

RUIN'S PROGENY

Race, Environment, and Appalachia's Coal Camp Blacks

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Abstract

Extractive industries have long been a topic of study in environmental social science. These studies have focused on how extractive industries, as linked to global capitalism, degrade local communities and their environments, but have failed to consider their racialized effects. At the same time, when scholars have examined the intersection of race and the environment, their analyses tend towards the quantification and mapping of the disproportionate environmental burdens that weigh upon communities of color. Both literatures neglect to examine the intersection of race and the environment from a phenomenological perspective. Our research intervenes in the literature by asking: (1) How is the environment implicated in conditioning racialized subjectivities? And (2) How do landscapes and environment impact the formation of collective identity and sense of belonging for African Americans? In this article, we focus on the lived experience of a generation of Black coal miners and their families, who migrated throughout the central Appalachian region during the twentieth century Great Migration. This study offers an empirical investigation into the "landscapes of meaning" that can emerge from the experience of racialized displacement from land and environment. Further, in documenting the lived experience of this group of African Americans, this study also counters the otherwise dominant narrative that portrays Appalachian people as *hopeless*, *helpless*, and *homeless*; and *White*. Data for this study are drawn from the EKAAMP collection, a community-driven participatory archive aimed at documenting the lives of African American coal miners and their families. This work offers three contributions: It (1) reinserts agency into the analysis of communities affected by extractive economies; (2) invigorates the productive tensions that underlie considerations of the inextricable linkages between environment and the phenomenological experience of racialization; and (3) reconsiders the long-standing historical intersections between environment, community, and race.

Keywords: Race, Environment, Extractive Industries, African American Subjectivity, Collective Identity, Place, Appalachia

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[It would] remain impossible for the majority to conceive of a Negro [being] stirred by the pageants of Spring and Fall; the extravaganza of summer, and the majesty of winter

—Zora Neale Hurston, “What White Publishers Won’t Print,”
Negro Digest (1950, p. 87)

INTRODUCTION

The vibrant and meaningful relationship between communities of color and their surrounding environments has been historically disregarded. The research presented here answers the call of scholars like Carolyn Finney (2014) to offer “counter-narratives” that demonstrate the embodiment of memory, meaning, and vitality through interaction with the natural world despite the marginalization and oppression imposed upon the subaltern. When scholars have examined the intersection of race and the environment, their analyses tend towards the quantification of disproportionate environmental burdens that weigh upon communities of color (Crowder and Downey, 2010; Pastor et al., 2001; Saha and Mohai, 2005). By emphasizing the environmental inequities that plague such communities, this literature ignores the intersection of race and the environment from a phenomenological perspective. Moreover, the majority of literature on environmental concern and meaning-making centers on White communities (Agyeman and Spooner, 1997; Deluca and Demo, 2001; Finney 2014) thereby buttressing the dominant narrative that ties environmental awareness to Whiteness. Our research therefore seeks to rectify this significant omission in existing literature by asking: (1) How is the environment implicated in the conditioning of racialized subjectivities? And (2) How do landscapes and environment impact the formation of collective identity and sense of belonging for African Americans?

In this article, we focus on the lived experience of a generation of African American coal miners and their families, who migrated into and out of central Appalachia, during the twentieth century Great Migration. Our analysis shows that their subjectivities were largely conditioned in and through their relationship to the landscape and environment—from their deep understanding of agriculture, the mountainous landscape, and the bituminous coal that symbolized life and death to them. Although the vast majority of this population migrated over half a century ago, this generation of African Americans continues to call these coal towns in Appalachia “home”—a place of origin and belonging that deeply informs their collective identity. This changing “landscape of meaning”—referring to historically specific and particular landscapes upon which the social emerges (Reed 2011, p. 92)—is expressed, refashioned, and sustained through a variety of ongoing cultural formations and invented traditions instantiated by this group. This study offers an empirical investigation of the way in which collective identities can emerge out of the shared experience of racialized displacement from land and environment. This paper complicates the process of *ruination*—the resultant wreckage of the inevitable decline of imperial and industrial formations, and the ensuing displacement of the people and places that are subsequently rendered debris (Mah 2012; Stoler 2013)—by focusing on the productive tensions that exist between the duality of oppression and resilience. In documenting the autopoietic cultural expressions of topophilia, what humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1974, p. 4) refers to as “the affective bond between people and place or environment,” amongst this group of African Americans, this study thereby counters the otherwise dominant narrative that portrays the people of Appalachia as *hopeless, helpless, homeless, and White*.

PREVIOUS LITERATURE ON RACE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Environmental sociology has addressed questions of race and environment in three primary ways thus far. The first explores the unequal distribution of environmental hazards, which disproportionately trouble low-income communities and communities of color. Secondly, scholars have analyzed the mobilizations of the racially marginalized around these environmental inequalities, as seen in the Environmental Justice Movement(s). Finally, though much less prevalent, some of the literature has focused on how these environmental inequalities are produced. Notwithstanding the major contributions of this literature, existing scholarship neglects the phenomenological dimensions of the intersection of race and environment. By focusing solely on the (unequal) distribution of environmental burdens and the mobilizations of people of color against the pollution in their communities, this literature is blinded to ways in which even the most degraded landscapes figure into the identity formation of marginalized groups. Below, we briefly review this literature.

Opposition to the placement of a toxic, polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) landfill in Warren County, North Carolina, in 1980 initiated the unfolding discourse of what would come to be known as Environmental Justice (EJ). As a social movement, EJ is centered on addressing disparities in environmental health, hazards, and risks. Within sociology, Environmental Justice is a very productive field, with deep roots and linkages to activism and advocacy. In the past, the study of Environmental Justice has been conflated with the study of environmental inequality. Here, we would like to distinguish the two within the academic literature of sociology. Environmental inequality is a field of inquiry concerned with the disparity of environmental health, between communities, especially based on categories of race, class, nationality, and gender, whereas Environmental Justice refers simultaneously to an ethical principle and the sociological study of the social movement formed around it. Simply put, Environmental Justice literature is the study of the social movements that emerge to combat environmental inequalities.

Environmental justice is a normative concept that emerged in response to environmental racism, and can be thought of as the remedy for environmental racism. Robert Bullard, a founding figure in Environmental Justice scholarship, defines environmental justice as the principle that “all people and communities are entitled to equal protection of environmental and public health laws and regulations” (Mohai et al., 2009, p. 407). Environmental justice takes an ethical stance that calls for both positive and negative rights: All people have the right *to* live in clean environments in which they can thrive, and they should have freedom *from* exposure to toxins. Since Bullard's (1990) book *Dumping in Dixie* first explored the mobilization of five communities of color in the South, Environmental Justice has become a mainstay of environmental sociological inquiry, with many scholars examining social movements against unequal environmental health and protection (Čapek 1993; Pellow 2000; Szasz 1994; Sze 2007; Taylor 2000).

Early studies of environmental inequality focused on demonstrating the phenomena through descriptive study. Beginning in the 1970s, a small group of researchers used data from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to study exposure to air pollution. They found that poorer neighborhoods were exposed to more polluted air than wealthier communities (Berry 1977; Kruvant 1975; Zupan 1973). From here, a new research enterprise blossomed as scholars and activists began to share accounts of environmental injustice (Bullard 1990, 1993; Hofrichter 1993; Mohai and Bryant, 1992). These scholars were primarily focused on the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on communities of color—or environmental racism—which is

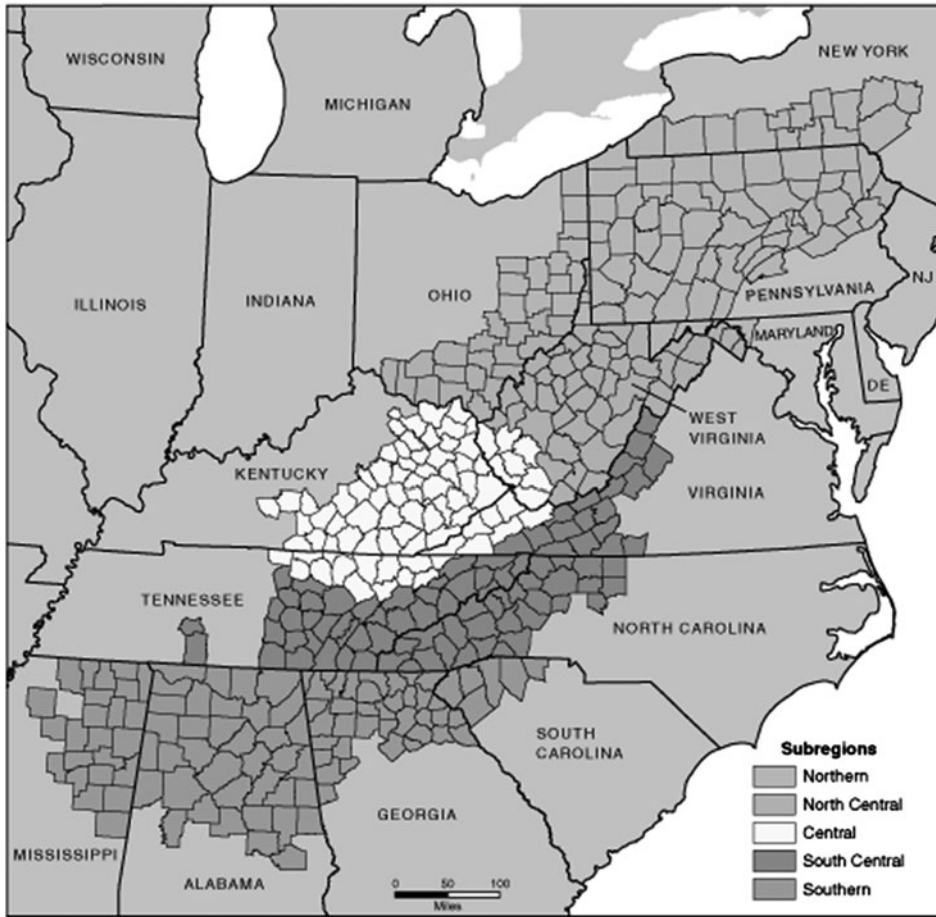
“racial discrimination in environmental policy making, the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste facilities” (Mohai et al., 2009, p. 407).

While important, these studies often focused solely on the *existence* of unequal environmental outcomes and the struggles against them without paying much attention to the mechanisms that created them (Pellow 2000; Szasz and Meuser, 1997; Weinberg 1998). David Pellow (2000) suggests that social scientists instead focus on the mechanisms that produce environmental inequalities, and some scholars have taken up this suggestion (Crowder and Downey, 2010; Pastor et al., 2001; Saha and Mohai, 2005). Kyle Crowder and Liam Downey (2010), for example, focus on inter-neighborhood migration, race, and environmental hazards, in an attempt to specify the mechanisms that create environmental inequalities. Using a multilevel analysis with combined data from the national Panel Study of Income Dynamics and the Environmental Protection Agency’s Toxic Release Inventory, the authors test two theoretical suppositions for why environmental inequalities occur: the racial/income inequality thesis and the racial discrimination thesis. Their findings support both but provide evidence that racial discrimination plays a stronger role than class in that when socioeconomic status is controlled for, even the highest-income Blacks and Latinos end up moving into neighborhoods with higher exposures to pollution than Whites. Despite attention to mechanisms of racialized environmental subjectivities, this body of work is symptomatic of the broader academic discourse that continually draws a stark line around communities of color and ecological degradation.

Overall, the dominant discourse about the environment is heavily racialized, linking Whiteness to concern and attention to environment (Agyeman and Spooner, 1997; Deluca and Demo, 2001; Finney 2014), and non-Whiteness to environmental decay. Unfortunately, the literature within environmental sociology perpetuates a narrative of urban environmental decay in communities of color by overlooking the ways in which people of color think about the environments in which they are embedded. This paper makes an important intervention in this literature by disrupting this meta-narrative of inequality and degradation by offering a thick interpretation of the ways in which collective identities are shaped by the inextricable relationship with racialization, landscape, and environment. Thus, we align ourselves with a burgeoning scholarship on race and environment that includes community-based accounts of Navajos in the Southwest (Voyles 2015), Asian Americans in California (Shah 2012), and immigrants in Silicon Valley (Pellow and Park, 2002). Our study does not claim generalizability at the level of the case, but instead points to the theoretical fecundity that the interpretive mode of inquiry lends to the empirical examination of race and environment.

THE SETTING: EASTERN KENTUCKY

This study is set high in the rugged, verdant, mountainous, industrial region of Central Appalachia. The last region in the United States to be swept by the boom and bust coal mining industry, Central Appalachia became a niche layover for Black migrants who were early movers between 1880 and 1930, a period that came to be known as the first wave of the African American “Great Migration” (Lewis 1987, 1989; Trotter 1990). These migrant streams primarily initiated from the mineral districts of Birmingham and Bessemer, Alabama, and to a lesser extent, the agricultural regions of Virginia and North Carolina (Lewis 1989). A part of the cadre of the estimated six million Blacks who fled the oppressive and violent context of the deep South in



Map by: Appalachian Regional Commission, November 2009.

Fig. 1. Map of Appalachia.

the early twentieth century, these tens of thousands of early migrants became “Black Appalachians” (Turner and Cabbell, 1985), if for only one or two generations.

The epicenter of fossil fuel production in the United States, Central Appalachia shares much in common along economic and environmental dimensions. However, the intra-regional variation in terms of social context, racial composition, and state-formation is vast, and therefore begs for what sociologist John Fiske (1992, p. 154) calls a “close examination,” recognizing that “the culture of everyday life works only to the extent that it is imbricated into its immediate historical and social setting.” To that end, we chose to focus our examination specifically on the African American experience in neighboring areas—Harlan and Letcher counties—in southeastern Kentucky.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this paper come from the Eastern Kentucky African American Migration Project (EKAAMP), an archival collection housed at the *Southern Historical Collection* (SHC) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The collection is comprised of 215 oral history interviews that were primarily conducted with African

Americans who share roots in the coal towns of Eastern Kentucky. In addition to the oral history interviews, EKAAMP also holds thousands of vernacular photographs and hundreds of documents and objects relating to the history and culture of this population of Black Appalachians and their descendants.

We adopt an interpretive mode of inquiry for this study and rely primarily on the oral history data to analyze the research questions. This approach is interpretive in the sense that Isaac Reed (2011) articulates in *Interpretation and Social Knowledge*. Arguing against a conceptualization of interpretivism simply as description, standing in opposition to realism as explanation, Reed posits “methodologies are ‘interpretive’ precisely in so far as they guide us toward [...] meaning-reconstruction, whereby social mechanisms are finally comprehended in their concrete, sometimes vicious power because the meanings that form them are brought to light” (Reed 2011, p. 161). Because we are primarily concerned with the phenomenological dimensions of race and environment, particularly as they relate to conditioning racialized subjectivities and collective identity formation, the collection of oral histories offers the optimal data source to examine the ways in which the entanglements of race and environment played a role in the construction of this generation of African Americans’ life-world.

Although loosely structured, the oral history interviews cover seven predetermined topics: (1) childhood memories of growing up in their community of origin, (2) family structure in community of origin, (3) perceptions of race relations, (4) educational experiences, (5) migration, (6) career trajectories, and (7) attachment to place. We primarily focus on topics 1, 2, 3, and 7 for our analysis; however, we did not exclude any part of the interviews from our analysis. We used 152 of the 215 interviews from the EKAAMP collection for this study, excluding all interview data with participants outside of the study population. We also excluded all interview data that has not yet been transcribed. We uploaded the data from the remaining 152 interviews into a qualitative data management software program, where we generated baseline codes to begin our analysis. Preliminary codes included “landscape,” “coalmine,” “mountain,” and “garden.” We then conducted a secondary analysis through which we generated the findings for the study.

As mentioned above, existing scholarship exploring questions of race and environment tends to perpetuate a narrative of decay when it comes to the environments of communities of color. This literature rightly points to the ways in which racial inequalities extend to human relationships to the biophysical world, but neglects to explore how people understand their own place and identity in and with land, landscapes, and environment. In this study, we examine the ways in which the intersections between race and environment bear on the formation of the social self and collective identity. In the following sections we explore the myriad meanings that emerge from interaction with the landscape as we follow the life history of southeastern Kentucky’s coal camp Blacks.

RUIN’S PROGENY: RACE, ENVIRONMENT, AND APPALACHIA’S COAL CAMP BLACKS

To understand life in a coal camp you must know this: there is no separation between home, environment, and industry. It is a place where the mountainside provides berries, peaches, and apples; prime spots for hide-and-go-seek; and the perfect glade for the perfect tree house. At the same time, it is a place where the soles of mountains are etched in the dark, dank, and dangerous crawlspaces that most of the men in the town call their workplaces. Like Atlas, the Titan god condemned to hold up the sky for eternity, their back-scraping work supported the entire economy of the town.

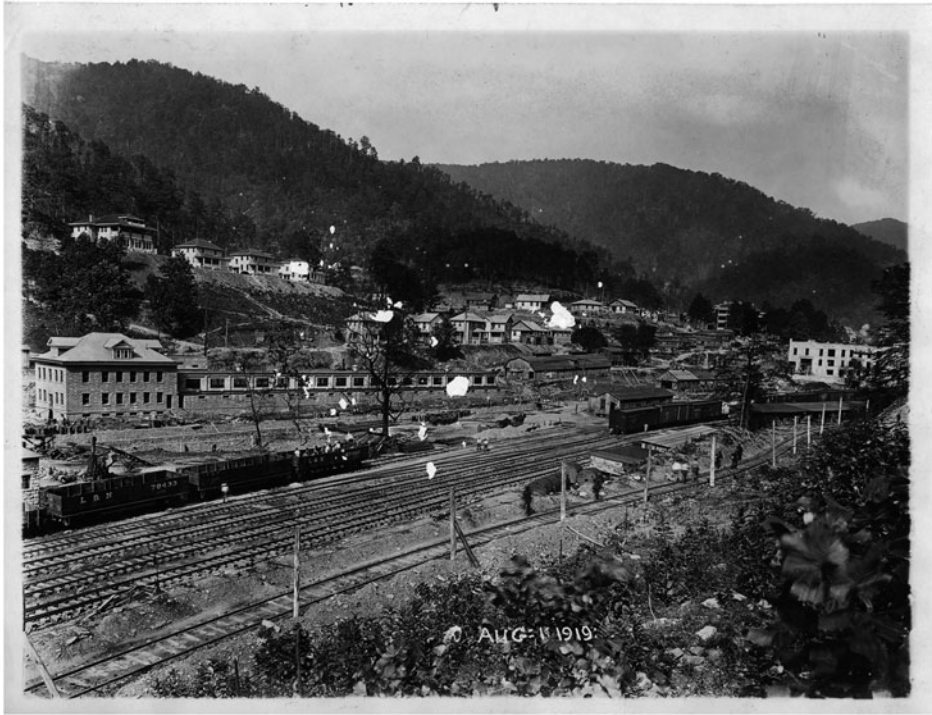


Fig. 2. Photograph of Lynch, KY (established in 1917) in Aug. 1919.

Archival photos provided with permission by Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College and the Appalachian Archives. These photos are part of the U.S. Coal & Coke and International Harvester Image Collection.

What follows is a narrative that traces the lives of the African American families who migrated to these coal camps in southeastern Kentucky, and who were eventually displaced upon the closure of the mines. We explore these families' landscapes of meaning in a double sense, both conceptually—examining a life-world constructed and contested through the tensions between life and death, freedom and oppression, ruin and progeny, that emerges from the subjective experience of living in these coal camps—and in the literal sense—drawing attention to the very trees, creeks, and creatures that make up the physical landscape and that have meaning for Appalachia's coal camp Blacks.

Brenda Thornton grew up in a bowl, or at least that's the way she describes it, a town "buried in the mountains," where you couldn't see anything "as far beyond those mountains."² For Black children in southeastern Kentucky, the edges of the world fell along the contours of the Appalachian Mountains. Their parents had moved to this region in search of new economic opportunities, fleeing the oppressive structure of opportunity in the Deep South—sharecropping, convict labor, and the ever-present threat of unmediated racial violence. What they found in southeastern Kentucky were towns built solely for the purpose of supporting the extraction of coal—towns entirely owned and operated by the coal company. Because of this totalizing, built environment everything seemed to have a purpose and everyone seemed to know his or her place. The Blacks lived on one side of the town, Whites on the other, coal mining managers along the main street, and the elites tucked away in villa-like estates on what was called "Silk Stocking Row." All necessary goods

could be bought at the company store—from rice to dish soap to a custom tailored suit for that year’s Easter Sunday church service. The company even provided certain amenities to keep the miners and their families entertained within the confines of the mining town—a movie theater, a town pool (for Whites only), two school houses (one for the Whites and the other for the “colored” children), and a number of churches to serve the various racial and ethnic immigrant groups in the community. In a town so contrived, however, Cynthia Brown-Harrington remembers the “freedom of it all”:

I remember the mountains, friends and families and mothers and fathers. Everybody’s father was a coal miner, everybody’s mother stayed home unless she was a nurse or a teacher. I remember snowy days, having snow rides on 2nd Street, stealing tires from the White people’s yard to make us a fire. I remember going to the poolroom to warm up when it snowed. I remember summers, playing in the rain, walking in the ditch, playing baseball in the street. We made our own ball from newspaper and wrapped a tape around it. We made hot rods, we raided apple trees at night, especially Ms. Almon’s tree. I remember going to 3rd Street, 4th Street, 5th Street just walking up there, to the graveyard behind our house³

Childhood memories full of such bounty and self-sufficiency were not unique to just Cynthia Brown-Harrington, but rather pervasive among all those who grew up in Harlan County at this time. It was a cradle of natural abundance—some called it a utopia, others called it a “little garden of Eden.” Jack French reminisces, “the good Lord provided everything; he really did. Because we could go three or four miles into the mountains; we would find all types of apple trees, blackberries, blueberries.”⁴ Weekday afternoons and on Saturday mornings children would hike up the mountains to fetch fruit for their mothers’ pies and jams, while helping in their fathers’ gardens was a daily responsibility—planting tomatoes, cabbage, and peppers. “We never went hungry,” Lee Arthur Jackson recalls:

We raised food in the garden and we raised hogs and some chicken, and daddy would always buy a side of beef. And mama canned all the vegetables and tomatoes and you know cabbage and greens and make apple jelly. Everybody had, I should say about a lot of people in Lynch, had gardens, and they had their little spot and nobody else messed with anybody’s spot or anything like that. And we raised the hogs and when it was hog-killing time everybody in the community came and slaughter the hogs all at the same time, and that’s just the way it was.⁵

Part of what made Black life in Harlan County at this time so abundant was the convergence of rural and industrial living. The generation of African Americans who migrated to Kentucky largely came from the mineral district of Alabama, where agriculture was not only a way of life, it was embodied. Intuitive knowledge about the science of farming, tilling soil, raising livestock, and living off of the bounty of the land is woven into the tapestry of the African American tradition through generations of enslavement and forced labor in the United States. The men and women who journeyed to southeastern Kentucky brought this knowledge with them and continued these agricultural practices in the coal camps, and transmitted it to their posterity.

Given the time spent interacting with the land, whether in their garden plots, rearing livestock, or trekking through the mountains for fruits and game, the Black families of Harlan County applied their rich agricultural knowledge base towards the local

flora and fauna. Brenda Wills-Nolan recalls going for walks with her grandmother: “I mean every now and then when you go pick blackberries you would see a green snake, but my grandmother was very familiar with the snakes, different snakes and animals, so she would tell you which one was poison and which one wasn’t.”⁶ Because people knew which snakes were poisonous and which ones were not, which paths through the mountainside would lead to fruit orchards, where the abandoned coal mines were, and which springs had toxic coal mine effluence, the forest and the mountains around the towns were not to be feared. Through this embodied knowledge came freedom—the freedom to move about and engage with the land.

Knowledge of the natural landscape also lent itself to strategies of re-use, further accentuating the bounty of the land and the ability to be self-sufficient:

Now we had cows and we had chickens and we would take the cow manure and the chicken stuff there and we would put them in the middle of the [garden] rows and that’s like fertilizer . . . that’s why we had, our garden grew bigger than anybody else because we used that cow mess and that chicken mess, and all we could say to anybody was ‘my daddy had a green thumb.’ Yes I know what made that green thumb, because we put all this cow manure and chicken mess on there.⁷

The gardens, livestock, and the mountains provided not only biological, but also cultural vitality. The seasonal slaughtering of hogs brought the community together as each social group had their own role. Each fall, the Black men in the community would



Fig. 3. Photograph of a home abutting the mountainside in Harlan County, KY. Archival photos provided with permission by Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College and the Appalachian Archives. These photos are part of the U.S. Coal & Coke and International Harvester Image Collection.

gather on a Saturday to slaughter their fattest hogs, which would supply meat for the winter and early spring. In recalling hog-killing season, Clara Smith reminisced:

[A]nd so in the fall, my father would bring two hogs down. They had a big iron pot. They would make a fire and put this pot over the fire and boil the water and I believe those hogs knew that it was ‘slaughtering’ time because they went ‘oink, oink, oink’ all around the yard there. And so they’d wait until we went to school and my dad and maybe four or five other men in the community, they’d stand around smoking their cigars and whatever, after we’d left and gone to school, they would shoot the hogs right in the middle of the forehead . . . right between the eyes. And they slit them open and they’d hang them up so that the blood would drain down, and put them in a big tub of—a big iron pot—and they would you know . . . pull the hair off. But I would be in school and I wouldn’t know anything about it so when I would come home from school my mother and maybe four or five ladies in the neighborhood, they would be there at the kitchen table cutting up all that fresh meat, and it was red and fresh and smelling like blood.⁸

These cyclical traditions—daily, weekly, and annual—were the backbone of a vibrant African American culture in Appalachia at this time.

That said, life in the coal camps was not only characterized by freedom and vitality, but also death, as men toiled in the bowels of the earth to extract coal for the corporation. The occupational hazards that coal miners faced were manifold, from respiratory illness to injury from falling objects and collapsing infrastructure. It was a daily sacrifice that only reified the precarity of the Black male body. One coal miner’s daughter said her father worked from “caint to caint [sic]”—can’t see when they start work and can’t see when they end it—as they worked from before sunrise to after sunset five to six days a week. Most men would make sure to shower in the bathhouse before returning home covered in coal dust. This was an effort to keep their own homes clean, but also to mark a clear mental separation between their work and home. Most fathers wanted to prevent their children from knowing how gruesome, how tiring, and how terrifying it was to work in a coal mine every day.

However, it was impossible to maintain this separation between, what was supposed to be, the interior sphere of home and the exterior world of industry. On one occasion, as a little girl, Clara Smith accompanied her mother to meet her father at the coal mine:

And we were standing there and she was talking to him and I was a little kid. I was looking up at this man and I was wondering who is this man my mother’s talking to? . . . he was pitch black from head to toe. All you could see was his eyes you know, and he was talking and she was talking, and I guess he saw me staring at him. And he looked down at me and my mother looked at me and she said, “Clara, do you know who that is?” and I said, “no,” she said “that’s your daddy.” I looked at him and I said to him, “Daddy that’s you?!” And then my hand was black, and my mother had to get some Kleenex and scrub my hand because I couldn’t believe that was him. That’s just how dirty they were . . . when they came out of the mines. You couldn’t see anything on him that would make me know that that was father.⁷

Although the mines were segregated, with Black workers working on one side, and White workers on another, at the end of the day, everyone came out of the mines covered in the same black dust. For Jeff Turner, this produced a certain sense of



Fig. 4. Miner loading coal in the portal #31 mine in Lynch, KY. Circa. 1920. *Archival photos provided with permission by Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College and the Appalachian Archives. These photos are part of the U.S. Coal & Coke and International Harvester Image Collection.*

evenness, in that you couldn't differentiate between White and Black men when both were smothered in dust and enduring similar conditions.⁹ Reminiscing about conversations he would have with his father, Turner notes: "When you go in that hole every day you go in even and you come out, you are dark . . . You couldn't tell from the face of a White man and you can't tell the face of a Black man that's when you are even." The common fear and fate that defined a lifetime of coal mining had an equalizing effect on Black and White relations, to some extent.

Coal mining was a death sentence. Coal dust is associated with a host of health threats, including coal workers' pneumoconiosis (CWP) and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), as well as silicosis from crystalline silica dust. Commonly referred to as "black lung," CWP was a common ailment for miners in eastern Kentucky. CWP is caused by the continual build-up of dust within the lungs, from constant inhalation, and results in inflammation, fibrosis, and in many cases death. Children of Black coal miners knew all too well the inevitable fate of their fathers. Black coal miners, especially, were forced into precarious conditions—working longer hours and taking dangerous jobs such as setting detonators—which made their bodies more susceptible to injury and ailment than their White counterparts. Upon learning their diagnosis, coal miners were shipped from the local hospital to Knoxville General where death was inevitable.

[T]hey took us there [Knoxville General], kids really couldn't visit, but they took us there and I remember it being an old hospital, it wasn't you know like Oakridge was clean and bright and cheery, it was dingy looking. And they took us in the

room where my dad was, I didn't know he was dying, and they had this pump pumping this black stuff out of his body and they had an IV in him, and he was laying there you know looking really really bad.⁷

Once the father died, families were given 90 days to move out of company housing so that the company could find a replacement.

The eventual degradation of the Black male body from a lifetime of working in the coal mine mirrored that of the industry itself. After decades of exploiting the land, the coal industry began to sell off property and lay off its workforce in the early 1950s, beginning with the Black workers. Because of this, young Black men and women began to leave Harlan County in droves, seeking work in the growing metropolises of Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and New York. Upon emigrating from the rural coal towns of southeastern Kentucky to new urban landscapes, Black teenagers were met with new forms of racism and oppression. Yvonne McCaskill recalled being called the slur, "country," during her first year of college and equating that with the more recent derogatory nature of the term "ghetto":

I think they [today's youth] replaced ghetto with country and stuff like that. I think that's the new term now and we said 'country.' But you know when we first came here because the landscape is drastically different from where we came from, it was culture shock in the sense that we lived around Black people, with Black people, but it was a different kind of living. You know our doors were opened all the time; we didn't have to lock our door—as I would say and everybody knew everybody. You know you didn't fear the White people, you didn't fear Black people.¹⁰

The condescending and offensive connotation of being called "country" contradicted her upbringing, which characterized the country, and rural areas like those in Appalachia, as in fact being rich in community, equality, and vitality. The pejorative "country," rather, echoed the vestiges of slavery within contemporary vernacular at that time, invoking images of ignorance, poverty, and backwardness which served as a way to promote both Whites over Blacks and certain Blacks over others. Vyreda Davis-Williams remembers, "We didn't know we were poor," because they always had "food to eat and clothes to wear."¹¹ However, the opinions of her peers were shaped by popular media that cast Appalachia as a place where old men have moss for teeth, no one is literate, and everyone is White. Thus, even in migration out of the semi-rural environment in the coal camps in southeastern Kentucky, the Appalachian landscape continued to define them both in their response to their new urban contexts as well as the way in which others, Black and White, characterized them.

As the young, working-age Blacks moved out, the aging fathers succumbed to black lung as their weary wives did their best to keep them comfortable through their inevitable transition to death. As the industry continued to dry up, towns like Lynch, Kentucky, began to fall apart. When the progeny of Harlan County's coal camp Blacks would come back to their family homes, they found abandoned lots, overgrown gardens, and most recently, bears roaming through the streets. Coming home meant walking amongst the ruins of what once was a vibrant community, or what Clara Smith calls a "ghost town":

And see like when I was down there we lived on 2nd Street . . . Well they [the Black neighborhood] had six streets. Now all those streets are gone and the forest . . . has come down . . . to the back of 2nd Street, yes. It's hard to look at that and imagine there were six streets going up there. They were all full of people;

there were houses and people in those places And it breaks your heart really to see how Lynch has gone down and it's almost like a ghost town as far as I'm concerned But nobody's buying anything down there [in Lynch], nobody's moving in down there and coming back home to live. I know I wouldn't ever even consider going back down there [to live] because there's nothing there. There's no entertainment, there's no work, there's just nothing there.⁷

For those that still call Appalachia home, this ruination is more than just physical or economic—it is also deeply symbolic. Jeff Turner explains, “We’re seeing the mountains die, we’re seeing the streets being swallowed up with the trees, we’re seeing death which is imminent to all of us.”⁸ The very visible decay is a reminder that the oasis of their youth—a place of self-sufficiency and cultural vitality—is gone. It mirrors the disintegration of their fathers’ bodies and the shriveling of the coal mining industry. The trouble for communities like Lynch and Benham, that emerge for the sole purpose of one industry, is the residue left after the boom and bust—the people and places that get caught in the gravity of the explosion. Once the boom is over, there is a sense of emptiness where there was once abundance—an implication that those people and places were simply kindling for the corporate fire. However, in the case of Appalachia’s coal camp Blacks, we see resistance to that hopelessness.

Despite the physical degradation of the town, families continue to come “home” every year for Memorial Day weekend. The companies gave many families the opportunity to buy their homes, often for as little as five hundred or one thousand dollars, unbeknownst to the new homeowners that the coal companies planned to exit the region. Instead of selling their homesteads once they realized they were deceived, many families kept these properties and they still remain in the family today. Several families still pay for electricity and running water, if only for that one weekend a year when their family and so many other families return. The Browns, Davis’s, Garners, Clarks, and so many others come home to spruce up their houses—sweeping the front porch, putting on a fresh coat of paint, and fixing a broken shutter. The air smells of barbecue and firecrackers, and sounds of chatter, honking cars, and church hymnals circulate throughout.

When asked why they continue to return, many attribute it to “love,” “family,” and a sense of “home.” There is something special about growing up in the mountains, they say. Cynthia Brown-Harrington argues that early summer in Appalachia is one-of-a-kind. “Kentucky at that time of the year is beautiful. And when you’re young and you’re growing up there you don’t really see all that but once you left and came back you saw the beauty of it. I was like, oh my god, look at these mountains, look at these trees.”² The mountain is not just a physical place to return to, but also a spiritual place that defines who they are:

When I go home it gives me an opportunity to fill my tank up. Sometimes in the city your tank gets so empty and you have to refuel. So when I go back home to rejuvenate the mountain spirit, it’s all through the concept of home home is where mama and daddy raised us in that little house. So I sort of call it our condo in the mountains.⁸

It is a mutual relationship—between the people and the land. As the Black families of Harlan County continue to make their annual pilgrimage to the mountains to “fill up their tanks,” they too revive the mountains, giving new meaning to Appalachia. For them, this region has become one of recreation and nostalgia, instead of a place of self-sufficiency and economy as it was in their youth.

Because of this deep affection for the mountains, many desire to return to Harlan County not only as an annual social destination, but also as a burial place. Odell Moss, for example, says that he wants to be buried in Harlan County because that is where the rest of his family has been laid to rest:

Why, I was born and raised there, all my family was born and raised there. And before my people passed away there was home there. And when people begun to passed away that's where they are buried right at Benham, now I have an older brother who was not buried there but the rest of them they were buried right there in Benham. And my baby sister, she was buried there because she was cremated but we buried, at least I did buried her right down between mom and daddy, you see. And you know, because my oldest brother was the only one who wasn't buried there I've already prepared things for myself to be buried there, everything is this over set and lined up and everything.¹²

The fact that most people want to return to Harlan County in death shows us just how important it was during their lives. Throughout their life histories, children of Appalachia's coal camp Blacks continue to come back to the place of their youth, creating new memories through re-engagement. In this way, we see that memory is embodied in the physical scars on their backs from crawling through the mines, in the cut on their foot from chasing their brother through the apple orchard, and in the burn on their finger from the firecrackers set off every Memorial Day weekend. At the same time, the shared experiences of racism, both in and beyond Harlan County, solidify the subjective experience of being a Black Appalachian.

RACE AND LANDSCAPES OF RUIN: TOWARDS AN INTERPRETIVE APPROACH

Here we take the charge to be a vital one: to refocus on the connective tissue that continues to bind human potentials to degraded environments, and degraded personhoods to the material refuse of imperial projects.

—Ann Stoler, *Imperial Debris* (2013, p. 7)

What does the case of Appalachia's coal camp Blacks tell us about race and the environment? Most importantly, our analysis points to the ways in which a slight change in perspective can illuminate previously unexplored dimensions of the intersection of race and environment. This is partially a matter of method and methodology. Most studies of race and environment proceed by asking questions about the unequal distribution of environmental burdens along racial lines, and therefore employ spatial and statistical methods to explore this phenomenon. Yet, when scholars focus solely upon these negative dimensions of how race and environment intersect, they are often blind to questions of meaning and identity formation within these same contexts. This paper shows how despite living in a socionatural context fraught with problems, from social segregation to death from occupational hazards, people created meaning and value through engagement with myriad forms of non-human nature within the coal mining landscape. They found freedom in the same mountains that would later cause many community members an early death. In spite of the collapse of the coal economy and the subsequent ruination of the built landscape, Harlan and Letcher County's coal camp Blacks continue to return in celebration of their persistent connection to the land.

In their 1994 article on the social construction of the environment, Thomas Greider and Lorraine Garkovich define landscapes as “the symbolic environments created by human acts of conferring meaning to nature and the environment, of giving the environment definition and form from a particular angle of vision and through a special filter of values and beliefs” (Greider and Garkovich, 1994, p. 1). To them, biophysical environments are transformed into landscapes as the reflection of the sociocultural contexts in which human groups live. They note how these symbolic landscapes are a reflection of values that people use to define themselves; thus, any physical object in the environment can have a plurality of meanings depending on the social location of the observer. A forest can be viewed simultaneously as a sacred, life sustaining space for one group, while the same forest could be seen as a source of profit for another. They also argue that we do not all have equal capacity to impose conceptions of the landscape equally. Whose vision of the forest wins out in the end will always be the result of power. As Greider and Garkovich write, “In the context of landscapes, power is the capacity to impose a specific definition of the physical environment, one that reflects the symbols and meanings of a particular group of people” (1994, p. 1). Our analysis complicates this conception of how the physical environment comes to have meaning for social groups. In the Harlan and Letcher counties, African Americans simultaneously understood the mountainous landscape in which they lived in a polyvalent manner: the mountains were simultaneously a source of life and death.

Borrowing from Isaac Reed, we propose an alternative model of how communities create meaning within their physical environments by appropriating his idea of landscapes of meaning. For Reed and his proposed interpretive epistemic mode of social inquiry, “when an investigator reconstructs the layers of meaning in which the social actions under scrutiny are embedded, what she does is paint a picture of the meanings—historically located, fabricated by the human imagination—upon which social life proceeds” (Reed 2011, p. 110). Social investigators operating with an interpretive framework recreate the overlapping landscapes of meaning within which social agents operate. Though Reed employs the metaphor of the landscape to think about interpretive attention to meaning and culture, he ultimately leaves the materiality of landscapes of meaning un-theorized. He writes:

Ultimately the actors and their related social processes are painted with the same painting, and painted in the same style, as the landscape upon which they move. This landscape is the concrete instantiation of meanings made by humans, to which humans become subject, and through which humans must act and interact. As actors position themselves in different places on a given landscape, they take up different (subject) positions, and thus have different views of it. The world looks different from the bell tower than it does from the fields, takes on different meanings from within the schoolhouse than from within the factory, and so on. Thus the landscape metaphor captures the variety of ways in which meaning and processes of communication provide the basis for, and give form to, actors’ subjectivities and strategies (Reed 2011, p.110)

Yet in this passage we find the roots of an interpretive environmental sociology that takes the meanings attributed to the physical landscape—populated by coal mines, trees, bears, people, hogs, dilapidated buildings—seriously. Rather than treating landscapes of meaning simply as a metaphor for what interpretive social analysts do, we have treated the landscape as “the concrete instantiation of meanings made by humans, to which humans become subject, and through which humans must act and interact” (Reed 2011, p.110).

In this paper, we have sought to illuminate the ways in which nonhuman nature and environments have meaning for communities of color, even in contexts of ruination. As our analysis shows, Harlan County's African American community remains tied to the mountainous landscape that most moved away from so long ago with the decline of the coal industry in the region. Still, they return every year to a place where memory of the past is embedded in the landscape, even as the verdant mountainsides swallow up streets, houses, and crumbling schoolhouses and churches.

Existing scholarship exploring questions of race and environment tends to perpetuate a narrative of decay when it comes to the environments of communities of color, without much attention to how these same communities create meaning within these contexts. This literature rightly points to the ways in which racial inequalities extend to human relationships to the biophysical world but neglects to explore how people understand their own place and identity in contexts of ruination. By focusing solely on the mechanisms that create environmental inequities in communities of color, we miss the myriad ways in which these same communities form meaningful relationships with the landscape. We hope that this article spurs new directions for scholarship on race and the environment that are attentive to identity, meaning, and culture, in the same contexts that have received so much attention for their state of degradation and disrepair. Doing so requires asking new questions and employing interpretive research strategies, in addition to those typically associated with this sort of research.

Approaching environmental sociological issues with a cultural lens brings forth questions of meaning, understanding, and subjectivity absent from the dominant discourse on race and the environment. In addition to the scholarship mentioned earlier (Pellow and Park, 2002; Shah 2012; Voyles 2015), Javier Auyero and Débora Swinstun's (2009) account of the everyday toxicity that pervades the lives of those living in a contaminated shantytown in Argentina serves as a prime example of the type of scholarship we imagine going forward—one that acknowledges the “structures of feeling” (Williams 1965) of being “imperial debris” and takes a community-based approach to understanding structural forces of oppression (Du Bois 1898). First, by examining the “structures of feeling” around questions of race and environment, scholars can focus on the durable patterns that emerge from close examination (Fiske 1992) and move towards the discovery of “the relationships between these patterns, which sometimes reveal unexpected identities and correspondences in hitherto separately considered activities,” or “sometimes again reveal discontinuities of an unexpected kind” (Williams 1965, p. 63). An understanding of these phenomenological patterns and their interrelationships offers a robustness to the analyses of environmental inequality and environmental justice that is not possible without it. Second, community studies à la Du Bois attends to the particular within the universal of such “structures of feeling.” Du Bois writes, “We must admit, for instance, that the study of the Negro in Massachusetts is not necessarily true of the Negro in Louisiana; that what was true of the Negro in 1850 was not necessarily true in 1750; and that there are many distinct social problems affecting the Negro” (Du Bois 1898, p. 81).

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NOTES

1. Authors are listed in alphabetical order and made equal contributions.
2. EKAAMP Interview #153, Brenda Thornton. August 2014, SHC.
3. EKAAMP Interview #7, Cynthia Brown-Harrington. June 2013, SHC.
4. EKAAMP Interview #74, Jack French. June 2014, SHC.
5. EKAAMP Interview #34, Lee Arthur Jackson. August 2013, SHC.
6. EKAAMP Interview #105, Brenda Wills-Nolan. July 2014, SHC.
7. EKAAMP Interview #117, Ernest Pettygrue. July 2014, SHC.
8. EKAAMP Interview #54, Clara Smith. August 2013, SHC.
9. EKAAMP Interview #126, Jeff Turner. August 2014, SHC.
10. EKAAMP Interview #3, Yvonne McCaskill. June 2013, SHC.
11. EKAAMP Interview #70, Vyreda Davis-Williams. June 2014, SHC.
12. EKAAMP Interview #10, Odell Moss. June 2013, SHC.

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