

## VISUAL ESSAY

# The Afterlife of Extraction in the Coal Region: An Exploration into the 'Land of the Living Dead'

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The Anthracite is a region living in the shadow of industrial collapse. Historically, it was a place destined to be inseparable, culturally and psychically, from exploitative, industrial coal extraction. Employing miners to dangerous, often deadly occupations in the mines, and extracted futures chock full of health hazards – the mines have not only extracted coal, they have extracted a landscape and its population. Proudful associations with the former coal industry vibrate willingly among the region's common chatter. Culture cannot be removed in ideology from the coal industry's past. While once defining a place, this pride, now serves as some ghostly sentiments lost in a vacuum tube, like the industry itself, unable to come to fruition. In the afterlife of industrial America, former coal towns and residents are left with the dually inflicted trauma of an extracted past and a precarious future lying ahead without coal. The area is alive in a sense yet the lifeblood of coal has ceased to flow. This is my investigation of what it means to live in 'the land of the living dead': an apt description for a region haunted by relics of the past and persisting material reminders, left with no ability to manifest them again in the present. Using navigation, photography, and analysis as a means, I wish to investigate what it means to live in the Anthracite region now. What it means to live in a place that has been extracted. What it means to have a pride for an industry that failed. And, what it is to live in coal's absence.

**Keywords:** coal; anthracite; extraction; photo essay; trauma

### ***Land-of-the-living-dead***<sup>1</sup>

*Land (noun).*

- a. the solid part of the surface of the earth, or the surface of the earth and its natural resources.
- b. a portion of the earth's solid surface distinguishable by boundaries or ownership.
- c. realm/domain.

*Of (preposition).*

- a. function word to indicate a point of reckoning.

*The (definite article).*

- a. used as a function word before a noun denoting time to indicate reference to what is present or immediate or is under consideration.

*Living (adjective).*

- a. exhibiting the life or motion of nature.
- b. having life.

- c. involving living persons.

*Dead (noun).*

- a. The state of being dead (adjective).
  - i. deprived of life: no longer alive.
  - ii. having the appearance of death.
  - iii. no longer producing or functioning: infertile or exhausted.
  - iv. state of being obsolete, out of power, without function.

## **1. An Exploration**

### **1.1. An Entry Point**

The Anthracite coal region, often called simply 'the Coal Region'<sup>2</sup> is an area within the central ridge-and-valley Appalachian mountains, comprising Lackawanna, Luzerne, Columbia, Carbon, Schuylkill, and Northumberland counties of Northeastern Pennsylvania. The Coal Region's heritage can be traced to the various cultures of the people who settled there (either voluntarily or not), as well as a past deeply involved with the coal industry. Imagine a cultural pocket of immigrant communities subjected to a material reliance on the coal industry. Descendants from Irish and Polish immigrant chains, the maternal half of my lineage



1. A church at a street intersection. The Christmas service signs were never removed.



2. We walk towards a colourful storefront just to gaze into its display window.



3. During a walk my gaze lingers on some row homes. I see primary colours and basement doors.

– at one time or another – found their homes within this region, scattering themselves among the small mountain hamlets of northern Schuylkill County, where coal looms large. Roughly a year ago, I began what would devolve into a series of visits to the region when a close friend of mine, Scott, relocated to New Philadelphia; a small town composed of the haphazard juxtaposition of former patch-town<sup>3</sup> row homes strewn in a gully between two mountains. After the death of my grandparents, I had fallen out of touch with the maternal, conservative portion of my family. I had fallen out of touch, with this side of Pennsylvania as well. The first time I visited my friend, marked the first that I would visit the area both alone, and as an adult. This was the start of my own ‘investigation’, being a series of persistent travels and visitations.

### 1.2. A Place

From long rambling drives through the region I acquired a deeper understanding of place. In this place specifically, a sense of the world seems to escape worldliness, and drift towards a forgotten sense of locality. I began to question what it means to live in America and to evaluate the value systems that families in removed places hold onto. There exists a place without many grocery stores, where people would appear to eat at gas stations. A place where rumours of alcoholism, spousal abuse, meth, and heroin linger in the empty spaces. In this place, people live in close proximity to gaping ecological scars of former strip mines.<sup>4</sup> Without the monolithic employer of the coal industry, how do people live? Potentially, they evade eviction, work at convenience stores, live off social security, or invent any number of alternate methods to ‘get by’. Otherwise, they survive; they work hard in physically demanding jobs, they hang tight to their families and their homes.

As I see it, the Anthracite is a region living in the shadow of industrial collapse. Historically, it was a place

destined to be inseparable, culturally and psychically, from exploitative, industrial coal extraction. The mines have not only extracted coal, they have extracted a landscape and its population by employing miners in dangerous, often deadly occupations in the mines, and extracted futures, chock full of health hazards. Early migration to this area was defined by industry demands rather than accounting for a new immigrant population’s needs, potentially leading to the modern reality of families holding onto to a place which offers no future – no mobility. Regardless, associations full of pride for the former coal industry hum willingly among the common chatter. Culture cannot be removed from ideology in the coal industry’s past. While once defining of a place, this pride, now serves as a ghostly sentiment lost in a vacuum tube, like the industry itself, unable again to come to fruition. In the afterlife of industrial America, former coal towns and residents are left with the dually inflicted trauma of an extracted past and a precarious future lying ahead of them without coal. The area is alive in a sense yet the lifeblood of coal has ceased to flow, and the notion of advancement is limited.

### 1.3. A Goal

This is my investigation of what it means to live in ‘the land of the living dead’: an apt description for a region haunted by relics of the past and persisting material reminders, left with no ability to manifest them in the present. Using navigation, photography, and analysis as a means, I wish to investigate what it means to live in the Anthracite region now in the present era of the Anthropocene. What it means to live to live in a place that has been extracted, during a time when the effects of the human on the earth possess an extreme visibility. And, what it means to have a pride for an industry that failed and to live in its absence.



4. A jaunt takes us up an old mining road.



5. Clustered homes fill an empty street.

## 2. Mode of Exploration

### 2.1. Psychogeography

Developed by a group of individualists who called themselves situationists,<sup>5</sup> psychogeography<sup>6</sup> typically refers to an active exploration of an urban environment through enacted wandering or journeying. Through navigation, the subject playfully interacts with the environment, partaking in spontaneous interactions, or navigating

unknown corridors. The subject is encouraged to view the navigation of the environment as an external influence – a source that provides a range of otherwise not experienced emotional stimulations and engages a personal response. My photos attest to this form of spontaneous navigation, and are a product of it. The juxtaposition of imagery and research engages my imagination in a way that mirrors the very act of wandering through old coal towns.

The principle of adventure allows me to make the photograph exist. Conversely, without adventure, no photograph.<sup>7</sup>

The method of navigation in combination with photography provides a perfect means to access an area and reflect on my own connection to it. To investigate the Anthracite region, I exposed myself to a number of prolonged journeys – being day long outings where I would park my car along a wayside and just wander the streets or bicycle on the sides of a highway to witness the coal fields up close and personal. Or, just set off on aimless ramblings, talking with friends as our vehicle glided up and down mountainous back-road alleys and onto abandoned dirt-coal roads in public access land.<sup>8</sup> In this episodic wandering, I would typically embark in minimal fashion – armed with a camera, a thermos of coffee, and a ragged pair of hiking boots. Through the wanderings, I believe I open a doorway, granting access to a place, access to spontaneous interactions with residents and strangers. Onto the buildings and landscapes left to decay, I map a potential awareness – a web of insight capturing abusive, traumatic histories and shaping the spaces between industry, a people, and an environment.

### 2.2. Urbanism in the Anthracite

Typically, psychogeography is a mode through which to explore an urban landscape. Applying this to a rural area adds a confused twist. Why is it even relevant for me to apply this to an area seemingly remote and isolated? Further definition is necessary. Urbanism refers to either the study of an area that is urban, or a lifestyle embodied and negotiated by those that live among a built environment. Any form of urbanism of this type in the coal region may

seem entirely odd. Imagine that it isn't. Realize that in many coal towns, settlements were so densely built up to house immigrants that these settlements mirrored or even overtook the population densities of places like Brooklyn at the turn of the 19th century. Note, a small mining town like Shenandoah, Pennsylvania in 1910, held nearly 26,000 people on merely 1.5 square miles of land. The skeletons of tall row homes looming onto narrow streets that seem to end drastically at the foot of hills probably attest to this. This contradicts a strict notion of urbanism, setting to one side a typically understood lifestyle fabricated from the built, urban environment. In towns that were structured to be densely populated, what changes follow when half of the population slowly departs? The area ruralizes, lifestyles shift, but the buildings and structure remain yet are no longer appropriate. That being said, a somewhat 'urban' approach of navigation remains entirely necessary.

## 3. Symbology

### 3.1. A Symbolic Landscape

In the coal region, common objects such as burned out houses, wreckage, vacant lots, or strip mines serve as ghostly references to an extractive history. The material environment of the region engages me like a physical web of objects with ideological and symbological<sup>9</sup> potential. The built environment is a reminder, a reference to a past with coal, but also to a present reality without coal. In a larger sense, structures are references to industrial era motivations for development. The coal history in Pennsylvania is merely a micro-example of a global extractive trend, which in part led us to the current environmental situation the world faces. Using navigation as a means, observation of physical spaces aids the analytic process of negotiating spatial meaning.



6. A common home facade.



7. *A pause to notice the curtains of a condemned home.*

### 3.2. Buildings

A ruin is defined as the remains of a building, typically an aged structure that has suffered much damage or disintegration, with little attention given to preservation. Similarly, decay is the enacted process in which something decomposes and eventually returns to the environment.

Then what stories do such ruins tell? What is the affirmative legacy of the coal industry and when is extraction complete in this single industry area? How do residents relate to ruins?<sup>10</sup>

A certain amount of decay is encrypted within the walls of the built landscape throughout the region. Though, once productive communities of workers, now many of the buildings are in a state of literal decay. To me, the action of viewing facades can be understood as a figurative process, a method through which we view the past simultaneously with the present. Without knowing the life lived past the closed doorway, the facade becomes a blocked off object; a symbol of a reality we only access superficially. In this way, whole towns can be relics of the past. They are skeletal reminders of the initial community ideology intended in industrial development. Visible decay is read like a code. Towns have strayed from their original qualities and taken on a new meaning for the current time. From the surface, we view a moment of ruination somewhere between a prior urban form and obliteration. Obliteration of former industry may have never been intended, but can the earlier values still hold relevance? The capability of natural processes to overrun built objects ultimately parallels the demise of the coal industry itself. In some instances, burnt out buildings or crumbling homes are shocking. They are a material aspect of a current political-cultural reality which follows a global trend. In Pennsylvania, there is an absence of something, an absence that residents either

have to live with or refurbish. In the towns themselves, this absence is encountered every day. There is an absence written into the constant proximity to ruins; both the ideological proximity to a life without an industry and lived post-industrial contamination.

### 3.3. On 'Ruins'

Objects that have decayed into fragments and traces draw together a transient past with the very desire to remember. Concrete and embodying absence, they are defined to a context of strict immanence, limited to the representation of ghostly apparitions. Yet they haunt. They become not a symbol of loss but the embodiment of the process of remembering itself; the ruined space itself remembers and then grows lonely.<sup>11</sup>

Multiple discourses connect with the observance of the material ruin – more specifically, the observance of abundant decayed structures and visible environmental scars. Multiple reactionary approaches are possible in the region given the current condition. The first approach would be that it is necessary to return the 'decayed' areas to their original functional and symbolic values. Given the ideological importance of mono-industrial reliance on the landscape of the Anthracite region itself, restoration of the physical space may be unobtainable. Without a restoration of an old system of ideology (coal industry as the 'life source') or the unimaginable fabrication of a new system, restoration is not possible. And, renewal seems improbable. The secondary notion to observing the Anthracite as a place of ruins comes from an outsider perspective. People from the outside looking in, view the multiplicity of devastation as markings of something horrendous, something that was crudely taken from a population. Rather, the state of the material world attests

to the politics of a labour-society and its resulting culture. A shift in the terrain here has been rendered a laborious, prolonged adjustment, that by the population may be seen as something of a natural process. The landscape is just how it is, a fact of life; there is nothing awry here. As an insider that became an outsider, I cannot help but see both sides. Decay can be a phenomenon to be 'fixed' and 'adjusted' – 'how can people live like this?'. Concurrently, it might also manifest as a constant, unwavering certitude, simply the way that things are, and probably one of the last things you should care about.

### 3.4. Landscape

A landscape can be symbolic. Features of the Anthracite landscape are unavoidable, just as marks of the extraction industry are globally. In places between towns where, after a heavy rainfall, a black residue from the empty mines leeches on the roadways. In the roadside woodlands, where odd shaped pits<sup>12</sup> and alien formations

mark the land. In a landscape decorated by the sight of blackened, flattened ground, where the trees haven't been able to grow back. The mark that industry has had on land itself is figurative; a terrain shaped by coal. The scattered mines, whether overgrown and hidden or not, are like eerie monuments to an exploitative history, to a land that has been taken from. Contact with strip mines themselves is unavoidable, obstructing the view of any casual drive. Visibly, they interact with the eye much like viewing a scar on human flesh would, an obstruction from an otherwise homogeneous landscape. They are scars of environmental damage and symbols of an extractive history. Interpretively, whether they are heroic scars of a hard-earned former glory, or scars from the traumas of the extractive past is up to the viewer's perception. History is trapped in these symbolic markings of the landscape. Through excessive wanderings we access the course of life itself, and are led to wonder if history will learn from scars, or continue making them.



8. A home built farther back from the sidewalk than the others.



9. I stop to notice materials collecting on a porch.



10. A home facade with a unique colour scheme.





11. A large apartment building stands at a street corner.



12. A tree grows upwards from a concrete porch.

## 4. Coal

### 4.1. *A Weird Rock*

Coal is a hard, filthy, ugly rock. Its only use is utilitarian, and whatever benefits it provides of light and warmth it takes away in destruction and death. And because coal destroys and kills, we do wind our way backward as we consider it – to the mountains, rivers, trees, animals, flowers, children, lovers, friends, family. Coal is a fit subject for poetry in an odd way, as Satan was a fit subject for Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Coal destroys and so it must be confronted.<sup>13</sup>

Plants do not just convert energy to for immediate fulfilment, they store it over time by carrying the energy within their fabric which releases while they burn or decay. The energy is carried on even when they are buried deep within the earth as fossil fuels. In this way, animals who once fed on organic matter become basins of solar energy. Flocks of animals in the Jurassic period, like living batteries of biologic potential, die and are buried with an untapped reserve intact in their guts from their plant-based foragings. Patterns of coal are the work of millions of years of biologically acquired solar energy compacted into convenient blocks of black, weird rock. When we burn coal, we can only imagine its release as if we are in a moment tapping into this limited biological battery millions of years in the making. From millions of years of biological decomposition and collection, the past 300 years of human development on this planet somehow tapped into what has been a vastly complicated and protracted process of organic energy collection and disbursement. Only now, in the present era, are humans challenged with the task of coping with non-renewable energies' impact on humanity and the planet.

### 4.2. *Coal and Progress*

Coal is a material, an object that emerged as a primary building block of America as we know it. Coal is a material inseparable from – and denoting a nod to – progress: infinite, expanding human development, without attention to its impact. In present America, coal is still mined, but fails to have a resonant voice within the modern American narrative.

Every basket is power and civilization. For coal is a portable climate. It carries the heat of the tropics to Labrador and the polar circle; and it is the means of transporting itself whithersoever it is wanted. Watt and Stephenson whispered in the ear of mankind their secret, that a half ounce of coal will draw two tons a mile, and coal carries coal, by rail and by boat, to make Canada as warm as Calcutta; and with its comfort brings political power.<sup>14</sup>

In light of Emerson's insights, coal is a commodified material, but moreover, a symbolic substance. Encapsulated in its essence are years of industrial growth carrying legacies that buried the employed miners under an exploitative quest for progress. The impact that coal has had on humankind, is seemingly infinite –its acceptance being the precursor

for industrial revolution and the growth of civilization to follow. I will not be able to do justice to its full history here.

### 4.3. *Coal in the Anthracite*

By tracing one thread of the historical and ideological importance of coal, we can understand a political and figurative linkage to pride, trauma, and place – specific to the Anthracite region, but also a phenomena that speaks to extractive industry with global resonance. Through understanding forces that unite the 'coal region', we can contemplate why it might be difficult for cultures worldwide to adapt to the present global reality still holding alongside the impact of years of resource extraction.

The entire Anthracite area had been bought from the Iroquois federation in 1749 by the Pennsylvania government for 500 pounds sterling. This area of eastern Pennsylvania was a region historically observed for its dense hardwood forest – termed 'the wild place' by Native Americans and later frequented by European tourists for its picturesque, rambling mountains similar to the footsteps of the Alps. Analogously to the bituminous coal that stretches from Western Pennsylvania to Alabama, anthracite coal was formed roughly 300 million years ago. Its difference is observed easily by its shiny exterior and hard consistency; 'stone coal'. Within the bounds of prehistoric processes that physically formed the American landmass, the Appalachian mountains are the result of progressive collisions of independent land masses into the formation of Pangaea –a supercontinent. Out of this action, the Appalachian mountains once soared into the atmosphere and are theorized to have been higher than the modern Himalayas. What we see now of the Appalachians is the by-product of millions of years of erosion. The Anthracite deposits took the brunt of these geographic collisions, experiencing a greater amount of prolonged geological pressures than other coal pockets across the world. Therefore, anthracite coal is a more evolved form of compressed, concentrated carbon, which grants it a certain tactile hardness, increased energy potential, and purity. With less concentrated hydrogen, it burns cleaner than wood and with less smoke than bitumen. A small fraction of the world's coal is found in the form of anthracite, with the majority of this fuel found within five counties of Pennsylvania.

### 4.4. *A Legacy*

Coal was the source of light and a primary source of energy for a developing America circa the 19th century. Massive outcroppings of anthracite garnished the Eastern Pennsylvania region, a historically unique mode within the American context. As the methodology of acquisition evolved technically, the material grew to immense importance within industrializing America, having a vast influence and power. From farmers mining coal quarry style in the 1700s, to canals feeding industry across the East coast, to railroads linking iron industry, to 1890, when America was producing the most coal out of any nation of the globe. By 1900, coal was the unrivalled source of a truly American hegemonical power. From the start, the acquisition of this black rock granted the Anthracite a pivotal role in the American extractive legacy that will not be erased.



13. *An old house that hugs a pile of coal waste.*



14. *During a walk, we observe what must have been a car dealership at one point.*



15. Colourful memorabilia seen through a shop window.

## 5. Extraction

### 5.1. What it Means

*Extraction*—from Latin ‘extrahere’ or ‘draw out’, meaning the action of taking something out using applied force or effort.

Narrowly, extraction and extractivism as processes can be understood in relation to industrial extraction procedures which enable the acquisition of non-renewable resources. In this sense, extraction is an enacted process of removal. Moreover, extraction refers to the often exploitative undertakings of symbolic removal that underpin the cultural communities employed, effected, and discarded as necessary instruments of extractive industries. In a contemporary capitalist manner, humans as well as the environment are commodified. If extraction is the most obvious of ‘removals’, we have also to ask; is coal the only thing that has been extracted (or mined) from the Anthracite region? And, can the communities in the Anthracite adapt to a future without coal?

### 5.2. Mining the Anthracite

Anthracite coal mining is a symbolic operation. The first miners to the region came from England, Wales, and Germany, followed by an influx of Irish during the middle of the 19th century, and Eastern Europeans later on. Various waves of immigrants (Polish, Slovak, Ruthenian, Ukrainian, Hungarian, Jewish, Russian), fleeing deteriorating conditions in their home countries were enticed to the coalfields by the promise of work and housing. Influence of these populations can be felt strongly into the present day. The remaining ethnic character and cuisine of the region attests to this past. Upon arrival, immigrants were shoved into slews of poorly manufactured patch town company housing

blocks that were scattered between mining operations. Initially, incoming immigrants were discriminated against and shunted into harsher jobs based on ethnic background, a process similar to ethnic hazing. Communities of miners tended to be in perpetual debt, housed in substandard conditions, and chronically undernourished. Aside from the suffering of such conditions, the geographical placement of housing settlements – specifically in areas where coal can be mined – is a circumstance that placed immigrant populations in locations where no infrastructure would have existed without mining industry. Without the industry, they would be seen as out of the way, and inaccessible.

Interpersonal systems built into the fabric of the employment itself further attest to trauma. Structural violence (Shackel 2018) may be understood as the process to describe the conditions faced in mining jobs, and as a process describing the extraction of a population itself. Structural violence refers to a form of gradual, persistent friction wherein social institutions harm individuals through a prolonged, oppressive deprivation of basic needs. Structural violence may be apprehended in the increased rates of premature death, illness, or disability shared by the miners. Mining has historically had the highest mortality rate of any profession in the US; human labour was an expendable but useful commodity tossed away in the black pits of the mines.

Mining itself was a deadly practice and to a great extent still is. Entering a mine day after day is to face a uniformly constant threat of death by extraordinary accidents of numerous types: cave-ins, explosions, toxic gases, or flooding. Typically isolated incidents of injury, while always probable, had never been able to procure a large scale amount of regulatory attention. Contrary to the bituminous coal miners of Appalachia, the Anthracite Region never had a significant union organization success. Coal barons managed to organize against attempts

at union formation time and time again. Another form of structural violence that occurred was child labour, with the rampant employment of underage children in the backbreaking, monotonous job of sorting coal.

### 5.3. *Extracted Health*

Seventy years of smoke and graphite  
Have eaten his lungs,  
Or is it the despair  
And boredom of the unemployed  
That flatten him in a bedroom  
soaked in a shadow?<sup>15</sup>

In the days of heavy coal industry, communities faced environmental stresses due to air filled with coal dust and the unavoidable drinking of contaminated water. This often would lead to the early onset of chronic disease. Black lung may be the most notorious example of this, having a reputation as a crippling, almost expected aftereffect of a life in the mines. Otherwise, those in mining communities (not just miners) have an increased risk of kidney disease, obstructive pulmonary disease, and hypertension. Chronic illness increases incrementally if coal production does. Exposure to coal-processing chemicals, toxic dusts, and polluting by-products of industry continue to impact public health. Acid Mine Drainage is the effect of toxic minerals being washed into drinking water. This results in a consumption of abnormally high amounts of heavy metals. As this region and the Appalachian have among the highest cancer rates in the United States, surely the fall of an industry has not ended its malign effects that appear to spread across generations like a plague?

### 5.4. *A Way of Life of the Anthracite Region*

Tied to global capital, fuelling the Industrial revolution on labour immigrants, the legacy of coal extraction persists.<sup>16</sup>

The coal region of Pennsylvania may stand at the very intersection of a traumatic lineage and contemporary social neglect. It is an extracted place. A singular reliance on coal has formulated a population owing its very creation story to a history stained by structural violence. In its aftermath, coal left a tortured landscape and a legacy of being ignored: promising an American future with lessened health care access, and widespread poverty. Without a doubt, troubles endured years ago live on today as communities negotiate their survival. In the sights of the region you could interpret the legacy of an industry on the landscape as a skewed dependency. The very thing that has blackened the hills, blackened the lungs, and crippled the bodies is the very thing to which many owe their sense of place to. While I personally question if some individuals will ever be able to find a mindful life source, perhaps I have an internal bias. It is only conscientious of me to recognize that patterns of strong working culture inherited from the coal era have endured to be reconfigured in modern, relevant forms. This sense of perseverance can account for how the region has developed something of a strong foothold in industrial and manufacturing sectors; diesel, trucking, automotive, etc. Otherwise, I interpret the Coal Region as a place with a strong independent spirit, which renders less motivation to summon exterior aid efforts when compared to other declined regions of America.



16. *We get out of the car to study the view after a drive up a long windy hill. It is intriguing to us how homes seem to be scattered so close to the mining fields.*



17. *Derelict equipment on a roadside.*



18. *Roadside Americana.*

## 6. Reflections

### 6.1. Connection

Amid the shadows of the back roads crawling up and down the mountains you hear whispers of forlorn places like Centralia:<sup>17</sup> a place where coal burns like an eternal hell underneath the ground. You hear murmurs of infamous immigrant massacres, deathly workers' accidents and chronic abuse. Yet, a pride surfaces without an ability to displace. There is a certain unity of 'hard coal,'<sup>18</sup> 'working class' resilience and attitude that resonates across the land. Permeating deep into the ground, the scars of the past are omnipresent. Vast hillsides can be witnessed, shredded with trenches and pits, or places where trees have overcome the strip mines. Large swaths of black, exposed former mines infiltrate the scenery and seem to bisect spaces between homes. Imposing dirty fields and toxic waste puddles several blocks in length stand as crude reminders to an all but absent past. The scenery is haunting, yet ghostly, breathtaking. I find myself deeply contested with what I see. I see visions of a post-industrial nightmare starkly contrasted with the whimsical tales of my grandparents: exemplars of a people who were proud to live, work, and die in a place they described as culturally rich and unified. A people who never thought their children would leave. A people who died in a different world than that they were born in. Surely, this story is not limited in accuracy to Pennsylvania, but relevant to global working class culture.

### 6.2. Points of Pride

Any mention of the Coal region cannot be done justly without an affirmative gesture to the common narratives; the stories jostled back and forth. The stories that lose a sense of absolute fact, but gain potency with repetition and transmission. At this point, this may all seem fairly grim. My aim is to provide insight to a place that is shaped by non-negotiable ties to an industry and defined by the people that have lived there: people who have survived with or without choice and purely in spite of circumstances. Stories of resilience sprout in my memory. Albeit that, discursive glimpses of pride to some, may be horror stories to others. This depends on perspective. To the outsider, glorification of horrendous accidents prompts a shock of superimposed terror or is viewed as begging for empathy. But, to an insider an interjection of bragging may allude to family roots one should be proud of.

Something that has always come up when talking with old-timers are the Molly Maguires. Fleeing famine, the Irish came to the Anthracite in droves. Clinging close to fraternal ties of secrecy they had first deployed against English oppressors, the hills of Pennsylvania were not so different, and they rose up again. They left a legacy of serving the discriminated Irish through arson, bludgeonings and systematic murder of oppressive coal bosses.<sup>19</sup>

Other famous tales hold more water and speak to either disaster or violence. There is the Twin Shaft disaster.<sup>20</sup> This was a massive cave-in that killed 58 miners. Or, the Lattimer massacre, where nineteen immigrants on strike were killed by a county sheriff's posse.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the Knox Mining disaster which happened on 22 January

1959 can stir up memories of survival and horror. The river slope owned by Knox Coal company flooded when corporate management instructed miners to illegally dig underneath the Susquehanna river. The proceeding flooding incident took three days to eventually mitigate and was only resolved when the holes were plugged with railroad cars and debris. In the chaos twelve workers died, and another 69 escaped. Amedeo Pancotti was awarded the Carnegie medal for climbing fifty feet up an empty air shaft to alert rescuers and successfully save 33 men including himself. This action is credited as single-handedly killing the mining industry of the region.

### 6.3. Foodways

Other manifestations of pride can be located in a shared sense of 'foodways'. Many local recipes, either brought out at potlucks and Sunday suppers inspire recollections of a blurry Eastern European peasant tradition mixed in with adapted survival histories in the hills and were brought out of hiding to survive the depression (potatoes and cabbage cost nothing). Some dishes are very nostalgic for me and reminiscent of my own American childhood not so far removed from Eastern European tradition. The cuisine speaks to a mashup of many distinctive Eastern European traditions.

Just to list some common items here. Bleenies are a dumbed-down adoption of Russian buckwheat pancakes. Pierogies, a typical famine food, are served in the region fried in lard and stuffed with any number of things, but typically not without potatoes and cabbage. Haluski are egg noodles cooked in butter with cabbage. I should not forget to mention the wide variety of other cabbage creations (sauerkraut, coleslaw, boiled, fried), and the endless variety of ways locals can cook potatoes and sausage.

### 6.4. Encounters

My friend Scott home sits on a row adjacent to a block of burnt out homes that have stood for years in a decayed state without demolition, and are speculatively inhabited by squatters. In his small town, the main grocery is a gas station that carries a limited supply of anything fresh. During several months of incidents, the next door neighbour Blinker, a scrapper, had overseen his girlfriend giving birth on the floor of his flat, and had several tangles with law enforcement officers. One day, I recall him laying flat on the ground outside, fixing his 1980s vehicle throughout the night. The regular habit of fixing plywood to the vehicle's underbelly provided a functional solution to the volatile activity of driving a car with a frame well-rusted-through on rough mountain roads. On another day, he had dumped a truck full of salvaged light fixtures from a burned out motel onto the sidewalk and spent the following ten hours meticulously sorting through these. Rumours of all sorts, disturbing, contradictory ...why? This is a confused reality.

Blinker stands as an oddball. His mention here serves merely as a gesture to extremity. A dual set of narratives exist in this place. One narrative attests to a lived-in clumsiness of an outcast America. The other attests to a normalized, hard working, people that continue to take pride in their culture and sense of place.



19. *One long drive up a dirt road dead-ends at a small pond. We get out of the car to absorb the water's stillness.*



20. *The local 'deli', frequented often for coffee and a sandwich.*





21. *Eclectic objects are displayed in a window.*

## 7. Now

### 7.1. *A Certain Otherness*

In the American imaginary, coal evokes a sort of bleak imagery of soot-covered miners trudging back and forth to support their families in grim small towns. Coal is a commodity lacking in any glamorous association. It is cheap, domestic, old-fashioned, and irrelevant. It evokes a place and a people that cannot be removed from its legacy and suffer a similar destiny to coal. A place that retains a certain absentee status from the American narrative; in the eyes of America, a weird place. An othered environment that falls between the cracks. Fittingly, it is a non-place.<sup>22</sup> A place that smears the ability to acknowledge it with nothing that resembles certainty. From this, there is explicit removal, distance, extraction of immediate perspective. In the enunciated voices of America, the significance of the Anthracite's cry fades into some distant horizon, probably to somewhere alongside the promises of mountain laurels<sup>23</sup> blooming and fresh mulberries.

### 7.2. *Understanding the Metaphor*

Anthracite was king until its sudden demise in the 1950s. It traces loom over the land and is embodied in the buildings, the landscape, and the people themselves. Since the 1960s, the main mode of mining shifted from boring into the ground to strip mining. Come the 1980s and 90s, such traditional mining faded out of use. The current mining operations in the area work on extracting coal from existing waste piles of old strip mines.

Strange that these places 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.<sup>24</sup>

In our current world, a political realm of the Anthropocene marked by dwindling resources, environmental degradation, heightened social and cultural inequality and economic inequality: what is to be said of this place? What is to be said of the cultural pockets that still hang on to this form of working culture? Can they adapt?

As the extractive frontier expands in other parts of the globe, and is brought into light with incidents like Standing Rock, the Anthracite serves as an example of extraction's afterlife. As coal falls further out of the American narrative, so does the region. Certainly, the life source has not returned fully. And it probably should not and will not. And, for all we know, Trump's promises to restore a coal mining America to its former glory mean almost nothing. What is to be said of a place like the Anthracite? A place where 'Make America Great Again' placards flank the roadways. A place and a people forced to live with the material consequences of its past. What is to be said of these places that flicker in the afterlife of extraction with no restoration in sight?

### 7.3. *A Disappearing Home*

From my ancestors to me,  
A certain belonging passed through my genetics,  
A place now distant ruminates,  
I feel its moan as a disconnected longing coming from  
somewhere deep in my gut.  
To a lineage scattered among the hills,  
A drive to reconnect, a drive to roam the land, and  
walk in their steps.

Rendered all a blur.  
 Military men, worried women, hard workers.  
 What does that mean?  
 not much maybe

Homeland means a person's native land: a location tied to a sense of origin, creation, or belonging. If you have ever felt homesick, you go home. What is the result when your brain cannot connect the emotion to a physical

action. You might ask yourself: 'why is that?'. You know secretly that you can't really go home. You can't go home to a place that appears to gradually fall out of existence with each time you visit. And, the harsh reality is that the culture of the place was built on an industrial system that would ultimately fail anyway. This is my own view, and I am convinced that it is something that can be felt in areas across the globe, places where a new system has not yet replaced the old connectedness offered by heavy industry.



22. *On a walk through an alley, I pause to notice the texture of a wall.*



23. *Finding a symmetry.*

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> All definitions are from Merriam Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com>.
- <sup>2</sup> A historically important coal-mining area in Northeastern Pennsylvania.
- <sup>3</sup> Patch-town, coal camp, or just 'patch' is a variety of company town or village established for coal miners, typically in a remote, undeveloped area. Though no longer company owned, many survive.
- <sup>4</sup> Strip mines are products of strip mining or open-pit mining, a process where minerals are carved from the surface rather than dug out of a landscape.
- <sup>5</sup> Situationists International was an international organization of avant-garde artists, thinkers, intellectualists, and political theorists prominent from 1957 to 1972.
- <sup>6</sup> Psychogeography was defined by Guy Debord in 1955 as a study of precise laws and specific effects of the geographic environment on the emotions and behaviour of individuals.
- <sup>7</sup> From p. 19 of Barthes's *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1988).
- <sup>8</sup> I have been informed by a friend's neighbour that much of the open land in the region is still owned by the Reading Anthracite Coal Company, and this is maybe the only reason it is partially preserved.
- <sup>9</sup> Symbolology, meaning the study of symbols as a mode to understand something.
- <sup>10</sup> From p. 379 of Meade's 'In the Shadow of the Coal Breaker: Cultural Extraction and Participatory Communication in the Anthracite Mining Region' (2017).
- <sup>11</sup> From p. 93 of Stewart's, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an "Other" America* (1996).
- <sup>12</sup> Formations most likely attest to a movement of independent miners who mined by digging large holes into the hillsides. This is a practice that may have continued well into the 1960s.
- <sup>13</sup> From 'Preface' by Denise Giardina, which appears in Green's *Coal: A Poetry Anthology* (2007).
- <sup>14</sup> Quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson, as quoted in Freese's *Coal: A Human History* (2016).
- <sup>15</sup> Excerpt from 'My Father's Black Lung', a poem by Dylan Thomas that appears in Green's, *Coal: A Poetry Anthology* (2007). It is a story from West Virginia, but of relevance to Black Lung in a general sense.
- <sup>16</sup> From p. 378 of Meade's 'In the Shadow of the Coal Breaker: Cultural Extraction and Participatory Communication in the Anthracite Mining Region' (2017).
- <sup>17</sup> A coal mine fire that has been burning since 1962 has rendered Centralia a ghost town.
- <sup>18</sup> Hard coal is a word that means anthracite, but I have heard this used to describe the region's population.
- <sup>19</sup> From p.130 of Freese's, *Coal: A Human History* (2016).

- <sup>20</sup> The Twin Shaft disaster occurred in the Newton Coal Company's Twin Shaft Colliery in Pittston, Pennsylvania, on 28 June 1896.
- <sup>21</sup> On 10 September 1897, near Hazelton, Pennsylvania, nineteen miners of mostly Polish, Lithuanian, Slovak, and German ethnicity were killed by a Luzerne County Sheriff's posse; many others were wounded.
- <sup>22</sup> Coined by the French anthropologist Marc Augé, non-place refers to anthropological spaces of transience where the human beings remain anonymous and that do not hold enough significance to be regarded as 'places'.
- <sup>23</sup> A broadleaf evergreen plant common in the mountains of Pennsylvania, as well as throughout the Eastern United States.
- <sup>24</sup> From p. 42 of Stewart's *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an 'Other' America* (1996).

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## Author Contributions

All photos taken by author; © 2019. 'From my ancestors to me ...': © Andrew Long 2019.

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