in relation to the communicative constructions of identity, class, and social memory. It is the intention for this work to add to ethnographies focused on deindustrialization in advanced capitalist societies that have highlighted the complicated and intense displacements that plant shutdowns and workplace downsizing inflict on workers and communities (Dudley, 1994; Walley, 2014). The present project adds dimension to ethnographic work done in zones of mass mineral extraction (Stewart, 1996; Kirsch, 2014; Morris, 2008) and Appalachian regional studies (Stewart, 1996; Hufford, 2002; Batteau, 1990). There has been work of a historical nature on deindustrialization (cf. Cowie & Heathcott, 2003a). Yet research on deindustrialization has been focused on global cities (cf. Davis, 2017) while other work has offered more of focus on the aesthetic dimensions of ruins (cf. Edensor, 2005). Out-of-the-way places like the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania, pushed further to the margins by the extractive impulses of industries in *other* areas where the fruits of extraction went, have not often been studied. Studies of deindustrialization tend to focus on urban spaces treating topics like “the ghetto, economic collapse, public housing, or redevelopment” (Beauregard, 2002, p. x).

Some compelling studies of the Anthracite Region however, have been done often by scholars who engaged with the anthracite community using oral history approaches. One such study by historians Thomas Dublin and Walter Licht is *The Face of Decline: The Pennsylvania Anthracite Region in the Twentieth Century*, also cited in this dissertation. Dublin and Licht (2005) use oral history along with the study of mining records, newspapers, and surveys to put together a robust story of labor, ethnic, political, and environmental histories in several Anthracite Coal Region towns. Another study by Dublin, *When the Mines Closed: Stories of Struggle in Hard Times* (Dublin, 1998) includes in-depth oral histories with residents of the region, but also curates the photos of local Anthracite Region photographer George Haravan, who was a coal-miner's son.

Other oral histories focused on the Anthracite Region include those projects around specific mining disasters in the Northern Anthracite Field such as the Knox Mine Disaster (Wolensky, Wolensky, & Wolensky, 2005; Wolensky, Wolensky, & Wolensky, 1999), the Avondale Mine Disaster (Wolensky & Keating, 2008), and the often-overlooked women's garment industry (Wolensky, Wolensky, & Wolensky, 2002). A more recent book cited in this dissertation (Wolensky & Hastie, 2013) focuses on labor, ethnicity unions, and the complex tenancy structures that emerged in the mines.

This present project is distinguished by its ethnographic approach. It is both specific and universal; it offers a close look at the challenges and struggles of a particular coal-mining region, but the insights gleaned from this study also illuminate the experience and patterns of deindustrialization, domestically and globally. As Marx (1981/1894) first noted, mining areas are liminal spaces—defined by highly rationalized production and high population density—

that challenge the rural-urban distinction and invite theorization of the links between out-of-the-way places and more cosmopolitan regions.

Another particular interest that drew me to this study comes from my lifelong connection to the place. My desire to provide an ethnographic study of the cultural and lived experiences of economic abandonment and deindustrialization, one which considers how community members have used media and communication to strengthen identity factors (class, ethnicity, and social memory), took me back to my home area—the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania. A crisis incident in my grandparents’ town, which is also my mother’s hometown, reminded me that the Anthracite Coal Region has been a history of contested identifications, memories, cultural processes, but, to my knowledge, a long-term ethnographic project had not been conducted in the region. Since this incident, the beating death of Mexican immigrant Luis Ramírez Zavala in 2008 by a group of white teenagers who were exonerated of all serious charges in a local court, the town of Shenandoah and the Greater Anthracite Coal Region have occupied a contentious position in the public imaginary as a symbol of racialized violence directed at Spanish-speaking immigrants and also as a white working-class threat to the *symbolic power* (Bourdieu, 1999) of liberal, middle-class values and regimes of representation. A Sundance-financed film was a part of an onslaught of subsequent media about the killing and the town. This story is deeply linked to industrialization and deindustrialization.

This project gives attention to the significance of the coal-mining industry for those who were a part of it and experienced deindustrialization. Moreover, this work enhances our understanding of the transformation of regions as differently situated people confront structural changes associated with memories of industry and negotiations of identities

connected to space and place. The spatial configuration of the Coal Region, with its clear physical relationship to coal interests—not the least of which are company-owned “patch” towns and abandoned coal mines—in various states of decline—continues to shape local relationships. The work seeks to provide some answers to the following questions:

1. How are cultural identities negotiated within a region of post-industrial decline?
2. How does the dialectic between past and present produce social memory in a post-industrial zone and in particular, in its local abandoned town(s)?
3. What is the relationship between local narratives and dominant narratives in post-industrial places and spaces?
4. How do larger cultural tensions around class play out locally?
5. How have community members used media texts, digital media, local cultural production and interpretations of artifacts, and narrative in relation to identity, social memory, and class?
6. In what ways does social memory mediate identity in the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania?

### **Putting the Anthracite Region on the Map**

The Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania occupies a small percentage of the geographic area and of the overall identity of region. Farmlands surround the Appalachian Mountains and economic interests tend to focus on urban issues in the Greater Philadelphia area first and then on smaller cities located in the Lehigh Valley. The wealth created by mining has reached few. For example, by the 1960s, the sole anthracite cities, Wilkes-Barre and Scranton, were the only two urban areas in the U.S. with unemployment rates in the double digits (Wolensky, 2010). In an industry that functions

almost like a colony, “virtually all of Anthracite’s profits went elsewhere, specifically to the coal companies incorporated on Wall Street and in Philadelphia and Baltimore, as well as their shareholders” (p. 68).

Societies are linked in common historical processes. Perhaps nothing exemplifies this more clearly than spaces of mineral extraction and in particular, coal-mining. The wealth from the commodity was sent to the United States’ largest cities from single industry areas like the Anthracite Region; it fueled the Industrial Revolution onward. Pennsylvania has borne the brunt of disadvantage: Pennsylvania has the most abandoned mine lands in the United States (Hopey, 2016)—250,000 acres—thereby impacting 5,000 miles of waterways with pollution and acid mine drainage (AMD) (Zawicki, 2015).

Whereas bituminous coal, mined in most of Appalachia (see Figure 3, Chapter 3, shown in yellow) is often considered primary when the topic of coal-mining comes up, nine counties (see Figure 3, Chapter 3, shown in pink) comprise a small, isolated area in the Appalachian Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania which contains virtually all of the United States’ anthracite coal—almost pure carbon. These fields have the most concentrated supply of anthracite in the world. Centralia, Pennsylvania (located in Columbia County) sits amongst the folds of these mountains.

### **Description of the Chapters**

A summary of the chapters is as follows: Chapter two, “Literature Review,” reviews the literature on identity, social memory, and their links with class construction. It explores the literature on identity to enhance an understanding of how differently situated residents in post-industrial spaces confront the structural changes associated with the decline of industry. Reviewing literature on gender and race identity as well as ethnic relations, it intends to

speak loudly about class as an identity category. The chapter uses Eviatar Zerubavel's (2006) notion of "the elephant in the room" to discuss class stridently arguing that the discussion of class in larger cultural contexts frequently comes with social consequences.

Chapter three, "Approaches and Methodology," outlines the combination of approaches to research that I used to answer the questions that frame this research. Throughout the two years living in the field and another four years that I made periodic visits, I engaged in a breadth of ethnographic approaches. I engaged six ethnographic approaches including: participant observation, unstructured and semi-structured interviews, personal narrative or "autoethnography," the collection and analysis of media discourses, life histories, and the creation, maintenance, and engagement with a *public digital humanities collaboratory*. Methodologically, this project confronts the dynamism of capital, digital interaction, and migration and therefore challenges the notions of a culturally bound "fieldsite" (Marcus, 1995; Hannerz, 1998).

The above offline fieldwork continually informed the growth of a Facebook page which I began in 2013. I later created a WordPress webpage in association with Facebook page. Anthracite Coal Region community members engaged with digital media on both sites resulting in the Facebook exceeding 8500 participants and more than 2500 researcher-written and/or facilitated cultural vignettes. Initially two curated questions were featured on the Facebook site for three years. Participants responded to the vignettes and the digital material. A number of the original participants were people I first came across in my offline fieldwork.

Contributors also submitted and shared their own personal artifacts. Through the comments section, narratives and dialogue ensued about key community incidents. Participants also created and shared their own media to dialogue about the community. This

*public digital humanities collaboratory* offered a place for the Coal Region community to explore and to document cultural experiences and memories.

Chapter four, “Place, Narrative, Identity, and Collective Memory,” demonstrates how place, identity, and memory link with past and present class, labor, and industrial dynamics, as well as landscapes left to ruin. Although the anthracite coal mining industry left the region decades ago, it has remained a central part of memory tied to local identities throughout the region. Local residents recall the ethnic diversity of the region and how that shaped labor identities, violence in the coal mines, and community life. For many residents, such memories were often difficult to reconcile. Since the coal mining industry was not required to clean up the environmental damage it caused throughout the region prior to the era of decline in the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania, these ravages remain on the landscape, in the air, and in the water. Some residents are marked by different forms of illness, by their work in the mines, by their memories, or just by joyful play on mountains of coal refuse that ended up scarring their skin. This place-based form of environmental inequality or, as I am terming it, *environmental classism* has created a flow of out-migration and deterioration of the community’s housing stock. With the process of community decline, *environmental classism* has worsened and prisons, landfills, and toxic waste dumps have been brought into the Coal Region. With the out-migration of residents, a new identity has formed that merges the ethnic diversity of the previous mining generations with the experiences of life on a mined landscape: *coalcracker*. A *coalcracker* is typically used to refer to individuals who have a lived or symbolic experience of “King Coal.”

Chapter five, “Re-Collecting Centralia, Pennsylvania: Supernatural Tropes and Local Memories” examines dominant mediated imaginaries of Centralia, Pennsylvania, which has

become a cultural trope for a modern ghost town, deserted by force because of a mine fire and a subsequent government intervention. It explores how residents take part in and create a public culture wherein they engage with historical, cultural and media representations of the region revealing their own lived memories of the place that stand in contrast to the dominant tropes. Media not only have contributed to the process of untying geographically specific memories from their place, but they led the process by circulating romanticized texts and images that destabilized a sense of place with an industrial/deindustrial past. Building off of Gilloch's use of Barthes' term "punctum," it suggests the addition of the concept of *post-industrial punctum* to our theoretical vocabulary to understand residents' memories of places like Centralia, Pennsylvania. It proposes the term *cultural extractivism* to suggest the dispossession of cultural resources from a marginalized community or culture for the use by a dominant community or culture.

Chapter six, "In the Shadow of the Coal Breaker: *Cultural Extractivism* and Public Communication in the Anthracite Mining Region" explores the narratives that residents tell about the ruins of the Saint Nicholas Coal Breaker. It explores the legacy of the extractive coal industry and considers ongoing extraction in a single-industry area after the departure of an industry. The chapter further explores the concerns of *cultural extractivism* to consider how people were "mined" and communities left resource bare after the coal companies abandoned them. Coal Region residents used social media and engaged with mass media discourses to process the historical and mnemonic relevance, the cultural politics, and the ethical dimensions of the demolition of Saint Nicholas Coal Breaker, a coal processing plant, which was the last anthracite coal breaker built before 1960 and was once the largest coal breaker in the world. The demolition was conducted by a coal mining company engaged in



strip mining on the land. It further proposes the notion of the drone as a “democratizing technology.”

Chapter seven, “In the Shadow of ‘King Coal,’” proposes avenues for further research in areas of post-industrial decline at a time when Spanish-speaking migrants are arriving into deindustrial regions. This proposed research suggests shifting the focus away from idealizing discourses of essentialized cultural difference to prevent conflict between newer and long-time residents. It instead recommends re-thinking these regions in terms of scale as well as political economy and ethnic composition in both the home areas of the migrant newcomers and the long-time residents. Research in small-towns and down-scaled cities then adds dimension to the literature considering that most studies have focused on a binary between rural and urban and thusly focused on the lived experiences of migrants and their neighbors in urban areas.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature discussed below contains the analytical tools crucial to an analysis of the lived and cultural experiences of industrial decline. It lays the groundwork to consider how identities are constructed through shifting positions that involve power and choice, how gender theory may be used to examine such dynamics, and how such theory can then be adapted to considerations of how racialized, ethnicized identities, and class identities mediate self-perceptions. Collective memory is relevant to understanding what makes deindustrialized spaces unique and meaningful and how identifications with place and space remain, despite shifts in landscape, edifices, or other sites. This section ends with literature that explores digital media spaces and communal engagement with both subjects and audience.

#### Identity

Although there has been some debate on the distinctions between *identity* and *identification*, the terms have often been used interchangeably. Alberto Melucci (1996) suggested that the term *identity* is problematic because it can imply that identity is a stable, singular entity. Nancy Morris (1995) notes that *identity* is dynamic and as such, “the

mutability of symbols and symbolic meanings and ... the variability of symbols” associated with identity are often overlooked in discussions of culture (p. 168). Regarding this problem, Stuart Hall (1996) had suggested the use of the term *identification* over *identity* in order to account for the multiple and temporary subject positions that are available in a fluid process of subjectification. Although some scholars hold divergent perspectives about the distinction between the two terms, for the purposes of this project, *identity* and *identification* will be used interchangeably or, when relevant according to the meaning attributed to the term by the specific theorist. Nevertheless, Hall provides the basis of the central argument for the constitution of identity: There is no central, master, or essential identity. Identifications are constituted via subject positions available through cultural codes and through language. What are the processes and the institutions through which these identifications are constituted?

Ideologies mediate the identities of a social subject and then constitute the subject via what Louis Althusser (1989) has characterized as Ideological States Apparatuses (ISAs). Thus, as Althusser (1989) suggests, interpellation involves individuals recognizing themselves as subjects through ideology (Althusser, 1989). Althusser (1972) offers the metaphor of a person who turns around in response when a police officer yells, “Hey, you there!” The person turns around in response. That relatively involuntary response to the linguistic act of hailing is, Althusser argues, a model of how the individual is called into a subject position. In this way, the individual is hailed, or called into a *social subject position*, and *made a subject of a particular social formation*. Upon hearing this “hail” an individual turns around, and “by this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he [sic] becomes a subject” (Althusser, 1972, p. 174). For Althusser, the assignment of a gender, a race, an ethnicity, a nationality, and/or a class is accepted, more or less, without any

conscious choice on the part of the individual. This generalized acceptance is facilitated by the ISAs such as the family, educational institutions, and media, which inculcate these identities, and which tend to reinforce the control of the dominant class. Althusser argues that for any group aspiring to gain state power, it must gain hegemony through the ISAs (1972). These ISAs form a part of civil society (in contrast with what he calls the RSAs or Repressive State Apparatuses which are formally part of the state) and they shape, through non-violent means, class relation, ideas, and social perspectives.

Judith Butler (1997) takes up Althusser's (1989) conception of interpellation of a subject to examine how it frames the possibility for individual resistance or agency. Althusser distinguishes between ideology in general, which interpellates subjects as described above, and ideology in particular. Ideology in general is the commonsense framework of determining the limits of what can be thought in a society. Particular ideologies are the values, traditions, and shared understandings of reality common to members of a particular social group. What are the theories and conceptual tools that account for how subjects negotiate their identities in relation to these ideologies? How does language mediate subjects' positions in relation to these understandings of ideology, and thus, the construction of identity?

Theorists have chosen to use the term "subject" so as to decenter what was once the privileged notion of the individual. Here the paradox of the the-chicken-or-the-egg is resolved through language and the relationship between subject and object. The emergence of a subject does not imply some making of the subject occurs through the mutual construction of the subject and the social processes because "[c]onstruction is neither the subject or its act, but *a process of reiteration* [italics added] by which both 'subjects' and

‘acts’ come to appear at all. There is no power that acts but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability” (Butler, 1993, p. 9). As such, and in following a poststructuralist practice, most theorists engaged in this debate prefer the term “subject” over “individual” or “person” to show the linguistic nature of our positioning within a symbolic order.

Theories of narrative can help explain why subjects invest in certain interpellations. Interpellations (Althusser, 1989) are also “narrative-laden” (Vila, 2000, p. 242). The temporal dimension of narrative allows individuals to make sense of how the intertwinement of past, present, and future propels identity construction. We reconstruct the past as well as the “others” in our narratives through categories and metaphors and often relate an unfamiliar or complex part of reality, to a familiar one. A person tends to accept an interpellation when it gives meaning to her/his particular construction of identity. This acceptance of an interpellation occurs in a process in which interpellations and narratives modify one another mutually, wherein the plot guides the selectivity of the interpellation. The process of evaluation of the relationship between interpellations and narratives can culminate in several ways. The interpellation may be accepted, or it may be rejected; or more likely, interpellations and narratives will modify each other and produce a “more coherent version of the self” (Vila, 2000, p. 246).

More generally, social theorists have been guilty of theorizing through essentialized dynamics between insider and outsider. Against this is a long history of critical work which seeks to render these simplistic binaries more complex and more reflective of a world which rarely functions exclusively according to essentialized oppositions between male/female or black/white. In an effort to challenge such simplistic binaries, black feminists, Chicano

feminists, working-class feminists, and Third World feminists (hooks, 2006; hooks, 2000; Anzaldúa, 1999; Spivak, 1993; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993), to name a few, historically have challenged the theory and practices of the white, middle-class feminism of the 1980s which seemed to generalize white, middle-class experiences to all women. (See also Goodwin, 2006).

As Judith Butler's (1990) conception of performativity advanced feminist theory and queer theory, the applications of her theory to other axes of difference that become markers of identity such as the studies of race and ethnicity become plausible. Butler (1993) began to contest the claim of psychoanalytic feminism that gave sexual difference priority over racial difference and, moreover, that something exists called "sexual difference" that is unmarked by race. Butler argued that sex did not exist apart from gender by questioning the notion of a natural body that preexists normative inscriptions.

To advance this discussion, clarification of Butler's use of the term *performativity* will be helpful to understand processes of identity construction. For Butler (1990), discursive regimes produce gender categories. Butler denies understandings of gender as an ontological category, because for her, the categories of woman/man, homosexual/heterosexual, and the like, are not essential characteristics, but the effects of specific formulations of power. Instead, the body is constructed discursively and therefore it is not experienced prior to or outside of discourse. As Butler shows, gender is constructed through the reiteration and performance of discourses. For Butler, thus gender is performative "that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be . . . gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. [T]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to

be its results” (p. 34). Butler therefore challenges fixed categorizations of identity. Butler means that constitutive acts are determined for us by our place within language and convention. Butler (1993) clarified her theorization of performativity by adding that it is not free play, theatrical self-presentation, nor equal to performance. In addition, constraint does not necessary limit performativity, but rather impels and sustains it. For the study of media and identity, genders “constitute univocal signifiers” thus serving as “a social policy of ... regulation and control” (Butler, 1988, p. 528). What happens when we begin to expand this notion to other identity factors? Can we?

One frame to expand this consideration of how identities are constructed is provided in Judith Butler’s (1999) preface to *Gender Trouble* where she argues that “the question to ask is not whether the theory of performativity is transposable onto race, but what happens to the theory when it tries to come to grips with race” (p. xvi). Anthropological literature has suggested that human characteristics are not fixed genetically, but emerge within processes of development facilitated by culture. Despite the anthropological argument that race has no biological basis, the nature versus culture debate may rehearse and therefore risk reifying racial categories while claiming to argue against their significance. For Butler (1990), a major problem of feminist theory has been the nature/culture split between sex and gender. Butler (1990) argued against the nature/culture split, for it defines sex as pre-discursive; instead, she collapsed the distinction between sex and gender arguing that there is no sex for which there is not already gender.

To expand this conception to racial and ethnic studies and to class studies, we can deploy Butler’s theory in at least two ways. First, we can argue that color and phenotypical characteristics as well as labor categories (along with racially and ethnically-inflected labor

categories), like sex, are not pre-discursive. They are not natural and we should question how they have been naturalized. Here, Michel Foucault's (1995) conception of genealogy offers us the possibility to rescue marginalized discourses and to show that the seemingly natural is in fact not natural and that those discourses have lost the battle for meaning (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Ladelle McWhorter (2005) provides a genealogy of race to look for clues as to when race became a biological concept. McWhorter asserts that racism originates in subjectivity. White privilege is the deployment of racist power, wherein whiteness seems like the norm. Normative whiteness does not mean that white people exercise power to directly harm non-white people, but rather they use the tools that non-white people have not been given. Thus, white privilege is performatively constituted as it is determined for us by our places within language and convention. There is no white identity behind the expressions of whiteness.

Here I would add that under-privileged and socio-economically disenfranchised whites (particularly in rural or abandoned deindustrialized spaces) have been left out of movements to claim the rights of marginalized people and often serve as constitutive outsiders for privileged middle-class whites. The tools of white privilege including the hegemonic discourse of neoliberalism position poor whites as outsiders while the aspirations of those who fit within neoliberal discourses are advanced in dominant narratives. In this case, class dynamics are subordinated to an essentialized notion of race in which it is reductively equated with skin color.

Secondly, if we can argue that race and class, like gender, are not based on an essence, we begin to see that meaning is built around racial and class signifiers; and, like the gender signifier, racial and class signifiers circumscribe boundaries and exclude others. In the



case of a deindustrialized or economically abandoned place, a mode of production (base) which both required and made possible particular forms of ideological interpellation (superstructure) no longer exists but older identifications with the social worlds of industrial labor somehow remain. As such the emergence of “postproletarian” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001, p. 14) society does not necessarily portend the collapse of previously dominant hegemonic discourses which were relatively fixed around “nodal points” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 112) or the (untimely) re-reproduction of structures of industrial labor through subjectification.

Prescriptive identity categories inevitably exclude some. Here, Kwame Appiah’s (2000) provocative concluding statement in his essay “Racial Identity and Racial Identification” applies: “If I had to choose between Uncle Tom and Black Power, I would of course, choose the latter. But I would like not to have to choose.” For Appiah, one’s skin color or sexual body should not be “too tightly scripted” (p. 614). As such, Appiah presents the opportunity to create new and more inclusive ways to speak about race, similarly perhaps to how Butler (1990 & 1993) has spoken about gender. Appiah’s suggestion also allows for consideration of how people’s shifting identifications and the social policy surrounding identities may include resistance and punishment.

But, what about class? To extend this theory to class is complex. Why? Class in the United States become what sociologist and collective memory scholar Eviatar Zerubavel (2006) calls “the elephant in the room.” The main premise of Zerubavel’s “theory of the unsaid” is that cognition is affected by social forces. Thus, denial is a social phenomenon and a collective endeavor that presupposes a mutual avoidance of a topic (Zerubavel, 2006, p. 47). The theory distinguishes between private noticing and public acknowledgment. Denial

occurs socially and depends on a collective “conspiracy of silence,” (Zerubavel, 2006, p. 2). It involves “[s]eparating the relevant from the irrelevant ... as a sociomental act performed by members of particular social communities” (Zerubavel, 2006, p. 25). Therefore, the classed existence in the United States is alive, but is seldom discussed in the mainstream. This dynamic is not unusual or accidental.

Zerubavel (2006) explains how the intensity of a silence is affected by the number of people implicated in it, and the length of time it operates (p. 58), and provides a series of hypotheses about the problems that can result from this, including the possible consequences of breaking that silence such as ridicule and vilification for the silence-breaker (p. 72). Zerubavel explains “meta-denial” or the concept that often the “very act of avoiding the elephant is itself an elephant!” (p. 53).

Critical discussions of class are often silenced in mainstream discourses. Moreover, in the United States, time and time again immigrant workers are described as particular kinds of (usually cheap) racialized labor (Beltrán, 2010) by both supporters and detractors of their presence. On the other hand, neoliberal discourses that tend to reflect middle-class values conflate white-working class identity with racist attitudes.

Whereas the “old identities” (Hall, 2000, p. 144) served to unite, they also silenced others within social movements. The old identities were hierarchical such that men had priority over women, race often had priority over class, and at the same time other movements (such as the Asian movement) were silenced. Similar to Hall’s criticisms, Pablo Vila (2000 & 2003) has criticized the Chicano movement for showing only the positive aspects of the movement and he also showed how the new immigrants at entry points along the Mexico/U.S. border were silenced by some Mexican Americans who were long-time

residents. Vila's criticism aims to raise awareness of this dynamic and have as few people as possible on the outside. Instead of granting epistemic privilege to specific identity categories, Vila urges attentiveness to historical specificity and inequality. Extending Vila's point, (in the next section) I argue for attentiveness to place-based specificity. Human subjectivity is plural, contradictory, socially embedded, and mutually constitutive. Therefore, any hierarchical emphasis on a particular type of emancipatory unity (aimed at emancipation) closes off our ability to observe multiple and contingent sites of identity by claiming epistemic privilege.

In an attempt to consider what happens to the theory of performativity as it comes to grips with race and class, genealogy begs us to consider how the racially gendered and classed body also does not exist outside cultural and social meanings. The bodies are constituted through acts. (Also see Butler, 1993.) Students and theorists of marginalized identity studies should examine and uncover ways in which social construction and certain acts that constitute race and sex and class shape our understandings of bodies, what kinds of meanings bodies acquire, and which practices and acts make our bodies racialized, sexed, and classed. In doing so, we can gain an understanding of social construction in order to resist such construction.

This dissertation seeks to enrich the literature on how identity is experienced and everyday life is imagined in spaces of economic of abandonment, particularly for the residents who face these conditions. Media outlets often cast the (white) working-class "as a monolith and imply an old, treacherous story convenient to capitalism: that the poor are dangerous idiots" (Smarsh, 2016) thus neglecting class dynamics and the structural economic, social, and political disenfranchisement of many residents. In this case, poor or

disenfranchised whiteness has been constructed as having poor character and in the case of contemporary political events manifesting a two-pronged myth about the whiteness and class—“that they are to blame for Trump’s rise, and that those among them who support him for the worst reasons exemplify the rest—[and this myth thusly] takes flight on the wings of moral superiority affluent Americans often pin upon themselves” (Smarsh, 2016). Cultural elites involved in mass media production may lack understanding of the lived conditions of the people about whom they write. (See also Goode, 2005). As such, white so-called working-class identity functions as a problematically situated category, or a “constitutive outside” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, pp. 127-134) to neoliberal notions of diversity.

### **Social Memory**

The discursive practices through which the past is brought up in the present also play a role in shaping identity. Yet scholars’ tendency to function within disciplines distances them from public historical circulations and mediations. The foundation for this argument comes from a distinction between making an “interpretation of history” and having a “sense of history” (Glassberg, 2001, p. 6). Academics engage in the former by gathering evidence and by engaging with theory. The latter, having a “sense of history,” is what most people do: They create identity through thinking about personal experiences of the past as well as collective (or social) memories from the groups to which they belong. But how are these memories formed? The meanings of media and texts are not only contained in the messages proposed by creators, but instead change through active interpretation, changing contexts, and in relationship to people’s diverse sociocultural backgrounds. People care about the past because it shapes their identities which are intrinsically attached to places (Glassberg, 2001).

Media generate “shared memories through processes of selection, convergence, recursivity and transfer” (Rigney, 2005, p. 11). Thus, the materiality of collective memory is evidenced by the fact that it resides in the physical artifacts and cultural forms that surround us; subsequently, these forms and artifacts help us to remember. Therefore, whether or how an event is remembered publicly can influence how it is remembered privately (Zelizer, 1995). Disenfranchised groups often have attempted to challenge official narratives leading to disagreements over meaning around social or cultural memories of prevailing and familiar interpretations of the past wherein “... efforts to assert alternative notions of historical consciousnesses and concomitant collective memories are grounded in a politics that seeks to bring to light historical yet enduring forms of inequality in service of more inclusive presents and futures” (French, 2012, p. 339). Claims for these memories suggest that, “assertions of collective memories are political, polyvocal, and contested” (p. 339).

Writing in the early twentieth century, French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992) is considered to be the first modern theorist and investigator of “collective memory” (Climo & Cattell, 2002). Halbwachs suggested that memory is not simply organized through the mind, but by social arrangements that provide the means for memory reconstruction. With this assertion he thought it impossible for humans to remember coherently outside of social membership. Therefore the (social) organization of remembering as well as commemoration are important to humans. Because humans are social beings, we remember according to the memory frameworks and social practices of the groups to which we belong. Similarly, sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel (1996) suggests that “much of what we remember is actually filtered ... through a process of interpretation that usually takes place within particular social surroundings” (p. 285). While we simultaneously belong to multiple identities, different

identities and identity groups emphasize particular aspects of life. Aspects that are not congruent with particular frameworks of social memory will not be passed on. As such, for Halbwachs (1992), “collective memory is a specific representation of the past based upon present concerns and should be investigated with this mediated perspective at the fore” (French, 2012, p. 339).

Social memory is a culturally mediated social process within a symbolic space comprised of “sign and symbol systems ... as well as ... memory devices and institutions (from notebooks and encyclopedias to libraries, archives and computers), memorials and other architectures and geographies in which memory is embodied and objectified” (Brockmeier, 2002, p. 25). Memory sites can take various forms, material and otherwise, which include: monuments, memorials, language and texts, landscapes, urban environs, testimonies, and embodied performance (French, 2012).

Texts or “memory texts” (Biesecker, 2002, p. 393) generally refer to materials and cultural artifacts of life and community. D. F. McKenzie, (1999) argued that the constitution of a text is not related only to the presence of language, but more importantly, the act of construction. In fact, he maintained that landscapes and places are also texts. Therefore, meaning is produced through responses, communication, circulation, and decontextualization and recontextualization. Collective memory, “cultural memory” (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995, p. 132), social memory, or public memory comprises “that body of reusable [and accumulated] texts, images, and rituals ... whose ‘cultivation’ serves to stabilize and convey” unity or an identity (p. 132, emphasis original). Borrowing from Halbwachs (1992), Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) assert that such memory works through reconstruction related to “an actual and contemporary situation” mediated by “figures of memory” (p. 130). As such, each

context relates to these “figures of memory” uniquely by way of criticism, appropriation, preservation, or transformation (p. 130).

### *Memory of Industry*

The geography of a place is often filled with familiar yet symbolic sites and absences that characterize social memory and establish spatiotemporal reference points for society (Osborne, 2001). Place, landscape, and memory texts such as monuments, memorials, and commemoration sites reinforce collective memory. As part of the process of creating social memory, these sites often reinforce unified identities, but they can also resist them. Landmarks (Halbwachs, 1992) and *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1996) serve as mnemonic devices for narratives, shared versions of the past, and imagined futures. Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire* or memory sites such as archives, memorials, and monuments were necessitated through the process of industrialization and the associated social changes—according to Nora, the necessity emerged because there were no longer real environments of memory. The paradox of capitalism’s dynamic of creative destruction (Schumpeter, 1934) ceaselessly reconfigured built and natural landscapes producing abandoned factories and mining operations, broken windows, boarded up businesses and piles of refuse evoking a sense of place on the peripheries of economic growth. Particular narratives, versions of the past, or imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) require buttressing from placed-based artifacts (Basso, 1997; Althusser, 1989). Dominant social groups offer “official” (ideal, patriotic) interpretations whereas more “vernacular” forms of memory (Bodnar, 1992, p. 122), “memory texts” (Biesecker, 2002, p. 393) and memory sites can be physical places, symbols of places, and discourses about places, as well as discourses about places unmoored from and

later reattached to their previous referents. Conflicts over the commemoration of labor coincide with historical conflicts over ethnic identity.

When industrialized spaces have been marked in the United States, the associated class history is usually not evident in the official narrative (Foote, 1999). Carolyn Kitch (2012) has studied postindustrial and de-industrial memorialization throughout Pennsylvania and found memorials to be “rhetorically ambiguous” (p. 97) at times because many in her study incorporate the tragedy of death along with a celebration of the industrial revolution. Some of the memorials in her study of industrial-related tragedy are out of the way and difficult to find, suggesting that the memories are more community-based and therefore not part of an official national narrative.

Memorials like these and other small markers are scattered throughout the United States, providing testament to the sacrifices Americans made to gain rights and to defend rights during the era of industrialization. The unequal clashes between labor and capital were punctuated by strikes, massacres, and riots; however, the U.S. labor movement has not been memorialized on a grand national scale and labor violence only sometimes has been sanctified at a local level (Foote, 1997). At stake is who is permitted to speak for the industrial past and its future. Conflicts over the commemoration of labor—“martyrs without memorials” (Foote, 1997, p. 295)—coincide with historical conflicts over ethnic identity.

Labor-related national markers are typically associated with industrial and technological achievements. In fact, industrialization and the economic dynamics of which it was a part have not been incorporated in the same symbolic framework of narratives about collective suffering as the wars fought on U.S. soil. Nevertheless, the industrialists (e.g. Rockefeller, Mellon, Carnegie, etc.) self-aggrandized their work, their persons, and



themselves and through their philanthropic dealings, had schools, universities, museums, and other public entities named for themselves:

Not only did [the industrialists] fund or endow ... [these institutions], but their work shaped entire communities both at the factory gate and in the wealthy enclaves they established to escape the urban conditions they helped to create. The success of these endeavors means that the American landscape is presently shaped to reflect industrialization in a relatively positive light, that is, from the perspective of the industrialists who came out ahead. The period of peak industrialization when the great vertically integrated monopolies and oligopolies took shape is known as the “Gilded Age.” It celebrated the victors of the war between industrialists and workers rather than the vanquished (Foote, 1997, p. 300)

If the laborers were not the victors of the Industrial Revolution, certainly small towns and rural areas heavily dependent on specific industries were not the victors of deindustrialization—understood in terms of what Bluestone and Harrison (1984) defined as “a widespread, systematic disinvestment in the nation's basic productive capacity” (p. 6).

How then can industrialization be remembered? Do we remember the victors of the Industrial Revolution and the associated industrial and technological achievements of the industrial age? Or do we commemorate the labor struggles endured by the workers and their families and the subsequent hardship and hurt caused by deindustrialization? According to Jeffrey Abrams (1994), there is no easy answer to these questions. He claims that the heritage industry tries to have it both ways. With “postmodern excess”, the worse the industrial experiences, the worse the industrial landscape, the more “authentic ... [the] attraction” (p. 29). Here Abrams critiques the aestheticization and commodification of the industrial

landscape and the absence of a critical reflection about the link between the “concrete historical decisions of capital [and] the stern political and economic realities besetting rustbelt communities” (p. 29). In critiquing the “heritage industry,” we would do well to consider Walter Benjamin’s (1968) warning against the tendency for mass culture to aestheticize economic processes. In his seminal essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin explains that commodification, for Benjamin, amounts to forgetting that labor has gone into the emergence of an object and subsequently addressing this object as though it had objective value separate from its making in a mode of production.

### *Memory Fragments*

In *The Arcades Project* (1999), Walter Benjamin’s incomplete but posthumously published master work, as well as in “The Berlin Chronicle” (Benjamin, 1978), and his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (Benjamin, 1968), Walter Benjamin adopts a fragmented writing strategy. The spaces between the fragments of text in these essays and fragments of memory are the spaces that the reader must complete in order to finish the narratives. Benjamin developed the approach of fragmentation in relationship to memory largely as a corrective to the impulse to aestheticize material objects. Remembering is a process always to be read backwards from decontextualized ruins. Memory fragments, as Benjamin’s (1968; 1978) work implies, can be retrieved and assembled in new ways.

In her ethnography about the “othered” spaces of West Virginia coal camps, *A Space at the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an “Other” America*, Kathleen Stewart (1996), like Benjamin, experiments with the concept of the fragment and its relationship to memory. Through fragments of writing, she shows how the fragments or vestiges of industry, patch towns, and “the places piled high with collections of used-up things still in use” (p. 41)

narrate "... [i]n the ruin that *remembers*, history and place, culture and nature converge in a tactile image that conveys not a picture-perfect reenactment of 'living pasts' but allegorical re-presentation of remembered loss itself" (p. 90, emphasis original). Organizing her monograph through the allegory of the space at the side of the road, she writes about the local way of speaking about unplanned things happening in spaces on the sides of roads, and the way in which accidents, tragedies, and death just happen to her informants. Through Stewart's ethnographic lens, the space at the side of the road then represents an opening or a disruption to a nationalist story of America on a progressive track replete with democracy, opportunity, education, and capitalism. Stewart transcribes her interviews using methods of ethnopoetics (Hymes, 1996) to evoke the speech patterns of her informants and to preserve the memories enshrouded in their words. She shows how her informants speak about "[o]bjects that have decayed into fragments ... [and] embody ... absence ... [and] haunt ... They become not a symbol of loss but the embodiment of the process of remembering itself; the ruined *place* itself *remembers* and grows lonely" (Stewart, 1996, pp. 92-93, emphasis original). This kind of remembering involves unresolved feelings about the lives and living conditions of the people who reside amongst the piles of discarded materials that function as mnemonic devices and shape discourses and practices in everyday life—evidence of "systemic societal problems" (Kitch, 2007, p. 126).

#### *Memory and Class in Relationship to Identities*

In *Steeltown USA*, Linkon and Russo (2003) study the outfall of deindustrialization in spaces such as Youngstown, Ohio. They find that memory "helps to shape both personal and communal identity, and how individuals and communities see themselves influences their

behavior and their sense of what is possible" (p. 3). The past provides a context for the present to create a shared history, which will develop into "communities of memory" (p. 3).

In order to understand how memories are formed in the city, Linkon and Russo examine printed and visual media produced in the city. Their findings reveal a tension between dominant (class) representations and vernacular (class) representations. For example, the materials created by the steel companies made little reference to the workers; in contrast, media and oral histories created by the union and the workers highlighted the workers. Their review of a school textbook series, an example of what Althusser (1989) would call an ISA, reveals an emphasis on commonalities and ignorance of class stratifications—these constructs benefit the dominant middle-class by encouraging labor productivity and conflict avoidance.

Linkon and Russo show how, when the steel mill closed and the process of deindustrialization was underway, a struggle ensued over collective memory between those who thought that the steel-making past should be forgotten and those who believed that the past should be acknowledged. Sometimes the clashes between these two versions of memory played out in public including a failed attempt to preserve the Jeannette blast furnace from demolition (Linkon & Russo, 2003b).

In other work on postindustrial Youngstown, Linkon and Russo investigate diverse media representations of the city ranging from national news, newspaper articles, to film, and business articles revealing how such representations were taken up locally and subsequently how they began to shape the city's identity. The media tended to use the city as an allegory for failure, desperation, and sometimes ridicule while generally avoiding critique of the business decisions leading to Youngstown's deindustrialization. After the steel mills shut

down, the city's unemployment skyrocketed, the out-migration of youth accelerated, and crime increased. The newest economic stimuli to the city came through the building of prisons, which was also publicized in the media as a metaphor for desperation (Linkon & Russo, 2003a). After all, who would bring prisons into their city if they were not desperate? Some residents internalized these external evaluations of their city while others became angry or the denied them. Even the well-intentioned activism of Bruce Springsteen and the song he wrote about Youngstown, aptly entitled "Youngstown," was used in the media to deflect attention away from the corporate disinvestment in Youngstown and eventually to portray the town as desperate. These scholars (Linkon & Russo, 2003a) assert that class is the major means of stratification arguing that working-class, post-industrial communities like Youngstown need to reclaim their pasts and to examine the erasure of community memory facilitated by the circulation of texts and the fragmentation of collective memory.

Bright (2011) notes concerns with the representation of class in scholarship. He explains that pp. 67-68) coal-mining communities have fallen from their "position as *cause célèbre* of the liberal intelligentsia ... [Q]uestions of class exclusion and contested access to power in places such as these have been collapsed into a racialized discussion about the 'white working class'" who are often positioned as having an "intellectual *and* moral deficit" (emphasis original) and/or are explained "in terms of middle-class values" in news coverage (Kitch, 2007, p. 127).

Deindustrialization, the economic process of extracting the jobs from a community and deserting the artifacts of industry—shuttered buildings and waste facilities—leaves a community to struggle for reinvention and to claim narratives from commodification and aestheticization. Larger cultural tensions around class have circulated in the media in the

wake of the election of U.S. President Donald Trump, U.K.'s Brexit, and the killing of Mexican immigrant Luis Ramírez Zavala. The contemporary emeshment of class, local identities, post-industrial decline, and the social memory of the presence of industry requires careful ethnographic work in order to advance theoretical terminology and methodological approaches that may follow the lived experiences of residents in such communities.

### **Places and Spaces of Communal Engagement Multi-modality, Multi-sitedness, and Digital Ethnography**

The lived experiences of residents in a community are in continual flux. Yet there is not some “out there” in which a community engages; rather subjects’ identities as well as communal place and space dynamics reconfigure, are renegotiated, and also transform where such engagements occur (cf. Boellstorff, 2010). Interacting with or conducting research in a community means pragmatically adapting to its “interconnectedness of culturally driven practices and norms” (boyd, 2008, p. 46). It means recognizing that communities and subjects are multi-modal and sometimes multi-sited and therefore ethnographic fieldsites are not necessarily limited by an online/offline boundary.

#### *Early ethnography*

In order to understand the relevance of *multi-modality* to communal engagement on digital spaces, it helps to visit the ideas of traditional ethnography. The assumption of classic ethnography has been that the researcher must take part in and live in a particular place for an extended period of time, being careful to immerse oneself while remaining detached. This kind of ethnography is typically understood as a written account of “the social organization, social activities, symbolic and material resources, and interpretive practices” (Duranti, 1997, p. 85) of a group of people. Such an account is made by participation in the community social life and the entwinement and reconciliation of two qualities: the ability to distance

oneself from one's own cultural biases or an etic view and the ability to develop an empathy and an inside perspective or an emic view. A classic example of such work is Clifford Geertz's (1972) study on Balinese cockfighting.

While ethnography does not rely on one particular research method, the most common approaches to ethnography involve observation and interviews. Ethnographic researchers may collect other material depending on the nature of the setting; however, the researcher is always assumed to be "in the field." The *field* in traditional ethnography, has been understood as an actual "recognizable place to go that contains the people we are interested in" (Hine, 2012, p. 24). The name ethnographic *fieldwork* serves as a collective term to gather all of the approaches that a researcher may use to formulate as thick and detailed of a description and analysis as possible of the community studied.

Some of the earliest work in anthropology by Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) commenced the fundamental ethnographic assumption that an ethnographer should use participant observation in the field to garner the native's point of view. Thus, the so-called approach of *participant observation* is most typically associated with ethnography. With participant observation, the researcher plays a part in the interactions, activities, and events of a group of people to learn about their lives and their culture. This research method is a means to learn both explicit and tacit aspects of the culture (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

#### *Multi-modality and communication*

To apprehend ethnography that involves the internet, it will assist us to outline some related concepts and changes. In the 1990s, the experience of using the web usually involved relatively one way communication with stationary content and the traditional webpage. By the 2000s, there was a move from this earlier form of the web, web 1.0 to web 2.0. Web 2.0

was replete with uploaded videos, Facebook “likes,” consumer transactions, and unlimited blogging. Web 2.0 also provided solutions to technological problems and developed innovations such as wikis, social network sites, and RSS feeds (Lindgren, 2017). Lastly, it shaped the thinking about how we actually *make* things and how we connect (Gauntlett, 2011; Lindgren, 2017).

The idea of exchanging content of any kind (image, text, audio, video) with large numbers of groups, friends and interacting with it, tagging it, and linking it to other spaces has created what some have called a “democratic nature of Web 2.0” (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008, n.p., as cited in Lindgren, 2017). While association has been debated, the new web 2.0 has allowed new kinds of social interaction and knowledge creation that were not as possible with web 1.0. It also opened up the possibility for diverse users to mix, re-mix, and edit multi-modal content—that is—content that makes use of various modalities (e.g. sounds, written text, images, videos, and more).

These semiotically rich environments present various forms of text ranging from literature to social media. Yet when we speak of “social media” it should be recognized that people *shared through media prior to web 2.0* (Lindgren, 2017). As Nancy Baym (2011) suggests, the web 2.0 should be viewed an extension of social phenomena instead of a transformation of these phenomena. In other words, social networks among friends who like each other preceded social networks on the internet that utilize the concept of “friends” who “like” each other.

A print and screen-based society instantiated the evolution of the term “multi-modality” with the growth of digital technology. Yet the foundations of the concept of multi-modality come from discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is an approach to the analysis of



communication with research flowing from linguistic anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, and communication (Schiffrin, Tannen, & Hamilton, 2001). The terms *discourse* and *discourse analysis* hold different meanings for scholars from different fields. The term *discourse* in some social sciences and philosophy contexts may refer to ideologies and belief systems, and not to language use. This *discourse* has been called *discourse* with a capital D, whereas *discourse* with a small d is concerned with language use (He, 2000). I use the definition of *discourse* from Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) which states that “discourses are socially constructed knowledges [sic] of (some aspect of) reality” (p. 24, parentheses original). Through this definition, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) allow for discourse to exist disembodied from its mode of realization while at the same time allowing for the idea that discourse appears in language, as in other modes.

*Mode* is a way to make meaning through culturally and socially saturated representations and communication. These representations and communication depend upon the medium and cultural context. This concept can be evidenced by the simple example of looking closely at the example of the house (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 24).

[The] domain of the ‘house’ and of the ‘living’, as it is articulated discursively and textually in everyday practices, such as where and how we live – the kinds of spaces we inhabit, the kinds of things we do in them, the way we ‘furnish’ them, the way we use spaces ... the texts ... include the everyday practices of ‘ordinary’ humans as much as the articulations of discourses in more conventionally text-like objects such as magazines, TV programmes ... all of them are sites where discourses appear.

As noted, according to analysts of multi-modal discourse, language is one mode among many that can be involved in communication (Kress, 2009; Unsworth & Cléirigh, 2009; Norris,

2004; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). Additional modes include: images, writing, layout, speech, embodied practices, and sound. Thus, as Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) point out, discursive action occurs in many practices and modes.

#### *Multi-modality “offline”*

As an instance of multi-modality, linguistic anthropologist Marjorie Harness Goodwin (2006), in her ethnography *The Hidden Life of Girls*, illuminates the manner in which girls create social worlds through talk-in-interactions. Goodwin conducted ethnographic research spanning three years in a progressive California elementary school in the 1990s during recess and lunchtime aided by the use of video recordings. The author studied both the linguistic and embodied practices that the preadolescent girls of mixed ethnicities in her study used to create in-groups and out-groups amongst their peers.

However, Goodwin (2006) began her research more broadly, first conducting general participant observation in various classes and different lunch periods, and then paring the participant observation down to about fifty children and specific lunch times and recess periods. As part of her early-stage research, she also followed a group of six girls closely “[i]n order to understand the ebb and flow of children’s activities in some depth” (p. 74). It was from her initial broad-based participant observation that she concluded that recreation and playtime would be the richest places to explore girls creating their social worlds. Moreover, it was also through this initial phase that she found the research informants that she would follow for the three-year study.

The second chapter of Goodwin’s (2006) book entitled “Multimodality, Conflict, and Rationality in Girls’ Games” (p. 32) counters Carol Gilligan’s (1982) assertion that girls are more cooperative than boys. Here Goodwin (2006) shows instead that girls of all ethnicities

and classes construct opposition and demonstrates that they in fact seek it out. The girls accomplish such states through particular multi-modal practices including the utilization of “turn shapes initiated by forms of polarity and response cries,” the use of “negative person descriptors” that categorize their targets, the use of increased volume and intensified intonation, “embodied performances” including touching players and demarcating spaces hopped on with tapping and jumping, “all within the built social world of the game grid” (p. 72).

A strength of Goodwin’s (2006) approach is not necessarily that she has moved beyond the “hearsay method of fieldwork” (Malinowski, 1923/1959, p. 120) such as interviews and verbal reports, but that she begins her research with broad-based participant observation and later approaches her work using video technology and analyzes the multi-modal embodied practices that the girls exhibited in the interactions and in their co-creation and use of the physical world.

Video recordings provide a more comprehensive image of embodied activity in multiple semiotic fields. Scholars such as Ochs (1979) had long argued that linguistic transcripts of children demonstrated preferences for verbal communication over nonverbal behavior. Such a modality (the transcript) was based on researchers’ goals, methods of recording, and the use of analyses of adult communicative behavior as models. Goodwin (2006) fills this gap by incorporating multi-modality in her research and moving analyses of children’s communication beyond the limits that Ochs (1979) found.

Goodwin’s (2006) research adds to a growing body of literature that uses video technology to provide a more complete picture of different communication modalities. (See García-Sánchez, 2011; Goodwin, 2000). Thus Goodwin’s monograph provides a strong

example of an ethnographic approach using video technology that takes micro-level analyses of girls' moment-to-moment situated activities to reassess macro-social concerns about power relations and girls' agency. Through this approach, the author challenges essentialist readings of language and gender leaving room for additional research on the situated development of linguistic and embodied identities.

*Ethnography for the Internet: Multi-modal, multi-sited*

This concept of multi-modality lends itself to Internet ethnography. Sociologist of technology Christine Hine (2015) draws on literature from multi-modality, multi-sited ethnography, and technology studies to explain what she calls an “ethnography *for* the Internet.” Her multi-modal approach to ethnography for the Internet, does not treat an online/offline boundary as a the limitation for ethnographic fieldsites. Instead, this approach accepts that cultural concerns will often cross that boundary “or be agnostic about the existence of such a boundary as an organizing principle for social experience” (p. 54).

Hine (2015) offers the E3 framework of internet—an embedded, embodied, and everyday phenomenon. Instead of treating the internet as a “cyberspace” that exists separately from offline life, she suggest that the Internet is *embedded* in various circumstances, in the practices of daily life, in institutions, in devices, and that there is continuity between online and offline use. Hine (2015) explains that: “In popular discourse and everyday experience, the Internet has become much more routinely a place to express an *embodied* self rather than a place to leave the body behind” (p. 43, emphasis, my own). The contemporary Internet's *everydayness* is very much imbricated with its embedded and embodied characteristics making digital communication “mundane and unremarkable ... simply an infrastructure that offers a means to do other things” (p. 46, emphasis, my own).

Hine (2015) further notes, cultural ties and processes of making meaning do not necessarily coincide with convenient geographic spaces. George Marcus (1995) suggested in his earlier theory of multi-sited ethnography (1995) that ethnographers follow world systemic realities (people, objects, stories, and metaphors) instead of remaining in one place. Moving from site to site, however, does not suggest that ethnographers can always build deeper cultural renderings. Setting up boundaries and being responsible for the limits they create can still be useful (Candea, 2007; Hine, 2015).

Studying the *processes* may require investigations in more than one site (Hannerz, 1998). The innovation implied by multi-sited ethnography challenges the comforting paradigmatic notion of an ethnographer tied to a specific geographic location uniquely able to produce a deep ethnographic account yielding the mythic “ethnographer’s magic” (Stocking, 1983). To these ideas, Hine (2015) adds that, the “highly consequential nature of the choice of field site ... [has] much to say to the central issue of how we are to do ethnography for the Internet” (p. 26). Although it is possible to cut and delimit a fieldsite “by a particular online forum, or a particular group of people, such spatially constrained choices will often be theoretically limiting” (p. 26). Creativity and openness regarding fieldsites allow different connections to be pursued in an ethnography for the Internet. It is not possible to study or know the entirety of the Internet ethnographically; ethnographers should explore what it means to people to have the Internet in their lives. The ethnographer’s participation “becomes a way of getting close to that lived experience of the Internet, developing an understanding of how it feels to navigate the social textures of everyday life” (p. 27).

*Digital ethnography and community engaged practices*

A recent example of digital work involving deindustrialization that engages community is Christine Walley's Exit Zero Project. Walley (2015) explains "*transmedia* as experimental ethnography" (p. 624) in her work on the Exit Zero Project. The project deals with deindustrialization in Southeast Chicago and the links between industrial job loss and expanding class inequality throughout the United States and builds on experimentation with text, image, audio, and online media. The first two parts of the project, a book and a film, fashion together the personal stories of Walley's father, a former steelworker, along with her own stories and those of her family members and community members. The third part is an "in-progress online archive and storytelling site" that is a collaboration with a local, community-based museum.

Walley (2015) not only sees her project as adding "multiple modes of sensory apprehension" (p. 636), but she asks: Must a scholar accept existing hierarchies or can s/he "simultaneously accept responsibility for authorship *and* adequately recognize the voices of alternative projects of those with whom we work?" (p. 636) Transmedia work for Walley (2015) is promising because it allows a project to appear in multiple "genres, styles, forms, and authorial voices" (p. 636). The transmedia work fosters different styles of interaction and creates an online and offline dialogue between its various parts.

Another recent example of community engagement online is Margo Shea's (2018) work about participatory methods, place, and, social memory. Shea (2018) argues that because memory is socially constructed and it is intimately tied to place, collaborative research and research that otherwise utilizes participatory methodologies offer a particular significance to the scholarship of memory studies and place. By using participatory research

methodologies, digital tools such as participatory project design, crowdsourcing, participatory community mapping, and community curation, Shea (2018) argues that the individual and social functions of cultural memory are more readily visible to all participants in collaborative projects. In this sense, she suggests that:

[o]pen-ended projects have the potential to claim and make visible diverse kinds of knowledge, expertise and goals. Participatory, collaborative research methodologies in the areas of place and memory require a renegotiation of roles between researchers and non-researchers, scholars and publics, universities and communities. (p. 187)

Shea (2018) adds that participatory methods create memory processes that perform the same functions and forms memory takes in community life including “establishing connections, developing usable pasts, negotiating multidimensional relationships between the individual and the group, and producing ... narratives of community values, worries and aspirations” (p. 187).

Memory work has often lacked privilege within academia. Shea (2018) further points out that when scholars engage in participatory research, it is often “rendered invisible, and the scholarly contributions are unheralded” (p. 188). Yet, it is the practices that the scholar uses to minimize his or her voice that propels the voices of community-based work. These epistemological processes and objectives in and with local communities “can interrupt the ways scholarship tends to reproduce unequal relationships between researchers and non-researchers, scholars and publics, universities and communities” (p. 188) thereby offering new ways for understanding memory and place.

## CHAPTER 3

### APPROACHES AND METHODOLOGY

#### A Call Back to the Anthracite Coal Region

In recent communication scholarship, Jaime Loke (2013) claims that the online space surrounding the news of the killing of Mexican immigrant Luis Ramírez's killing in Schuylkill County's local paper, *The Republican Herald*, (the county where the murder took place located in the heart of the Anthracite Coal Region), "showed that this public space was not only an outlet for citizens to amplify *socially regressive views* [emphasis added], but also presented a challenge for professional journalists, as it highlighted the necessity of engaging with such views effectively beyond simply avoiding 'politically incorrect' terms" (p. 179). In the Ramírez crime, a group of white teenagers beat the victim to death and were found "not guilty" of all serious charges in a local court. Several of the teens later faced federal prosecution for hate crimes. Yet to truly move beyond the simple avoidance of "politically incorrect terms," it is necessary to consider how working-class and economically disenfranchised people are explained "in terms of middle-class values" as explained by another communication scholar Carolyn Kitch (2007, p. 127) in her work on the news



coverage of the 2006 West Virginia Sago Mining Disaster (Kitch, 2007, p. 127). The portrayals that Kitch notes can be present in both media as well as in scholarship.

The Anthracite Coal Mining Region has been positioned outside of mainstream dialogue as the latter has failed to draw a portrait of the complex conditions common to late-capitalism which include the multifaceted ways in which people experience and confront conditions in their daily lives within the Coal Region, as they encounter media representations of themselves and the Region, and as they negotiate these dialogic boundaries. For example, a database search of ProQuest Historical Newspapers of *The New York Times* using the term “anthracite” and excluding classified ads and simple mentions of the term in other articles produced only six articles dealing with the Anthracite Coal Region in a 30 year span—since 1988. Each of these six articles dealt with crises in the Coal Region: Three focused on the Centralia mine fire, one on the killing of Luis Ramírez, one on historical labor strife in the region involving the Molly Maguires, and the final one, “In a Gritty Town, Hope Outlives Prosperity,” dealt with decline in the town of Shamokin and mentioned local hope for employment as construction of a new prison began in the area. In terms of representation, there were few articles in this mainstream national newspaper and those articles printed *talked about* residents more than *talking to* them, revealing a perhaps (un)intentional exclusion of residents in deindustrialized zones. Such exclusion is what partially motivates this dissertation.

In terms of positioning, I felt well-suited to conduct this research project. I hail from the small town of Frackville in the Coal Region flanking Shenandoah, where I grew up amongst family members who labored in local mines. Wrestling with my own working-class identity, I left the area to become, at the time, one of a few college graduates from my

hometown—an education, which as Pierre Bourdieu (1984) explains, would partially shape me through a system of power relations in which small distinctions of taste become the basis for social judgment. Often my grandfather’s words haunt me as I imagine him beginning his tenure in the mines at the age of eight: “If you don’t work with your brains, you must work with your back.” His words mark a historical and a personal rupture—for as this project suggests, “class” mobility is an exercise in ambivalence. Leaving the economically-abandoned mining region put me out of my family’s known social world.

Through this project, I wished to “mine ... a self” that was “entwined in family [and community] relationships” (Walley, 2013, p. 15; cf. Bourdieu, 2008; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Waterson & Rylko-Bauer, 2006). Like me, many residents have memories of family members dying of black lung disease or in mine-related accidents. These common experiences made me an insider to the landscape—one who lived on the land and experienced deindustrialization. Familiarity with the region allowed me greater access to interview subjects and ensured increased sensitivity to the modes of language and self-representation which defined the Anthracite Region’s residents. Intimate familiarity with my fieldsite became crucial as many long-term residents of the Anthracite Region have closed ranks against media or government “outsiders”. Furthermore, my ability to speak fluent Spanish and my experience living and working in Mexico allowed me to conduct research in the Spanish-speaking communities in the Anthracite Region, especially in Shenandoah and in Hazleton.

As communication scholar and ethnographer Sarah J. Tracy (2013) explains, when working in qualitative research (in contrast to quantitative research) the descriptions of methods “often flows into the stories, observations, and interactions collected. Qualitative

researchers do not reserve the writing for the end of project, using it instead as a way to reflect on their already discovered results” (p. 25). As stated earlier, this project has six research questions:

1. How are cultural identities negotiated within a region of post-industrial decline?
2. How does the dialectic between past and present produce social memory in a post-industrial zone and in particular, in its local abandoned town(s)?
3. What is the relationship between local narratives and dominant narratives in post-industrial places and spaces?
4. How do larger cultural tensions around class play out locally?
5. How have community members used media texts, digital media, local cultural production and interpretations of artifacts, and narrative in relation to identity, social memory, and class?
6. In what ways does social memory mediate identity in the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania?

In order to answer these research questions, I employed six different ethnographic methods—participant observation, unstructured and semi-structured interviews, the creation, maintenance, and engagement a *public digital humanities collaboratory*, the analysis of media narratives, life histories, and “autoethnography.”

The study of the cultural and lived experiences of deindustrialization in relationship to identity, social memory, and class expands across a scale encompassing the politics of time. Evidence gathered on relationships, experiences, consumption and transformations and documented in the present has relationships to the past. This encompassing endeavor was accomplished by linking ethnography, communication studies, memory studies, identity

studies, digital humanities, anthropology, and critical theory. Throughout the project, I have avoided the separation of these kinds evidence because of the shifting and contested qualities of identity and memory. The result is a place-based portrayal of post-industrial decline and the complexities involved in negotiating cultural identities.

Given that my project was marked by long-term immersion in a community of the course of years, each of my research approaches were used for all the questions outlined *except* in the case of the fifth question: How have community members used media texts, digital media, local cultural production and interpretations of artifacts, and narrative in relation to identity, social memory, and class? Given the nature of question 5, I mostly interacted with community members on the *public digital humanities collaboratory*.

The sections below detail a summary of my approaches to research and participation in the community; they discuss my approaches to multi-sited research and explain my research sites; there is a broader section detailing the significance of autoethnography to this project and my experience as a native researcher re-entering the field. Later, I address a theoretical consideration that I developed during fieldwork about “the ethnographic interview as participation”. The final section develops ideas about a digital future for the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania Digital Project.

### **Approaches to Research and Participation in Community Dialogue**

The ethnographic fieldwork material for this study has been gathered in the Anthracite Region and its “diaspora” from 2010 to 2017 as part of this dissertation and also from my long-term/lifelong engagement with the studied communities—as a member of a family that labored in anthracite coal mines for generations, as the daughter of a “coal patch”

resident, and as a physical body that confronted the environmental and geographical realities of the region.

Contextualizing life in a single-industry deindustrialized zone like the Anthracite Region involves recognizing what Raymond Williams (1977) calls “structures of feelings”—social experiences uncertain, changing, and in process—inextricable from the socio-historical and situated experiences that have produced them. Approaching these experiences necessitates a geographically specific telling of fragmented personal stories which sit at the margins of *re-collection*. Here, non-dominant memories mix with institutional narratives and sometimes challenge them.

The ethnographic fieldwork for this project consists of a gamut of approaches employed over the course of years. I observed and elicited personal experiences, local histories, official and unofficial stories, as well as relevant texts and materials. In order to gather this data, I employed six ethnographic methods: participant observation, unstructured and semi-structured interviews, the creation, maintenance, and engagement with what I call a *public digital humanities collaboratory*, the analysis of media narratives, life histories, and personal narrative or “autoethnography;” my approach to method flows directly from the theoretical arguments expressed in this dissertation. For instance, the traditional assumption that culture maps onto a bounded “fieldsite” is problematic when examining the dynamics shaped by the flow of capital, of migration (Marcus, 1995; Hannerz, 1998) and of digital interaction. A more dynamic approach to space and place is needed, as this project examines the movement and flows of subjects, practices, and discourses involving all three of the concerns mentioned above: the flow of capital, of migration, and of digital interaction.

Thus space and place function as unifiers for this dissertation because they connect social memory with identity. Although speakers and writers tend to use the terms as synonyms, they do not function this way in the present project. Following Doreen Massey (1994), space is constructed out of social relations, which are dynamic and temporal. “[S]pace-time” is a “configuration of social relations ... [and these] social relations are inevitability and everywhere imbued with power and meaning and symbolism ... the spatial is ... an ever shifting social geometry of power and signification” (p. 3). According to this definition, the spatial involves the relationships between capital, geography, household, landscape, political power, the workplace, and more. These dynamics are in constant shift.

The ability to think about spatial relationships in this way invites the following definition of place: “One view of a place is as a particular articulation of those relations [space-time as formed out of social interrelations at all scales], a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings” (Massey, 1994, p. 5). That is, “identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple” (Massey, 1994, p. 5). The uniqueness of a place is drawn through “the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections *to* that ‘beyond’” and not through drawing boundaries (Massey, 1994, p.5, emphasis original).

Throughout this project, places and spaces are clearly distinguished through not only the use of the terms, but the descriptions that explain either the social relations and their power significance or interconnections and cultural links. Some terms used through the text include: “landscape,” “mine(s),” “site(s),” “ruin(s),” “breaker(s),” town names (Centralia, Shenandoah, etc). “road(s),” “street(s),” “home(s),” “house(s),” “church(s),” “synagogue,” “creek/crik,” “environment,” “mine fire,” “building(s),” and more, render locations spaces or places.

## **1. Participant observation**

My participant observation involved accompanying people in their work, community and social events, and religious services throughout the Coal Region. I did preliminary research between November 2010 and June 2014, making trips to the area. I spent two years physically living in the field, from July 2014 to July 2016. I spent time at community events and volunteered or accepted invitations to volunteer. I accepted invitation to dinners and helped with washing dishes. I attended community film events and notated resident responses. I attended ethnic festivals and diversity events. I engaged in the “participatory transects” (Bernard, 2002, p. 332) method, in which I asked informants to take me on informal filmed tours of these areas. I spent longer periods of time in significant sites: a convenience store owned by a recent migrant and local churches. I attended events that publicly performed diversity like the annual Heritage Day celebration in Shenandoah, PA several times.

## **2. Interviews**

I identified 40 interviewees primarily using “snowball sampling” methods (Bernard, 2002, pp. 185-186) beginning with connections cultivated through my longtime attachment to this place. For example, in many instances, I reached out to people from my childhood. My mother was an invaluable key informant. She spent her life in the Anthracite Coal Region in Schuylkill County, a coal miner’s daughter. She reminded me of family stories and of connections to which I was either not privy or that I had forgotten. Not only did she suggest interviewees, but she also served as a well-connected member of the community who introduced me to her friends or acquaintances.

The ethnographic interview, then is a more structured method of information gathering and when used in conjunction with participant observation, it tends to be informal. As a complement to participant observation, interview goals may be to allow the interaction to flow, to refrain from obstructing informants' communication, and to allow them to speak (Bernard, 2006). Bernard (2006) has outlined a continuum of control that the informant has in interviews from lowest to highest: Interviews can range in level of control from a conversation, to unstructured interviews, to semi-structured interviews, structured interviews, and lastly self-administered questionnaires. There can often be a participant-observer role associated with certain types of interviewing (Briggs, 1986).

Since I used primarily unstructured and semi-structured interviewing in the present research, I will provide more details on how to conduct such interviews. Unstructured interviewing involves a clear plan, but the researcher has little control over interlocutors' responses (Bernard, 2002). A researcher will find this kind of interviewing most useful when there is significant time available, such as during a long-term fieldwork engagement or if she or he has the opportunity to interview the same informant on multiple occasions (Bernard, 2002).

Informal "conversational interviews" that are "emergent and spontaneous" are called "ethnographic interviews;" however, the researcher has to catalyze this interaction, for example, during interludes in activities during fieldwork in order to direct the focus to his or her questions (Tracy, 2013). Bernard (2002) points out that much of what is called ethnographic interviewing can thusly fit under the rubric of unstructured interviewing.

Semi-structured interviewing involves having a clear plan, just like unstructured interviewing, but the researcher must prepare an interview guide. The interview guide offers



a list of questions and topics meant to be covered, often in a particular order, but the researcher still allows openings for new leads, avoiding excessive control (Bernard, 2002). This type of interviewing is particularly useful in the cases in which the researcher may only get one chance to interview someone (Bernard, 2002).

In the present research, semi-structured interviews explored residents' individual histories, what it means to live in the "Coal Region," the boundaries that govern the interactions of residents and outsiders, their experiences of the past and present, and thoughts of the future, why they thought the mines closed, and memories of the Coal Region's mining past and its economic decline. (See Appendix). In order to investigate how class-related violence reverberates through the lives of individuals, I tracked discussions of mining deaths, mine-related accidents, strikes, and scarcity, along with the everyday strategies that residents deploy to handle them. I paid particular attention to descriptions of life in female-headed households and experiences of losing one's father in the mines. (The living arrangements in patch towns were such that the mining companies owned towns and thereby the houses. Families would typically be immediately evicted upon the occupational death of a miner unless the widow could produce another worker to maintain the house.) I attended to local experiences of the economic impact of living in a single-industry extractive region in which the industry employed only males.

Interviews explored how community involvement may have changed over time, and memories of the Coal Region's mining past and its economic decline. I also interviewed informants like the owner of a bar which is a place of vernacular remembrance for the still controversial Irish-American Molly Maguires. I conducted interviews with Coal Region

newcomers to grasp their reasons for moving to the area. In particular, I focused on their positions in local structures and their understandings of the “Coal Region.”

Moving from general to more specific questions depending on the responses of the interlocutor, I inquired about what the person’s town was like when they were young, what kinds of educational opportunities are available locally, why the mines closed, and more. I did not ask the same questions of all interviewees, varying instead what I said according to the backgrounds, positions, and interests of my interlocutors.

### **3. Self-narrative and Autoethnography**

I’ve analyzed my own experiences (e.g. playing around orange-colored streams and dealing with water boil advisories) and those of my family members—initially migrants who were coal miners for generations, many of whom died as a result of mining, and many of whom started their work as children—as they relate to larger social processes (cf. Bourdieu 2008; Walley, 2013; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Waterson & Rylko-Bauer, 2006). I investigated my feelings and experiences and challenged them by comparing them with interviews, media research, literature, and participant observation.

### **4. Public Digital Humanities Collaboratory**

On my personal Facebook page, I decided to post a juxtaposition of images of Centralia, Pennsylvania (see Figure 1) with a corresponding caption in December 2013. This decision evolved from encountering ubiquitous horror-related mediated accounts about the town and from running into visitors coming to the Coal Region who lacked similar class experiences as my family, as other locals, or as me.

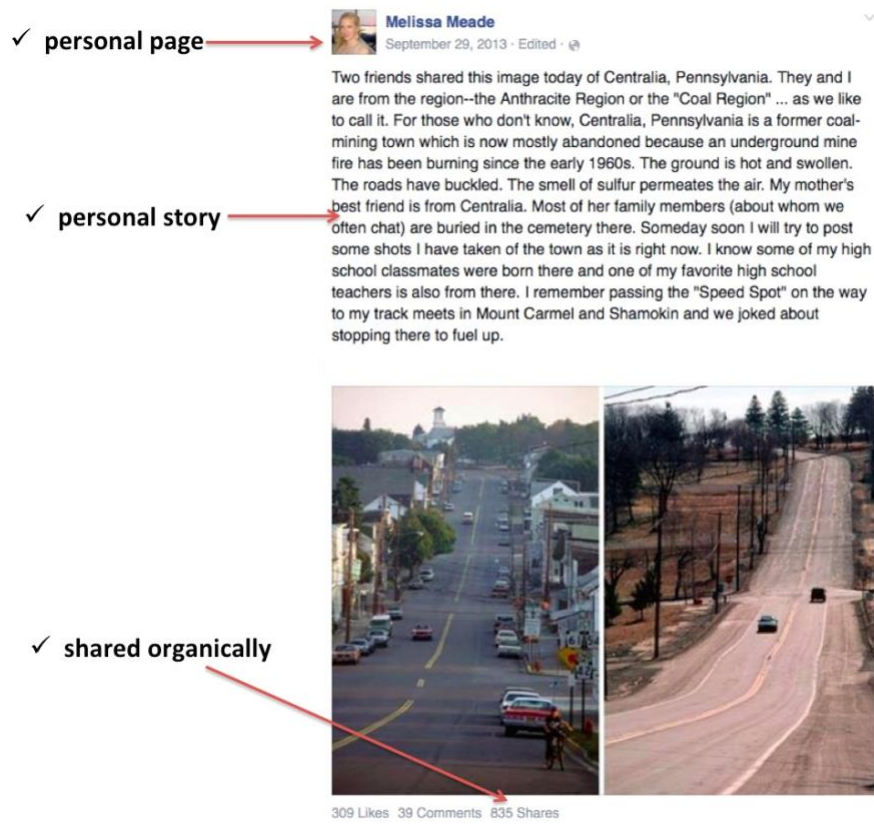
The dissemination of the side-by-side image of Centralia images through social media offered a new potential to form a collective—a participatory public—and support the

processes of identification among my personal connections in the anthracite community, in ways that could possibly challenge dominant mediated distortions with local narratives.

I included a personal Facebook page post because I had long noted the circulation of commoditized media forms about the town. Not only is the Anthracite Coal Region the location for my both my “offline” and “online” or digital fieldwork, but also I am a lifelong resident who grew up amongst family who labored in the local mines and therefore my personal Facebook page connects me to many Coal Region residents with large extended social networks in the region and its diaspora. By participating in social media and articulating personal memories, I wanted to critically dialogue with my Coal Region connections about local residents’ life histories, their relationship to Centralia, and about the great environmental and human tragedy that affected the town. My anticipation in posting the piece below to my personal page was to obtain a small vignette usable in my research. More broadly, I considered the possibilities of an Anthracite Coal Region “participatory culture,” one in which “not every member must contribute, but all must believe that they are free to contribute when ready and that what they contribute will be appropriately valued” (Jenkins *et al.*, 2009, p. 6). I sought to test the potential of this social medium to serve as a space for dialogical communication where residents could take part in and create a participatory public culture by engaging with historical, cultural, and media representations of the greater Anthracite Region thereby legitimating memories of their communities.

The post offered a transformative moment of collective remembering. The experience of the demise of Centralia offline brought Coal Region storytellers into digital engagement. The vignette is an autoethnographic sharing where personal history, experience, and biography relate to research (Walley, 2014). Through my organic social network, the

community re-shared the vignette over 830 times, “liked” it over 300 times, and commented on it 39 times.



**Figure 3.1.** Personal Facebook post with curation that became the genesis of the digital ethnographic portion of my project—the Anthracite Coal Region Digital Project began here.

### *Digitally Documenting a Community*

After experiencing this digital connection, I decided to create the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania Facebook page, estimating that I would attract few hundred followers in total. The following text was including on the public page:

This page contains curated images, cultural references, news items, and materials to consider and understand the importance of the Anthracite Coal Region (Carbon, Columbia, Dauphin, Lackawanna, Luzerne, Northumberland, and Schuylkill Counties).

Having grown up in the Anthracite Coal Region of Pennsylvania, I have focused my academic research on the real world histories and experiences of people who call the

Coal Region their home, of those who grew up there, but moved away, and of those who are newer residents of the region. Friends, neighbors, and family used to share news items and images that they've found and we later discussed them. This page is born out of such dialogue.

The comments expressed on this page do not reflect the opinions or endorsements of the page founder or of its moderator. Material on this page is public. It may be used for purposes of research. (From the purpose listed on the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/AnthraciteCoalRegion/>)

As it turned out, I had a few hundred followers in less than an hour. Soon community members were sending me emails and making diverse requests: For example, people often had a family member who was killed in the mines. They wanted a way to verify the death. Or perhaps their town was obliterated because it was a company town. We call these towns locally "patch towns." When the coal companies left the region they took with them the jobs on which the community depended and thus the patch town eventually disappeared. People were looking for traces of the town to develop links with their past and with memories of their ancestors who labored there. Community members had stories to tell about their fathers' and grandfathers' mine work, injuries, and deaths. They shared images and stories about life around the numerous coal breakers. They were creating their own media and writing their own digital culture. Through my collaboration with the community, the Anthracite Coal Region Digital Project began to consistently produce two written and posted digital cultural vignettes per day on Facebook, some of which circulated up to 60,000 times.

Culling material for the Facebook page involved a variety of production practices on my part as a researcher, even from the submissions from the community as they were not all readily readable when received. The production practices involved in creating a single vignette for posting usually included sourcing the material, researching the source, usually

taking a screenshot (sometimes from an ephemeral source such as e-Bay or amazon.com postcard sale listings), editing the screenshot through iPhoto or Photoshop to eliminate the sales text from Amazon or eBay, writing the researched text of the vignette with prompts for community dialogue, and finally scheduling the date and time for which the post would appear on the Facebook timeline. This extensive curation and placement of vignettes in context elicited thoughtful and widespread responses to the Facebook posts. The comments section proved to be an invaluable source for vernacular, yet vital, data about the lived experiences and history of the region, including information about patch towns (from the homes, to the mines, to the infrastructure), mining disasters, and events that seem long-forgotten from the historic record.

Community members sent in a variety of media ranging from high tech images they shot from drones flown over stripped or otherwise disemboweled landscapes to family documents to newspaper clippings to images of towns that have been since been abandoned by coal mining operations and no longer have a place on the map to digital images of personal items. Generally, there is no analog footprint for these items. I began to ponder ways how I could help preserve the community's memories when the analog record is not available, and realized that this endeavor would have to involve a "true" digital repository.

I created a WordPress-based website (see Figure 3) in 2014 in order to solve some of the challenges of posed by the large scope of the project and the body of media and writing created by the community. I sought to solve some of the communication and retrieval problems presented by the affordances of Facebook. Yet this WordPress website did not end up solving the challenges of retrieving and assembling the growing body of material nor of assisting with the great co-production going on within the community. Instead, I ended up

authoring longer cultural essays that circulated even more within the community. I was driving traffic to the Facebook page and to the new webpage, so I was improving the digital footprint by pushing up the page's SEO<sup>1</sup> which helped to overwrite dominant media tropes representing the Coal Region. Yet in the process I augmented the workload. According to the page's insights, it has varied been 6600 and 800 unique hits monthly. At the time of writing, in mid-February 2019, it had received 1400 hits without any new content added.

The ethnographic material outlined in the other approaches sections above continually informed the use and growth of the Facebook page until approximately May 2017 (see Figure 2) and webpage on which a cross-section of the community engaged. The pages additionally generated a host of participant observation opportunities in the community as well as semi-structured interviews and site visits.

The online work both on Facebook and on the Anthracite Region Project website—which I have termed a “*public digital humanities collaboratory*” were created as extension of my original personal Facebook to invite Coal Region residents to continue to use digital media to discuss understandings of “political economy,” “history,” “heritage,” and “community welfare.” Residents were invited to respond to the significance of artifacts. Through the process, narratives and cultural production emerged.

On the collaboratory, community members reflect on dominant imaginaries of the community, they re-imagine the region, gather feedback, and they express evolving sadness, anger, outrage, pride, and admiration—in writing, through the creation of media, and by submitting their personal curated materials. In turn, I ask my own questions to the



**Figure 3.2.** Facebook page with curated content and user-generated content  
<https://www.facebook.com/AnthraciteCoalRegion>



**Figure 3.3.** WordPress-based platform  
[www.anthracitecoalregion.com](http://www.anthracitecoalregion.com)



community and gather community insights on which topics residents think I should address on the page and in my research. I have observed the community “professionalize” their submissions by adding citations and curation as they begin to “speak” through the codes of the dominant narratives about the region.

On both sites, a cross-section of the community has been digitally engaged for nearly five years. The result of this ethnographic work is a community collaborative project that has grown on Facebook to more than 8500 participants and over 2500 researcher-written and/or facilitated cultural vignettes. Approximately two curated items accompanied by questions were presented to the community daily over the course of the first three years since the page’s launch. (Later items were less frequent due to time constraints.) Members wrote responses to the questions and circulated the material to other community members. A core of the page membership consisted of individuals that I encountered in my offline fieldwork. Community members likewise submitted and curated their own items from their personal archives. In the comments section, the community dialogued about key incidents (e.g., mine fires, coal breaker demolition, subsidence, child labor, patch town life, environmental degradation, mining disasters, deaths, killings, mass ethnicized executions of the Irish and Irish-American Molly Maguires, incarcerations, and dismemberments). Users also made and submitted their own media. The material used for this page was obtained through constant reflexive interaction in the community. I collected and posted locally-made media and writings shared through social media space (usually the Facebook page, but sometimes the website), suggested to me during participant observation, or that community members either e-mailed, mailed to me, or personally delivered to me. In short, the digital space became an

attempt to produce a record in which the Coal Region community explored together cultural concerns and memories from the industrial and deindustrial eras.

The present work differs from traditional ethnographies that base their work on studying a population because, as a researcher, I view community members as *producers of knowledge* and I seek to contribute to the intellectual work already under way in the region. This commitment led me to not only engage with the community in day-to-day life, but to create this digital project—the Facebook page and later the companion webpage as prototypes—both of which invite residents to read images and materials and to offer interpretations as a critical practice and which support community dialogue and participatory communication by bringing to light residents’ stories, local histories, and social injustices.

Very little interactive history, work on heritage, or social memory work has been done with working-class or labor communities. Although a number of vernacular Facebook groups and pages have popped up which deal topically with various Coal Region towns and subjects, none but the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania Digital Project avoids expertise-centered discourses. Instead, as a researcher, I am in the role of facilitator/conserver to collect material and narratives, to assist the community with storylines and visualizations, to group materials thematically, and to create ways of accessing, searching, and sharing the material.

## **5. Life Histories**

A historical approach helped highlight the processes of deindustrialization and class and ethnic relations. I gathered life histories of three residents with in-depth knowledge of relevant aspects of life in the Coal Region. I focused on work history, family migration

history, memories of the coal industry and its place in community life, recollections of physical space, and experiences of decline.

### **6. Contemporary Media Images of the Coal Region: Commodification and the Circulation of Images**

By immersing myself in long-term participant observation, my investigation of media was anchored in local culture (Murphy, 2010) similarly to media ethnographies written by Abu-Lughod (2005), Mankekar (1999), and Wilk (1994), but it was part of a larger ethnographic project. For example, while I was conducting fieldwork a major Sundance-financed documentary entitled *Shenandoah, PA* by the Pulitzer Prize winning photographer David Turnley was released with anticipation in Schuylkill County. This text selected particular representations of working-class whites and migrants, revealing much about who represents the town of Shenandoah in media discourses, how, and where. I engaged in participant observation at the New York City premiere of *Shenandoah, PA* and at two local screenings in the Coal Region, which included the director, production team, community members, and the film interviewees.

Likewise, I participated in a pre-production film event about the use of coal ash and the mythologies of Centralia held in Shamokin, PA. There, I not only engaged with activists and experts on environmental issues affecting the Coal Region that extend beyond coal mining. I also became even more aware of the widespread mediated imaginaries of Centralia.

### **Multi-sited Ethnography**

Multi-sited ethnography complicates the classic notion of fieldwork. Hannerz (1998), Marcus (1995), and Gupta and Ferguson (1992) challenge the traditional ethnographic assumption that cultural practices map onto a single demarcated space comprehensible as a unitary fieldsite. Marcus (1995) urges researchers to follow cultural processes and argues

that, rather than “attenuating the power of fieldwork” (p. 100) multi-sited ethnography, as it invariably requires more nuancing, further fractures any us-them frame that may have been associated with traditional ethnography.

As Gupta and Ferguson (1992) argue, the idea of a bounded cultural space presents significant problems for situations involving the unmooring of cultures from places (as in “multiculturalism”) and for global capitalism. A community may be in a specific physical place, but a community can also be “clusters of interaction” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p. 8). Thus, studying cultural and lived experiences of economic abandonment *by following* representations of deindustrialization and *tracing relationships*, for example, may require investigations in more than one site.

Multi-sited ethnography has brought up questions about whether or not a division of a researcher’s involvement in a single site may lead to the sacrifice of ethnographic depth. However, “carrying out an entirely local study in a site strongly marked by translocal and transnational connections would surely not result in satisfactorily complete, deep ethnography” (Hannerz, 1998, p. 248). The methodological innovation implied by multi-sited ethnography challenges the comforting paradigmatic notion of an ethnographer tied to a specific geographic location from which they are uniquely able to produce a deep ethnographic account yielding the mythic “ethnographer’s magic” (Stocking, 1983) that has been associated with Malinowski’s work. Thus, in my own research, not only did I visit diverse Coal Region towns, but I spent time with the community on digital space. Therefore, this dissertation expands the notion of multi-sited ethnography, which is typically a geographic concept, to online interactions. Yet my fieldwork was fluid in the sense of “moving” from offline to online and back again. I had physical contact with geographical

places that “moved” to a digital “space” where identities, and memories were connected to “place.”

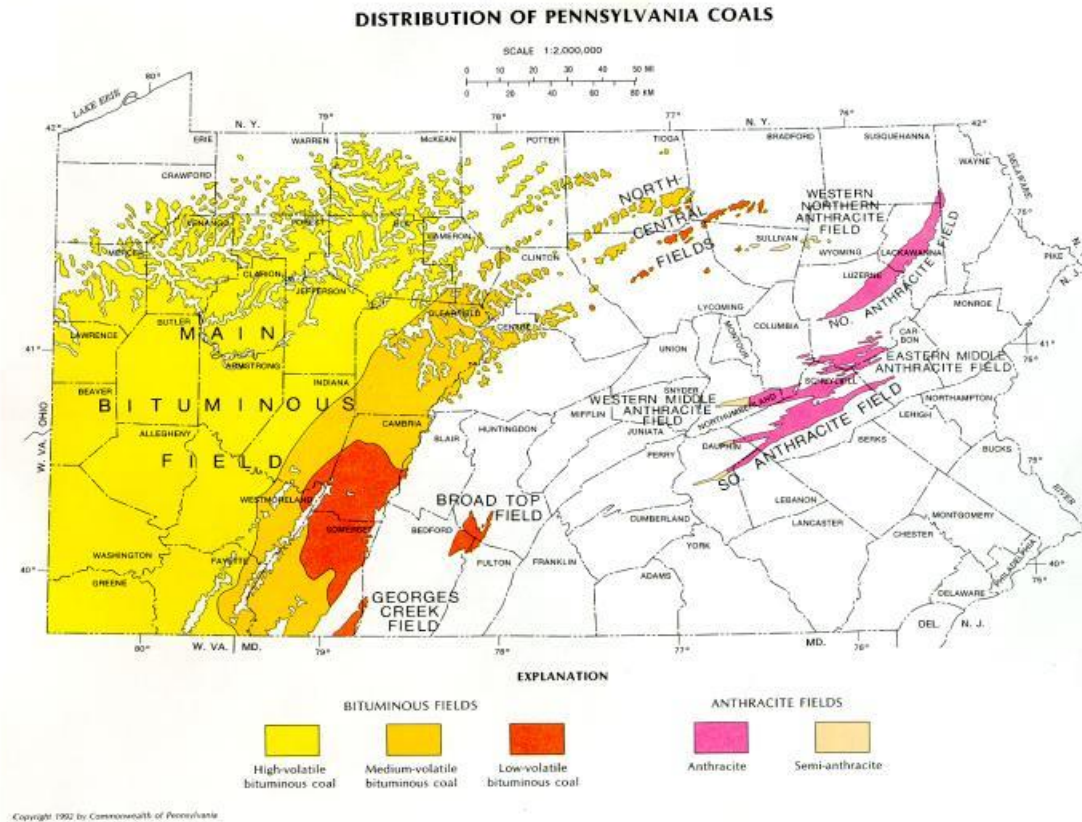
I have chosen not to isolate sections of the Coal Region, despite its mountainous geography. One of my reasons for this choice has been because of the lack of regional physical connections. Yet the Southern Field (see discussion of sites in the following section) has been historically media-dominated by the Northern Field. There are no local news stations in the Southern Field. Most people receive their “local” news from the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre station, WNEP-TV. As an ethnographer, I spent significant living in the Panther Valley where Dublin and Licht (2005) did much of their research. However, I technically *hail* from the Southern Field, which initially gave me more direct access to informants from that area. I also attended many events in the Northern Field and recruited participants from that area. I spent time directly speaking with Robert Wolensky, the sociologist and author of a number of the studies in the Northern Field, mentioned in chapter one. He has been instrumental in creating local coal-mining history events held normally throughout the Northern Field; however, they lack attendance from the Southern Field. He had spoken to me to help bridge divide through outreach and perhaps by using the Anthracite Coal Region Digital Project, which has cross-regional membership. I have created a number of announcements for his events on the project.

Marcus’s (1995) concern for “multi-sited ethnography” involved more than moving from place to place. His concern was primarily for challenging any distinction between a local site and the global system. This method becomes relevant to zones of coal-mining in particular because Marcus confronted the separation of the fieldsite as the work of the ethnographer and the theoretical work of the economist and/or the political scientist. In the

present project, *systemic realities* were studied in a local place and online. Yet these physical places were conceptualized differently by participants on the ground as being “local.” My methods required the very willingness that Marcus asserts: to leave behind a conception of a bounded field-site and follow people, stories, metaphors, or objects, as they themselves travel from place to place, and move between different media. Multi-sited ethnography is more than the multiple fieldsites. The term “site” extends to range of meanings beyond geography to include “media,” “archives,” or experimental with ethnographic approaches within projects.

### **Anthracite Coal Region Sites**

Whereas bituminous coal, mined in most of Appalachia (see Figure 4, shown in yellow) is often first comes to mind when the topic of coal-mining is mentioned, nine counties (see Figure 4, shown in pink) comprise a small, isolated area in the Appalachian Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania which contain virtually all of the United States’ anthracite coal—almost pure carbon. These fields have the most concentrated supply of anthracite in the world. The fields were known by their geographic locations, as noted on the map: Northern, Southern, Eastern Middle, etc. Some of the towns mentioned already, Shenandoah and Frackville are located in Schuylkill County, in the Southern Field. Hazleton, in Luzerne County, is in the Northern field. Other key physical spaces for my work in the Anthracite Region have included Centralia in Columbia County located in the Western Middle Field, Shamokin in Northumberland County in the Western Middle Field, Girardville, Mahanoy City, and Ashland, all in Schuylkill County and all in the Southern Field, Ashley and Wilkes-Barre, both in Luzerne County and both in the Northern Field, and Jim Thorpe, in Carbon County, in the Eastern Middle Field. I also spent time in various patch towns



**Figure 3.4.** Distribution of Pennsylvania coals. (Credit: US Geological Survey, Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources)

throughout the coal fields including Mahanoy Plane, Ellen Gowen, and William Penn, to name a few. The Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania Digital Project that I created and maintained throughout my research became a key space generating not only community dialogue and offline relationships, but it also catalyzed me to reconsider concepts of multi-sited ethnography.

This project approaches *ethnography* as both a methodological approach *and* an epistemological orientation. Broadly speaking, ethnography is a written account of “the social organization, social activities, symbolic and material resources, and interpretive practices” (Duranti, 1997, p. 85) of a group of people. This account is made by participation in the community social life and the entwinement and reconciliation of two qualities: the

ability to distance oneself from one's own cultural biases or an etic view and the ability to develop an empathy and an inside perspective or an emic view. Yet as anthropologist George E. Marcus (1995) reminds us: "Ethnographic research ... embedded in a world system ... moves out from single sites ... to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space" (p. 96). The present research considers ethnography as more than an inert methodological tool. It explores the disciplinary traditions of ethnography (from anthropology, sociology, and communication) by thinking about circulation, mediation, and commodification and by exploring changing conceptions of "the field" and "fieldwork" when a researcher is active both online and in the field with participants.

Thus, I approach my research by attempting to write a cultural rendering that explores varying forms of mediation ranging from spoken and embodied language, to written texts, to electronic technologies with different degrees of contact, shared awareness, and possibilities of reciprocation. For instance, the online space that I termed a *public digital humanities collaboratory* moved out from my "typical" research site and opened up new avenues of artifact circulation that I did not initially imagine. The community dialogue generated by an initial Facebook post on my personal page suggested that this post had tapped into sentiments that local residents were (still) looking to express. I posted juxtaposed images of Centralia, Pennsylvania (see earlier)—one which showed the main street of an inhabited town, and the other showing that street in the middle of a barren landscape—and wrote a corresponding caption on my personal Facebook page in December 2013. This decision evolved from encountering frequent media narratives written about the town.

The post became a digital instance of collective remembering that stands in contrast with contemporary commodified and aestheticized media circulated online as well as offline.



Coal Region narrators had borne the burden of the fall of Centralia *in situ* and subsequently participated in meaningful dialogue about it online. My connection to the place and the Region made the vignette not only my story, but imbricated it into a digital collective along with the narratives of my informants.

The level of community involvement with the Centralia post inspired my subsequent creation of the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania Facebook page. As noted earlier, the community immediately became involved in this Facebook page. What transpired was exemplary of the quote mentioned earlier from George E. Marcus (1995) about multi-sited ethnographic research moving out from individual sites to “examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (p. 96). Here I had the relatively rapid, continual growth of a digital project supporting the community associated with my offline fieldwork.

### **Autoethnography**

Global capitalism moves people and places like my family perhaps by extracting their labor and sending its product elsewhere or by recruiting them as immigrants to do this labor. These stories would become rich resources for my research. I grew up amongst family members who labored in the local coalmines. They passed on to me the texture of their lives and the place in which they raised me. But deep coal mining was all but finished by the time I was born. Instead, I grew up in the shadow of “King Coal.” Many personal experiences of growing up in the Coal Region—from the drama of the Centralia mine fire, still burning after 56 years, to stories of family members’ deaths in the mines or from black lung disease, to the more mundane play on coal refuse piles as if they were hills or mountains—relate to the social and political economic processes (Bourdieu, 2008) that are central to this dissertation.

This ethnography includes aspects of self, of autobiography, of family, and always of home because the rupture from home, which became an Othered space has taken me back to it to forge a greater understanding of the dynamics there. The concept of “autoethnography” itself is fraught insofar as it involves placing oneself in the project, not only as a researcher or a research instrument, but also as a fieldworker who listens, challenges, and analyzes one’s own experiences and those of family members (cf. Reed-Danahay, 1997; Waterson & Rylko-Bauer, 2006; Ellis, 2013; Walley, 2013).

Deindustrialization disrupted upward mobility within the Coal Region. My own upward mobility was quite different than what the Region’s could have been if industry had not left. Like Christine Walley (2013) highlights in her ethnography on family and class in post-industrial Chicago, I found it to be lonely—a kind of case study of the American Dream. It was based on “a form of education that brought me out of the community in which I was raised and into a very different world. It allowed me to peer into the lives of elites that I had only known as caricatures on TV. And it transformed my habits and outlook ...” (p. 91).

Both of my grandfathers were coalminers. My maternal grandfather (whom I called *dziadzi*, a derivative from the Polish for “grandfather”) hailed from the coal-mining town of Shenandoah, Pennsylvania. The town was about two miles down the mountain from Frackville. Dziadzi was retired from coal mining from my earliest recollections. He was working as a town health officer when I was a small child. As far as I could tell, he definitely deserved to retire from mining. He was my window into that occupation. By middle-school age, like most miners' sons, he was already working as a breaker boy—a dangerous job given to children in the coalfields. The job involved pulling pieces of shale from coal as it was broken between the teeth of rotating mechanical drums. I remember my grandfather showing

me his miner's hardhat with a lamp on it. He also showed me his metal lunch pail and his dynamite detonator—artifacts of his personal labor history. Repeatedly, he conveyed the words that begin this dissertation, words that habitually haunt me as I imagine his youth being shattered like a piece of coal entering a coal breaker when he became a “breaker boy”: “If you don’t work with your brains, you must work with your back.” And although I very much admired his brutal honesty with me, I could not help but feel a bit of pain each time he said those words.

More than six feet tall, my grandfather was a strong man like his father. His father, my great grandfather, eventually died of black lung disease, and my mother tells me that when my great-grandfather became too ill to work, my grandfather worked mining shifts for both of them so that his father could still collect wages.



**Figure 3.5.** (Uncredited). My maternal great-grandfather Boleslaw Komosinski and grandfather Frank Komosinski stand in front of what was then Saint George’s Lithuanian Parochial School across the street from my grandparents’/mother’s home on the 200 block of North Chestnut Street in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania.

My grandparents lived in a small, modest row home on a hill; however, that “hill” once had no gradient. Instead, it was once a flat, smooth road. Mine subsidence, or the

“movement of the ground surface as a result of readjustments of the overburden due to collapse or failure of underground mine workings” (Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, 2019), made the street collapse into an uneven, unsupported hill-like formation. According to residents, townspeople just shifted their homes to accommodate this human-made earthquake. Much of the area is undermined and typical homeowners’ insurance does not cover damage from mine subsidence. Home deeds do not include the ground underneath the home. That ground underneath was often company property; coal companies possessed the “mineral rights” and residents were in the unfortunate position of accepting whatever conditions occurred under their homes. As Bill Conlogue (2013) explains while he was looking at a map of the northern anthracite coal field in the Lackawanna Valley, “Although many maps divide land into counties, states, and nations, this map marks company property ... The map ... [shows] that the region’s geology holds hostage its geography ... most cities and towns in the Anthracite Region ... [have their] doppelganger in a city below, a dark Atlantis peopled by the ghosts of men and mules who worked both into existence.” (p. 7) As in Conlogue’s description, my grandparents’ home and much of their town was propped up on old, crumbling wooden pillars of the underground tunnels’ world below, “a fact expressed in every mine subsidence” (p. 7). Residents have told me that they have memories of the sounds of mining operations under their homes—they could hear the conversations of the miners in this separate “underground town” below.

When my grandparents passed away, we sold their three bedroom/two bathroom duplex home for under \$18,000 dollars, the going rate for a home in Shenandoah in the early 2000s. The “profit” was split between my grandparents’ two daughters. Prices have gone

down since then, with houses being sold for hundreds of dollars on e-bay or simply abandoned for owners' inability to pay taxes. My family was disinvested.

In earlier decades urban whites moved to suburbs at a time when the value of the housing stock there was increasing. Meanwhile, ethnicized, disinvested, northern Appalachian labor was stratified in a way that deprived them of wealth in housing. In the case of the Anthracite Region, houses may have been company-owned or almost always located over a mine or near a mine. Meanwhile, white city residents' migration from urban areas that were becoming more racially mixed to more homogenous suburban/exurban areas has often been referred to as "white flight." This term references in particular the post-World War II period starting in the 1950s in which the development of suburban living gave white urban dwellers a place to live outside of city limits subsequent to two Great Migrations of African Americans. Numerous factors stemming from that era shaped white flight including the desegregation of both schools and public services in the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954. This migration dynamic generally never reached the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania.

Despite American ideas of diversity, I have found that class history is a history we are often willing to forget. As noted earlier, labor history has not been marked in the national memory, unlike war in which the U.S. has had involvement. Following Zerubavel's (2006) argument, class is the proverbial "elephant in the room." We are nationally implicated in the silence around class. According to this theory, the consequences for breaking the silence are heightened by number of people involved and the length of time of the silence under consideration. In terms of bringing labor and class concerns into the national conscience, I argue that the stakes are high for anyone who speaks loudly about issues surrounding class.

For me class history has not been easy to forget. Thinking through my own autobiography, I consider how my family's stories and my own stories link up with larger social processes. Although I'm an *indigenous ethnographer*, "going back" to investigate the cultural processes of economic abandonment meant that I belong to more than one world (c.f. Altorki & El Solh, 1998). I metaphorically and literally speak more than one language, have multiple identities, and have more than one home. I have learned to live with and speak from difference—to be the same as and different from those with whom I live (c.f. Hall, 1995 from whom I applied this idea). Through this reflexivity, I constantly re-positioned myself in relationship to my informants and as Rosaldo (1993/1989) advocates—to the constant process of learning.

### **Entering the Field**

As a researcher returning home to search for a rental in my home county of Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania in the heart of the Anthracite Region, I ran into many challenges as I visited potential residences. It took me much longer to find a residence than I had hoped. I spent several months prior to my July 2014 move date looking for a place. In one case, a landlord showed me a place that had a sign outside reading: "Unfit for Human Inhabitation or Use" [sic] and "No Trespassing by Order of the Constable." (See Figure 6). On the telephone, he offered an explanation prior to my arrival asking me to ignore the signs. When he arrived, he went ahead and showed me the place which had no electricity and no running water. Rather than a back on the edifice, the place instead had a blue tarp and thus anyone living there could fall out of the second or third story. He explained that these issues would be repaired before my move-in day. The residence smelled like feces which was not surprising given that the landlord explained that he disconnected the water on the previous

tenants. Still, the place had the charm of a previous era underneath the veneer of extreme decline and disrepair—a two-story walk-up on the main street that was much better in its heyday. I could almost hear the dishes clanging above the dirty, scratched wooden floor in a room that was likely the dining room. These challenges in searching for a residence were indicative of an economically disenfranchised zone.

This landlord expressed some concern that perhaps this place was not the right place for a “nice girl like [me] Why would [I] want to live across from the smoke shop? [I] could maybe find you somewhere else. Maybe [I would] want to live in Oneida? [Name of a local patch town.]” The smoke shop was often used as a euphemism for a particular class of people. Moreover, his words indicated to me that despite being *from* there, he had judged me as the class of person who could not live in a “condemned” rental. Yet he was willing to rent the place to *some-body*. Perhaps I would present too much of a problem in those conditions for him as a landlord? He certainly had class on his mind. In the circumstance of post-industrial housing stock, I seemed to represent a higher status person than one to whom he was willing to rent such a particular place, an indication that even though I came from *there* and I dressed to present myself as a regular tenant looking for a place, he judged my class.

And although I wanted to be in the “heart” of things, one concern I had was the prevalence of house fires. In a few of the towns that I wanted to stay in such as Shenandoah or Hazlelton, a house fire could take out an entire row of homes. It was not uncommon for people to lose all their belongings or even die. Thus, these house fires can be the norm in the some parts of the Anthracite Coal Region. On a 0-degree morning on February 14, 2016 around 4am—a time while I was still conducting my ethnographic fieldwork—a three-alarm blaze flared up in the row of houses described above in Shenandoah. Arson has even

emerged as problem in the town of Shenandoah. A row of homes such as this one could ignite in moments.

In January 2017, after another fire destroyed three row homes, a news article explained that, “[T]he old oils and thicker woods used to build the homes contribute to the quick-spreading fires. Firefighters in this region are trained to respond to row home fires, as it's something that isn't going to stop anytime soon” (Bianco, 2017). The Shenandoah Fire Marshal stated that, “It’s the way the construction has been built throughout the years. It’s unfortunate ... sometimes they’re hard to control and other times we get lucky ...” (Bianco, 2017). In these rows of homes it is unlikely to find firewalls, fire barriers, or firestops to prevent the spread of a fire through penetrations for cables or pipes. Moreover, vacancy and lack of updates to the structures confound the situation.



**Figure 3.6.** (Photo credit, Melissa R. Meade, 2014). Images of signs on “for rent” property, Shenandoah, PA.

Fire trauma touches my family and thus is part of the experiences that I bring to the field. My great-grandfather (Figure 1) built his family’s home in Shenandoah. The houses



were packed in tightly, but he had planned for the closeness by installing fire-resistant shingles. Despite his foresight, freezing cold weather, an ice storm, and distance from a fire hydrant cost him and my great-grandmother their home in which they lost everything. My mother relays the story: “They had to carry my grandmother out on an ironing board. She took a stroke during that fire. They had to come live with us. My grandmother died before seeing her home re-built.”

### **Interviewing as Participation**

Although most of the interviews I conducted during my research were semi-structured, I worked to cultivate the ethnographic sensibilities to approach each interview critically by considering the goals of the participants and the appropriateness of my communication style. While this approach may sound obvious, researchers often enter an interview situation with an agenda that can then lead to confusion (Briggs, 1986). Influenced by Janice Radway’s (1984) research on working-class women’s interpretations of romance novels and Charles Briggs’s (1986) reflection on interviewing, *Learning How to Ask: A Sociolinguistic Appraisal of the Interview in Social Science Research*, I adapted my approach to the interview in function of my interviewees’ practices which often opened up new avenues of questioning and meaning.

For example, early in my fieldwork I found myself in a privately-owned convenience store to interview an informant wherein a small group of Mexican men milled around the cash register. This modest *bodega* is located on the main thoroughfare of Shenandoah, Pennsylvania. The bodega, adorned with posters from Mexican action movies, was well-stocked with products from Mexico and the customers also perused Mexican-style cowboy shirts and boots as well as CDs. The men divided their attention between a soccer game on a

flatscreen television hung high upon the wall and conversation with each other about work. Jesús, the store's owner, has lived in Shenandoah since the 1980s and was one of the first Mexicans to migrate to the town. Mostly male Mexican newcomers had started arriving in the area at that time. He agreed to participate in a videotaped interview. However, the interview was interrupted repeatedly by the flow of customers purchasing Mexican products such as calling cards, tortillas, *pan de dulce*,<sup>2</sup> and potato chips. In addition, the presence of the camera inspired a variety of reactions. For example, some customers told new customers entering the store of the camera's presence while others signaled to me and to new customers by pointing, one customer hid his face, and some people walked by witnessing the camera, whereas others stared.

Meanwhile, Jesús discussed the beating to death of fellow resident Luis Ramírez Zavala back in July 2008. In the midst of this discussion, an influx of customers entered the store. As Jesús took a pause from our interview to attend to his customers, one customer, Roberto, approached me to talk because he recognized me from when I attended *Misa en español* (a Catholic church service held in Spanish) earlier in the day where we shook hands with each other during the Mass's peace rite. Clearly aware that the camera was still rolling, he began to speak about his life in Shenandoah. He lamented that his daughter would soon graduate from high school, a high school that he characterized as having significantly less academic rigor than her schooling in Mexico. Although she adamantly wants to attend college, he said he cannot afford it and therefore it will be impossible for her here in the U.S. He questioned me about applying to college.

Roberto and I also discussed how he decided to come to Shenandoah and how his experiences in the town challenged his expectations of life in the U.S. He contrasted

Shenandoah with his town in Mexico; in the latter, he said there were many activities available such as live theater, movie theaters, public gatherings, and concerts. On the other hand, he said he found Shenandoah to be “depressing” and devoid of the social life present in his Mexican hometown. Moreover, he never imagined that a town in the United States would be replete with abandoned, destroyed, and boarded-up houses. He said that he would have been extremely sad if his wife had not joined him. For him, Shenandoah only offered “three things: church, love, and Wal-Mart.”<sup>3</sup>

The vignette described above presents a problem of interpretation. As part of my research plan, I was conducting a semi-structured interview with Jesús in a traditional ethnographic manner; however, I was making use of electronic recording technology in the form of a digital video camera. Broadly, I had an interest in the way that the newest residents of Shenandoah, the Mexican immigrants, speak about the town of Shenandoah, their homes in Mexico, and their labor. Moreover, I had already done participant observation throughout the town and in this store in particular. It was through this research that I noticed that the store seemed to have a broader significance to the Mexican community, beyond simply a place to buy groceries and other sundries. Customers, particularly men, linger and talk and they also watch television and converse. My plan to use a general ethnographic method—interviewing—as part of my research, was complicated by the involvement of the video camera, the customers’ interest in me and in the camera, the people in the store engaging with media, and the saturation of the entire store with materials, signs, and symbols. Moreover, a customer recognized me from previous participant observation that I conducted in the church and initiated a conversation with me while the camera was still rolling.

### **A Problem of Interpretation**

The fieldwork situation described above must be approached on two levels: First, the researcher must consider which information to collect and how to collect this information; second, the researcher must determine the methods of interpretation she will use. For example, in her study, Radway (1984) used interviewing to explore women's practices of reading romance novels and also analyzed the same romance literature herself. Her research suggests that the meaning of the romance text is not only available to literary scholars, who have traditionally analyzed these texts and drawn conclusions about the envelopment of readers into dominant ideologies.

Instead, Radway argued that readers have their own interpretations of the texts and that they find relationships between the texts and their own lives. She insists that the dismissal of readers' interpretations allows the literary critic to support her/his ideology leaving behind the real reader. The study shows the integration of a traditional ethnographic method—interviewing—with an analysis of the books and it also shows how the women's experiences with the novels influenced the production and distribution of these types of books, how membership in different interpretive communities (in this case, literary scholars on the one hand and consumers of mass market romance novels on the other) can produce different relationships with texts and encourage differing interpretations of texts, and how ideologies may influence the interpretation of texts.

In addition, Charles Briggs's (1986) study of the role of the interview in his own ethnographic research illuminates not only some of the problems associated with traditional ethnographic interviewing if conducted unreflectively, but also offers, as the title suggests: *A sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science research*. His study

considers what Duranti (1997) has called the “ecology of questioning ... who is allowed to question who, when, and how” (p. 104). Briggs (1986), after making repeated “communicative blunders” (p. 39) while trying to learn about phenomena in his fieldwork with Mexicanos in Northern New Mexico, learned that interviews are themselves phenomena.

Despite having connections in the community, good Spanish language skills, and an accepted project, the researcher was unfamiliar with the oral traditions of the Mexicanos who resisted his kind of interviewing despite accepting him into their community (Briggs, 1986). Having studied his own speech with his informants, he urges researchers to learn about the vernacular speech of the community in which one is conducting research. According to Briggs, the researcher should consider the norms of communication, the goals of the participants, the appropriateness of the situation for interviewing and the appropriateness of the interview for transmission of knowledge, and she/he should ascertain the social roles of the participants involved. Failing to pay attention to these points would likely lead to inaccurate fieldwork.

By considering the norms outlined above, Briggs (1986) determined that if he wanted to learn about the tradition of carving amongst the Mexicano people, he should become an apprentice. This participant-observer role opened up new manners of questioning that allowed him to learn more about the carvings and their meanings. He combined ethnographic sociolinguistics and analyzed the interview as an interactional whole, analyzed the conflicting pressures of interviewing (getting information versus creating a communicative atmosphere), and began to recognize that the interview is a co-constructed event.

Returning to the ethnographic vignette in Jesús's store, the method I employed did not involve a traditional ethnographic interview, even if I initially thought that what I had scheduled with him would be a semi-structured interview (Bernard, 2006). Following Briggs (1986), the interview was a discursive phenomenon not only co-constructed by Jesús and by me, but also by the customers and the way in which everyone related to the entire semiotic field. Participating in the place, I was open to conversing with Roberto, the man who talked about the impossibility of his daughter's college ambitions and also about the geography of Shenandoah. My native status was not salient in Jesús's store, and the kind of cultural capital I was thought to symbolize (e.g. educated white woman who spoke Spanish) not only influenced the interactions I was having, but influenced and served my interview experiences (Murphy, 2008) leading to ethnographically rich information and discursively rich footing (Goffman, 1981). Through both my outsider status and my ability to speak Spanish, I was called into a conversation to discuss socioeconomic issues that I otherwise may not have been privileged to discuss since my interview with Jesús also included a conversation with Roberto.

Likewise, the conversations going on around me in Jesús's store were not insignificant to my research. With their interactions mediated by products from Mexico and a television displaying a soccer game, the men in the store negotiated their relationships and their places in the town and in the global landscape. Jesús, Roberto, and the other men in the store signaled to cultural processes that did not map onto a single space, in this case, Shenandoah (Hannerz, 1998; Marcus, 1995; Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). For example, not only did I learn from Roberto that he perceived the education that his daughter received in Mexico as superior to the high school education that she received in Shenandoah, but he also

saw the general U.S. college application process as favoring those who have money and citizenship status. This process was not something that he envisioned himself going through with his daughter. I was then interpellated into potentially talking to her about college, which admittedly attracted me because, I, like Roberto's daughter, graduated from a local high school with limited opportunities.

### Digital Futures

Building upon the Anthracite Coal Region's digital community work, I began assembling a project team to create a content management platform (see Figure 7) to permanently archive the Facebook vignettes, narratives, and user-generated media, to add a search function and applications for self-generated personal narratives and community-contributed media to more flexibly interact with the community, and to better serve community research interests.



**Figure 3.7.** Omeka-based platform  
<http://gamma.library.temple.edu/anthracitecoalregion/>

I have found that while Facebook and the WordPress-based essays serve as excellent spaces for communication, they are not symbiotic for cataloging, searching, and archiving of information that will continue to offer a resource reflexive space where the public can engage with knowledge—both the knowledge of the site and the knowledge that they seek to contribute—and perhaps assemble it in new ways. Building upon this community collaborative digital project, I reached out to a librarian and professor in the Anthracite Region in search of a person with digital and archival knowledge to complement my own skills and that is how I met my collaborator, Jennie Levine Knies, Head Librarian at Penn State, Scranton-Worthington. In 2015, when Knies and I attended the *ILiADS* Digital Humanities Institute at Hamilton College where we received assistance in creating a script using R software to download posts and comments from the Facebook page.

We are using Omeka as a web-publishing platform (<http://omeka.org/>). This open-source platform is currently being used with many museum and archive repository projects. Although Omeka might have some limitations for the more complex “storytelling” end of website, we could add more support to work along with it in a future phase. The advantages to Omeka are its relative ease of use (potentially allowing community members greater ability to make changes to parts of the site), and its accessibility to others who would like to model similar projects on this example.

We are using Dublin Core as the standard that will be used for accessing, enhancing, and displaying the project’s archival metadata. Metadata, or “data about data,” is information in the data that is easily understood by people and improves the actions of computers and search engines. Metadata is not visible to users of a site; however, it is not a new idea. For decades, it has been used by museums, libraries, and other cultural institutions. (For example,



card catalogues pre-dated the semantic web.) The many benefits of choosing a standard include: “platform independence, portability, accessibility, extensibility, and longevity”

(Rinehart & Ippolito, 2014, p. 60). With digital content standardized

that is not controlled by any one piece of software (and its related software company), then ... data is protected from the whims or misfortunes of that company and can be ported to another software platform ... if it's portable, then it's also accessible ... If ... digital content is formatted in an open, documented standard, that is also extensible; it's possible for others to extend ... [one's] efforts and build new services using ...[the] content ... if your content is standardized, it lives in a format that may not last forever, but it will certainly last longer than the proprietary formats controlled by computer companies who respond to market forces by updating (read: obsolescing) their software every 18 months. (p. 60)

The Dublin Core standard is widely used by libraries and archives, and has been ratified in Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), ANSI/NISO (National Information Standards Organization), and ISO (International Organization for Standardization) for standards. It is flexible enough so that it can be adapted to the specific needs of the project.

The Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania Digital Project serves as an example of research in which the ethnographer combines approaches offline, autoethnography, and participatory online interaction to result in what Clifford Geertz (1973) calls, “thick description” of a culture. The project emphasizes engagement, participation, collaboration, dissemination of knowledge, and working to achieve equitable relationships with community members.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **PLACE, NARRATIVE, IDENTITY, AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY**

#### **Introduction: I Bleed Anthracite**

I posted video footage in August 2016 on my personal Facebook page featuring “Graffiti Road” or Old Route 61, the thoroughfare that drivers used to need to take when entering into Centralia, PA in Columbia County, located in the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania. I recorded the footage after I was involved in other ethnographic research at a nearby church pilgrimage site to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Ukrainian Catholic Church. The church’s bright blue domes stand in contrast to the side of the mountain, above the former town of Centralia. Old Route 61 has been closed since the early 1990s because of an active subterranean mine fire that has been burning beneath the town for over 50 years. As a result, the road has mine subsidence<sup>4</sup> issues and deep cracks in its structure. [For more on Centralia, see Chapter 5]. Since then, traffic has been re-routed around what used to be the former grid of the town of Centralia. Over the course of years, the fire moved closer to the residents’ houses and the government eventually declared eminent domain in order to force residents’ from their homes. The road had been dubbed “Graffiti

Road” due to the frequency with which visitors come to the site, ride four-wheelers there, walk around, and especially because they mark the terrain of this shut-down stretch of highway with spray paint.

Upon seeing my Facebook video post, one Anthracite Region resident, Lena, wrote in the comments section: #solidaritymycoalcousin and #bleedanthracite. These comments show a stronger attachment to place than might often be evinced in typical economic arguments. Lena suggests both a kinship with me as a local from the Anthracite Region, but her description reflects an embodiment of class that goes beyond tastes, habits, and daily styles of life. Life in the Anthracite Region has exposed our families’ and our bodies to actual physical substances and environmental pollutants. People not residing in analogous areas will not contend with these corporal confrontations.

Lena’s brief electronic comments on my Facebook page allude to the common struggles we experienced, the significance of our lives growing up on polluted, and/or demolished landscapes, and our shared familial backgrounds as women from “coal mining families.” Her two hashtags convene memory with desire creating a situated narrative of place and collective identity. In her reply to me, Lena showed how two *unrelated* people can be “coal cousins” and even in the face of a dead industry, that she “bleeds anthracite”—thereby suggesting how place, identity, and memory can link up with both past and present class, labor, and industrial dynamics, as well as out-of-the-way landscapes that have been left to ruin.

Though the large-scale underground anthracite mining industry has been gone for decades, coal is still central to the public identity of many places in the Coal Region (Kitch, 2012). How then are Anthracite Region’s residents’ identities formed in shadow of the

decline of previous modes of production? In what ways do residents construct identifications with a place and its memories that were shaped by an industry that did not necessarily express filiation with them?

Anthracite coal once required deep mining or underground mining to extract it. The Coal Region was a single-industry extractive economy. Our families and our ancestors' families engaged in the tough and precarious labor required to remove it from the ground. It is through such dangerous labor that our ancestors acquired their family histories that support identity: Many of us lost a family member in the mines, or had a relative die of black lung disease, or had a family member who worked since a child in as a breaker boy. Although anthracite coal burns longer and produces more heat than other types of coal, it was more difficult and costly to mine than other types of coal due to the undulating veins set deep below the earth. Mine owners recruited the labor of immigrants and began the long-term process of exposing the community to associated environmental toxins.

In the title of his book on the culture, work, and values in Pennsylvania's anthracite coal region, *Coal Cracker Culture: Work and Values in Pennsylvania Anthracite, 1835-1935*, Harold Aurand (2003) invokes a familiar term for anyone who hails from this region: "coalcracker." The term was used at the turn of the century to suggest that the region had an aura of being in a "separate and distinct state" or a peripheral zone (Nichols as cited in Aurand, 2003, p. 8). The author of this quote, although perhaps guilty of a hyperbolic characterization, alluded to the local culture characterized by the anthracite mining industry including the diverse ethnic cultures of the people in the mining communities, the labor of the people who mined the coal, and the associated consequences. The term is still used today by people who hail from the Coal Region. For longtime residents of the Coal Region like

Lena and me, we are “coalcrackers” or as she calls us, “coal cousins,” because, as she points out, we share the common connections related to the industry and the landscape. Yet as deindustrialization settled into the Coal Region, the identification of “coalcracker” became more complex as newcomers—frequently with ties to Latin America and not associated with “King Coal”—came to build lives in some anthracite towns. Emphasizing the physical body, the body’s relationship to coal-mining and the environment, community, relationships, and remembering, Lena’s vignette encapsulates what it means to be a “coalcracker” in a deindustrialized landscape familiar with instances on dispossession. More particularly, to be a *coalcracker*, one must have had a long-term connection to the symbolic dimensions of “King Coal.”

#### **Symbolic Experience on a Landscape of Extraction: King Coal’s Cultural Hegemony**

The single industry area of “boom” and “bust” in the Anthracite Region does not simply equate to jobs, but involves a lived, symbolic experience on a landscape of extraction. Through long-term consolidated corporate dominance, the Anthracite Coal Region has functioned as an internal peripheral economy existing outside of the urban core—in particular, in relationship to Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore, the cities where anthracite organizations were incorporated and to where its profits went. Companies were centralized in these cities and raw materials sent away there.

Earlier research on how the Anthracite Region is constituted as a place argues that, “... any broad concept of place must address two different aspects of a landscape: the physical support it provides (means) and the intangible rewards it offers (meaning)” (Marsh, 1987, p. 337). Means and meaning sustain a relationship to time wherein landscape meaning comes from the past and landscape means provide for the future. That is, “the previous means—the economic history—are a significant part of the meaning, and ... judgment[s] of

whether the landscape's means are sufficient or insufficient to maintain its residents into the future depends on the strength of its meaning" (p. 337). However, the coal-related infrastructure did not just create a system of economic determinism. King Coal's social organization has shaped society institutionally, privately, politically, and morally (Gramsci, 1971), and in doing so, developed a lasting cultural hegemony in the Anthracite Region. As discussed in what follows, class and ethnic animosity were central to this hegemonic social formation.

When the Anthracite Region was central to industry, the large profits received from the extraction of minerals largely went to transporter companies (later the railroads) because "what would be a notable feature of ... anthracite development: The movers and shakers of the trade ... were the transporters and merchandisers of coal, not the operators of the mines" (Dublin & Licht, 2005, p. 12). At first making use of rails and canals and then bypassing canals entirely with an eye toward the urban markets, the railroad companies shaped the lives of Coal Region residents and those in urban markets in distinct ways. In the process, these same railroad companies excluded independent coal producers from the market by increasing their freight rates and eventually eliminated them by offering only long-term contracts with stable tonnage and returns (Dublin & Licht, 2005).

By 1907, after these corporations purchased the significant independent operators and through the signing of "... exclusive, sometimes perpetual sales contracts with remaining independents, the seven major railroad companies controlled fully 91 percent of all coal produced in the anthracite region" (p. 20). Reading Railroad, for example, claimed 60 percent of coal reserves—the greatest amount. With this intense level of concentration at all levels of interest from ownership, production, and control to transportation networks, these

railroad cartels affected not only the independent coal producer, but the consumer and of course the mineworkers from whose labor King Coal generated its enormous profits. King Coal was an oligopoly.

Global conditions such as political unrest, poverty, and migration influenced the political economy and social relations of the Coal Region. The old, industrial/infrastructural connections linking the region to the global economy created particular circuits of migration resulting in the region's ethnic mix. To supply the labor to extract the coal, the region experienced a steady flow of immigrants. Capital recruited waves of peasants escaping feudalism. The Coal Region frequently was the first place English, German, Welsh, then Irish, and eventually Southern and Eastern European arrived in a process of proletarianization.

As such, when the region sat at the center of industrial growth, this growth was predicated upon circuits of labor migration and those circuits of labor migration in turn shaped ethnic relations. The area's population grew through the migration of people in a relatively rigid conjunction of ethnic and labor categories: The English were typically mine owners; the Welsh were skilled miners; and the Irish became common miners. Overall, fluctuations in the demand of anthracite coal added constant tension between laborers and capital. In addition, the British (who were often mine operators) and the Irish brought with them from their countries religious, class, and imperial troubles. From the late 1890s onward, southern and eastern Europeans came. Then in the early 1900s, people from Poland and Russia joined them.

The repression of labor discontent corresponded with the nascence of the anthracite coal industry. Coal company operators tied themselves with concepts of patriotism and

statesmanship to quell labor unrest even going back to the time of the Civil War when they recruited federal troops to suppress Irish anti-draft protests (Kenney, 2013). Even with increasing unemployment in the anthracite region, waves of Eastern European and Southern European immigrants continued to arrive in the region creating a surplus mine labor. Newer immigrants were often positioned initially in less skilled mine labor roles and paid less (Bodnar, 1985; 1982). Capital responded to market fickleness by taking advantage of this cheaper surplus labor.

Old-world ethno-religious, class and imperial conflicts infused relations in the coalfields transforming them into “caldron[s] ... of intense labor conflict” (Dublin & Licht, 2005, p. 21). Along with labor disputes, the diverse complexion of the region at the end of the nineteenth century included conflicts over the establishment and control of ethnic churches (Dublin & Licht, 2005). The town of Shenandoah had nine Catholic churches, each associated with an ethnicity—Lithuanian, Ukrainian, Slovak, Italian, Irish, Syrian, Italian, and two Polish. There was also one synagogue. Other coal-mining towns had similar arrangements. Carolyn Kitch (2012) points out that these divisions suggest the “historical realities of segregation” (p. 88). People wanted to be with people like them and this notion was implied through “celebrations of ‘neighborhoods’ and ‘traditions’” (p. 87).

In a conversation about the ethnic churches, one informant, Linda, who used to belong to the larger of the two Polish churches says:

**Linda:** People took pride in their ethnicity, but it’s all politics. Who knows who. She tied the notion of ethnicity to politics and labor economy:

**Linda:** It matters who is holding the purse strings.



In a previous conversation, Linda had explained breaking from Polish tradition to marry an Irish-American man. She describes the workings of an ethnically-inflected labor economy that her family navigated to deal with the systemic exploitation of one family member who contracted black lung disease. Linda's father-in-law, an Irish-American miner, had an advancing form of coal worker's pneumoconiosis. Black lung disease has only one cause—breathing in coal mine dust. Linda's father was an ethnically Polish miner who advocated for her Irish-American father-in-law after he had been denied benefits. She argued that through her father's strong community ties as an ethnically Polish mining-timber man, he was able to navigate the appropriate political channels connected to labor so that her father-in-law had a favorable outcome. Given her father-in-law's conjunction of ethnicity and labor as an Irish-American common miner, his experience of structural inequality would have been greater. Already experiencing a suffocating death from black lung disease, further economic disenfranchisement likely would have become a part of “the normative everyday forms of symbolic violence hidden in the minutiae of ‘normal’ social practices” (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004, p. 20; Bourdieu, 1999; Bourdieu, 1984; cf. Goldstein, 2004; Uribe, 2004). He would have subsumed the common miner's death to this disease without economic support despite the labor he rendered in the coal mines.

In present-day, the restructuring of ethnically-connected churches and organizations can bring significant pain to the community. With the permanent state of deindustrialization and out-migration, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Allentown, which oversees these churches, began to restructure them. It cited the decrease in population, the declining Mass attendance, and a decline in the service of priests. This pattern of consolidation would take hold throughout Northeastern Pennsylvania. In the Coal Region, this restructuring played out

by closing certain parishes and merging them with others. Eventually, many towns like Shenandoah and Frackville had only one church remaining. The churches in the surrounding patch towns closed and congregants were merged with larger parishes in nearby towns. In Shenandoah, all of the Catholic churches were merged into one—Divine Mercy. The physical place now called Divine Mercy, used to be Annunciation, the Irish church.

Yet of greatest controversy was the Diocese's decision to demolish Saint George Lithuanian Catholic Church of Shenandoah in 2010. It was the oldest Lithuanian church in the United States. Its spires stood notably over the valley on a drive into town. The Diocese made allegations that the church was unsafe. Parishioners disagreed. Embattled parishioners sued the Diocese. They had significant support including from the Lithuanian ambassador to the United States. They appealed to the Vatican for its preservation, to no avail.

Parishioners interviewed for the documentary *Shenandoah* spoke about their loss of the church, while watching augers and wrecking balls consume it. The church, tied to ethnicity, labor history, and religion, was a memory and identity artifact. About the relationship between memory and identity, historian John R. Gillis (1994) writes, “it involves the coordination of individual and group memories, whose results may appear consensual when they are in fact the product of processes of intense contest, struggle, and in some instances, annihilation” (p. 5). The decision to raze the parish ultimately did not come from within the community. In the midst of losing community places such as the hospital, the brewery, and the local newspaper—seemingly causalities of the powerlessness involved in post-industrial decline—the first parishioner interviewed for the *Shenandoah* documentary echoed Gillis's theoretical point:

**Parishioner 1:** This is about the only place we had left to go and receive any type of comfort. I mean, we lost our hospital, we lost our newspaper, we lost our brewery, we

lost all our stores downtown. This is about one of the last places of refuge we had and now we're losing it. They're destroying our church. A church that is the oldest Lithuanian parish in the United States of America.

Another parishioner describes the loss as “doom,” wherein the church was a representation of the soul. He classifies the dismantlement as a kind of collective doom.

**Parishioner 2:** If you believe in a soul, here's your soul. You're doomed. No matter what happens, we're doomed.

Parishioner 2's words turn the idea of “doom” for the individual “soul” to a collective “we're doomed” as he processes the dismantlement of the church. Here, the diversity of the Anthracite Region as described earlier becomes a single collective identity through the loss of these buildings and places. The desire to remember, which arises in the face of loss and destruction, smooths over these separate identities.

In order to keep the memory alive, a group of parishioners sponsored a noticeable billboard that flanks the side of Route 924, the road you travel into Shenandoah from Frackville. It reads, “Remember Saint George Church.” Several members of the church were interviewed for the news about the billboard and they talked about their efforts to preserve the memory. They also created a corresponding website that they list on the billboard. The first interviewee cited his family connection to the church:

**Interviewee 1:** I'm assuming that when my grandparents came over from Lithuania they helped in the building of the church. It was my idea to put the billboard on the highway. As long as I'm alive I will fight to keep the church in people's minds.  
(Reynolds, 2013)

This resident likely sees his grandparents as what cultural geographer Kenneth Foote (1997, p. 295) called “martyrs without memorials.” The resident placed the billboard on the side of the road as a long-term vernacular memorial and even describes *himself* and his *fight* as a living or human memorial.

A second interviewee demonstrates an important aspect of memory: Place and memory come to together with emotion to form identity. The picture of the church on the billboard functions a mnemonic referent for the interviewee. He can still look forward to seeing the church:

**Interviewee 2:** At least it's something to look forward to as I used to drive into town and I always looked forward to seeing the twin towers on the church. The picture on the billboard is a memory of that. (Reynolds, 2013)

People share memory outlines of the same places and artifacts. For memory confirmation to take place, these places and artifacts have to be accessible to other people, a dynamic always accompanied by emotion (Archibald, 2002).

These comments further show how individuals fought for community-based memorialization. Given the scale of interest in the church and its historical significance, it quite possibly should be a national, if not an international landmark. Communication scholar Carolyn Kitch (2012) pointed out a similar phenomenon when she reviewed postindustrial memorials throughout Pennsylvania and found that they did not make it to the national narrative and instead were more community-based.

Despite such powerful memories of ethnic ties amongst Coal Region residents, there were very real conjunctions of class, ethnicity, and structural violence. My father's cousin shares with me her family tragedy which illuminates this phenomenon. Because of a mine "accident" that killed her grandfather, her uncle operated a bootleg coal-mining<sup>5</sup> operation in which her father worked after her grandfather was killed in a mining inspection accident that was likely the result of conspiracy. As Dublin and Licht (2005) argue, the imperial and ethnic conflict between Irish miners and the English mine-owners carried into the coalfields. In the

midst of these ethnic/class conflicts, my cousin Mary's grandfather was an Irish mine inspector. She writes:

**Mary:** My dad was born in 1914 and when he was only 16, his father George J. O'Malley was a coalmine inspector for safety. He was at one of the mines and he and another man were riding the cable car down into the mine. The line snapped and he was crushed when the car hit the bottom. He survived but received bad injuries to his legs and some chest compression. He was taken to Ashland Hospital where he was in about two weeks. On the day he was to be discharged, he threw an embolism to his lung and died immediately. There has been speculation, but only that, about the possibility of sabotage because they might find some issues in the mine. He left my father as the oldest and three younger siblings. It caused my father to have to work after school. Initially they used to go along the railroad line with buckets picking up coal that fell off the train cars. Apparently, this was allowed. They made very little money, but his younger brothers could help. It was tough, but they did it until he was old enough to start driving a coal truck. He did that through the Depression and saved his money to go to Bliss Electrical School in Washington. Then the country was still in a bad depression and he was able to get a job with the Tennessee Valley Authority in the Carolinas where they were doing hydroelectric plants.

Mary's father and his uncle sunk a bootleg coal mining operation into the same mine lands owned by the company for which her grandfather worked before he got killed. When I asked if they ever tried to stop them, she said that the company never tried because, as she said, "They knew they were responsible for his death."

Greg's words written on the Anthracite Coal Region Digital Project echo Mary's point:

**Greg:** There's Blood On The Coal And The Miners Wail In Rooms That Never Saw Sun Or Sky [sic]

What could be worse than having one's body at risk of loss of limb or life? In a single-industry economy in which people already struggled to make a living, as Rosalind Morris (2008) argues that in another coal mining region in South Africa: Those without hope recognize "that being exploited by capital is ... better than not being exploited by capital" (p. 206). As early as the 1920s, machinery was beginning to replace human labor. The industry was starting to make underground miners' labor obsolete. Residents often paid coal

companies for the dangerous access to waste coal piles. Mostly women and children (see Figure 1) picked coal from these piles. Yet there was a risk of getting consumed by the pile and dying of suffocation, like the asphyxiating death experienced in the Wales Aberfan disaster (Jackson, 2016; also see the description of the disaster in Chapter six). The piles could combust. And still strikes strained the supply of coal available on the slag heaps. As technology improved, machinery was able to sort out more coal from the slag making slate picking obsolete, but the eradication of the slag heaps had other impacts on families who relied on them for their fuel and to pay church dues.

As the slatepickers' problem illustrates, with the use of efficient equipment and the expulsion of thousands from work, there was practically no coal on the culm dumps; "free pickings became scarcer and scarcer." Culm is anthracite mine waste. The culm piles throughout the Anthracite Region Pennsylvania typically contain a mix of waste shale and assorted coal-shale remains. Miners began engaging in forbidden mining on company-owned lands mostly for their own use. Eventually, they began to sell the coal for cash and the term "bootleg" emerged because the operations happened mostly at night (Adamic, 1934).



**Figure 4.1.** Slatepickers getting coal from waste dump. Miners' wives and children used to pick coal out of the refuse heaps for use at home. (Uncredited).

Mining families often viewed the bootleg business as legitimate. Both of these examples call attention to the structural violence on the margins of the coalfields and highlight how life on these margins related to ethnicity and class:

As for the 'steeling' part of it, how did the different companies get their coal lands? [sic] In some cases they paid \$6 an acre; was that a fair price? In other cases they stole it from the Indians. Was that a nice thing to do? Well [laughing], we're the new Indians, taking what coal we can back from the companies.... We 'steal' coal in order to keep from becoming thieves and hold-up men, which, to keep alive, we probably would be forced to become if we didn't have these holes. (Adamic, 1934)

Eventually predominantly Catholic bootleg towns appeared. What Louis Adamic's (1934) interview quote from a bootleg miner above shows is that the miner saw bootleg mining as a way to slow structural violence, thereby preventing him from engaging in other potentially immediate violent actions that could also enable his survival.

Earlier mining politics and violence in the northern fields was a complicated web of tenancy which included subcontracting (work contracts were given to individuals who hired low-wage workers) and leasing (incorporated groups got complete control of labor and laborers). Both of these dynamics were unfavorable to laborers. As a complicated piece: A third of the workforce came from Italy where workers brought both a great legacy of organized labor that was sometimes at odds with local organized labor. Organized crime bosses became subcontractors and lessees (Wolensky & Hastie, 2013). On the backbone of this complex history, what happens when a functionary perhaps unknowingly challenges the hegemony of the coal industry in contemporary times? Alex, a police officer lost his job *and* his police department when he investigated the entanglements of King Coal. He narrated to me:

**Alex:** I saw trucks filled with culm coming out of the area redacted. I asked the mayor and he said they were taking it to redacted. I decided to go back there in my

police cruiser on another occasion and I caught up with the trucks. I asked them what they were doing. The trucks said they were digging up [*the trucks give another reason than what the mayor provided*]. I decide to follow the trucks and lo and behold they took the culm to Frackville to the co-generation plant. I filmed all of it. And I watched them. They were not just taking culm. They were digging 18 feet into the ground. [This implies they were likely taking something of greater value than the culm. Perhaps there was coal there that they were extracting.] So I took it to my superior. I said, “They are stealing from us. A little town with no money.” In two weeks, I got a letter that they were closing the police station. There were hearings about it. I tried to pursue it and the organization was found not to be doing anything wrong. My friends warned me, “These are powerful people you are messing with. You will end up with a bullet in your head and no one will no one will know why.” So my friend hired me in juvenile policing nearby.

Here, the RSA, or repressive state apparatus, the police officer, was not adequately functioning ideologically to coerce public by looking the other way and therefore maintain the local means of production for “King Coal.” His job is taken away.

### **Dispossession, Divisions, Departures**

As many of these examples suggest, dispossession in many mining areas reaches “the very worst urban levels” (Bright, 2012, p. 319; cf. Bennett et. al., 2000) and even extends beyond those levels of deprivation (cf. Wallace, 1987). The Anthracite Region has been shaped by legacies of structural economic violence, violence between labor and capital, and ethnicized violence between groups of workers—sometimes resulting from the efforts of capitalists to divide workers and forestall unified labor activism. A particular technique used by capitalists was to divide mineworkers into separate linguistic and ethnic groups at work and in housing (Trotter, 2015). This technique helped to weaken potential forms of union solidarity.

The new waves of immigrants were not given a warmer welcome:

Established British- and American-born English-speaking white miners resisted the impact of both technological changes and massive southern, central, and eastern



European immigration on their work, livelihood, and communities in coalmining towns. British colliers not only openly disdained the new workers as “ignorant”, untrained miners who threatened their safety underground, they also regarded new immigrant culture, work habits, and adherence to Catholicism as a threat to Anglo-Saxon Protestantism ... established British colliers responded to the increasing influx of new people with “a mixture of condescension and contempt”. In some cases, these workers ... moved west, describing the new immigrants in nativistic terms as the “Slav invasion”. Violence against Slavs by earlier British and particularly Welsh miners resulted in the Lattimer Massacre on 10 September 1897, when armed coal company guards murdered nineteen Slav strikers in cold blood in the anthracite coalfields of Pennsylvania. (Trotter, 2015, pp. 151-52)

Even though these folds of the Appalachian Mountains in northeastern Pennsylvania contain the richest deposits of anthracite coal in the world, the common use of the appellation “The Coal Region” overshadows the shift from industrialism to deindustrialization that began in the 1930s and continues until now, much as it overshadows the story of ethnicized human conflict and tragedy among mine workers and their families:

Statistics suggest the grimness of the industry: 30,000 men have died mining anthracite in Pennsylvania, including 4,500 teenagers, 179 men in a day, and 6,200 men in a single decade ... A given miner had one chance in ten of dying underground in his career. Any reckoning of the cost of anthracite must include those 30,000 men, plus their 15,000 widows and 45,000 orphans, plus 50,000 cripples [sic], plus the hundreds of thousands of men who lived and died with miner’s emphysema, “black lung,” from breathing coal dust for half a lifetime. (Marsh, 1987, p. 342).

Now, with no workers near the coal culms surrounding the towns, there are far fewer people inhabiting local houses. In most towns, out-migration of residents and home abandonment are issues.

Out-migration has influenced the anthracite towns as much as the influx of immigrants before 1920. Decades of departure have led to demographic problems wherein the young take along with them the investment in their education and upbringing (Marsh, 1987). By the 1950s, Coal Region residents who stayed in the area were often commuting an hour or more to work cities such as Reading, Allentown, or the state capital of Harrisburg. From this exodus, a number of towns like Shenandoah, Mahanoy City, and Shamokin are replete with abandoned houses and boarded-up businesses (see Figures 2-4) and many houses are for sale for “less than the price of a used car” (Bohman, 2010). By the 1970s, the area began to see more and more abandoned homes and area is increasingly experiencing a rise in unlivable houses. More recently, a reporter detailed in a 2010 news report that he saw a house for sale covered with papers from year 2000 (Bohman, 2010). In this same news report, Jack, a local resident, remained as one of two people on a block of row homes in Shenandoah. He says that all his friends are gone and his wife recently passed away. “I’m waiting to go myself,” he says. He continues, “It’s getting rough. It’s getting to be a slum ... So, I have to grin and bear it.” He describes the area of his residence as the loneliest place imaginable.



**Figure 4.2.** Collapsed, abandoned home. Shenandoah, Pennsylvania. (Photo credit, Melissa R. Meade, 2012).



**Figure 4.3.** Boarded-up, for-sale storefront. Shenandoah, Pennsylvania. (Photo credit, Melissa R. Meade, 2012).



**Figure 4.4.** Abandoned home. Shenandoah, Pennsylvania. (Photo credit, Melissa R. Meade, 2012).

The mining industry configured the space people live in and, in turn shaped the mechanism through which they understand their identities. The imbrication of spatial arrangements and company dominance meant that typical State functions, in the Althusserian sense, were largely displaced onto mining corporations which were relatively independent from direct State regulation. For instance, a town located in Schuylkill County, Shenandoah's characteristic tightly packed row homes were the result of the mining companies owning both the mineral rights and the land surrounding the town, thereby limiting the geographical area in which miners and families could live. Thus, the population density of this tiny town grew to an urban density as houses were literally built on top of each other. Such geospatial distribution made Shenandoah, at one time, like a small city in its density (see Figure 5).





**Figure 4.5.** Tightly packed row homes in Shenandoah, PA. (Photo credit, Melissa R. Meade, 2012).

The configuration of Shenandoah's labor market and related aspects of its educational system were dependent upon the requirements of mining companies. In a particularly extreme example of this tendency, the area surrounding Shenandoah is embedded with corporate patch towns. In the general sense, patch towns came about when a mining company bought the private land and thereby owned the housing, stores, and other businesses constructed around the mine. These towns tended to generate their own monetary unit called company "scrip" thus, the miners and their families were unable to make purchases outside of the "company store" which took advantage of this dynamic by inflating prices. Moreover, significant features of patch towns were also in their public services. The towns had no elected public officials; the police were employed by the mine to protect the coal from being stolen. The central role of corporations in the provision of "public goods" like social services and policing shows the all-encompassing power of the mining company in family,

community, and political life. After the decline of mining, Anthracite Region residents were also forced to confront the termination of these arrangements.

For decades, the residents of northeastern Pennsylvania had been interpellated as miners and mine laborers. Interpellation involves individuals recognizing themselves as subjects through ideology (Althusser, 1989). The mining industry now no longer exists as a viable form of employment, yet it still subjects longtime inhabitants to the physical/embodied and place-related elements of a mining region. Yet the Coal Region has been de-centered from its place at the heart of industrialization and de-linked from infrastructural connections as discussed earlier—some of which are material connections such as railroads and canals built to transport coal and some of which are material flows like the flows of capital.

The Anthracite Coal Region's industrial past mediates longtime inhabitants' identities. The Coal Region represents a slightly divergent instantiation of the high modern process of interpellation via Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) so persuasively (but generally) described by Louis Althusser (1971). Althusser (1971) offers a metaphor for the generalized process of ideological interpellation with an example of a person walking down the street who is hailed by a functionary of the State:

*[A]ll ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject ... ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals ..., or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects ...*

From the beginning, then, processes of subjectification are only representable with place-based and embodied dimensions.

As in Marx (yet only in a single reference) ideology is theorized through a place-based metaphor of an edifice in which the economic base determines in the last instance the ideological superstructure. Althusser suggests that a given social formation is brought about by the reproduction of the conditions of production, which are formed through both the reproduction of productive forces and the reproduction of relations of production. Yet the relationship between base and superstructure has more complexity than that contemplated in many interpretations of Althusser. Any element of the capitalist system should be understood in terms of its “*overdetermination* as a function of the structure of the determination of the whole” (Althusser, 1997, p. 106). For instance, Althusser calls for attention to the status of multiple and competing temporalities interacting within a given synchronic structure. In other words, all temporalities of labor, production, circulation, and distribution (theoretical or material) must, in their *concept*, co-exist within the single space of a constantly shifting modernity.

The processes of ideological interpellation are fundamentally intertwined with the problematic of a subject’s spatial and time-based orientation. The mediated identification of particular regions with specific forms of economic activity often functions as a crucial hinge of this connection. A zone of economic abandonment like the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania is a space where the cartographic grid of intelligibility (Jacob, 2005) which typically allowed individual subjects to place themselves is no longer present in any clearly recognizable form. Some longtime inhabitants of the area articulated experiences of physical and ideological disorientation as they walked vacant streets or boarded-up town centers or as buildings were subsumed to wrecking balls, as Jack detailed earlier when he described his life on the abandoned row of homes where he resides. On a post about the

completed demolition of the Saint Nicholas Coal Breaker (see Chapter six), another resident, Josh, commented on the Anthracite Digital Project that local county residents are “brainwashed to take pride” in the area because local residents’ have been forced to pay for the exploitative and environmentally destructive business practices of “coal barons”.

**Josh:** Coal barons of past and present reaped big money while destroying our countryside and now shed a fake tear. While our taxes pay for cleanups of creeks and pits and silt and waste banks. To hell with them all. Schuylkill County [name of the Anthracite Region county discussed] is brainwashed to take pride in the shithole.

In this sense, the post-industrial Pennsylvania Anthracite Coal Region is experienced as an alienated territory, where the very aspiration of subjects to sell their own labor-power as a condition of possibility of full subjectivity (Marx, 1991) is foreclosed. A mode of production (base) which both required and made possible particular forms of ideological interpellation (superstructure) no longer exists but older identifications with the social world of coal-mining labor remains. As such, the emergence of “postproletarian” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001, p. 14) societies does not necessarily portend the collapse of previously dominant hegemonic discourses relatively fixed around “nodal points” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 112) or the (untimely) re-reproduction of structures of industrial labor through subjectification. The mining industry no longer exists as a viable form of employment, yet inhabitants still consider themselves residents of “The Coal Region.”

Interpellations are also “narrative-laden” (Vila, 2000, p. 242). Why might subjects invest in certain interpellations? The temporal dimension of narrative allows individuals to make sense of the intertwining of past, present, and future, which propels identity construction. We reconstruct the past as well as the “others” in our narratives through categories and metaphors and often relate an unfamiliar or complex part of reality, to a familiar one. A person tends to accept an interpellation when it gives meaning to her/his



particular construction of identity. This acceptance of an interpellation occurs in a process of modification between interpellations and narratives, wherein the plot guides the selectivity. The process of evaluation of the relationship between interpellations and narratives can culminate in several ways. The interpellation may be accepted or it may be rejected; or more likely, interpellations and narratives will modify each other and produce a “more coherent version of the self” (Vila, 2000, p. 246). But daily existence in post-industrial spaces throughout the Anthracite Region may not allow for such an integration to take place.

For instance, some economically disenfranchised residents, in the shadow of deindustrialization accept narratives that tie to coal mining related identities because they are faced with decaying artifacts of the past, reminders of the mining industry, and community events that reinforce those past-oriented narratives. But, in the case of the long-time residents of some towns like Shenandoah, the absence of new interpellations forecloses possibilities for future-oriented narratives; therefore, the old interpellations remain alone contributing to past-oriented narratives now unmoored from their previous conditions of possibility. Without the old interpellations and the artifacts that supported them, these residents potentially risk losing their existence as laboring subjects.

Sometimes these past-oriented narratives can be highly nostalgic for social worlds that may have never quite existed. Looking again at the town of Shenandoah, the narratives of the dominant discourses of the long-term residents who organize town community events and affairs tend to reflect an idealized past and therefore overlook past ethnic segregation, labor strife, and ethnic violence directed towards immigrants, despite the fact that the town was founded on their ancestors’ immigrant labor. Much as Christine Walley noted in her discussion of European immigrant labor in the Calumet region of Chicago, various European

immigrants assimilated to local notions of “whiteness” which also served as a “symbol of class status” (Walley, 2017, p. 234). As an instantiation of the latter idealized discourse, the annual Heritage Day celebration started in 1999. Designed to alleviate some of the anxieties associated with deindustrialization through the celebration of essentialized cultural difference, Heritage Day reflects cultural pluralism models where groups are “externally defined [and] encouraged to forget internal differences and to create ... homogenous cultural performances” (Goode & Schneider, 1994, p. 95).

Yet Heritage Day is an event that makes some town newcomers feel like outsiders: “We aren’t united on that day ... we think that they think we are invading them [the Americans],” said one newer resident who came from Mexico in the 1980s. This critical view of diversity echoes earlier moments of ethnic conflict. For example, according to a *Harper’s* article about early Slavic immigration to Shenandoah, “... never were newcomers given a less hospitable reception ... the newspapers abused them complaining of a ‘mixed population’” (Leighton, 1937, p. 139). This description stands in contrast to, in words of one long-time resident involved in community revivification: “We get along and we’ve *always* gotten along.”

But the de-linking of the Coal Region from global and national circuits of political economic power through deindustrialization had other, less apparent impacts. Lack of employment opportunities discouraged any influx of new laborers including the two Great Migrations of African Americans. Likely as a result, most anthracite towns were “passed-over,” in a sense, by *diversity discourse*. Largely a product of the Civil Rights movement, the shifts in naming, practices of inter-group engagement, and representations of social difference which became normatively required in the metropole were never entirely

articulated with the ethnicized experiences of Anthracite Region residents. Existing simultaneously as a predominantly “white” and as an “deindustrialized” space, the Anthracite Region—once an area of great labor struggle from the Irish-American Molly Maguires to the slaughter of peacefully-protesting Slavic immigrants—became largely forgotten by the metropole by the arrival the heyday of Civil Rights. Throughout my research, long-time residents answered the following question: Do you remember any Civil Rights activity coming to the area? They explained that there was no activity or outreach from the metropole.

In the wake of killing of Mexican immigrant Luis Ramírez Zavala in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania, when a group of white teenagers beat the man to death, mainstream media outlets and activists alike often depicted the long-time residents primarily as racists, while neglecting class dynamics and the structural economic, social, and political disenfranchisement of the region. Many underprivileged long-time residents may not been inculcated into larger discourses of ethnic diversity—the ensemble of practices and language usage which mark people as full participants in U.S. society—and partially for this reason their speech can register as offensive, whereas others residents may employ similar speech in intentional defiance of normative discourses. As such, Coal Region identity can function as a problematically situated category that seems to sit outside of mainstream U.S society. Cultural elites involved in mass media production may lack understanding of the lived conditions of the people about whom they write even as local residents may not understand the backgrounds of the newcomers.

Nowadays, as newcomers not tied to King Coal set up residence in the Anthracite Region, at stake is who is seen as a “good immigrant” (Goode & Schneider, 1994, pp. 15-16

& p. 173) and who remains a threatening interloper, who attains insider status and who is constructed as threateningly Other. The term *coalcracker* had previously evolved to become a pan-ethnic identity that could supersede previous ethnic identities tied to Europe, particularly when Coal Region residents are communicating amongst groups or individuals without the cultural or lived experiences of “King Coal.” Residents often use the term of filiation if they migrated out of the space. The new, post-industrial (de)linkages (dis)connecting Coal Region towns like Shenandoah to the global economy have created particular circuits of migration resulting in the region’s present-day ethnic mix. Across the United States, deindustrialized towns plagued by closing mines and factories, unemployment, and out-migration are experiencing an influx of Latinx newcomers whose identities are not tethered to previously dominant industries (cf. Sandoval, 2010). As in Shenandoah, we see newly opened Mexican restaurants on depressed streets and vital Spanish language churches. According to the 2010 United States Census, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania’s population of “Persons of Hispanic or Latino Origin”—a category defined by the census—was 5.7 percent, whereas in Shenandoah, the population was 16.7 percent.<sup>6</sup> From one point of view, these towns have been revived; from another, they are losing their essential character. At stake is not only the path of town revival, but also the re-shaping of ethnic and class identities and power relations. As in many small towns and cities throughout the United States, people of Latin American descent represent the latest large wave of immigrants to the anthracite region. As mining operations are now closed (save for a few strip-mining companies), these newcomers do not have the same interpellations connected to “King Coal” and its decline.

Debates on local immigration recently had expanded to include the city of Hazleton asking the Supreme Court to hear its appeal on behalf of its local immigration law. Flanking Shenandoah, Hazleton has the nation's "fastest growing Hispanic population" at a rate of 479 percent (U.S. Census, 2010). In this context, a former Coal Region mayor, Lou Barletta of Hazleton (now a U.S. Congressman and an advisor to President Donald Trump), passed the Illegal Immigration Relief Act which shaped debates on immigration throughout the country and in particular the Arizona Senate Bill which drew attention nationally. The local origin of some of these larger discourses and statutes is under-examined in the literature (Carr, Lichter, & Kefalas, 2012; Kaye, 2010).

### *Coalcracker Politics*

From 1988, Pennsylvania had voted democratic in presidential elections. Larger mediated narratives have largely blamed the "white working class" for a fear in losing economic status thereby securing President Donald Trump's 2016 victory (cf. Porter, 2018). Rather, a more granular ethnographic understanding of the presidential electoral dynamics reveals that Trump appealed to coal mining as an identity while simultaneously Hillary Clinton was viewed locally in the anthracite region as rejecting this identity which local residents had applied to her.

In 2012, Barack Obama won Barletta's county, Luzerne County, with a 4.8 percent margin. Trump, just four years later, however, won Luzerne County with a 19.4 percent margin swinging it 24.2 percent over democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. In my home county of Schuylkill County in 2012, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney captured 56 percent of the county's vote compared to Obama's 42 percent; however, in 2016, Trump received 69 percent of the vote in contrast to Clinton's 26 percent. What changed?

Throughout the Coal Region, Clinton was typically associated with the *coalcracker* identity because she had family roots in the northern part of the Anthracite Coal Region, having spent parts of her childhood there. If Clinton had been able to persuade the deindustrialized anthracite communities as Obama did in 2012, she would have won Pennsylvania and won the Electoral College. Hillary Clinton was perceived to have disavowed her *coalcracker* identity by speaking out against coal during her campaign. She was typically associated with Scranton, Pennsylvania within the Coal Region in relationship to the time she spent during her summers visiting her grandparents in the northern Appalachian Mountains of the Anthracite Region.

Long-time residents may stay living in the Anthracite Region, but young people, if they attain a college education, usually migrate out. Therefore, ethnic relations and the ethnicized politics of labor have changed. In place of tens of thousands of miners filling the main streets, the region offers limited employment. Prisons, transfer stations<sup>7</sup>, and landfills have replaced the mining and garment industries. The former are entities disproportionately placed in low-income communities representative of a kind of *environmental classism* in places already hard-hit (Corkum, 2014). One resident, David commented in consternation: “We get prisons; we got mine waste. Oh my God.”

Narratives are intimately linked with desire, and “narrativity proposes a particular order of meaning ... that is always a moral one” (Vila, 2000, p. 237). Narratives tend to move toward conclusion with a moralizing ending. In Anthracite Region, the hegemony of anthracite coal mining remains for longtime residents even as the industrial structure and labor interpellations have been removed.

### **Environmental Concerns/Environmental Inequality/Environmental Classism**

Anthracite coal companies declared bankruptcy and left the Coal Region in a hurry taking local jobs with them and without concern for the condition in which they were leaving the environment. As a solution to clear up these culm piles, Schuylkill County alone now has five of Pennsylvania's 14 waste coal power plants. The plants burn the culm in fluidized bed combustion, which "produce huge amounts of waste – about 4 times more CCW [Coal Combustion Waste] per megawatt of electricity than conventional coal burning plants" (Keating, Evans, Dunham, & Stant, n.d.). Two of these waste coal plants are located in my hometown, part of the tapestry of my childhood—Wheelabrator Frackville Energy Corporation and Gilberton Power Corporation, both of Frackville.

Since these waste coal plants did not meet the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Clean Power Plan for carbon-dioxide emission standards in 2015, the plants were looking to apply for a legal exemption. Since many culm piles burn and produce CO<sub>2</sub>, the argument put forth by the plants was that burning the culm in the co-generation coal-waste plant would not exceed the emission from the smoldering culm piles if left in communities. And otherwise, the use of culm as a fuel then removes this chemical threat from the local landscape (Legere, 2015).

Alex narrates related concerns about this conundrum and ultimately *environmental classism* on the Anthracite Digital Project at the time that Saint Nicholas Coal Breaker<sup>8</sup> was completely imploded in 2018. (See Chapter six for more on Saint Nicholas Coal Breaker):

**Alex:** The area is a disgrace: The reclamation of the silt banks for fuel for the power plants in the Gilberton [the name of a local patch town] area is an environmental nightmare. There is runoff into the already polluted streams. The free blowing fly ash blown by the prevailing wind into surrounding communities. Let the owner start reclaiming the land, rather than with a tear in his eye say he is sorry to see it go. What happened to the asbestos siding that was on the structure? All I can say is the price of

scrap steel must be on its way up. Possibly the *Mcall* [the url the *The Morning Call* a newspaper from another, nearby county is [www.mcall.com](http://www.mcall.com) ] should do some investigative reporting on this.

As written in Chapter six, fly ash is an “often-red coal waste that contains toxic chemicals—arsenic, mercury, lead, chromium, and uranium and has been implicated in a rare blood cancer cluster in the Anthracite Coal Region called polycythemia vera.” Alex simultaneously points a finger at local economic power structures for what he suggests their roles have been in destroying the environment; at the same time, he implicates a newspaper for failing to investigate the relationship between coal company profit and the local environmental destruction.

In the Anthracite Region, fly ash has been used as mine filler for both active and abandoned mines. Whereas most Coal Region residents’ ancestors were employed in deep mining, another type of more economical extraction evolved in the region starting in 1920s and 1930s (Dublin & Licht, 2005). This type of mining—strip mining—leaves the landscape yet more bleak and scarred and displaced the laborers who worked in deep mining. The earth shattering process of strip mining involves the use of dynamite, bulldozers, augers and earthmovers to rip apart the land in consecutive long narrow strips. The waste, dirt, and rock taken off of the top of the next strip is put on top of the last one forming rolling black hills on which little or no vegetation could grow. These rolling culms remain prominent throughout the landscape of the Anthracite Region, reminders of the originary accumulation (Marx, 1991).

Many strip mining operations continue throughout the Coal Region, coal ash is often used to fill in the pits. This type of mining disturbs the groundwater which eventually flows offsite. With no liner to stop it, the coal ash leaches its toxins into the water (Keating, Evans,

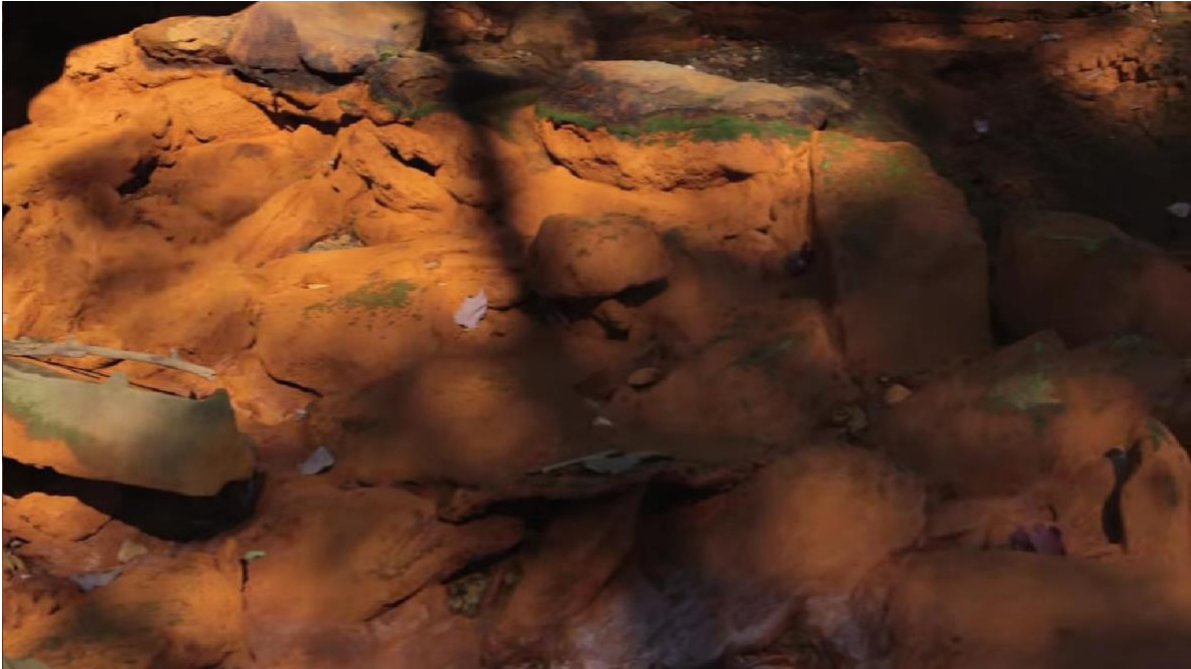


Dunham, & Stant, n.d.). Coal ash is also used to neutralize acid mine drainage<sup>9</sup>, a use I learned more about when filmmakers came to discuss the dangers with community members during my research. At this film event I met Casey, who not only corroborated part of Alex's narrative, but is the founder of the Citizens' Environmental Team.

Casey's organization seeks to be a voice for people concerned about environmental issues in the Anthracite Region. She shared with me another documentary in which she was interviewed about these concerns. In the documentary, she visits and shows spectators the Gilberton mine shaft, located in the patch town mentioned by Alex:

**Casey:** This is actually the opening from the Gilberton mine shaft. They have put 16 million tons of fly ash ... to control acid mine drainage. And this is what is coming out from underneath them. And you can see on the rocks up there in the corner, you can see acid mine drainage. You can see the iron pyrite. There's no liner. There's no anything. It [coal ash] is just poured on the ground. Underneath most of these sites you have mine pools. There is more chemicals in there probably than you'd have in the average chemical factory. And it is all leaching into the ground. To whatever mine pool is underneath to God knows whose water supply where.

The overall focus of the investigation points out that coal ash, "though it is known to contain carcinogens, ... is often dumped in unlined ponds [and pits] where it leaches into groundwater. There is no federal coal ash regulation on the books—only a patchwork of state



**Figure 4.6.** Gilberton, Pennsylvania mine shaft showing acid mine drainage/iron pyrite. (Source: *America's Dirty Secret: Coal Ash*, 2015).

level standards.” Some locals residing near the coal ash dumps in the Coal Region say “they are shrugged off as collateral damage by corporate interests and slow moving government agencies.” (*America's Dirty Secret: Coal Ash*, 2018).

Such environmental inequality and *environmental classism* has been a long-term experience for Coal Region residents and the outfall of extractive economy of anthracite mining has been a particular culprit in creating a social process with impacts on many actors including residents, the state, coal companies, workers and former workers, and social organizations (c.f. Pellow, Weinberg, & Schnaiberg, 2005). *Environmental classism* is a more specific term adapted from Pellow, Weinberg, and Schainberg's definition of environmental inequality. They write:

Environmental inequality occurs as different stakeholders struggle for access to valuable resources within the political economy, and the benefits and costs of those

resources become distributed unevenly. Stakeholders who are unable to effectively mobilize resources are most likely to suffer from environmental inequality.

Conversely, stakeholders with the greatest access to valuable resources are able to deprive other stakeholders of that same access. (pp. 6-7)

Environmental inequality is an umbrella term used in environmental justice that encompasses structural issues to access, which would be particularly notable in environmental racism and applicable to issues of class. Because the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania is a predominantly white and resource poor area, *environmental classism* is the term I apply (cf. Huang, 2019 for a discussion of poverty and illness in the Coal Region).

These abandoned mine lands sometimes have been “rented” for the disposal of toxic waste, selling the health of residents to unknown toxins which can then interact with the mining chemicals and exposures. As one such example, Casey and her husband have been exposed to the disposal of drums of toxic waste buried behind the row of houses where her home is situated. She explained that walking on the waste site on a rainy day permanently has stained the skin on her legs.

In a perhaps more extreme case, Pittston, PA, residents tried to air grievances about their community suffering with cancer during a the public lecture about a secret toxic waste dump that I attended. They attribute this cancer from a mine borehole that was used as an illegal disposal site of liquid industrial wastes and oily wastes in the 1970s and 1980s. The outflow eventually reached a mining water tunnel structure and thereby flowed into the Susquehanna River. People lived for days with the fear of breathing cyanide gas. This situation became one of the worst contaminations on navigable water in the U.S. It was used as a case in lobbying for the passage the Superfund legislation in Congress in 1980<sup>10</sup>.

Residents in the radius of the Tunnel report a cancer cluster in a two street vicinity, which was not studied separately from the Pittston zip code in a 2012 Pennsylvania study. Community members from these streets presented at a meeting with the Environmental Protection Agency and Pennsylvania Department of Health with memories and physical signs of cancer to ask why their area was not examined. “A small sample size,” Dr. Ostroff, the medical doctor who is Director of the State Board of Epidemiology said, “would not provide sufficient data” (Staub, 2011).

The environmental toll from U.S. mining is the greatest in Pennsylvania, which leads the U.S. in its “inventory of abandoned mine lands ... [including] waste coal piles, abandoned highwall mines, underground fires and mines that leach acid drainage into rivers and streams (Frazier, 2016). Earth disturbances from mining cause acid mine drainage. According to the U.S. Department of the Interior, “Streams contaminated with acid mine drainage typically lack fish and other aquatic organisms due to the water’s high acidity and harmful concentration of metal.” Acid mine drainage in the anthracite region has made the streams and rivers bright orange (Sadak, 2008). These streams are the very streams I played in as child growing up in the region—a part of the legacy of environmental damage left behind by the coal companies who abandoned the region by the 1970s when coal production went down and regulation went up requiring mining companies to reclaim destroyed land.

Only in recent years have I come to know that streams are not naturally orange. The everyday practice of seeing such warm hues trickle down the hills of my childhood had blinded me to the tension between industrialization, deindustrialization, and the corporeal experience of place. I never fetishized the spectacular orange colors; these were mundane. Embedded in social structures, normalized in the day-to-day by regular experiences and the

institutions supporting them, I remember the water boil advisories of my childhood. I was never allowed to drink the water at my grandparents' home in Shenandoah without boiling it. I remember watching the news for advisories and proudly telling my Nana, "There was no advisory. It is safe to drink." She would get very angry with me and telling, "It doesn't matter what they say on the news. The water must always be boiled—it's safer that way." As it turns out, boiling the water only removed the bacterial contaminants and not the elemental ones.

### **"The People Say the Coal Left": What Was Left Behind?**

Now, in the Anthracite Region, the fragments or vestiges of industry, the mine fire, patch towns, and "the places piled high with collections of used-up things still in use" (Stewart, 1996, p. 41) tell a story, creating an opening or a disruption in a nationalist narrative of America on a progressive track replete with democracy, opportunity, education, and equality. As in Kathleen Stewart's account of another coal-mining region in West Virginia (1996) informants speak about "[o]bjects that have decayed into fragments ... [and] embody ... absence ... [and] haunt ... They become not a symbol of loss but the embodiment of the process of remembering itself" (pp. 92-93). In the Coal Region, this kind of remembering involves unresolved feelings about the lives and living conditions of the people who reside amongst the piles of discarded materials that serve as mnemonic devices.

For some Coal Region residents, narrative and place intersect to capture or repress memories. A resident heavily involved in the revitalization efforts in another Coal Region town related to me: "The people say the coal left. The coal's been gone for fifty years! Forget about the coal. It's time to move on. People were so down on their luck when I got here." This informant speaks with a New York accent, indexing her home region—she moved to an Anthracite Coal Region town nearly thirty years ago because she was fascinated with the old

architecture, but she glosses over the intricate feelings involved in the loss of labor power experienced by long-time residents. Taken another way, this resident suggests that other residents' narratives about the region's past contribute to impeding its recovery. Therefore, they function as "screen memories" (Sturken, 1991, p. 22) which conceal and reveal those memories that people want to block. As such, she urges the community to move on from their identities associated with coal. Drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis, such loss "defer[s] meaning" (p. 35) and—in the case of collective memory—shields groups from the kind of forgetting that this informant urges. Instead, certain memories are emphasized while others are uninvited to process via mourning or healing.

Traveling through the present-day Anthracite Coal Region, one finds sparsely populated towns and abandoned mining sites which recall a time when anthracite coal fueled the Industrial Revolution. Industrial ruins such as these coal culm piles remain on the landscape as signifiers of a specific economic articulation. A typical sight in the Coal Region is one of these "volcanic cinder cones ... with a few dozen birch trees clinging to its oversteepened sides" (Marsh, 1987, p. 345). One used to be able to find the largest burning pile of culm in the world (over a mile high) next to the Coal Region town of Shamokin. Referred to as the "largest man-made mountain in the world," the "stark, sooty heap represents thousands of hours of hard labor by miners of many ethnic backgrounds" (Inkrote, 2009). Imposing itself on the side of the road by its sheer visibility, this immense, black pile of pollution with multiple active bank fires joins undermined land, destroyed landscapes, roads fractured due to mine subsidence, and little vegetation save for invasive plant species like black birch—all the outfall of deindustrialization.

Where these big culm piles of coal waste encroach the sides of the road, they appropriate a sense of land throughout the region. In places where the banks burn, the smell of sulfur permeates the air, corroding the pores with soot. Thus, *when the coal left*, it also left those tiny micro-particles flying through the air. If those piles weren't burning, they might simulate mountains. In this way, class can "leave its mark" on one's body with "some workers and communities experienc[ing] considerably greater exposure to environmental hazards than others" (Walley, 2013, p. 11). In Jeane's ethnopoetically written story, her body is (environmentally) classed by the placement of her home near to such toxic waste, which morphed into mountains for her. Her body is marked by the black anthracite coal scars that childhood play scaling these "mountains" produced:

**Jeane:** grew up in Trenton, one of the patches outside of Mahanoy City, and there were huge banks of **soft** coal dirt that we called "**silt**" behind the houses ... as kids we would climb to the top and then run down the **side** ... you would **sink** into the really **soft** dirt up to your knees, so you had to be really quick to pull your feet up and out before you went flat ... I **still** have the dark coal dirt in **scars** on my knees ... it was really hard not to get into trouble for **being somewhere** you weren't **supposed to be** by "Mom" [emphasis original] when you came home as dirty as Dad did when he came home from his shift in the mines. [emphasis added]

The Coal Region is literally embedded in her skin, which has become a mnemonic text. Much like the coal particles became embedded into the miners' lungs, space, cultural form, and environment meet on Jeane's body and corporeally mark her as being from/of the Coal Region, just as coal-miners usually had coal embedded in their skin from working in the mines. Likewise, Don, an anthracite miner, develops this idea that the Coal Region is implanted in his body when he was interviewed for a local news article: "When I got cut and I'd bleed, I used to pull out a handkerchief or something just to stop the bleeding and I'd keep working. And the coal used to get into it. I remember I was drilling once and a sharp piece of coal fell off, and it was like a razor." He pointed out that it cut the vein and left blue

line on his left wrist more than two inches long. A local historian called them “coal miners tattoos” (Pytak, 2015).

Environmental experts note that *some-bodies* have more exposure to environmental toxins, particularly those bodies in working-class or poor communities. In *Pennsylvania Heritage Magazine*, Valerie Zehl (1997) explains the importance of anthracite coal to the Industrial Revolution while articulating an experience of the region as an alienated territory, wherein the environmental damage filled the local water with its chemicals, exposing bodies to toxic substances:

Anthracite helped fuel the country's industrial revolution, but in the wake of that revolution, the land that cloaked the coal fields—once brilliant with abundant life—lay torn asunder, scarred by both large and small mining operations. In time, trees disappeared and machinery and buildings took their place. Surfaces caved in where mines and tunnels had been abandoned. Water rushed downward not to fill streams but to fill these great pits.

Zehl is alluding to the “process of industry’s emancipation from nature” (Schivelbusch, 1977, p. 2)—the shift from land as a commonwealth to land as a means to personal fortune for industrialists. Although mining companies emancipated coal mining from nature, nature could not exactly do the same. Coal Region resident Vince theorizes this point, when he looks at a picture of the large culm pile, mentioned earlier:

**Vince:** Shamokin. [Name of a local town]. Taking it in for the culm burning plants. At one time it was the largest **manmade mountain in the world**. [emphasis added]

The culm piles have once again become “manmade mountains.” Residents’ views changed nearly overnight and a common lamentation amongst locals was this refrain: “I would look out the window and see trees and sunlight. The next thing I knew, it was a black mountain.”



*The Orange Order: Acid Mine Drainage*

At a Girardville, Pennsylvania Saint Patrick's Day parade in the Anthracite Region sponsored by the Ancient Order of Hibernians, Black Jack Kehoe Division #1, I noticed the orange color of the Mahanoy Creek running behind the festivities. The Hibernian House (of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, an Irish Fraternal Organization) is a bar owned by Joe Wayne, the great-grandson of Jack Kehoe, the alleged “Molly Maguire” from the Anthracite Coal Region. Ten Irish coal miners were hanged on the same day, June 21, 1877 in the Coal Region for their supposed roles in the murders of mine supervisors. The day is known locally as “Day of the Rope.” Several other alleged Molly Maguires were hung later that year. Kehoe is portrayed by Sean Connery in *The Molly Maguires*, a 1970 film depicting violence in the anthracite coalfields and the infiltration of the Irish “Mollies” by a private Pinkerton Agency detective hired by Franklin Gowen, President of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad and of the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company. The Hibernian House (also depicted in the film), originally owned by Kehoe, now features exhibits of memories about ethnicized Catholic Irish labor and of general anthracite coal industry labor and counters historical narratives prevalent about the Molly Maguires, such as the one in the film. Yet, historian Kevin Kenny (1998) argues, the Molly Maguires “may not have existed in terms of a gigantic conspiracy as depicted by contemporaries, but as a pattern of violence engaged in by a certain type of Irishman” (p. 7) who came from the Irish countryside and worked under unfamiliar historical conditions of exploitative industrialization in the United States.

Throughout the bar, Wayne's displays recall miners' actions against unbearable wage and working conditions and the subsequent bloody policing of the region at the command of

the mine owners. In particular, the place remembers the subsequent injustice that ensued, culminating in the simultaneous hanging of twenty Irish men between 1877 and 1879—presumed to be Molly Maguires—including Wayne’s great-grandfather Jack Kehoe. This mass execution was the largest in U.S. history of any group (O’Shea, 2015).

Looking out at the orange stream situated behind the Hibernian House (see Figure 7), Patrick, a Coal Region resident tells me, “It’s the Orange Order,” while he releases some nervous, and seemingly ironic laughter. I ask, “What did you do if your water was polluted?” He answers, “Well that was real simple. We just didn’t drink it!” But the metaphor he proposed sticks with me: Orange Order was the organization meant to keep Protestant dominance in Ireland. All of my ancestors toiled in these coalfields. Both of my grandfathers began their labor as children. The half of me that comes from Irish ancestors who struggled in these coalfields can’t help but ponder the metaphor he proposed. The other half of me that comes from Polish miners understands it, too. The manner in which the second generation Irish immigrant, labor leader, and president of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) reflects on the diversity of sweat and toil of the anthracite miners in his efforts to unionize them is reminiscent of Kwame Appiah’s (2000, p. 614) suggestion about identity to not be “too tightly scripted” (as in have a single meaning): “The coal you dig isn’t Slavish, or Polish or Irish coal, it’s coal” (Beik, 1998, p. 152). These ethnic, class, and imperial conflicts flicker in our memories and the legacy of King Coal endures on the landscape in the present.

The creek ran orange from acid mine drainage (AMD). Yet resident David told me the creek is also a “shit crik.” I’ve heard friends and family use this expression during my childhood—“shit crik,” to describe some of the streams and tributaries. Back then, I thought of it as some kind of hyperbole. But what it actually means is that a creek’s water was

(rumored to be) tainted with human feces. David explained that the town of Girardville's sewage went directly into the creek until about the year 2000. Supporting his story, the information at the website of the *Pennsylvania Bulletin*, “derived directly from the Commonwealth's official gazette for information and rulemaking”

(<https://www.pabulletin.com/index.asp>) lists under the Clean Streams Law, that Girardville applied “to construct and operate a sewage treatment plant, pump stations, sewers and



**Figure 4.7 .** Mahanoy Creek, Girardville, Pennsylvania. (Photo credit, Melissa Meade, 2014).

appurtenances to serve Girardville Borough and Butler Township” on August 23, 1996

(<https://www.pabulletin.com/secure/data/vol26/26-37/1538a.html>).

I shared the sewer application date with David. When I told him that as a child, I never truly believed the term “shit crik” with which he described the water, he has this to say:

**David:** It [the locally used terminology “shit crik”] is as real as it gets. What’s more, the patch town of Rappahannock just outside of Girardville was the location of

Keystone Chemical Company [during the 1980s]. The company buried barrels of toxic waste and also dumped it into the stream. When some citizens cleaned up garbage that had been dumped in the stream, their skin became stained permanently orange because of some peculiar chemical reactions.

According to the “Environmental Covenant” recovered from the U.S. Department of Environmental Protection, the ground where Keystone Chemical Company was located:

... was originally used for the disposal of coal refuse but was also mined for coal in the early 1970s. From 1978 to 1986, the property operated intermittently under previous ownership as waste oil recovery/hazardous waste treatment and disposal facility. Hazardous waste disposed within the impoundment [water] on the property during those operations primarily contained heavy metals. The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (PADEP) ordered operations to cease in 1982, 1984, and permanently in 1986 following hazardous waste inspections that revealed several violations. From 1988 to 1991, closure activities were performed at the Property that included the removal of stabilized sludges and liquid waste from the impoundment [water], removal of the leachate [water that has percolated through a solid, and in the course of this action, extracts soluble or suspended solids] collection system and underground witness tanks, removal of remaining storage containers and fuel blending storage tanks, and the closure and demolition of sludge processing, Storage, and associated staging areas. Additional monitoring wells were installed in 1986 and sampled through 1992 ... Contaminants remain in the soil and shallow ground water with in the Environmental Covenant Area above levels appropriate for unrestricted use and EPA has determined that institutional controls to restrict land and groundwater use are appropriate and required as part of the final remedy.

*(Environmental Covenant for Keystone Chemical Company in Girardville, PA, 2014)*

By 1983, citizens and elected officials were fighting against Keystone Chemical's bid to continue the processing and recycling of hazardous waste given all these violations (Betz, 2009).

Girardville is not the only town that has lacked an adequate sewage system. The leader of a local environmental group charged with cleaning up AMD says that his organization has come across many streams with wildcat sewers<sup>11</sup> in small communities and patch towns. Other streams had raw sewage going into them because these localities were not hooked up to a public sewer system, a package plant, or sewer line that had been planned for expansion for the residents to tie into for a fee. The fecal coliforms from the sewage make cleaning up the AMD more challenging because they raise the alkalinity<sup>12</sup> of the water. In addition, the state won't pay this environmental group to do the clean-up because under state law the municipalities are required to develop and manage proper sewage operations.

### **Conclusion**

*Coalcracker*, resident of the Coal Region, or someone who has had family who has worked in the mines more generally has emerged as an identity tied to this single industry zone of economic abandonment. Even though many longtime residents of the Anthracite Coal Region experience environmental inequality on a daily basis, they have had their identities shaped by ties to labor in this region and by their spatial and place-based experiences of it. Spatial and place-based arrangements range from experiencing former patch towns, to co-generation plants, culm piles, orange streams replete with acid mine drainage (AMD) and other pollutants, strip mining, to abandoned housing and other signs of dispossession.

## CHAPTER 5

### **RE-COLLECTING CENTRALIA, PENNSYLVANIA: SUPERNATURAL TROPES AND LOCAL MEMORIES**

*While fires in abandoned coal mines occur from time to time, none have been as large, lasted as long or gained more notoriety than the one under Centralia.*

~Jerry Ennis (1989), U.S. Office of Surface Mining

As we approached the hill that took us away from Ashland on State Route 61—plumes of smoke emitted from the cracking road and the dead birch trees that flanked its side were blanched completely white. Nowadays this road is closed to the public due to fractures created by heat and mine subsidence<sup>13</sup> issues. Like most towns in the Anthracite Coal Region, Centralia, Pennsylvania was a single-industry coal-mining town. Frequent drives with family took me through Centralia during my childhood in the 1980s and 1990s. Back in those days when I was driving through with family, I used to hold my breath to avoid noticing a pungent smell similar to rotten eggs that emanated from ground gases. Yet I took the experience as ordinary and mundane—Centralia had an underground mine fire. Although the disaster grew to be a part of everyday life, I knew that the residents suffered fallout. A high school friend told me a story of riding his bicycle with his best friend on this same road. The boys covered their heads completely in order find their way through the gases—in order to breathe. While inside the car, one got a whiff of the fumes, but the dusty, smoky air made

the bicycle riders choke on these smells coming from the ground gases. On the online digital space I created for the Anthracite Region, Richard highlights this sense that the mine fire tragedy became an everyday life experience:

**Richard:** I used to drive through the town long after most of the people had relocated ... The smoke coming out of the ground along the road was taken for granted by all of us.

Are local encounters like mine, my friend's, and like Richard's suggestive of what it means to be from the "Coal Region"? Centralia is located in the heart of the Anthracite Coal Region. As it is a popular destination for those interested in "urban ruin" photography, the romanticization of this location Centralia involves the larger geopolitics of the state, nation, and world. In December 2013, I posted a comparative pictures of Centralia, Pennsylvania (see Figure 2) with a self-written vignette on my personal Facebook page. This initiative came to me upon encountering frequent media narratives about the town related to the supernatural and to horror and from bumping into "urban explorers" visiting the Anthracite Region who have not necessarily had the same class experiences as either my family, as other local Coal Region residents, or as me.

To many local residents, the demise of Centralia represented both an everyday progressive, yet traumatic instantiation of the town and the greater Anthracite Region's disadvantage within the government's agenda of neoliberal "governmentality" (Lemke, 2001, p. 12; Foucault, 1978/1991). Yet many of these visitors, "explorers," and tourists brought with them reformulated imaginations of the town thereby producing and circulating aestheticized media and supernatural stories after their visits. These media have contributed to the short-circuiting of social dialogue about deindustrialization. In addition, such media have contributed to the further marginalization of the Anthracite Region rather than serving

as a critique of the area's experiences of long-term extractivisms and economic abandonment. While dominant power structures continue to "extract" the surplus value from what their industrialist antecedents left behind, a deferred future for Centralia that never happened now "haunts" the landscape of post-industrialism, which outsider narratives often exoticize through supernatural tropes.

Thus, this chapter broadly explores the relationship between social memory and place by considering how dominant media representations evoke history and instantiate a process of place transformation. It asks how local people understand and negotiate these mediated transformations. The chapter considers how media not only have contributed to the process of untying geographically specific memories from their place, but they led the process by circulating romanticized texts and images that destabilized a sense of place with an industrial/post-industrial past. Through an analysis of an amusement park depiction, both the video game and the horror film *Silent Hill*, commentary on the horror film on a U.K. based Facebook page dedicated to supernatural tropes, the travel and review sites Yelp and Trip Advisor, as well as a discussion of Google algorithms, the chapter illustrates how the deindustrialization of Centralia is used as an object for consumption (a commodity). The placement of it on review sites and the movie are an effect of its commodification. Local residents, on the other hand, share their lived memories through the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania Digital Project.

Centralia is as an extreme example of human-made disaster. It has been commercialized and aestheticized through media. Adam, an author of a Yelp post referenced in this chapter, explains these phenomena: "There is a problem though ... this has become a



sort of organic tourist destination. You never get the feeling of isolation and grief because there's always some other group 100 feet away doing the same thing you're doing.”

Specifically, the chapter asks what is involved in the process of transforming Centralia into a "ghost town"? How do local residents' memories contest and/or connect to this process?

It asks, how do dominant narratives circulated about the town of Centralia and its past transform the town into a salable and aesthetically appealing good? How do memories and online discussions by former residents of Centralia and by residents of the broader Anthracite Coal Region counter this commodification by both sharing their lived memories and related identities by providing narratives of the place's past?

### **Centralia Mine Fire**

The Centralia mine fire broke out at a site used for Centralia's trash just before Memorial Day 1962, which sat atop an old strip-mining pit, “a hollowed out bowl [of coal refuse] about fifty-feet deep and seventy-five feet wide, where an independent contractor had stripped the Buck Mountain vein—a seven-foot-wide coal seam—in the 1930s” (Quigley, 2009, p. xix). The trash's fire ignited this exposed coal seam, followed the trajectory of the mineral underground into an abandoned coalmine, and advanced toward a residential neighborhood. By the late 1960s, Centralia, once a coal-mining boomtown had toxic gases like carbon monoxide and methane now wafting into residents' homes. Sulfurous steam stung the nostrils of passersby. All attempts to put out the fire would be unsuccessful.

Despite a brief revival in the coal industry during World War II, Centralia, like most of the Anthracite Region, faced permanent decline by the 1950s leaving locals without their principal source of employment and therefore also leaving local governments without their main source of tax revenue. The coal companies originally responsible for literally

*undermining* the town had “gone to liquidation, bankruptcy, or just the mists of history. No legal responsibility ... [remained] on them” (Ennis, 1989, p. 226). With no taxes coming in, town trash, petroleum-based chemicals, furniture and other wares were disposed of on the stripping pits. It was not entirely unusual for piled up garbage on top of uncovered coal seams to ignite and set fire to the honeycombed underground structures (Quigley, 2009).

The tipping point for the fire’s significance happened one Saturday morning in early 1981 during a visit from U.S. Representative James Nelligan (R-PA) who was sent by the then Interior Department Secretary (an adversary of government spending projects) to confer with Centralians (Quigley, 2009) about the mine fire. At the time of the Representative’s visit, 12-year-old Todd Domboski was playing in his grandmother’s yard. At some point he went to investigate smoke emerging from the ground when the earth collapsed beneath him and he found himself

sinking into the hot slippery mud. He tried to gain footing, but it was futile—the hot, slimy earth was swallowing him. As ... his body became submerged, he tried desperately to free himself ... Sinking into the growing abyss, he clasped onto a clump of tree roots sticking out of the ... earth, to halt his fall. Todd tried in vain to extract himself, but it was impossible. He breathed in the toxic gasses and smoke. (The heat in the hole later measured at 350 degrees.) He screamed for help. His cousin Erik ... rushed over and spotted Todd’s orange baseball cap in the pit. Erik yelled for his cousin to reach for his hand and he somehow pulled Todd from the ... earth. (Meade, 2015)

By this time, the fire already had been burning for nearly two decades and the local media’s interest in the disaster had waned. But the story of Todd Domboski getting sucked into the subsiding sulfurous land sent shockwaves through the town and drew in national and even international mass media coverage.

Todd lived through the traumatic ordeal, but the subsequent media coverage finally forced the federal government to face the fire. The estimated cost in 1984 of extinguishing

the blaze was \$660 million, but instead Congress drafted a relocation bill in the amount \$42 million so that families that wished to leave Centralia, could do so *voluntarily*. The Domboskis moved, too: “The state bought our house in the first relocation, but it was depreciated 20 percent for the mine fire. They didn’t help at all with the move, so we moved by car since I couldn’t afford a moving van,” said Todd’s mother Flo. (Jacobs, 1986/2010, p. 9; see also Meade, 2015). By some estimates, \$50,000 may have been enough funding to put out the fire in when it started in 1962 (Guss, 2007). A few homes and residents remained until the government declared eminent domain, through which homeowners were evicted from their homes. The last remaining residents refused to leave their homes and sued the government for the right to stay until their death, plus the value of their homes and legal fees. The final six residents won their case after years fighting in 2013.

### **Centralia on Facebook: Potential for Collective Remembering**

As a narrator who witnessed and experienced the outfall of deindustrialization in this region, I shared some of my autobiography publicly in a personal Facebook post and identified myself with the area’s economic abandonment. I posted the un-credited side-by-side layout picture of Centralia paired with curated text (see Figure 1). In the photo, the spectator can note extreme transformations of the landscape over the span of several decades. The mine fire, the failed attempts to extinguish it, and the forced evacuation of residents with the subsequent razing of their homes both marred and denuded the land within a generation. Right next to this barren visage, on the other side of the split photo, the spectator can see what once was a vibrant town. Having experienced this “spectacular violence” (Thomas, 2010, p.109), Centralians now risk having their town and experiences “un-remembered” (Cattell & Climo, 2002, p. 21) because the land, buildings, and other significant landmarks

have been destroyed, no longer offering support for their memories. The demolishing of the homes and buildings perhaps involved the attempted “erasure or commodification of the past” fostering a myth of progress and in the process forgetting “that things might be otherwise, that elements of the past might have conspired to forge an alternative present” (Edensor, 2005, p. 141).



**Figure 5.1.** (Uncredited). Side-by-side images of Centralia, Pennsylvania on State Route 61. The first image shows the town when it was still a lively place to live. The second image shows the town decades later after residents’ houses were demolished through government intervention.

[My friends, family, and me] are from [this] region—the Anthracite Region or the “Coal Region” ... as we like to call it. For those who don't know, Centralia, Pennsylvania is a former coal-mining town which is now mostly abandoned because an underground mine fire has been burning since the early 1960s. The ground is hot and swollen. The roads have buckled. The smell of sulfur permeates the air. My mother's best friend is from Centralia. Most of her family members (about whom we often chat) are buried in the cemetery there. Someday soon I will try to post some shots I have taken of the town as it is right now. I know some of my high school classmates were born there. I remember passing the “Speed Spot” on the way to my

track meets in Mount Carmel and Shamokin and we joked about stopping there to fuel up.

And if the past landscape now obliterated could have led to some kind of alternative present, the interpretation of media depicting Centralia's altered landscape is an act of construction through which meaning is produced via communication, circulation, and decontextualization and recontextualization (McKenzie, 1999).

Leaving a place to ruin and delimiting its abjection by demolishing its buildings speaks to its marginal or subordinate status. The dissemination of the above picture through social media opened up a new potential for me, as a resident, to try to form a collective—a participatory public—and to support identification among anthracite community members, thereby producing local narratives to challenge dominate mediated distortions.

### **A Community Remembers Centralia on Facebook**

On Facebook, community members like Betty link their ideas about home to a sense of absence that extends all the way to their childhood:

**Betty:** I grew up there [in Centralia] as a child and had to move because of the fire. My parents built a house in Aristes [village next to Centralia] and then so did I. I miss Centralia and the candy store and park!!! I remember how the town used to be like Mt. Carmel [town near to Centralia] with stores and rows of homes. And that was in the 80s.

For Betty, Centralia is defined now by the absence of the things that she loved: the candy store, the park, stores, and rows of homes. Such absence brings about a sense of melancholy. People care about places because they shape identities, which are intrinsically attached to memory—both collective and individual. If places and landscapes are “memory texts,” (Biesecker, 2002, p. 393) or the textual materials and cultural artifacts of life and community, meaning is produced through interaction with them, responses to them, communication with them.

And Priscilla feels displaced, only coming home at times, driving through the locations that are in her memory:

**Priscilla:** ... When we go home for any length of time, we travel through Centralia on our way to Shenandoah [nearby town] to get kielbasa [Polish sausage] to bring back with us. Sometimes we take the back roads and travel through where the huge windmills are ... As the years pass and we have watched the houses slowly be torn down, it is a sad drive along the road on the right for us. We remembered when it was the picture on the left and we would travel to one of our favorite restaurants called Ghezzi's run by Frank Barvitski and his brother. Does that restaurant or the name sound familiar to you?

Here Priscilla recognizes how the fragments of memory were being dismantled as she passed through her home area on trips back. Piece by piece each fragment of Centralia was being relegated to the incinerator. Fragmentation can reconstitute memory, serving as a corrective to the impulse of aestheticization and commodification (Benjamin 1968; 1978) of artifacts, images, and in the case of Centralia, of places. Walter Benjamin's work suggests that "the rescue and preservation of artefacts, images, and ideas" from the process of ruination and their "subsequent reuse or refunctioning in the pressing political struggles of the moment" (Gilloch, 1997, p. 14) can be read backwards. Collective memory then is not fixed in time; it is rather an evolving practice in which places and ideas transform, blend together and vie for dominance. Here, memory is a process of construction in the present from the decontextualized ruins. In the case of Centralia, the "ruins" were torn down directly by agents of the government. In the case of the Breaker (see Chapter six), government policies and lack of policies worked in favor of coal mining companies to allow the structure's demolition.

In examining another coal mining region, in Appalachian West Virginia, Kathleen Stewart (1996, p. 64) explains how residents' time away from their hometown manifests itself as a type of exile: "In conditions of cultural trauma, displacement, exile, and economic

collapse, the very negation of ‘home’ constitutes its hold on people.” As in this case, another Centralia resident, Ray, who was “exiled” to a nearby village lamented that he and his family have been twice affected by the coal industry: They first had to move out of Centralia due to the mine fire relocation and now, in the new village, there is a large, unlined fly ash pit<sup>14</sup> used for the disposal of toxic industrial coal waste.

This sense of exile extended to another Facebook group dedicated to discussing the memory of Centralia when a *Philadelphia Inquirer* journalist sought assistance from community members to write an article about Centralia. He posted another article he wrote about a contemporary coal miner in the Anthracite Region and explained to the residents that he is not a complete outsider, because his family comes from other nearby Coal Region towns. Kelly offers the most reverberating comment in the thread and her words express a sense of exile:

**Kelly:** Sure you are [from nearby towns]. Do you have to walk through piles of trash to pay your respects to your parents and grandparents’ graves? Or try to remember where the houses you grew up in stood before it was just graffiti covered land? No offense, your request may be innocent, but I wouldn’t hold my breath.

Kelly’s words illustrate an ongoing problem for Centralia residents: the alleged destruction of deceased residents’ graves by outsiders. Centralia’s cemeteries were not included as a part of the government’s eminent domain actions and thus remain in the same place, as residents return to these sites of remembrance where family memories dwell. Kelly likewise laments residents’ struggle to remember a street grid populated with houses that no longer physically exists—instead, according to her, the streets are now covered in graffiti.

The town has been mediatized, romanticized, commodified, and exoticized. Kelly then issues a challenge to a mainstream newspaper reporter: “No offense, your request may be innocent, but I wouldn’t hold my breath.” Centralia is vulnerable to narratives that portray

it from the outside. Speaking for the town, Kelly tries to stave off media that may threaten her “homeland.” Place is particularly significant to marginalized communities and centers of power look to these places both as nostalgic and threatening, as Kathleen Stewart (1996) writes about in relationship to another Appalachian coal-mining community:

[I]n these most marginalized, out-of-the-way places ... place seems to matter the most ... [P]laces so devastated by history retain the marks and memories of the past while in the suburbs the sheer timelessness of the straight line of progress spreads like oak wilt from house to house ... [T]hese pieced-together re-membered places bear the weight of a homeland while the “master planned communities” at the center of things encase themselves in a picture-perfect simulacra of homeyness emptied of history and memory ... [T]hings seem to proliferate ... in the margins while the centers with the power to create look to these “Other” places as a source of both nostalgia and threat ... (p. 42)

Demonstrating and defending this retention of memory, another resident, Maggie issues a challenge to the journalist’s privilege asking:

**Maggie:** Oh a journalist like the others that refer to Centralia as a “ghost town”?

### **Mediatization, Romanticization, Commodification, Exoticization**

As expressed in Maggie’s protest, Centralia has been used significantly as an exemplar for various fictional accounts of a “ghost town” and of Hell. Although Centralia has been documented in nonfiction writing and film, many accounts such as Dean Koontz’s series of dark short stories *Strange Highways* (1991) and David Wellington’s horror novel *Vampire Zero* (2008) all have all used the town’s memory to serve their fictional or fantastic purposes. On a more local level and in a more tangible form, the popular Knoebels Amusement Resort in nearby Elysburg, PA has a ride called The Black Diamond—a common nickname given to anthracite coal because of the high profits yielded by few operators, at the risk of hundreds of thousands of workers. This dark, three-story ride takes the participant into a haunted coal mine where she/he is warned that these tunnels might



collapse and leave her or him “at the hands of ghostly miners who have died before you.” By the end of the ride, “trains pass a swirling, fiery vortex. Although this resembles popular depictions of the gates of Hell, a sign identifies the location as Centralia” (Pitta, 2015, p. 139). (See Figure 2).



**Figure 5.2.** Knoebels Amusement Resort ride, “The Black Diamond.” Riders pass through a fiery vortex, a popular depiction of Hell, and arrive as a sign that says “Centralia.”

Centralia was also an inspiration for the 2006 horror film *Silent Hill*, the film adaptation of the video game. Although the film *Silent Hill* was not shot there nor did the Japanese videogame series of the same name have any affiliation with the town, the local memories of Centralia, PA became overwhelmed by global public interest in both sets of media. The director of the *Silent Hill* movie, Christophe Gans, cited in an interview that Centralia was the film’s inspiration:

“We used [what] had happened to the city of Centralia to feed the mythology of *Silent Hill*,” ... Gans and screenwriter Roger Avary used Centralia as a reference point for what *Silent Hill* might look like in the real world—although it was filmed in Canada. (“Centralia”, however, was the movie’s working title, so that the production might avoid attention from *Silent Hill* [videogame] fans while filming.) (Fyfe, 2015)

Thus, the effort of the filmmakers to transpose the actual location for the horror film *Silent Hill* onto Centralia (the videogame series did not specify a location, but was rather noted to be set somewhere in United States), also in effect began to transform collective memory of the tragedy of the town into a macabre spectacle. In lieu of associating the town's deserted state with local people economically disenfranchised and displaced from their homes, visitors instead might be fans of

a pyramid-hatted ghoul and his various acts of sexual violence. "You can go to Centralia on almost any day of the year and see tourists wandering around," says [David] DeKok, [author of the book *Fire Underground*, an account of how the fire began under Centralia and how government made ineffective attempts to extinguish it]. "Of those I speak to, which obviously isn't everyone, I would say a third to a half are there to see 'the real Silent Hill.'" (Fyfe, 2015)

As the above example illustrates, Centralia was produced for the consumption and aesthetic experience of the horror genre fans. The ghoul, the monster, or closely related horror images are used to evoke fear of an Othered economic space outside of the demands of historical specificity. In the case of Centralia, the horror scene serves as an omen of an unmanageable non-urban location. It allows its consumers to displace anxieties upon it and thereby avoid understanding the unknown experience of coal mining and deindustrialization in a single industry are. As a cultural space for hidden desires, the monster "evokes potent escapist fantasies" (Cohen, 1996, p. 17). The geographic marginalization of Centralia away from the urban core allows explorers "the simple and fleeting joys of being frightened" (Cohen, 1996, p. 17).

A U.K. Facebook page called Eerie Truths exploited this horror trope along with the connection to the film *Silent Hill* by featuring Centralia in what became one of their most popular posts in July 2017. Receiving about 74,852 comments, 250,360 shares, and over 58,000 reactions at the time of writing, the post included the following text and images:

Centralia, Pennsylvania (Silent Hill). In order to maximize circulation of the horror trope, the language of the post deflects any responsibility, instead relying on the passive voice to position the town as a haunted and horror-ridden place. Phrases such as: “**It is said** to be one of the most haunted places in the United States ...,” “Many died there and the abandoned town **is said** to be harboring the souls of the people who refused to leave,” “Visitors ... **have reported** numerous sightings of ghosts, faces, figures ...,” and finally, “It has **been described** as the gateway to hell.” Each bolded phrase above shows that the authors used the passive voice and thereby avoided sourcing the false information about Centralia that they spread to hundreds of thousands of people. Avoiding responsibility for the actions of the verbs they chose, the writers connected these passive verbs with allusions and metaphors of horror and haunting.

In addition, within the material cited above the reader can see descriptive phrases further extending the horror trope portraying Centralia as “one of the most haunted places,” as the “gateway to hell,” as a place where one may encounter “numerous sightings of ghosts, faces, figures,” as a place in which “[m]any died,” and which harbors “the souls of people.” In the cited post below, each such phrase is underlined for reader convenience.

Centralia, Pennsylvania is the real life town which inspired the movie Silent Hill. It **is said** to be one of the most haunted places in the United States, so where better to get inspiration for a horror movie? Centralia was a coal mining town since 1842 when the land was purchased by the Locust Mountain Coal and Iron Company. The Mine Run Railroad was built in 1854 to transport coal out of the valley. Centralia was an active coal mining town until 1962 when the coal beneath the ground caught fire. There is still some disagreement over the specific event which triggered the fire which makes the underground furnace a mystery in itself. In 1966 rail service to the town ended and residents started to abandon Centralia. By 1980, it had just 1,012 residents, although another 500-600 people lived nearby. As of 2016, there are just 10 people living there and Centralia has become a ghost town, and not just because of the lack of people and smokey, creepy atmosphere. Many died there and the abandoned town is said to be harboring the souls of the people who refused to leave. Visitors over the years **have reported** numerous sightings of ghosts, faces, figures, and more. One of

the most common reports is that of a young girl covered in ash who stalks the cemeteries. Other claims include screams and moans coming from under the ground as well as a demonic face which is shaped from the fires below. The coal fire which started in 1962 is still burning today, and it could do so for another 250 years. It **has been described** as the gateway to hell and after that name was coined, locals probably heard enough and left. The underground fire gives the town an authentic haunted look as smoke just rises from the ground. [emphasis added; no spelling or punctuation was changed from the original text]



**Figure 5.3.** Romanticized images used to depict Centralia, Pennsylvania as shared on the UK Facebook page “Eerie Truths”

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/www.theerietruths.co.uk/posts/721959611320635>

### Naming and Algorithmic Memory

At the time of writing this chapter, the query “Silent Hill, PA” is one of the top three searches about Centralia completed on Google Trends. Centralia is repeatedly referred to as

“Silent Hill” or the “real Silent Hill” in mediated accounts. The search engine’s preference for the mediated re-naming of the place by film *Silent Hill* is significant. Names evoke the social history of a place and sites of memories are significant for claims over meaning and often become the focus of contestation (Cattell & Climo, 2002). Therefore, the significance of place-names can be reinforced on landscapes and inform people’s ways of imagining and interpreting the past (Basso, 1996). Moreover, the political economy of search engines with their “black box” algorithms demonstrates which search is the most profitable for Google: That which associates Centralia with a horror film and marginalizes local memories.

Visitors captivated by romantic and provocative imaginaries of disinvestment come to the Coal Region to observe the decay and disappearance of a town. As a paradigmatic experience of disaster, many come to see one of the two roads leading south out of the town—a destroyed stretch of Pennsylvania Route 61 (see Figure 4). The road has been permanently closed to vehicles since the 1990s. Now it is buckled and fissured from heat and mine subsidence with gnarly vegetation dried in the cracks. Steam and smoke plumes emit from these fissures and the highway has been painted over with graffiti. Photographers, amateur filmmakers, tourists, and “urban explorers” populate blog spaces, Flickr albums, user-generated review sites, and social networking sites with images of people dramatically posing inside these fissures on this defunct section of Pennsylvania Route 61.

Such romanticization has a long history in the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania: Visitors come to the Coal Region with their mediated imaginaries in order to shoot “ruin porn”—photographs of industrial ruins, abandoned buildings, and general decay, including Centralia, Pennsylvania, the latter of which has become a cultural trope for a modern ghost town, deserted by force because of the mine fire

and the subsequent government intervention. An example of this romanticization, at the site of the abandoned Saint Nicholas Coal Breaker located in by the nearby towns of Shenandoah and Mahanoy City, I ran into urban explorers who explained their purpose—they were from New York, NY and they “[had] a lot of practice in finding and exploring ‘cool’ urban decay. This [deindustrial] scene [was] nothing new to [them].” (Note: A coal breaker is a large facility that used to process coal into usable sizes for market). They proceeded to tell me that



**Figure 5.4.** Now closed to the public, a destroyed section of State Route 61 has been dubbed “Graffiti Road.” (Photo credit: TripAdvisor.com)

they visited the “other” breaker (the now torn down Huber Breaker) near Wilkes-Barre. They were quickly on their way after snapping some photos. I was a bit speechless, recalling that I saw the abandoned coal breaker scene nearly every day as a child. Strangely these visitors just “discovered” my community’s local, everyday experiences of deindustrialization and now they could potentially be taken out of context for nostalgic purposes in media accounts.

Online review and social networking sites showing user-generated content such as Yelp and TripAdvisor share some visitors’ reviews of Centralia. In their reviews, these visitors typically either exoticize their experiences of the town perhaps even suggesting that they felt the presence of a ghost or instead they express disappointment that the town is not ominous and dystopian enough to fulfill their expectations. The reviewers’ determination to document their experiences can be observed in the general function and set up of Yelp. Going back to as early as December 2007, Centralia has had its own entry on Yelp.com under a section called “Local Flavor.” Yelp’s typical function is to crowd-source reviews of local businesses and also to serve as a place where businesses can update their contact information, their hours of operation, and other basic information. What’s peculiar about a Centralia entry is that not only are no businesses located in the town, but also, as of 2002 the zip code had been revoked at a time when there were only approximately 21 residents. By the subsequent 2010 census there were only 10 remaining residents. The Centralia Yelp entry is locatable by doing a typical Yelp search—by searching under the “Find” option at the top of the page while searching simultaneously in the “Near” option for other local towns. For example, while searching from Jim Thorpe, PA located rather far from Centralia, one hour away in Carbon County, but still within the Anthracite Coal Region, and then subsequently



clicking on “Local Flavor,” the user’s top hit is Centralia and renders 22 reviews at the time of writing.

Of the 22 reviews present on the Yelp site for Centralia, 16 of them had language specifying either a relationship to the supernatural or to a disappointment that the town was not scary or ghostly enough to fulfill the reviewers’ expectations. Such heightened reviewer expectations for Centralia speaks strongly to its commodification. For example, the reviewer named Nadia draws the reader into supernatural language that she includes in her writing:

**Nadia Z:**       Eerie.  
                      Quiet.  
                      Weird ...

Fires are still burning – stick your hand into the cracks of the silent highway, covered with graffiti, and you will feel the heat... if you walk a bit around, you can see steam rising up from the cracks in the ground. You can feel the heat touching your face as you walk – or was it a ghost? ...

I got chills walking on that highway to nowhere.

She calls the place “eerie” and “weird” and suggests for the reader to “stick ... [his/her] hand in the cracks of the silent highway, covered with graffiti.” The description of the highway as “silent” is an allusion to the horror film *Silent Hill* based off of the videogame series, discussed earlier. The cracks in the highway are referred to twice in this short entry as a paradigm of destruction. She goes on to mention heat, also twice. Yet the second time she introduces the theme of heat, she invokes the supernatural: “You can feel the heat touching your face as you walk – or was it a ghost?” The heat on your face just might be a ghost and not the result of social and economic processes that *haunted* the Anthracite Region.

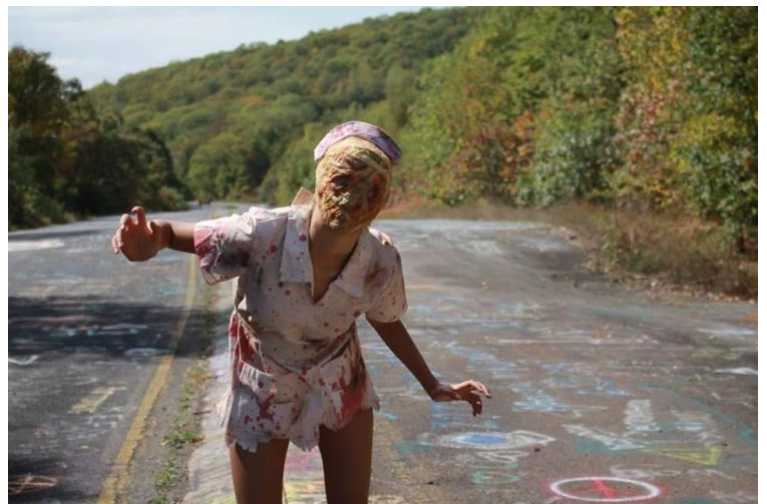
Another reviewer from Baltimore, Maryland on the travel website featuring user-generated content called TripAdvisor even did a photo shoot on the road with a costume as the “nurse” from the film *Silent Hill* and posted the images online. She explained that her



daughter wanted to be the nurse from the film for Halloween, so they went to Centralia to do “a fun photo shoot.” (See Figures 5 and 6). This recognition of the town as a symbol of *Silent Hill* and a place to live out a Halloween horror fantasy suggests that mediatized forms reach children and adults alike. The film’s circulation of horror tropes in relationship to the town cannibalizes memories of Centralia’s misfortune and displaced residents, overlaying them with mediatized nostalgia in essence producing a transformed landscape in which the supernatural, rather than economic and cultural practices bears responsibility for environmental and human tragedy.



**Figure 5.5.** Image of the nurse character from the film *Silent Hill*. (Photo credit: [www.fanpop.com](http://www.fanpop.com))



**Figure 5.6.** Reviewer from TripAdvisor.com submitted an image from a photo shoot she did on Centralia’s Graffiti Road. (Photo credit: [www.tripadvisor.com](https://www.tripadvisor.com))

Absent any critique of the conditions that resulted in Centralia’s circumstances, a reviewer on Yelp named Adam reveals that his expectations for a horror-filled visit to Centralia would likely be “anticlimactic.” He was disappointed to not get “the feeling of isolation and grief because there’s always some other group 100 feet away doing the same

thing you're doing.” Hoping to find a sense of desolation and death in “an old coal town undermined by a persistent fire,” a “Hell on Earth,” the cultural context that this reviewer brought with him implies nostalgia for loss. Like places of war, mining landscapes are the kinds of locations that someone else preferably has to deal with on a day-to-day basis and which “students and/or horror buffs” can regard with nostalgia after extraction is complete. Again, the visit takes place around Halloween:

**Adam C:** can't complain too much. I used the chance to visit "this weird little ghost town I heard about" near Halloween as an excuse to visit friends. Knowing full well the endpoint would be somewhat anticlimactic ...

If you don't [know about Centralia], it's one of those eerie places that high school and college students and/or horror buffs might trek to. Other people have covered the history: an old coal town undermined by persistent fire. Hell on Earth. Silent Hill come to life.

The road (the old HWY 61) crumbles. An oppressive, smoky smell fills the sky. The night I went was particularly hazy and foggy, which only added to the spooky atmosphere. Driveways split off from the road leading to nothing. Graffiti of the "WELCOME TO HELL" variety gives off a "should I really be here?" feeling.

The number of graveyards nearby cannot be an accident, though. Not even spooky, that. Spooky<sup>15</sup> ...

There is a problem though ... this has become a sort of organic tourist destination. You never get the feeling of isolation and grief because there's always some other group 100 feet away doing the same thing you're doing ...

Much like in the case of the other Yelp review presented above, media not only have contributed to the process of untying Centralia's geographically specific memories from their place, they have spurred the process by circulating romanticized texts and images that destabilized a sense of place linked to an industrial past that still is experiencing the effects of industrial abandonment. Andreas Huyssen (2003) theorizes this point using the example of the circulation of images and texts associated with the Holocaust to assert that the Holocaust

has emerged as a trope that ties itself to local situations that have distinct political and historical dimensions. Through this process the Holocaust begins to lose its ability to index a particular historical scenario. It has become a metaphor, much as Centralia is metaphor for vague sensations of “grief” and “isolation” articulated by this reviewer, yet when one arrives there with those politically and historically charged memories, now unmoored from their surroundings “there's always some other group 100 feet away doing the same thing you're doing.” This reviewer came with pre-conceived ideas about “Hell on Earth” and again *Silent Hill*, but he ends up calling Centralia “Spooky,” a slang word used to describe something simultaneously spooky and humorous. Not only does this writer view Centralia as a place with supernatural dimensions, the fear it generates can also be funny. Such a description overlooks the tragedy of a single-industry town’s residents losing their homes and their physical attachments and reminders of place.

The above Yelp descriptions focus on the symbolism of modern ruins in non-urban spaces and their romanticization. While some may argue that an artistic movement has been created that has inspired conversation around urban deindustrialization in which buildings and other abandoned places are put to new use, the bulk of problem-solvers, investors, planners, and research has dealt with global gateway cities (and to a lesser extent downscaled cities) and it seldom focuses on the experiences of residents in post-industrial small towns and cities. The decontextualized potentialities of the supernatural remain an imaginary for some visitors while ruination is the experience for those who resided there and for whose memories are inscribed on the landscape.

## Re-Collecting the Anthracite Coal Region with Digital Media

To the tourists who write these romanticized descriptions, Centralia is an imagined place, a “*lieu de mémoire*,” a memory place which, which as Pierre Nora (1996) defines, is created through texts, discourses, practices, symbols, or spaces of mythological history. These *lieux de mémoire* propagandize national or even international collective memory absent any real connectedness to the past—houses, infrastructure, street names, schools, officials, or even a zip code. This kind of memory, from Nora’s perspective, is a site of memory which incorporates individuals into the “mass and mythology” of a type of nationhood. The generation of this type of memory is about “amnesia”: the lack or even absence of “remembrance and/or its orchestration” (Gilloch, 2017).

In the case of Centralia, the dismantlement of the place made the former town vulnerable to outside interests or more specifically commodification. Although residents still had their vernacular memories, horror tropes began to appear in larger media narratives overwriting these local memories that remained intimately attached to place. Without the *lieux de mémoire* or “real memory” hingeing on the meaning of place, what is left is commodification, aestheticization, and propagandization of the memory of place.

Graeme Gilloch (2017) points to Nora’s (1989, p. 7) argument that there is little memory left:

Our interest in *lieux de mémoire* where memory crystallizes and secretes itself has occurred at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory.

Then for local residents, the geography of Centralia does not have many familiar sites or symbolic sites because most sites have been razed. What signals can one get from a town where the homes and infrastructure were demolished and the zip code taken away? Residents instead note absences that bind collective memory and establish spatiotemporal reference points. They put together fragments—pieces of memory—collecting them, sharing them, and now displaying them through digital media. Residents’ communal sharing of memories stands in contrast to the tendency of tourists who focus on specific sites in Centralia only to later circulate horror tropes. Figure 7 below shows the remains of housing infrastructure that a local named Roger submitted to the Anthracite Coal Region Digital Project. Roger writes:

**Roger:** This photo I took in Centralia tells the whole story. Taken in 2005.



**Figure 5.7.** Remains of a Centralia resident’s home—the staircase taken in 2005.

Likewise, Eloise returned to Centralia in 2003 to photograph the location where her great-grandparents' house once stood overlooking the town. (See Figure 8).

**Eloise:** I took this one in 2003 on the hill where my great-grandparents house originally stood.



**Figure 5.8.** Photo taken from a hill overlooking Centralia by the great-granddaughter of Centralia residents.

The meaning of this place has been vulnerable to external narratives because particular narratives or versions of the past rely on placed-based artifacts which are now absent in Centralia (Basso, 1997; Geertz, 1973). Labor histories and ethnic relations in the Anthracite Region have always had at their heart a tension between dominant social groups' "official" (ideal, patriotic) interpretations and more "vernacular" forms of memory (Bodnar, 1992, p. 122)—the latter "memory texts" (Biesecker, 2002, p. 393) and memory sites.

To capture how Centralians experience acts of remembering, it is helpful to turn to Roland Barthes' (1980) work in *Camera Lucida*. Through his personal mourning, he discovered an image of his deceased mother as a young, ten-year old girl wearing a white dress. Whereas one passes over the subject of most images with a disinterested gaze or *studium*:

others have a powerful and profound impact occasioning a veritable visual shock to the spectator ... This, the wounding of the present by the image of the past through the recognizable portrait of the living, now dead by a catastrophe, that was then still in the future, which now lies in our past—he [Barthes] terms the *punctum* (Gilloch, 2017).

Graeme Gilloch's (2017) analysis of the *punctum* sheds light on how post-industrial spaces such as Centralia must be acknowledged as places of painful and provocative recollections that have penetrated and punctured the residents—leaving “sore points, scabs, scars.” They are what I will term *post-industrial punctum*.

Walter Benjamin's concept of phantasmagoria and its theorization in Gilloch's (1997) earlier work can further contribute to framing how Centralians experience their memories of sites that are no longer physically present particularly in relation to mediated images of Centralia. The classical use of the term, “forms of illusion and enhancement in the service of domination and exploitation” (2017) accounts for how Centralia's cultural traumas and economic displacement have been transformed as products for consumption in the form of mediated imaginaries of “haunting(s),” “ghosts,” “monsters,” and the supernatural. Yet Gilloch (2017) suggests that there may be an alternative way of thinking about phantasmagoria—in terms of “critical hauntology” and a preoccupation with

the voices of the past that have been silenced and the presence of those who have disappeared or have been displaced or misplaced, with the unremembered, with the unknown dead, with the unheeded, unwritten, unacknowledged, the traditionally oppressed.

These “voices” are those of the local residents and their memories.

Within a critique of “horror” and other supernatural tropes circulated about Centralia, Pennsylvania, the use of the term “haunts” that Gilloch proposed—which functions both as a noun and as a verb—can challenge and help reclaim spectral, “horror,” and other misappropriated representations related to human suffering, the town, and the greater Anthracite Coal Region. Gilloch (2017) offers that for “those who refuse to go quietly into the quiet earth, they are not places of memory, but *lieux hanté* or haunts—both an action and a place. A haunt is a setting which one frequents, to which one is drawn, to which one returns again and again.” Re-collecting local narratives on digital spaces, creating a digital footprint with the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania Digital Project, and in person storytelling have begun to create “haunts” against the larger mediated discourses of the Coal Region.

The Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania Digital Project emerged from my original Facebook post about Centralia and became a part of my ethnographic fieldwork. As such, the project is grounded in and propelled by an existing, physical community. As the digital project has moved forward, the topic of Centralia has generated significant dialogue. As the dialogue continues, some residents deliberately contested these larger mediated representations of Centralia as supernatural:

**Jackie:** I drive through Centralia many times to visit family in Atlas. It's not a creepy or eerie drive. It's sad that a once beautiful town is reduced to so few homes. It brings back so many memories of what life was like back in the day.

Jackie cites her frequent experiences driving through the town. Here, in response to a piece of media about the town, she expresses sadness at the loss. On the other hand, Jill, another



community member, adds that people try to add a dramatic paranormal element by taking advantage of the town's emptiness:

**Jill:** It's not haunted or creepy... just very sad and empty. I grew up in a town nearby but spent a lot of my childhood at my aunt's and uncle's that lived in Centralia. People are trying to make it into something paranormal now that it's empty. Former residents get angry when they read this kind of drama about their beloved home. I don't blame them.

She implies that the visitors who come to Centralia to produce and circulate mediated paranormal stories are not from the town and do not have the attachment to the place that local residents do.

As many Anthracite Region lands were left hollow and undermined, some residents like Harry offer an explicit critique of capitalism and the extractive coal mining industry that took from the land:

**Harry:** Wonder who capitalized on all the mineral rights with the "Mammoth Vein" that is under that area?

The Mammoth Vein is a coal vein that runs under Centralia. Harry recognizes that the area by Centralia is currently being strip-mined. He references a peculiarity in which the bankrupt mining companies, eager to flee the no longer profitable landscape, sold the mineral rights to the town of Centralia for \$1 and thereby avoided dealing with their prior extractive relationship with the land. Harry's words contest the typical portrayal of deindustrialized areas (Linkon & Russo, 2003a) by pointing out how corporate interests continue to function and have their say. Harry's vernacular critique calls back to Linkon and Russo's (2003a) analysis of how the portrayal of deindustrialized areas often focuses on the victims (overemphasizing their desperation) without discussing or criticizing the "business decisions" (corporate disinvestment) that lead to deindustrialization. Moreover, in the United States, homeowners or towns cannot own the mineral rights under their homes, so this

development was significant in the case of Centralia when the government declared eminent domain on the land after the resulting mine fire. Centralia was left with the consequences of the of the mining industry's lack of stewardship.

After experiencing this kind of literal extractivism, Centralia became the source for commercialized horror and supernatural images exported to larger media markets. This *cultural extractivism*, as I am terming it, involves the expropriation of cultural resources, memory artifacts, images, narratives, or stories extracted from a marginalized or forgotten community or culture for the use by a dominant community or culture.

The digital spaces of the Anthracite Coal Region Digital Project began with autoethnographic sharing about Centralia and the concurrent circulation of digitized images of the town. This chapter has analyzed dominant mediatized imaginaries of Centralia arguing that they have turned a blind eye to the displacement of local residents and failing to inquire about the mine fire's destruction, its origins, and its continued effects. Instead, these images were a form of *cultural extractivism*. They served to aestheticize the land and its people by circulating horror tropes and commercializing related media products with alternative narratives that are not focused on the narratives and memories of Centralians. The Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania Digital Project offered a place to dialogue around dominant narratives' aestheticization of local stories and to collect local narratives and media. Using digital technology, anthracite community members asserted local identities that went counter to more dominant media sources such as travel spaces (e.g. Yelp.com, TripAdvisor.com) and the film *Silent Hill*. They registered the physicality of place by showing that mining people and mined places can be more than "ghosts" and more than specters of extractivism.

## CHAPTER 6

### IN THE SHADOW OF THE COAL BREAKER: *CULTURAL EXTRACTIVISM* AND PUBLIC COMMUNICATION IN THE ANTHRACITE MINING REGION

#### Memories Amongst the Industrial Ruins

They have started the demolition process on Saint Nicholas Coal Breaker (see Figure 1). A looming coal-dust covered structure abandoned for decades, Saint Nick (as we locals sometimes call it) sits on the stretch of road between Mahanoy City and Shenandoah, Pennsylvania. It was the facility where anthracite coal—the product of the extractive labor of the men and boys in the region—was broken up into usable sizes for the market. Up until the 1930s, separating work was done by boys called “breaker boys” as young as six years old in an unheated, dusty, dank room where they hunched over their toil organized in a step-like configuration as they tore their fingers up working for a pittance. Their small, ungloved fingers were an asset to an unrelenting industry for such little hands felt the sizes and textures of the rocks accurately and picked the slate and un-usable materials from the equally unrelenting flow of coal that fed the nation’s thirst for what we called “progress” (see Figure 2). These boys were not in school. Instead, they were breathing in coal particles like their fathers and probably their grandfathers did before them. Their overlords, the breaker or chute

bosses, stood over them with bullwhips. And the consequences of this dangerous and difficult work could be the loss of a limb or limbs or of a boy's life.

When your car takes this conduit where Saint Nick reticently sits, it moves along to a *tak, tak, tak*—the sound of bottom ash and fly ash<sup>16</sup> peppering its sides with the advancing momentum. Local resident Samuel explains in consternation on the Anthracite Digital Project that they will probably sell the metal for scrap:

**Samuel:** To Reading Anthracite, the breaker is a liability that's [sic] only value is scrap metal.

The Breaker has stood during these decades on the cratered, black landscape—on “hills slashed round and round with deep gashes of strip-mining like a roughly peeled apple”—an extracted terrain, much like Stewart described in another part of Appalachia (1996, p. 13).



**Figure 6.1.** Saint Nicholas Coal Breaker. (Photo credit, Melissa R. Meade, 2014)



**Figure 6.2.** A view of the Pennsylvania Breaker, South Pittston Pennsylvania (showing breaker boys). (Photo credit, Lewis Wickes Hine, 1911).

The Breaker is a testament to time and a particular economic configuration. A *figure of memory* (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995, p. 130), local identities were cultivated around it. As Samuel's words suggest, inflections of power in such contestation run deep; the struggle over the significance and identity of this place has been between unequal forces (cf. Massey, 1994). Tied to global capital, fueling the Industrial Revolution on the labor immigrants, the legacy of coal extraction persists. Samuel again notes:

**Samuel:** Another part of our anthracite mining heritage going, one excavator bite at a time. Very sad! ... But to those involved with the preservation of our anthracite heritage, its value is much, much more than the sum of its metal.

Samuel's experience of the traumatic disappearance of the Breaker mirrors such impact on the community—reminiscent of Stewart's work in West Virginia coal camps: “the ruined *place* itself *remembers* and grows lonely” (1996, p. 93 [italics original]). My mother

passes onto me a sense of these “lonely ruins.” Moving through her hometown, she contemplates the abandonment and deterioration of the physical space: “I could cry when I see it,” she said, as she observed the abandoned ruins of a dairy on the street where she grew up in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania. Around the corner, she looked at fallen rocks on the edge of a playground: “Oy ye ye. We used to play here and climb on those rocks. [She pointed to an edifice of rocks around a space that was once a playground]. Now look at them.” She takes inventory of her surroundings and the faded/fading past before her. The aesthetic experience of the space colliding with her memories reveals the trauma and subjection that this space embodies. I am overcome with a longing to comprehend the changes to the Anthracite Region and the rhythms and habituations that connect her, the community, and me to these buildings and landscapes that have been left to decay—what is embedded in this place, its bodies, and the memories they conjure. I went to this street frequently to spend time with my grandparents in the 1980s and early 1990s. The dairy was always abandoned in my experience, but the ruins seem to grow as the years pass.

Then what local memories are embodied by these ruins? What is the affective legacy of the coal industry and when is extraction complete in this single-industry area? How do local residents identify with these ruins? What might happen in a local community when an industrial artifact such as a coal breaker—the archetype of coal extraction—sits in ruins on the landscape for 45 years, decaying, only to be torn down without much fanfare? How do larger cultural tensions around class and related memories of “spectacular violence” (Thomas, 2011, p. 109)—like the ghosts of deaths, dismemberments, child labor, executions, mine fires, land subsidence, and ethnic conflict that echo through these places and spaces? How do identities and memories get passed on to family members? What does it mean when

you grow up thinking of spaces as “land” that were really “fill,” slag, culm, or waste? How does social memory mediate identity around the text of the Saint Nicholas Coal Breaker?

Tracking the “cultural poesis” (Stewart 2005, p. 1028) of (de)industrial life scenes or “aesthetic act[s] that animate ... and literally make ... sense of cultural forms and forces at the point of their affective, material, or imaginary emergence” (Stewart, 2002, p. 350), this chapter approaches these questions by following traces of the past as they emerge and the day-to-day practices that sustained them noting intensities and flashpoints as they arise in daily life. As a particular flashpoint, Coal Region residents processed the demolition of the ruins of Saint Nicholas Coal Breaker and rapidly made and shared media with and through the *public digital humanities collaboratory* that I created and maintain through an active Facebook page<sup>17</sup> and corresponding website.<sup>18</sup> In the case of the Breaker, its image and surrounding landscapes emerged as theoretical flashpoints around which community members remembered life in the shadow of “King Coal” as well as deliberated about the fractured landscapes, deindustrialization, local people’s exposure to environmental toxins, labor history, and the present-day *cultural extractivism* of the Breaker. Through media production, residents engaged the Facebook page, in order to preserve the Breaker’s memory and subvert its demolition.

Experiencing the demolition of the Saint Nicholas Breaker both on the ground and in relationship to similar *goings-on* or *things that happened* throughout the Coal Region, community members became public storytellers and producers of media documenting the Breaker scene in a kind of “graphomania” (Stewart, 2002, p. 356 cited Boym) or the “incessant practice of recording the details of everyday life in order to gain access to it” (Stewart, 2002, p. 356). Through photographs, videos, and stories residents expressed

imaginations of the Breaker's future demise, regrets of not documenting it over time, and used documentary techniques to engage in the aesthetic act of capturing transformative processes as they unfolded on the landscape.

Mining my own life in the Coal Region, such affective intensities of places ruined or obliterated are key not only to my personal narrative of class, family, and community, but also to how this Appalachian mining community has been socially reproduced—in an Othered space, where mediated cultural representations of lives-lived bump up against both local and global imaginations revealing under the surface the impact of past cultural extractive transgressions on hopes, on imaginations, and on bodies. The overall project resists the legacy of mining and Appalachian regionalization—including the northern Appalachian regions of Pennsylvania—which are part of a symbolic operation (Batteau, 1990; Stewart, 1996) sustaining the constellation of “Appalachia,” coal-mining, and deindustrialized space as a “bourgeois social imaginary” (Hufford, 2002, p. 63). Appalachia, filled with “yesterday's people” (Weller, 1965), is frequently romanticized, rationalized, or reviled. The Otherness of this region has been objectified through diverse media genres in addition to physically experiencing ongoing “industrial rampages” (Hartigan, 1997, p. 336). Deindustrialization is a complex transformation driven and intensified by the precarious global economic conditions endemic to late-modernity (Appadurai, 1996; Bauman, 2000; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001; Cowie & Heathcott, 2003b; Harvey, 2006).

In the Anthracite Region, what were techniques for survival collide with fragments of memories. There are Jennifer's words from the Anthracite Digital Project:

**Jennifer:** My dad John, his father Andrew, and my uncles John and Lawrence worked in the tunnels putting up props. This was especially grueling and important when they were ‘robbing’ whatever coal was left when the mine was playing out.’ I marvel at their bravery and strength in this dangerous job. They told me that they



always left a little of their lunch for the rats because when the rats left, there was deadly gas and an explosion imminent. [emphasis original]

The miner was not afraid of the rats in the mines, but instead shared his lunch with them because their non-human instincts served as an omen to impending danger such as explosions and cave-ins; when a miner was killed in the mines, the mine often brought his body home on the “Black Maria,” a carriage or vehicle used to haul critically hurt or dead miners. In the case of death, the mine often even threw the deceased miner’s body on the widow’s porch.

The coal company “played out” the extractivism in Jennifer’s account by illegally robbing the pillars—the supports of the underground workings—of every last bit of virgin coal thereby overlooking individual and community safety. Again, borrowing the words of Stewart, if we “imagine the kind of place where, when something happens, people make sense of it, not by constructing an explanation of what happened, but by offering accounts of its impacts, traces, and signs” (1996, pp. 57-58), then stories like Deanna’s create a picture where the Breaker scene loomed large. Deanna recounts to me her aunt’s story about her grandfather’s death in the mines when they brought his body home on such a Black Maria:

**Deanna:** They just threw him on the porch. Because that is what they did. The only thing that my aunt remembers of the event as a little girl is being pushed into the living room and there lay his dead body.

My mother shifts her clothing. We get into the car and she signals the different formerly thriving ethnic neighborhoods throughout Shenandoah. “The Italian people lived here. This area was mostly a Jewish neighborhood, close to the synagogue.” My eyes follow rows and rows of tightly packed houses. Shenandoah had over 12 mines forming a clock around the town and squeezing the houses on top of each other. The town was conceived by coal interests, once hemming 30,000 people hailing from many European nations in this one square-mile area (Sorin, 1952) surrounded by company-owned “patch” towns and coal

mines—a spatial arrangement which continues to influence inter-group interactions. And as anthropologist Basso (1996) points out, spatial arrangement “reach[es] deeply into other cultural spheres, including conceptions of wisdom, notions of morality ... [and] ways of imagining and interpreting the ... past” (p. xv). By now there are too many abandoned houses to keep track of. A 2011 news report calculated the home abandonment rate at 30 percent (Bohman, 2011). “Was your neighborhood considered the Polish neighborhood?” I asked. My mother does not answer. Instead, she tells me a story about her friend Patty’s experience with deindustrialization. Patty’s house is attached to an abandoned house and she attributes her home’s cockroach infestation to this situation. “It’s bad [living on top of that decay],” my mother says.

### **Public Communication**

The demolition of Saint Nicholas Breaker (see Figure 1), the last anthracite coal breaker built before 1960, became a flashpoint in online communication (modern-day coal processing plants are different in structure than Saint Nicholas in that they are usually embedded into the side of strip- mining operations). Saint Nicholas Breaker sits on the side of Route 54 in the Anthracite Coal Region in the Appalachian Mountains of Northeastern Pennsylvania, and is located just over the mountain from my family home of Frackville, in Schuylkill County. The other breakers throughout the region have been demolished, the final of which was the Huber Breaker in Luzerne County in Ashley, PA. Since the demolition started on Saint Nick in September 2013 to present, I received more than two hundred digital photos of the Breaker in various states of ruin and demolition produced by community members. These images came in through the website and Facebook page, which morphed into community spaces of critical dialogue, horizontal debate, and remembrance.

The news of Breaker's demolition was not widely known until the publication of a May 2015 Associated Press article came out and the process was already underway. The online space of the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania Project as a *public digital humanities collaboratory* became a community public communication forum to discuss feelings and frustrations with the demolition of Saint Nicholas Breaker. The *affective reality* was anticipated nervously in the community—a future without the last remaining artifact that aggregated miners' labor into one mass. Few industries have been infused with more inequality than the anthracite coal industry with its tumultuous history between capital and labor. Community members such as Stanley tie notions about preservation with a sense of powerlessness to stop the demolition in the face of extraction—reverberation of trauma and of subjugation at the continuing legacy of “coal barons”:

**Stanley:** That is why the [preservation] project never got off the ground ... there is coal under it and these coal barons still control ... [this county].

As community members documented the progressing demolition, their photos poured in, and Stanley wrote: “I want to cry.” The combination of the extraction of coal through strip-mining, the Breaker's demolition, and a looming future with labor's past erased—brought about sadness and memories of the power struggles with those who extracted the most from the Coal Region and its people.

Jacob, another community member, adds suspicion that the property was not assigned historical value because of corruption at the state and county levels. He claims to see blighted buildings around him receiving preservation distinctions whereas Saint Nick remained in the hands of coal interests:

**Jacob:** There are buildings in other towns in this county that need to be removed and the county claims them as national history and puts them in the county and state's

historical society. Due to the owners of this property, this building was basically bought out of the historical society in the late 80s so it can be taken down.

Jacob suggests that it was not preserved due to the mineral bounty beneath it sought for extractive purposes by the coal company. Therefore the ownership made sure it would be demolished. As in Stanley's characterization, for Jacob, extraction trumped community hope.

The idea of the coal vein beneath the Breaker as a primary motivation for its demolition is furthered in Sally's comment, replete with discursive devices to emphasize her story and guide her reader:

**Sally:** We are watching the **stripping of the land** where Saint Nicholas Breaker once **stood**. Two **steam shovels** are working hard at getting **every ounce of coal out of the ground** ... In a few months it will totally be **wiped off the map** and all that will remain is a chain link fence and **steam shovels digging up the coal** they found. **Wonder** how long they knew there was a thick vein of coal under the **surface** of the Breaker property? And I **wonder** if they will put the earth back to original form when they are done collecting **every speck of coal**. I hope so. [emphasis added]

Sally's words reference local relationships to the environment and residents' experiences witnessing their landscapes changing before their eyes. The stories of these places become unmoored from their landscape. Not only are the coal companies engaged in the "stripping of the land," but the Breaker will be "wiped off the map." Sally poetically articulates her exhaustion with the strip-mining process. Through these sections of her writing, we can see that she repeats phrases such as "steam shovels," or "digging up the coal," "every ounce of coal out of the ground," "every speck of coal," and "wonder" and harmonious sounds like "stripping," "stood," "steam shovels," "surface," and "speck." Her words emphasize a situated sense of place and the overwhelming extraction of the landscape ("every ounce of coal out of the ground") and the memory artifact—the Breaker—"wiped off the map." This space is an affective space or what Gregg and Seigworth (2010) might call a bloom-space in which Sally enters into relationship with the objects and encounters the experience of the

demolition process. The affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves. (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 1 [italics original])

Sally's sense of wonder at the mining operations' reconfiguration of both the built and natural landscape leads to a familiar sense of place from such workings—piles of refuse and unfilled gashes in the earth which evoke concerns about leaving the region on the peripheries of both economic growth and environmental equilibrium. She alludes to past experiences of removing what is aboveground in a hurry to get to the coal vein and in the process obliterating what stands in the way while remaining suspicious that, as in the past, the earth will not be the same.

### ***Cultural Extractivism in the Northern Appalachian Mountains***

When another resident submitted aerial shots to the Anthracite Coal Region Digital Project taken with a Go-Pro drone, the images reveal the black, cindered, stripped landscape replete with an immense gash in the earth containing an orange, opaque pool of acid mine drainage (see Figures 3-5). Some orange waste noticeably is dried up next to the gaping hole, littering the surrounding black culm and showing that this is a landscape that cannot bear vegetation. The large orange pool is flanked by a smaller equally opaque, khaki-greenish pool of wastewater that sits in the middle of a crater (see Figure 5). Bearing witness to this scene, Sally reflected on the landscape's dismemberment and her personal loss of family homes in the coal patches around the Breaker:

**Sally:** Thanks, Sean Wargo for sharing your photos of the demolition of the St. Nicholas Breaker. *Makes me want to cry* to see it like this. Where that black car is parked - take a straight line across the highway (Rt 54) and that is where my Grandmother Timms lived from 1929 until her death in 1944, and then my aunt and

her husband continued to live there until 1988. Can't believe how they tore up the real estate digging out the vein of coal they found. Hope they put it back the way it should be when they're finished. [emphasis added]



**Figure 6.3.** Side-aerial view of Saint Nicholas Breaker and strip-mined landscape of Saint Nicholas Coal Patch, located between Shenandoah and Mahanoy City, Pennsylvania. (Photo credit, Sean Wargo, 2015).

Sally recognizes that the Breaker, the patch town houses, even the people have lost “the magic of commodity” (Edensor, 2005, p. 100) at the relentless material destruction from these advancing *cultural extractivisms*. In conversation, another resident, Lilly, who moved to the area 30 years ago noted that

there is a lot of talk about what the coal industry did to the land and what it took out of the land—the natural resources, but very little talk about how it used the people and what it took out of them—the human resources.

Or as another community member, Gertrude, similarly put it:

People were mined as well as coal and communities left empty like the mines after the resources dried up.



**Figure 6.4.** Front-aerial view of Saint Nicholas Breaker and strip-mined landscape of Saint Nicholas Coal Patch, located between Shenandoah and Mahanoy City, Pennsylvania. (Photo credit, Sean Wargo, 2015).

The disillusionment expressed by these informants reaches back to a tense tradition in which the local community's rights and workers' rights were suppressed in the interest of "King Coal." These residents buttress their identities as Coal Region residents with references to "the place" and with placed-based experiences that they differentiate from the "owners" and the "coal barons." Stanley's choice of the phrase "coal barons" to describe those presently extracting the coal shows that he makes a strong connection with past injustices and present conditions. Tying "coal barons" to the locality, Stanley calls forth the evocative power of time and space: The abandoned Breaker, symbolic of these struggles recalls unbearable wage and working conditions, life cycles, confrontations with coal and

iron police, and a general lifestyle in the shadow of a coal breaker—in this case, in the shadow of the largest coal breaker in the world. The coal company’s removal of the Breaker and thereby its function as a mnemonic device, risks further suppressing local memories.

Randy puts it succinctly:

**Randy:** Leave it up. It’s a monument to hard work.

Amongst community mourning, outrage, and confusion, the coal company responsible for the demolition of the Breaker addressed the photographer of the provocative aerial pictures shown above (Figures 3-5), posting in the comments section of a posted Breaker photo:

**Reading Anthracite:** Sean Wargo, would you kindly post these to our page? You’ve done fabulous work and we’d love to see you get credit!

The private workings of the coal company became visible and public through these aerial images. Yellow and orange acid mine pools stared back at the viewer from the black, lunar landscape. What did the coal company see in this still image? The fetish of the photo presented “an ambivalent mix of pleasure and anxiety; ... simultaneously attract[ing] and repel[ing] ... because its material insistence can neither be incorporated...nor expelled” (Stewart, 2002, p. 350). Yet the present images created by a Coal Region resident subvert the power of the coal interests. They differentiate themselves from “ruin porn” wherein the privileged outsider gazes at the bygone state of ruins and decay devoid of people in order to mine them of their cultural resources by aestheticizing suffering and injustice. Instead these images question both the present and past use of the landscape and its people.





**Figure 6.5.** Aerial view of Saint Nicholas Breaker and strip-mined landscape of Saint Nicholas Coal Patch, located between Shenandoah and Mahanoy City, Pennsylvania. (Photo credit, Sean Wargo, 2015).

Studying the semiotic dimensions of human environments to understand human-land relationships (Geertz, 1973; Basso, 1996) is crucial in appreciating the cultural meanings on which individuals act. People in the Anthracite Region tell stories about looking out their windows and over the course of days, black mountains of coal waste dumped by a coal company appeared completely obstructing the view. They could no longer experience the panorama of the landscape and their houses now sat in a permanent shadow. The symbolism of the shadow on the house raises distinct cultural concerns particular to this locale—a “cultural ecology” (Basso, 1996, p. 67) that extends beyond functional studies of the environment. In discussing culm banks prompted by an image labeled “a picturesque culm dump” by a Scranton photographer, there are Gary’s words:

**Gary:** Well, frankly, they were ugly, dirty, and one of the many reasons I knew I would not live long in Mahanoy City once I got out of college. My mother would ‘wash the porch’ regularly due to the persistent dirt from the coal banks and coal trucks rumbling up and down Centre Street. I do not miss the culm/coal banks.  
[emphasis original]

Here Gary extracts himself physically from the Coal Region. The coal industry had a longstanding extractive relationship with his town of Mahanoy City, spraying dirt all over Gary’s homestead. Also, implicit in Gary’s words was the lack of industry left in his town, a dynamic that began to pull young people away from the region. There was nothing left for them there, reminiscent of Stewart’s (1996) description of another part of Appalachia:

Forms of cultural agency emerge out of the powerful ... images of a world got down so that when the young people are sent off to the city with the words ‘there ain’t nothing here for m’ ... they are sent off with the weight of the place behind them. (p. 48)

Gary experiences the loss of a home that he cannot miss – a place where his mother had to “wash the porch” clear of coal silt and where the rumbling coal trucks interfered with and unsettled imaginations of home.

The label “picturesque” inscribed on the social space by the photographer becomes an emotional and aesthetic challenge to Cathy and James. Cathy expresses the affective dimensions of living amongst slag heaps by protesting the description:

**Cathy:** They are depressing, dreary-looking sights, a far cry from picturesque!

James feels “bothered” by these massive piles:

**James:** The mountain of tailings and the surrounding area just outside of McAdoo really bothers me.

The protests to the description of “picturesque culm” comingle with memory, trauma, and the unplanned things that just happened—forming a cultural poesis making sense of these forms as they present themselves. Remembering ruins, Daniel’s words insist:

**Daniel:** Just waiting [for the culm dump] to give away and wipe out a town like in Wales.

Daniel’s analogy to the collapse of a culm pile in the Welsh village of Aberfan in October 1966 situates the Anthracite Region in the global discourse of mass mineral extraction. In the Aberfan tragedy, as the pile of coal waste mixed with water, it slid downhill in a slurry/cement mix killing 116 schoolchildren and 28 adults. The disaster happened at Pantglas Junior School as some students were beginning their classes for the day, others were still in the playground, and still others were filing into the school.

During a visit to the Breaker site on New Year’s Day 2015, Saint Nick’s white, asbestos panels of siding barely peeked out from the soot and its broken windows—craggy like a jack-o-lantern’s mouth—seemed to laugh at me. The strip-mining operations continued nearby and the movement of the coal waste up the mountain to the co-generation plant was in full force. The smell sickened me. Saint Nick might have laughed at me because perhaps I am not tough enough (anymore?) to breathe in fly ash, sulfur, and industrial toxins. Or was I never tough enough? Yet still this structure bound many of my informants, as it did me, to the region. The aggregation of thousands of men and children’s labor poured into massive chutes and combined into one morass of coal in such structures all across the Anthracite Region.

On a stretch of road between Shenandoah and Mahanoy City by the Breaker, the conveyor pictured in Figure 6 reaches over the road displaying the phrase “COAL KEEPS THE LIGHTS ON” framed by the black heaps of culm from the coal stripping operations.

The phrase is accurate insofar as the 2013 U.S. Energy and Information Administration Statistics reported that much U.S. electricity generation was indeed coming from coal. Yet community members tell me this conveyer is taking the refuse to a co-generation plant whereas as the stripping operation in the background foregrounded with those words misleads. The coal from the stripping operations is exported abroad, for example, to China. The co-generation plants are using the anthracite refuse, but what the burning of the refuse is putting in the atmosphere is unclear. The air is sulfurous and dusty.



**Figure 6.6.** Conveyer displaying the phrase “Coal keeps the lights on” that reaches over the stretch of road between Shenandoah and Mahanoy City, Pennsylvania. Strip-mining operations are visible in the background. (Photo credit, Melissa R. Meade, 2014).

If, as author and social commentator Jane Austen (1817/2008, p. 345) proposed in her novel *Persuasion*, “[o]ne does not love a place the less for having suffered in it,” the Breaker and surrounding culm banks emerged as tropes for mourning the loss of local

identity. Sadness and anger about the Breaker's loss as a labor memory text circulated in the community amongst other extractive legacies. Austen's ideas in *Persuasion* again remind us that although a place may have brought its inhabitants pain, its intensity as a memory-space arises from the traces of the past. Thus, in the Anthracite Region, the tensions of history and memory, moments where inequalities can be traced to relationships shaped by the mining industry and to the Region's subsequent deindustrialization, the online space became a place for residents' to communicate their stories and to circulate the trope of the Breaker:

**Donald:** I'd say keep it. I never personally seen it [sic] but it's a part of the Coal Region. If kids and adults alike are trying to climb it, or do stupid stuff in it, it's on them. I'm not saying renovate the entire thing, but just enough so people can see parts of it. It's history, and the coal region is slowly drying out, we need stuff as examples to future generations to know what the area was/is like, what formed it, and what shaped it. Tearing down coal breakers, buildings around coal breakers isn't going to make the area 'prettier' or more 'attractive' no matter how many buildings fall we still have coal all over the place, and if some of these coal breakers are taken down, what would happen with all the coal around it? We can't just put grass seed all over and hope for the best, no matter what, we are still going to look in the mountains and see black. [emphasis original]

Donald emphasizes the importance of the Breaker as an object of identification noting that he thinks the environmental and the aesthetic dimensions cannot be improved: "[W]e are still going to look in the mountains and see black" no matter what. The power of memory is signified by the decay of the Breaker. It has become an object "for the imagination's ceaseless effort to wrest a local 'real' from the tragic and senseless evolution of an extractive industry," as in Stewart's (1996, p. 96) ethnography in West Virginia. Absent the Breaker, nothing grows on culm banks or stripped land. Some birch trees pop up, but soon die off. It is basically a black desert (see Figures 3-5), as Donald laments.

As in the example from the Aberfan disaster in Wales, children attended nick Nicholas Elementary School right across the street from the Breaker and surrounding culm

banks. By the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, the local paper, *The Evening Herald* was documenting silt storms that plagued the community and “put a black cloud” around the school (1971, April 19). Jane brings up the ordinary nature of the situation:

**Jane:** I worked at the school across the street. I remember all the train cars loaded with coal and the dust blowing all over the kids at recess!

And Rachel:

**Rachel:** There was so much activity there in the 60s. As a student at St. Nicholas, I remember watching from our classroom as the trucks and trains would pull in and out. We were so easily distracted!! On windy days we couldn’t go outside for recess due to the coal dirt in the air. It was very sad to see our school destroyed by fire and equally sad to see this landmark dismantled.

Although Rachel points out that the children were not allowed out at recess on the windiest days, closing the windows does not keep pollutants and contaminants out. Again, *The Evening Herald* reminds us of the problem of the silt storms and remained a site of resistance to the storms throughout the 1970s:

It was impossible to breathe in the area without nostrils being ringed and coated in black. The silt also caused grit between the teeth and the wind-whipped particles stung the eyes. The storm, similar to one two weeks ago, came three days before Palm Sunday as people in the path of it tried to clean up their homes for the holidays ... Some people had lights on as they came through the heavy concentration of black dust on Route 54 just north of the Saint Nicholas School, which lies in the path of the storm. (1977, March 31)

By the mid-1990s, *The Evening Herald*, the critical voice speaking out against these black storms, merged with another paper further from the silt storms. Heavily mined northern Schuylkill County, in essence, had lost its newspaper.

With plans to build a new school in Mahanoy City, school board candidates met and one candidate explained: “The kids who attend the new school will be eligible for black lung<sup>19</sup> before they reach the 12th grade” (1977, April 1). Despite these compelling words, the

operations hummed and the winds blew. Sally explains this dynamic of the Anthracite Coal Region Digital Project:

**Sally:** My grandmother lived directly across from the entrance to the breaker and just below the St. Nicholas Elementary School. The breaker worked 24 hours a day and that rail yard was never empty of coal cars filled with coal waiting to be shipped out. When a windstorm came along, that fine coal on the culm bank blew around like the desert sand. It was pitch dark and you needed to turn the headlights on to see where you were going. The silt seeped into every crack and crevice of those company homes – there was coal dust all over the inside of the homes. And yet, those folks remained living there for over 85 years and would still be living there if they could, same for working in the breaker.

Just like a deep miner entering the mine with the lamp, residents needed light to drive through the coal-blackened light of day. Still residents were “interpellated” (Althusser, 1989) into their labor identities in this single-industry region with the Breaker central to the process of extraction that made them subject to this social formation.

Seeing a picture of the semi-demolished Saint Nicholas Breaker on the digital project covered in snow, Sally laments:

**Sally:** The snow covers the coal dirt until it melts and then becomes dirty slush. A palimpsest of King Coal’s “present past,” the snow briefly covered the culm from Sally’s view, hiding how the ground had been organized, invested in, technologized, and productive of coal. Frieda’s words suggest that when there was an active extractive industry employing the local community, the landscape comprised a part of daily life and she experienced childhood joy playing on it:

**Frieda:** Know exactly what you are talking about Sally. Brought home a lot of that muddy coal dirt myself. Mom made sure we left our shoes out back to be cleaned later when it dried. March was an especially nasty time for mud. Down the road from us, there was a huge coal sludge bank where we’d play sometimes. We called it the ‘slip bank’. Fond memories of those times.

Although differing in their written approaches, Frieda demonstrated her ties to the land vis-a-vis the coal dirt much like Sally showed an understanding of locals' attachment to what used to be their labor and to the place where they lived and worked. Sally had explained earlier what her grandmother's life was like across from the Breaker where "folks remained living ... for over 85 years' and 'would still be living ... if they could."

Technically the area behind the Breaker is called "Patriotic Hill," perhaps because coal was thought to bring prosperity to some—a kind of patriotism circulated in tropes about the sacrifices that miners and mining communities made to usher in the Industrial Revolution. Houses in Patriotic Hill now face a co-generation plant that uses the coal waste or "culm" for energy. As I walk by, the results are as striking as Sally and *The Evening Herald* before her described. The coal-blackened exteriors of the houses look like they are forever forced to sit in the shadows. There is red visible in the palate, too. "Fly ash," as it is sometimes called is an often-red coal waste that contains toxic chemicals—arsenic, mercury, lead, chromium, cadmium, selenium, as well as the radioactive elements uranium and thorium (Hvistendahl, 2007). It has been implicated in a rare blood cancer cluster in the Anthracite Coal Region called polycythemia vera.<sup>20</sup> Such a class-laden physical environment can change our bodies or take our bodies away.

Around the bend is Blaschak Coal Company on the edge of Mahanoy City. When my father (who has since passed away) retired from his full-time job due to illness, he took work at an auto parts store across the street. Each time I drive by, I am confused: How could he breathe here? The black soot flying up from the plant and from the road has coated everything in its path. This place is the same place where the kids at the "new" Mahanoy Area School could allegedly acquire black lung disease. When I'm there, the soot coats my



tongue. The land for as far as the eye can see is black—black and torn apart—where there used to be mountains, slag heaps.

### **Politics of Ruin Time**

Looking at the ruins of the Breaker and writing narratives of the Breaker scene and the surrounding landscape, community members drew upon their own memories and those they inherited from both their families and from their communities. More than photographs taken as “ruin porn” romanticizing decay, avoiding contemplation of mining work, extractive trauma, and the decline of the anthracite industry, the *public digital humanities collaboratory* instead invited residents to respond to the significance of the ruins of the Breaker to the community. Community members showed how the Breaker’s past has significance in the present and demonstrated the dynamic ways that Anthracite Region residents trace their family and community stories to the Breaker’s past. The physical existence of the Breaker—the singularity of its colossal, looming yet time-worn form—integrates the time of the old architecture when the Breaker served as the place of aggregation of mining labor with the semiotically distinct architectural shape that has changed over time. Around this memory text, community members discussed why these pasts matter today. The Breaker is a symbolic place in which mining companies extended their power over time. Labor, the workday, and even children’s time were constructed by the mining company’s temporalities within it and about it.

But the politics of time takes another form around the Breaker scene. When a resident shared the drone images of the cratered, black landscape with orange pools of water or acid mine drainage around the Breaker, these photos (see Figures 3-5) sparked concern among residents. Such aerial shots were generally not available in the past. In this sense, the drone

technology used by this resident is what I am referring to here as a *democratizing technology*. The cost of a drone is generally not prohibitive for all buyers and drone images can show areas that are normally restricted from view. In the case of the drone photographs exemplified here, the conditions on the landscape get absorbed in the community's surroundings. This visualization of how mining costs are externalized to the community shows that mining companies "fail to assess their responsibilities in time frames commensurate with the longevity of their environmental impacts" (Kirsch, 2014, p. 4). By the 1970s, the total abandonment of the Anthracite Coal Region by most mining companies left waterway, environmental, aesthetic, and health-related scars on the region. If the mining companies were required to pay for these damages related to their extractions, it would not have only eroded their profitability, but their long-term projects would not have been economically viable (Kirsch, 2014). Indeed according to the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, Pennsylvania presently accounts for one-third of the United States' abandoned mine land problems. The citizen-generated imagery on the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania's *public digital humanities collaboratory* begins to challenge the politics of time rendering visible substantial environmental problems. But in the Anthracite Region, which has a significant number of strip-mining operations on top of long-term, large-scale damage, can future slow moving environmental and health-related issues come to light before problems become entrenched?

### **Mining People and Mined People: The Demolition of Saint Nicholas Coal Breaker**

What happens to these places, to the ruins, and to these stories in the Anthracite Region? My own experiences of these places comingle with those of my informants both online and offline as I write a cultural rendering and at each moment encounter new

movements, texts, and objects that intensify and then relent. Certainly the expression “The Coal Region” elides the economic and cultural shifts throughout generations of social dislocations and through both post-World War I and post-World War II industrial decline leaving behind a post-industrial area. Likewise, it elides the stories of human conflict and tragedy among mine workers and their families. The physical reminders of the area’s mining past—abandoned mining operations, broken windows, razed homes, and black hills of culm—provide testimony to these processes and occurrences. The place-based cultural traces inhabit the post-industrial spaces of the Anthracite Region. The cruel consequences of work in the mines included: “loss of limb or other physical incapacities, or premature death by accident, or gradual suffocation by black lung disease. The industry’s labor policy funded a precarious lifestyle” (Aurand, 2003, p. 8). Any heroic narrative celebrating only the victory of the Industrial Revolution omits the labor struggles and the life of labor, much as it avoids addressing the catastrophe wreaked on the landscape and the potential for “redemptive remembering” (Bright, 2012, p. 323).

By turns, the coal breaker—the last anthracite coal breaker in the world, which was in the process of demolition at the time of writing—was the place where most boys like my grandfather, as young as six years old started their work in mining operation as breaker boys. By the age of ten or eleven, they often followed their fathers into the earth and “worked [there] until they died a natural death, were injured or killed, or contracted Black Lung. When their lungs filled up with coal dirt, they went back to where they’d started, to the breaker. As the miners used to say: ‘Twice a boy and once a man is a poor miner’s lot’” (Miller, n.d.). Therefore, the coal Breaker represented the life cycle of the miner who worked at the mine since a child, became disabled from the labor, and then was relegated to dying as

he worked as a *breaker man*. The sanitizing of the landscape of this symbol empties the place of the cultural traces of *mining people* and *mined people* to re-extract more coal through strip-mining operations. While the physical traces of coal may remain on *some* bodies and a rare cancer cluster has emerged in the region, the underground miners' labor has been rendered superfluous and the last sign of it removed from the landscape.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **IN THE SHADOW OF “KING COAL”**

This project explores how the past and present produce social memory in a post-industrial zone. It investigates the relationship between local and dominant narratives in deindustrialized places and spaces and further considers how larger cultural tensions around class play out locally in the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania. The dissertation is concerned with examining the manners in which Coal Region community members use media texts, digital media, and narrative as well as engage in local cultural production and interpretations of artifacts in relation to identity, social memory, and class. And, it considers the ways that social memory mediates identity in the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania.

The six questions that this project seeks answers to are: 1. How are cultural identities negotiated within a region of post-industrial decline? 2. How does the dialectic between past and present produce social memory in a post-industrial zone and in particular, in its local abandoned town(s)? 3. What is the relationship between local narratives and dominant narratives in post-industrial places and spaces? 4. How do larger cultural tensions around class play out locally? 5. How have community members used media texts, digital media,

local cultural production and interpretations of artifacts, and narrative in relation to identity, social memory, and class? 6. In what ways does social memory mediate identity in the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania?

As this dissertation considered how cultural identities negotiated within a region of post-industrial decline, it is important to note that identity constructions are frequently linked with understandings of social memory in such regions. In the case of deindustrialized communities, this link is especially significant because in such areas power asymmetries are common and artifacts supporting place recognition may change or disappear quickly depending on corporate or other extra-communal decisions. Social memory is ultimately a mediated experience: Media, artifacts, texts, memorials, fragments, stories, narratives, and other representations all carry symbolic meaning. As media forms are often used in communities to remember artifacts, these forms attest to identities that emerged around them. Dominant narratives may seek to overwrite local narratives. Yet local communities may offer counter narratives mediating these discourses of power with affirmations of vernacular identities.

Chapter five explored questions two and four: How does the dialectic between the past and present produce social memory in a post-industrial zone and in particular, in its abandoned town(s)? How do larger cultural tensions around class play out locally? To examine these questions, the project focuses on how the deindustrialization of Centralia, Pennsylvania, subject to an underground mine fire burning for over 57 years, is used as an object of consumption through a variety of media: an amusement park depiction, both the video game and the horror film *Silent Hill*, commentary on the horror film on a U.K.-based Facebook page dedicated to supernatural tropes, the travel and review sites TripAdvisor and

Yelp, and Google algorithms. In analyzing these media, the project shows who makes claims over narratives of place in the presence of deindustrialization and creates a story showing how the past and present are in dialogue. More specifically, dominant media representations evoke historical references and transform place by untying geographically specific memories from their place and by circulating romanticized texts and images. The deindustrialization of Centralia, Pennsylvania, subject to an underground mine fire burning for 57 years, is used as an object of consumption through a variety of media: an amusement park depiction, both the video game and the horror film *Silent Hill*, commentary on the horror film on a U.K. based Facebook page dedicated to supernatural tropes, the travel and review sites Yelp and Trip Advisor, and Google algorithms.

Tourists and media professionals alike come to the razed town and produce romanticized, aestheticized, commodified media products. Such products have resulted in the circulation of horror tropes about Centralia and in particular, the association of the town with the popular horror film *Silent Hill* which has used the town as an imagined setting. This association has led to horror genre fans “favoriting” the town and visiting it. For these tourists and media producers alike, Centralia is an imagined place—what Nora (1996) calls “*lieu de mémoire*,” or a memory place produced through media practices, symbols, or spaces of mythological history. These memory sites propagandize collective memory absent any real connectedness to the past—houses, infrastructure, street names, schools, officials, or even a zip code. This type of memory generation is about “amnesia”: the absence of “remembrance and/or its orchestration” (Gilloch, 2017).

Local residents' vernacular memories were overwritten with the razing of Centralia which exposed the former town to commodification. Largely circulating media narratives were more easily able to use what happened in Centralia to overwrite these local memories with the above mentioned horror tropes. In the absence of *lieux de mémoire* or "real memory" hinging on the meaning of place, Centralia's memory has been at constant risk of commodification, aestheticization, and propagandization. At stake is who speaks for the area's past and its future. To add the perspective of class, the "In the Shadow of 'King Coal'" project names the concept of *cultural extractivism* defined as the expropriation of cultural resources, memory artifacts, images, narratives, or stories extracted from a marginalized or forgotten community or culture for the use by a dominant community or culture. In this case, term specifically describes the national and global commodification, consumption, and aestheticization of media narratives about the former Coal Region town of Centralia. In response to this dynamic, local residents used a researcher-created *public digital humanities collaboratory* to express identities that countered these dominant media narratives. The term *public digital humanities collaboratory* also expands the methodological vocabulary for multi-sited research in which the fieldworker engages with community members both during a long-term offline fieldwork engagement as well as through an online, public collaborative community.

Chapter four addresses questions three, five, and six which ask: What is the relationship between local narratives and dominant narratives in post-industrial spaces and places? How have community members used media, texts, digital media, local cultural production and interpretation of artifacts, and narrative in relation to identity, social memory,



and class? And lastly, in what ways does social memory mediate identity in the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania?

The present research has suggested that identity perceptions have been inherited from the concatenation of diverse earlier immigrant identities and associated class identities resulting in a pan-ethnically inflected class identity: “coalcracker.” “Coalcracker” united ethnic identifications with labor-related identifications resulting in a subject with family who worked in the mines literally “cracking the coal” and therefore who remains tied to this single industry zone of economic abandonment. Shaping the *coalcracker* identity is what I specifically called *environmental classism*. Environmental classism is a memory-based experience and in the case of the Coal Region this experience is tied to the long-term exposure to the fallout of an extractive economy: open mining pits, acid mine drainage (AMD), disposal of toxic waste, and other pollutants. Even though many longtime residents of the Anthracite Coal Region experience environmental inequality on a daily basis, their identities are influenced by labor memories and by place-based and spatial experiences. These spatial and place-based arrangements range from experiencing living in former company towns, to likewise residing by co-generation plants (plants that burn coal refuse), culm piles, and strip mining, to abandoned housing, and to other signs of dispossession. The *coalcracker* identity is even more salient in its persistence among longtime residents who migrate away from the area in significant numbers. It serves as a term of camaraderie amongst Coal Region “expatriates.”

This research has found that the *coalcracker* identity was mobilized in the campaign leading up to the 2016 presidential election in Pennsylvania, a key “swing state.” The Anthracite Region suddenly began to appear in media ranging from the *Wall Street Journal*

to the *New York Times* during the presidential election of 2016. While some media coverage and scholarly research have attributed the electoral support of the so-called “white working class” for President Donald Trump to the fear of losing status or economic concerns, the present research suggests that Trump was able to appeal to coal-mining as an identity. Three counties in Pennsylvania swung the state. Otherwise Pennsylvania voted democratic in presidential elections since 1988. Two of these counties associated with this swing are located in my zone of research: One is my home county of Schuylkill County; the other is the county of residence of the former mayor, Lou Barletta, who instantiated the Hazleton, Pennsylvania “illegal immigration legislation.” This legislation nationally trended and influenced laws throughout the country, most notably in Arizona.

Chapter six addresses all the research questions through an examination of the demolition of the Saint Nicholas Coal Breaker, the last coal breaker and the largest coal breaker in the world. This topic surfaced on the *public digital humanities collaboratory* and compelled considerable discussion. The ruins of the Breaker had stood on the landscape for nearly 50 years. The use of media and narrative revealed that this structure served as a coping mechanism for community members as local residents constructed identities tied to social memory around this physical artifact. Though an irony lies in the fact that such a structure is implicated in scarring and altering the landscape, in environmental issues, and in the labor connected to family members’ deaths, illnesses, and disabilities. Yet residents expressed the need to remember these very experiences of hard lives and hard times because of how It scaffolded their and their family’s labor-related identities. The “shadow” of the Breaker represented more than ties to this past. Thus, the demolition was an erasure of culture, of history, and of identity. The place-based social memories of such conflicts continue to haunt

the post-industrial spaces. The very erasure effected by the demolition paradoxically prompted a reaffirmation of those place-based social memories.

The Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania Digital Project serves as an example of research in which the ethnographer combines offline approaches, autoethnography, and participatory online interaction to result in what Clifford Geertz (1973) calls, “thick description” of a culture. The Anthracite Coal Region Digital Project provided evidence for all three narrative chapters, and in particular for chapters five and six. The overall study resulted in an active social media space on Facebook (created and maintained by the researcher) of more than 8500 members with more than 2500 researcher-written and/or facilitated cultural vignettes and a corresponding website. This work expands the notion of multi-sited ethnography to an online space to follow the people (Marcus, 1995). The multi-sited ethnographer needs to display the willingness to leave a bounded fieldsite to follow people, stories, metaphors, or objects, as they move from place to place, and between different media.

In engaging participants, the Project emphasizes engagement, participation, collaboration, dissemination of knowledge, and working to achieve equitable relationships with community members. A goal of the Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania Digital Project is to ultimately create an authoritative repository for user-submitted records documenting the region; to develop a host of related digital support using the data to supplement existing knowledge of the region, such as maps of patch towns; to compile user comments from Facebook and archive the commentary as a form of vernacular history and culture in lieu of the ephemerality and chronological ordering of the Facebook

timeline; and to create a resource that would tie together the dispersed sources about the region. The public will continue to have access to these materials online free of charge.

### **Extending the Framework of Research**

In the midst economic decline, Spanish-speaking migrants, mostly from Mexico, represent a large recent wave of immigrants arriving in Shenandoah and other Anthracite Coal Region towns. Since the 2008 beating death of Mexican immigrant, Luis Ramírez Zavala, by a group of white teenagers who were exonerated of all serious charges in a local court (as described in Chapter one), the town of Shenandoah and the Greater Anthracite Coal Region residents often grapple with a paradox common to deindustrialized economies: Only when violence breaks out does the region experience heightened, nation-wide recognition and scrutiny which paradoxically place it outside of nation-building narratives premised on the ideological creation of unity out of diversity. This violent occurrence has been discussed largely in ethnicized terms. My dissertation research suggests that human relations specialists such as school officials and media professionals express an idealized view of the Anthracite Region's new "ethnic" mix, and that in doing so, they appropriate mainstream discourses of essentialized cultural difference as a prophylactic against violence. Many white working-class residents express frustration with "diversity," sometimes by communicating what appear to be "socially regressive views" (Loke, 2013, p. 179). Meanwhile, public performances of diversity like the annual Heritage Day celebration make some new migrants feel like outsiders, echoing earlier moments of class-based ethnic conflict.

Re-thinking these issues in terms of "scale" (Brenner, 1999, p. 40) and the political economic and ethnic histories of both the receiving and sending areas (largely in Mexico) can add a critical dimension to my project. Future research could explore the notion of scale in

investigating how the changing position of localities within larger economic and political structures alters routes of “incorporation” for migrants into new community environments where power dynamics remain imbalanced (Glick Schiller & Çalğar, 2011, p. 190; Epstein, 1967). In this case, migration and ethnic relations in the Coal Region can’t be understood without a nuanced account of “King Coal” and associated vicissitudes of infrastructural connections—migration, capital—linking the region’s towns to the global economy.

This research in a region comprised of small towns is meaningful as the literature on migration tends to focus on “gateway” cities rather than “downscaled” cities or small deindustrialized towns and rural areas (Çalğar & Glick Schiller, 2011). Rural-to-urban migration has been written about extensively, but as Zolani Ngwane (2003) points out, much of this work is based on a binary between rural and urban and often examines the experiences of migrants within large cities.

The scale of this project reaches beyond the local communities, as the digital aspects of the project have generated a following in the academic community, think tanks, and not-for-profits (to name a few); I receive contacts from college, university, high school, middle school, and elementary students from both the U.S. and abroad. I am able to extract the Facebook vignettes and comments/narratives in order to search and archive them through a script written for my project. I have also started the development of an open-source content management platform to archive the vignettes. On the platform, I have included a search function and other various options serve user interests. I am adding applications for personal narratives and community-contributed media to more flexibly interact with the community. With research time, I can expand on this public engagement.

## CODA

Coal Region residents used their agency to create artifacts suggesting that media can be a site of resistance. As both an insider who came from the community and an outsider returning to live there, I became a total participant on the *public digital humanities collaboratory* that I created as an extension of my offline ethnographic work. In addition to the artifacts presented on the project, community members submitted and curated their own (unsolicited) artifacts. Theoretical flashpoints emerged, often resulting in local residents issuing challenges to dominant narratives and politics about the Coal Region. They searched to remember their family members' survival or deaths, and manner of deaths. I emerged on that medium as a critical ethnographer, even using my free time to dialogue with residents about community concerns.

I have wanted to make space in academic discourse for "local" articulations of concepts like "class", "exploitation", and "diversity." The Anthracite Coal Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania Digital Project's media function within the community as spaces of critical dialogue, horizontal debate, cultural production, and remembrance wherein Coal Region residents resisted dominant narratives and asserted vernacular identity. They served to overwrite horror tropes circulated in dominant media narratives and to create a locally curated digital footprint that boosted the SEO (search engine optimization) for the narratives produced by Anthracite Region residents written against these larger mediated discourses.

This dissertation has examined the cultural and lived experiences of economic abandonment in deindustrialized zones by exploring how residents of a former single-industry economy negotiate this process in relation to the communicative constructions of identity, class, and social memory. This work is situated among ethnographic work on

deindustrialization in advanced capitalist societies, in zones of mass mineral extraction, as well as other work on the Appalachian Region. Yet research on deindustrialization has largely focused on global cities and urban spaces situating spaces outside the metropole to the margins of academia. In a U.S. context, the predicament of the residents of small towns within Appalachia and beyond is driven by conflicts about economic decline, class, and memory—circumstances qualitatively different from those of the metropole. Even so, the unique destruction wrought by the emergence and decline of “King Coal” created conditions generalizable to many other areas throughout the U.S. and the world defined by the political economy of economic abandonment in general and of natural resource extraction in particular.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **INTERVIEW GUIDE**

#### **I. Introduction**

- I will conduct semi-structured interviews with about 40 subjects.
- The questions below are prompts to initiate dialogue and discussion.
- Interviews will typically move from the general to the more specific depending on the responses of the interlocutor.
- Some interviews will ideally be conducted on two or three occasions depending upon the backgrounds and schedules of the interlocutors.
- Not all questions will be asked of all interlocutors depending on their backgrounds/positions/interests.
- The word “Shenandoah” will be replaced with the corresponding locale. Place names will be adjusted accordingly.

#### **II. Interview guide:**

##### **A. Oral History Interviews In Shenandoah**

- 1) How long have you lived in Shenandoah?
- 2) How did you or your family end up in Shenandoah?
- 3) If you have not lived here your whole life, what were your expectations prior to arriving in Shenandoah?
- 4) What does it mean to you to live in the “Coal Region”?
- 5) What was the town of Shenandoah like when you were young?
- 6) How has Main Street changed, if at all?
- 7) Has the mix of people in the Shenandoah area changed during your time here? If so, how has the mix of people (ethnicities, young people, etc.) changed?
- 8) How do you make a living? Is that the job you envisioned yourself performing when you were younger?
- 9) What kinds of educational opportunities are available locally and regionally?
- 10) What kinds of work opportunities are available locally and regionally?
- 11) What kind of work did your parents and grandparents do?
- 12) Would you have been a miner, do you think, if the industry was still present?

- 13) What do you think about the mining industry? Why did the mines all close?
- 14) What do you remember or what have you heard about life when the coal companies were in full operation?
- 15) Did you have family working in the mines? If so, can you describe what you heard the lives of your family members associated with the mines were like?
- 16) Can you tell me about any mine-related accidents that you heard of?
- 17) Were there any employment conflicts that you know of in the mines?
- 18) How has Black Lung disease affected this community?
- 19) Do you attend church? Which church do you attend? Are you religious?
- 20) Can you tell me if Shenandoah is a good place to live? Why or why not?
- 21) What would you want potential newcomers to Shenandoah to know about the town?
- 22) Is there anything you're worried about when you think of the present/future of Shenandoah?
- 23) What are you happy about when you consider the present/future of Shenandoah?
- 24) Could you describe a typical day? Where do you go? Who do you meet? On weekdays? Weekends?
- 25) Have you ever spent significant time or even a vacation outside of Shenandoah? Where? What did you like/dislike about that place in relationship to Shenandoah?
- 26) When you come to downtown Shenandoah what do you see?
- 27) What do you think about the politicians who represent Shenandoah in the present? In the past?
- 28) What jobs do newer immigrants to Shenandoah engage in? Are these jobs helpful to the region?
- 29) Do you think the region should make efforts to revitalize its economy? If so, how?
- 30) What do you think of the companies that exist in the Shenandoah area today: prison, waste management, Mrs. T's, etc.?
- 31) How do you get your news?



- 32) Do you remember the Luis Ramírez beating death?
- 33) Has the incident and its aftermath changed the experience of living in the town or has it changed your views of the town? Of the Region?
- 34) Are you personally related to anybody directly connected to the incident?
- 35) What do you think about the incident in general?
- 36) How should future events like the beating death be prevented?
- 37) What does “diversity” mean to you?
- 38) Should achieving diversity locally be a goal? If so, who has the responsibility to maintain/foster diversity?
- 39) Have you heard of the film, *Shenandoah, PA*, by David Turnley? Have you seen the film? What do you think of the film? If you haven’t seen the film, on what is your opinion based?
- 40) What media (newspapers, television, Internet) do you normally consume? How often do you consume them?
- 41) What do you think of media coverage of the “Coal Region” in general?
- 42) What do you think of media coverage of the Ramírez beating death in particular?
- 43) Who is a “real” Shenandoah resident? A real “Coal Region” resident?
- 44) When “outsiders” and visitors look at the town what do you imagine they see?
- 45) When “insiders” look at the town, what do you imagine they see?
- 46) Do you think that the arrival of Mexican and other Spanish-speaking immigrants is similar or different from the arrivals of earlier waves of immigrants in the time of your great grandparents or grandparents, for example? Why or why not?
- 47) What do you think about the politicians who represent Shenandoah in the present? In the past?

## **B. Interviews for newcomers**

- 1) How long have you or your family member lived in Shenandoah?
- 2) How did you or your family end up in Shenandoah?

- 3) Did you know any people who resided here before your arrival?
- 4) What were your or your family member's expectations prior to arriving in Shenandoah?
- 5) What does it mean to live in the "Coal Region"?
- 6) What are your views on the changing composition of Main Street?
- 7) Has the mix of people (ethnicities, young people, etc.) changed during your time in Shenandoah? If so, how has the mix changed?
- 8) How do you make a living? Is that the job you envisioned yourself performing when you were younger?
- 9) What kinds of educational opportunities are available locally and regionally (in Mexico) and also in Shenandoah?
- 10) What kinds of work opportunities are available locally and regionally (in Mexico) and also in Shenandoah?
- 11) What kinds of homes are available locally and regionally (in Mexico) and also in Shenandoah?
- 12) What kind of work did your parents and grandparents do?
- 13) Would you have done similar work, if you had the opportunity?
- 14) Can you describe what the lives of people were like in that industry?
- 15) Were there any conflicts in that industry?
- 16) Would you have been a miner in Shenandoah, do you think, if the industry was still present?
- 17) What do you think about the mining industry? Why did the mines all close?
- 18) What do you remember or what have you heard about life when the coal companies were in full operation?
- 19) Can you describe what you heard about the lives of people associated with the mines, if anything?
- 20) Were there any mine-related accidents that you heard of?
- 21) Were there any employment conflicts that you know of in the mines?

- 22) Do you attend church? Which church do you attend? Are you religious?
- 23) Can you tell me if Shenandoah is a good place to live? Why or why not?
- 24) What would you want potential newcomers to Shenandoah to know about the town?
- 25) Is there anything you're worried about when you think of the present/future of Shenandoah?
- 26) What are you happy about when you consider the present/future of Shenandoah?
- 27) Could you describe a typical day? Where do you go? Who do you meet? On weekdays? Weekends?
- 28) Have you ever spent significant time or even a vacation outside of Shenandoah and your hometown in Mexico? Where? What did you like/dislike about that place in relation to Shenandoah and your hometown in Mexico?
- 29) When you come to downtown Shenandoah what do you see? How does this experience compare to your home?
- 30) What do you think about the politicians who represent Shenandoah in the present? In the past?
- 31) What jobs do newer immigrants to Shenandoah engage in? Are these jobs helpful to the region? Are they helpful to the local economy?
- 32) Do you think your home region should make efforts to revitalize its economy? If so, how? What about Shenandoah?
- 33) What do you think of the companies that exist in the Shenandoah area today: prison, waste management, Mrs. T's, etc.? What about those in and around your hometown?
- 34) Do you remember the Luis Ramírez beating death?
- 35) Has the incident and its aftermath changed the experience of living in the town or has it changed your views of the town?
- 36) Has the incident affected community life in your hometown?
- 37) Are you personally related to anybody directly connected to the incident?
- 38) What do you think about the death in general?
- 39) How should future events like the beating death be prevented?

- 40) What does “diversity” mean to you?
- 41) Should achieving diversity locally be a goal? If so, who has the responsibility to maintain/foster diversity?
- 42) Have you heard of the film, *Shenandoah, PA*, by David Turnley? What do you think of the film?
- 43) What do you think of media coverage of the “Coal Region” in general?
- 44) From where do you typically get your news?
- 45) What do you think of media coverage of the Ramírez beating death in particular?
- 46) Who is a “real” Shenandoah resident? A real “Coal Region” resident?
- 47) When “outsiders” and visitors look at Shenandoah what do you imagine they see?
- 48) When “insiders” look at the town, what do you imagine they see?
- 49) Do you think that the arrival of Mexican and other Spanish-speaking immigrants is different from the arrivals of earlier waves of immigrants in the time of your great parents or grandparents, for example? Why or why not?
- 50) Do you have family in Mexico? What family members do you have there?
- 51) Do you get to visit your family and your home area?
- 52) What was it like for you to first leave your home?
- 53) What do you think it was like for your family members?
- 54) Do you think there is a relationship or any similarities or differences between your home in Mexico and Shenandoah? What are some of those differences?

**C. Meaning of Place In Shenandoah and Mexico:** I’ll ask several informants to take me on informal tours of to understand how people from different backgrounds use language to link their own identities to a sense of place.

- 1) What does this place mean to you?
- 2) Was this place different in the past?
- 3) What did people do here before? What do they do now?

- 4) What kinds of people spend time here now?
- 5) What did the Main Street of Shenandoah used to look like or what did your region look like?

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Search Engine Optimization or the quantity and quality of traffic to your website.

<sup>2</sup> A type of sweet pastry particular to Mexico.

<sup>3</sup> Although this informant mentions Wal-Mart as a distinctive feature of Shenandoah, the closest Wal-Mart actually is located about nine miles to the south of the town.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, underground coal mining causes mine voids that can collapse and make the earth's surface subside. Mine subsidence then "can be defined as movement of the ground surface as a result of readjustments of the overburden due to collapse or failure of underground mine workings. Surface subsidence features usually take the form of either sinkholes or troughs." See <http://www.dep.state.pa.us/msi/technicalguidetoms.html> for more information.

<sup>5</sup> Private mining operations started by individual coal miners.

<sup>6</sup> The census does not provide clear indications of the ethnic, racial, or national diversity amongst the persons of these origins, but personal connections reveal that Mexicans are the predominant group; however, some residents are from Puerto Rico, some are from the Dominican Republic, and the United States, with a smaller amount of residents coming from Central America and South America. Census data does not reliably capture data about undocumented residents. For many other reasons, a simple tally of national origin does not paint a clear portrait of the diversity of Shenandoah's newcomers.

<sup>7</sup> Transfer stations "exist to move waste from small collection trucks into big trucks for longer-distance hauling" (Ewall, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> As noted in Chapter six, a coal breaker was structure in which coal's impurities were removed and where the coal was broken into various sizes for market.

<sup>9</sup> Acid mine drainage (AMD) is the acidic water from the exposure of the sulfide minerals to air creating sulfuric acid.

<sup>10</sup> According to the Environmental Protection Agency, "The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA), commonly known as Superfund, was enacted by Congress on December 11, 1980. This law created a tax on the chemical and petroleum industries and provided broad Federal authority to respond directly to releases or threatened releases of hazardous substances that may endanger public health or the environment." See <https://www.epa.gov/superfund/superfund-cercla-overview> for more information. For more on the Pittston Borehole, see <https://cumulis.epa.gov/supercpad/SiteProfiles/index.cfm?fuseaction=second.Cleanup&id=0301208#bkground>

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<sup>11</sup> Wildcat sewers are unpermitted sewer lines that discharge untreated sewage.

<sup>12</sup> The ability of a liquid solution to neutralize an acid. The measure of alkalinity determines if a stream can neutralize acidic pollution.

<sup>13</sup> According to the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, underground coal mining causes mine voids that can collapse and make the earth's surface subside. Mine subsidence then "can be defined as movement of the ground surface as a result of readjustments of the overburden due to collapse or failure of underground mine workings. Surface subsidence features usually take the form of either sinkholes or troughs." See <http://www.dep.state.pa.us/msi/technicalguidetoms.html> for more information.

<sup>14</sup> Fly ash pits are the dumping sites for the fine particles of ash, dust, and soot from the industrial burning of coal. According to environmental accounts, these wastes contain dangerous toxins. The organization Physicians for Social Responsibility writes that "coal ash typically contains heavy metals including arsenic, lead, mercury, cadmium, chromium and selenium, as well as aluminum, antimony, barium, beryllium, boron, chlorine, cobalt, manganese, molybdenum, nickel, thallium, vanadium, and zinc ... The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has found that living next to a coal ash disposal site can increase your risk of cancer or other diseases. If you live near an unlined wet ash pond (surface impoundment) and you get your drinking water from a well, you may have as much as a 1 in 50 chance of getting cancer from drinking arsenic-contaminated water. If eaten, drunk or inhaled, these toxicants can cause cancer and nervous system impacts such as cognitive deficits, developmental delays and behavioral problems. They can also cause heart damage, lung disease, respiratory distress, kidney disease, reproductive problems, gastrointestinal illness, birth defects, and impaired bone growth in children." Also, if you live near "an unlined wet ash pond (surface impoundment) and you get your drinking water from a well, ***you may have as much as a 1 in 50 chance of getting cancer*** from drinking arsenic-contaminated water." (emphasis original) <http://www.psr.org/assets/pdfs/coal-ash-hazardous-to-human-health.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> "Spoopy" is an internet slang term used to describe something that is simultaneously humorous and spooky.

<sup>16</sup> Bottom ash is the leftover industrial waste filtered from a coal-fired industrial furnace. Fly ash consists of the smaller waste particles that escape through the flue or chimney-like structure.

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/AnthraciteCoalRegion> Community participation exceeded 8500 at the time of writing.

<sup>18</sup> See <http://anthracitecoalregion.com> Future plans include converging these materials on another more user-friendly content-management platform called Omeka that will serve as a place of long-term community engagement and reflection. The technological affordances of

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this platform will aid in cataloguing and searching the material that the community develops and in creating a permanent archive and memory space.

<sup>19</sup> Black lung disease, miners' pneumoconiosis is due to long-term exposure to coal dust in which the inhaled dust builds up in patients' lungs leading to severe inflammation, fibrosis (the formation of fibroid scars in the lungs), and in the worse cases, necrosis – the death of cells by self-consumption. Silicosis, or the effects of inhaling silica dust, was also common in the Anthracite Region.

<sup>20</sup> See the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry for additional information [https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/sites/polycythemia\\_vera/index.html](https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/sites/polycythemia_vera/index.html)