

Coalfield Whiteness: “White” People, Black Coal (DRAFT)

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November 7, 2008

“I ain’t going to move, but somebody asked me, ‘If you had to move, where would you go?’ So I said, the first thing I’d do is go and get me a lump of coal, and I’d go to state to state, and [ask]: ‘You know what this is?’ And if they said no, that’s where I [would] want to live.”
(Gus, white resident of Blair, WV)

I. Introduction: Appalachia—a problematic “white” space

This chapter is part of a multi-sited ethnographic cultural analysis of mountaintop removal coal mining (MTR) in southern West Virginia, and is based on fieldwork I conducted in 2000 and 2004.

MTR is an extremely efficient surface mining technique that is permanently altering the topography of the Appalachian Mountains, and severely affecting the environment and quality of life in the coalfields.

Coal companies are able to mine more coal more rapidly and with fewer workers than ever before, while local communities suffer from increased pollution, damage to structures and water wells, and increased flooding, not to mention the loss of natural ecosystems and the altered landscape. Many coalfield residents have joined together in organizations to oppose the practice of MTR. However, they face continued resistance from those who believe that the coal industry is good for West Virginia and that MTR is necessary for the nation.

MTR happens in a “doubly occupied place” (Stewart 1996). Appalachia is economically “occupied” by the coal industry, “occupied” by its marginalization in the national culture, and at the same time, occupied by the people who live there, who must find ways to negotiate their lives within these other forms of occupation. This chapter examines one aspect of this double occupation, the negotiation of white American identity by supporters of MTR mining.

In the national imagination, Appalachia is a white space. This imagined whiteness is marked by a contradiction between its “purity” and extreme degeneracy, making the “Appalachian white” the

prototypical American white rural Other. In addition there is a symbolic association between coal mining and blackness. In the coalfields, blackness is frequently used as a metaphor for the cultural, economic and social conditions of coal mining. In the United States, whiteness is associated with cultural ideals of property, progress and hygiene, among other things. Coal mining, poverty and underdevelopment don't live up to this image. In the coalfields, as elsewhere, the fiction of whiteness is in part maintained by explaining its "failures" through metaphors of racial Others and the places they live.

Whiteness is frequently experienced as a non-identity by whites because of its role as the unmarked center of American racial formations (Dyer 1997; Frankenberg 1993; Perry 2002; Twine 1997). As the unmarked center, part of whiteness' power comes from its invisibility and its claims to universality (Goldberg 1993). However, there is a specific content to white identity, deeply caught up with American cultural citizenship, which I illuminate through an examination of coalfield whiteness in the context of surface mining. MTR is an example of how the human relationship to land is structured by cultural formations like race and gender. The cultural politics of MTR reinscribe ideological whiteness in an arena that is nominally race-free. At the same time as hierarchical difference is reaffirmed, white coalfield residents desirous of unmarked American citizenship are always pre-occupied with becoming better whites.

A word on whiteness and citizenship

The content of whiteness is at least partly nailed down by parsing its connections to hegemonic American cultural constructions of citizenship, individualism, private property, and modernity, as well as through the mutually generative interconnections between these concepts. United States citizenship was explicitly racial in one fashion or another until 1952. From 1790 until 1870, naturalized citizenship was limited to "free white persons." After the Civil War, this was expanded to include "persons of

African decent,” but Asians were not allowed to become citizens, and were even barred from immigration, starting with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. In the nominally race-neutral atmosphere of recent anti-immigration movements and laws like California’s Proposition 187, the historically white face of American citizenship is visible in the exclusive focus of these movements on immigrants of color from Mexico and sometimes Asia (Haney-López 1996).

Part of recent anti-immigration fervor has concerned the “drain” that undocumented immigrants allegedly place on state resources. The “illegals” anti-immigration activists are worried about are poor, and frequently rely on the social safety net for nutrition and health care. This is a “commonsense” articulation between poverty and “illegality” that would seem to go without saying, but noting it evokes the connections between whiteness, American cultural citizenship and private property. Historically, property ownership has been as intrinsic to American citizenship as whiteness. In the liberal political tradition, property ownership has been constructed as essential for an individual to have the capacity for self-governance (Goldberg 2002). Through the limitation of full citizenship rights to whites, property ownership became a characteristic of whiteness.

The connection between race, citizenship and property relations has been constructed and reproduced through the denial of citizenship rights to people of color, initially through slavery, by means of the Chinese Exclusion Act, through the racially differential benefits of the New Deal, through anti-affirmative action laws, or through efforts to deny a social safety net to undocumented workers. These laws have created and continue to sustain a pool of cheap, vulnerable labor that benefits the middle class and the wealthy (Hong 1999; Mink 1990; Valocchi 1994). The historical economic privilege of whites has placed most American wealth and property in white hands. State protection, in the form of laws and their enforcement, is essential for the existence of private property, but not only are people of color often offered little state protection from violence against their persons or their property, they have historically

experienced dispossession and violence at the hands of the state (Gordon 1999; Hong 1999; Hurtado 1996; Ignatiev 1995).

Liberal citizenship theory understands society to be made up of individuals, each pursuing his interest in the market (Somers 1995). According to Lockean labor theory, property is generated when individuals mix their labor with Nature to transform and “improve” it. Private property is thus articulated with the modern ideals of development and progress. This societal origin story also implies that wealth follows merit—those with wealth have it because they are more industrious than others. But the industriousness of the wealthy also promotes the public good; with each individual pursuing his own interest in civil society, the free market will supposedly find the “optimal use” for every resource, including every piece of land (Blomley 2002). Thus market-based development of privately held natural resources is understood as progress, which helps construct of other ways of using land as backward and inefficient. By defining our own so-called free market economy as the pinnacle of human development and freedom, American culture constantly judges its Others according to how they “measure up.” Property, whiteness, modernity, and development are articulated in a feedback loop that continually reaffirms the privilege of the wealthy “First World” over the impoverished “Third.” This ideology is apparent in the popular notion that the “better citizens” of a place, or the “best people,” are those who own property.

Theorizing whiteness and mountaintop removal

To paraphrase James Baldwin, as long as people think they are white, there’s no hope for the environment. Whiteness is a key element of the political culture that makes MTR make sense. Appalachia exists in a space of cultural marginalization that dichotomizes the white Appalachian subject into an idealized rural innocent and a degenerate hillbilly. In this cultural context, the problematic racial signification of coal mining exerts a particular pressure on white coalfield residents. The dichotomized

Appalachian in national culture is internally expressed through some white residents' desire to classify themselves as good whites against the failed whiteness of others. The most vivid example of this failure is in property relations, which as we've seen, are a linchpin in the construction of white identity and American political culture. But whiteness is also problematized and defended in the "micro-practices" of individuals who identify as white or who value what they believe whiteness to mean. Historically, the practices of everyday life were explicitly defined in racial terms, and through these practices individuals continue to make important claims about their identity (Heneghan 2003). In the coalfields, the cultural complex of coal mining, especially underground mining, problematizes this construction of whiteness—and therefore makes it even more compelling to those coalfield inhabitants who strongly desire to belong to modern America. Ironically, MTR, by annihilating the place, promises such belonging.

II. Coalfield property relations

Marginal property

Private property is one of the cornerstones of the American social, cultural and economic system. Part of the sacredness of private property is related to its importance in defining American citizenship; ideally, America is a nation of self-reliant individuals. But natural disasters, environmental devastation, and the everyday basic interconnectedness of life constantly illustrate the fiction of individualistic private property. In the coalfields, property rights are stacked in favor of the corporation—the right of an individual to protect his or her little piece of land is tenuous, downright illusory, if the coal company that owns the hills above decides to alter the topography. An ironic illustration of this practical fragility of rights to property in land is what happened to the Logan county office of the WV Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). The agency had to move its offices

to a new location a few years ago, because the former site “started getting flooded out.”¹ What happened to the DEP office happens to individual households many times over; as the topography is altered by logging and MTR, new floodplains are created. Whole communities suddenly find their “real estate” fundamentally changed from what they expected it to be, what it had been.

As American citizens, homeowners usually expect to embody a certain standard of living, a developmental and civilizational American standard. However, because of the fictional nature of independent property, it is possible to own so little that your property works against you in terms of civilizational standards. “Postage-stamp sized” lots in former coal camps, and coalfield property in general, which exists in the shadow of corporate domination, work against the desires of the residents to live up to middle-class American standards. Steve, a white DEP agent, described for me the “private” land holdings (that is, non-corporate) in former coal camps. He told me a story that illustrated the size of these “private” holdings:

A lot of these companies, as time has transitioned ... sold [the former company houses] to the individual, you know, let them be responsible, let them pay property taxes ... [and today] ... you’ve got a little community, a house with a little yard, with the chain link fence ... and it’s all private property, and all their sewage goes straight into the river. Why? Because no one has room for septic systems. ... I mean, it’s a legal snafu. A lot of them would put them in, if they had a choice, but they can’t get a permit ... because they can’t physically do it.

This story shows how much corporate land ownership is part of the taken-for-granted doxa of the coalfield landscape. The corporate ownership of most of the land is so unquestioned that in our conversation Steve doesn’t even think of it as “private property”—it has taken on a quasi-official status. The unsanitary conditions of these former coal camp houses are directly related to the company’s miserly unwillingness to sell more than the minimal amount of property necessary to externalize the costs of the residences to their individual owners, but it has become naturalized as part of the character

¹ In the words of a Logan county resident.

of the people. This illustrates how liberal citizenship, embodied in the property owner, disguises the interconnectedness of life—legal property creates a fiction, but not the reality, of self-contained units of existence. In McDowell County, where around 30% of the population lives under the federal poverty line, these unsanitary conditions pertain in many rural places. Chris, a white mining engineer, explained these conditions in terms of a culture of poverty; people “just don’t know any better,” because they were raised on welfare. This position ignores the role that corporate land ownership plays in constructing the conditions of possibility in the coalfields.

In the marginalized space of the Appalachian coalfields, the imbrication of whiteness and property ownership in American citizenship is manifested as deep insecurity on both counts. The ideal and formal equality of property owners is shown to be substanceless. On a cultural/symbolic level, as well as a political economic one, coal mining seems to be incompatible with (ideal) white American subjectivity.

Civilizational dreams

Over and over again, in interviews, I heard people argue that MTR supplies something southern West Virginia lacks—flat land for development. “We don’t have any bottom land,” Sam, a white retired coal miner from Mingo County told me. “We don’t have any flat land here,” Jerry, a white educator from Logan repeated. I heard this argument repeated so often, that it began to take on a kind of doctrinal reality. Thus I found my reality jarred, when Shawn, a white environmental activist, described how Arch Coal had dismantled the town of Blair: “We had two schools; the schools have been removed. Now there’s a sediment pond there. Blair had stores and take-out restaurants. Bottomland? They say we need bottomland. I’d say we have plenty.”²

² When environmentalists told me there was “plenty” of flat land already, they were usually referring to the hundreds of thousands of (undeveloped) acres already flattened by MTR. But in this case Shawn

The idea that “we need bottomland” reflects the hegemonic argument that southern West Virginia is poor because there is simply no room in the steep mountains for economic growth to occur. If other kinds of development are impossible, it follows that the coalfields can be nothing more than a sacrifice zone. MTR is a clear example of a place being sacrificed for the national interest. What underground mining does below the surface, and to miner’s bodies, MTR is doing out in the open, to the very place, consummating and obliterating the coalfields. As a sacrifice zone, the region is forcibly Othered. MTR is not something that could happen in a “normal,” unmarked, “American” place. It only can happen in the interior colony of Appalachia, which sacrifices for America but is not of America (Kuletz 1998; Lewis, Johnson, and Askins 1978).

But wait—at the same time, MTR is a very American thing after all. It is an ultimate expression of the ideal of improving nature. As local industry supporters put it, “God put the coal here” (for “us”) to take and use, in a kind of manifest destiny; it would be derelict of “us” as Americans not to use the coal that God put here in the mountains to make our economy strong. And MTR allows more coal to be accessible than ever before; now that all the “easy” coal is gone, technological innovation is required to get the coal that God put here for us. Not only that, but MTR offers a way to overcome the natural obstacles to development that have impoverished the coalfields! Thanks to the flat land it provides, all kinds of new industries are possible. Many coalfield residents exclaimed to me how beautiful the reclaimed flat tops were. “You’d think you were in Kansas,” said one. Another thought it looked like Wyoming. Another simply said, “You wouldn’t think you were in West Virginia!” And, these emotional reactions suggest, if we are not “in West Virginia” perhaps we are just in America. According to these

was referring to the flat land that had supported economic activity in Blair prior to the opening of Arch Coal’s Daltex mine in 1998 which led to the disintegration of the community, and more recently, to the 2004 opening of Arch Coal’s Mountaineer II, an underground mine whose sediment pond is now occupying the place that used to be the high school.

coalfield supporters, MTR, for all its destructiveness, offers a way to Americanize West Virginia. For the residents, this would mean (in theory) a diversified economy, tourism, better infrastructure, a better reputation nationally, more commercial consumption opportunities locally, in short, more modernity.

In the eyes of industry supporters, the flat land created by MTR epitomizes the civilizational standard of property. Tamed by corporate ownership, this flat land is an affirmation that nature is always already property waiting to be “improved.” For example, Twisted Gun golf course is a local icon of successful post-mining development, cited in nearly every conversation I had with people who support MTR. Yet who is benefiting from this development? The golf course is owned and managed by the three corporations who own the land and mined the area—and are still mining the area around the course: Mingo Logan Coal Company, Premium Energy, Inc. and Pocahontas Land Corporation, the largest land owner in West Virginia. And who golfs there? When I visited the course, it was largely empty, with only a few cars in the parking lot; the place is relatively hard to reach from the most populated areas in the coalfields. Working people would have to invest an entire day off in just getting there and playing a game of golf, not to mention the expense of the equipment and fees.³ In any case, whatever wealth it does generate is going directly to the companies who mined the land and created it.

Undoubtedly, the biggest return on their investment is the public relations value the place offers as an advertisement of post-MTR land use. The golf course’s web page reflects its facade of development.⁴ Although the white teenage boy who was working in the golf shop suggested I look on the website for answers to my questions about the golf course, the web page consists mostly of dead links. As an exemplar of post-MTR development, Twisted Gun golf course is an exercise in “spectacular

³ One white eighth grade girl told me her father golfed there; she also said it was the prettiest place she’d ever seen in West Virginia. She said it looked like the beach.

⁴ See <http://www.twistedgungolf.com>.

accumulation” (Tsing 2005, 59). Its brilliant uselessness to the local community suggests that its actual purpose is economic showmanship; the golf course is meant to create a new image of southern West Virginia in the eyes of potential outside investors in a way that more mundane projects fail to do.

Twisted Gun spectacularly illustrates the power of property, a particular, objectifying relationship to land that reflects the logic of whiteness. I asked the boy in the shop about the name of the golf course, and he told me a story that was evidently part of the lore about the place, which exhibits this logic.

According to this story, “during pioneer days,” there were “two guys running from Indians” [sic]. One of the white guys was killed by the Indians, and the other white guy took his friend’s gun and twisted it between the branches of a tree. So, the boy told me, the golf course got its name because “it’s on that property.” This habit of referring to land as property, even in anachronistic contexts, reiterates and eternalizes the “white” cultural relationship to land as private property. It reflects the “white” cultural pattern of commodifying and mechanizing nature (Cronon 1991; Merchant 1980).

There are more practical examples of post-mining development, of course. A veneer factory in Logan county, for instance, up-scale housing developments, a small regional airport (perhaps servicing golfers headed to Twisted Gun) and the aquaculture experiments touted by Mike Whitt in Mingo county; several area schools and prisons have also been built on reclaimed mountaintop mines.⁵ But some of the “development” seems even more illusory than the golf course. When Jerry took me on a tour of some of these sites, he also showed me the “Earl Ray Tomblin Industrial Park” where the veneer factory is located. Most of the industrial park is still only potential, consisting only of a sign with the

⁵ There are some risks with this kind of post-mining land use, however. A federal prison built on a reclaimed mountaintop mine in Kentucky has been dubbed “Sink Sink” because of subsidence. http://www.ohvec.org/links/news/archive/2005/fair_use/08_08.html

name, and a paved two-lane road that winds through a reclaimed field and ends in a cul-de-sac.⁶ But the most serious criticism of this hegemonic perspective on post-mining development is the one cited by Roger, a white environmental activist, that there has already been enough flat land created by MTR for the entire city of Charleston to be relocated, currently lying empty.

Even when the flattened land left by MTR is used for something, most post-mining development does not directly benefit the majority of poor and working people in the area, because it is perhaps coincidentally largely devoted to high-end projects like airports, golf courses, upper-middle class housing developments and the production of exotic (to the area) commodities like artichoke and wine. These projects reflect the aspirations of local elites and coal industry boosters—like Twisted Gun, they offer a spectacle in which West Virginia leaves its backwardness behind. There is a tendency in discourse about the region to equate the landscape of Appalachia with the character of the people. “Dark and dusty,” the steep twisted mountainsides are forbidding, just as are the dangerous mountain men who live there. MTR, much touted for its capacity to correct the natural inefficiencies of the landscape, according to industry supporters can potentially straighten out the crooked landscape of the southern West Virginia coalfields. MTR converts the wilderness to property, and in so doing, it offers southern West Virginia a way to become more modern, and more American—you might say, whiter.

This devotion to the development potential of post-mining land indicates the dominance of white middle-class notions of nature, property values and economic progress. The total erasure in pro-industry rhetoric of the forest and other life that is removed in a mountaintop mine exemplifies the objectification of nature. In a move strikingly similar to the ideology of colonial America, in pro-industry discourse, the land is often constructed as “useless” or empty. As a white county official noted when

⁶ The industrial park’s webpage cites the region’s high unemployment rate as an incentive for businesses to locate there. <http://www.logancountywv.org/ertpark.htm>.

discussing the Hatfield-McCoy trail development initiative, “We had all this land in southern West Virginia, just sitting here ...” Likewise, Randy, a white DEP officer, described MTR as a process that has “taken areas that are un-useful and made them useful.” He noted, “If I had a steep holler, I’d rather have useful land.” In his view, mining was an unequivocal good. On post-mining sites, he argued, “Once you plant trees, you have a better stand of timber than you had [before].” As an environmental regulator, he said, if coal operators were not mining in environmentally responsible ways, he would not support it. He also emphasized the distinction that many industry supporters made, between “pre-law” surface mining and the regulated mining of today. Today, he said, mining is a “complex and scientific process.”

This discursive emptying of the land is structurally similar to the erasure of Native Americans in the colonizing discourse of early European settlers and of Manifest Destiny (Cronon 1983; Kuletz 1998). In this case, not only is much of the local forest-based *human* activity ignored, but the non-human life on the unmined mountains is rendered completely invisible. Because most of the legal regulation of MTR is related to the Clean Water Act, which protects ephemeral streams, valley fills are controversial. This focuses attention on water quality and aquatic life, instead of on the forest that is removed along with the mountain. Although this tactic has proven effective in legal battles for the environment, it narrows the argument in ways that can minimize the harm of MTR. As Chris, a white mining engineer, told me, there is as much aquatic life in a “parking lot, ... [or] in [someone’s] backyard” as there is in an ephemeral mountain stream. So, he implies, valley fills do not actually cause any environmental harm. Indeed, as his white friend and co-worker, Rob, added, “In fact there’s a filtering process that could be a positive—is typically a positive factor. When you bring that water through all of that rock fill it’s a cleansing [process].”

Richard, a white county official, expressed his frustration with the environmentalists’ objections to valley fills this way:

One thing ... I've never been able to figure out is these small, small streams, there's no fish in those streams anyhow! You know, most of these small hollows you see, there's no fish in them ... There's not even any bait fish in them ... I was born and raised here, and I know there's nothing in these streams.

The view of mining as creating useful land out of nothing was echoed by Horace, a white small business owner in a coal-related field. Describing the controversy over MTR, he said:

I don't think [environmentalists] realize what [surface miners] are doing. They're putting valley fills in the streams, sure, but they're not blocking off the streams. They are making flat land for accommodations later on, that we don't have in southern West Virginia. Flat land. ... If you go up on top of one of these [unmined] mountains, just walk up top of them, [you'll see there's] nothing there. [Coal companies] are keeping most of the material up there on the mountain. Piling it up, flattening the land, and when they do put these valley fills on the streams, they compact [the earth], they get them in good shape, they are terraced, [they grow] grass, deer ... [the mining] didn't hurt a thing.

Horace expresses a modern, objectified relationship to land, echoing Locke's vision of European settlers improving the "empty" American continent. Because I knew that he was a religious person, I asked Horace about the notion that it is morally wrong to destroy the mountains, as many environmentalists argue. He responded,

I think God put that coal there, in the ground, as He did the timber ... and there's nothing growing on that mountain, and like I said, no one can build up in there; it's so steep that you can't access it, and the coal is in the ground. I believe it is there to get, and if they go about it in a good, clean workmanship manner, they should be able to get it. And if it's on certain people's property, and they would like to get it ... out of there, for income, [they should be able to mine it].

Metaphors of a racial Other

Just as industry supporters reiterate the logic of colonization to justify MTR, middle-class coalfield residents use metaphors of racialization to explain white poverty. Horace's cognitive separation from poor and working-class people affected negatively by coal mining is also represented in the remarks of Steve, a white DEP agent, and his wife, Laura, who is also white. In our discussion of the area's history, Laura called the area "Little Australia," as a way of describing the people who lived in the area

“before coal.” In other words, Appalachia was like a penal colony—inhabited by the dregs of the Empire. As the conversation continued, she described coal miners as “a special breed.” In our conversation, Steve frequently referred to a “coal-mining mentality,” and a “coalfield mentality” by which he meant that coal miners were prone to spending their money carelessly on the things they desired, and getting into debt, instead of saving their money or using it responsibly. These comments shape a social space in which coal miners are a separate class of Others.

Laura, the daughter of a coal miner, told a story that illustrates how coal mining has particular symbolic signification. She described the diversity of the coal mining community where she grew up:

I went to school with the Japanese, with the Hungarians, with the Italians, with Blacks, with different cultures, and we didn't know a lot of discrimination. I mean it was all just families there that were trying to make a living ... A couple summers ago, [I took] a multicultural psychology class, and we were talking about race, and you know, all that, and ... our professor was a Black woman, she was very, very, chip on her shoulder, still [sic] ... but anyway ... I said, 'I haven't had your experiences, I don't know how you were discriminated against, and all of that,' and I said, 'but where I was born and raised, you know, everybody was different, it seemed like, everybody, and we just all tolerated each other, we all got along, we all played together' ... There was a Black preacher in the class, and he started laughing, and he said, 'Yeah, Laura, down there where you're from ... when everybody comes out of the mines, they're all black, ain't they?' (laughter) And I said, 'yeah!'

There are several interesting points to take from these comments. First, Laura describes a situation in which the “native whites,” or white Appalachians, hold the place of the unmarked center of the diverse coalfield community, and she attributes her own experience, of not “knowing” discrimination, to the community as a whole. Her description naturalizes difference, whether it be understood as cultural or racial, and defines it as something that must be “tolerated.” But more interestingly, in her story, the Black preacher lends his support to her plea of racial innocence by pointing out the symbolic association of coal mining and blackness. Because of the specific material nature of coal mining, “they're all black.”

Even when most coal miners are white, as they are today in southern West Virginia, coal mining is difficult to reconcile with whiteness, because it so clearly reflects the abject body of labor (Cohen 1997).

The feudal-like living conditions of the coal company towns, the almost unimaginable hardships of working underground in the “hand-loading” era, the iconic image of the black-faced coal miner, and the epidemic of “black lung,” all contribute to making coal mining particularly difficult to reconcile with white liberal citizenship. It is hard to think about independence when the house you live in is owned by the company you work for, hard to think about political liberty when the industry controls local (and national) politics, hard to feel modern and empowered when your body is bent and sickened by working underground. Even property ownership, the hallmark of American citizenship, is less meaningful when your lot is too small for a sewage system, or is subject to damages caused by nearby mining. In these regards, the historical conditions of coal mining serve as a clear example of the contradictions between democracy and capitalism.

This “failure” of coal mining to live up to the ideal of white liberal citizenship almost goes without saying in coalfield commonsense. But it is reflected in the repeated analogies that my respondents drew between coal mining and blackness (whether imagined as biological or cultural difference). For instance, in our conversation, Laura and Steve noted the trend towards “political correctness.” Steve remarked,

There seems to be a phenomenon, you know, political correctness in this nation; you can't talk about lesbians, you can't talk about Black people, you can't talk about ethnic groups ... all that's politically incorrect. Got to be careful about what you say. But for some reason, it seems to be safe for states to talk about other states ... If you changed the label, if instead of West Virginia it was, well, this Black guy, people would be upset.

Steve referred to the national stereotype of welfare-dependent Appalachians, and noted, “There's people in every state that live on the dole. ... West Virginians are normal people.” Laura added, “That mentality exists everywhere, but here it's just a coal miner mentality. Everywhere else, it's the inner city mentality.”

Laura also noted that some of Appalachian specificity has its roots in historical facts. Describing historical coal mining conditions, she said, “I mean, the companies *owned* you.” Discussing the famed Appalachian clannishness, she argued:

When coal mining was established, people became suspicious of outsiders because they didn’t know who they could trust, because the coal companies treated people so poorly. And if you talked about the coal officials, then you could lose your job. You could be thrown out and your family out of the company housing.

So for Laura and Steve, stereotypical Appalachian behaviors result not only from poor Appalachians’ welfare dependency, as in the coal miner/inner city comparison, but also from a healthy distrust of the industry that so ruthlessly exploited its workers.

This high degree of racially-coded exploitation isn’t limited to the past, however, and it is not limited to people directly employed by the coal industry. As Paul, a white former resident of Blair, noted, much of the conflict between Arch Coal and the community of Blair that ended in the closing of the Daltex mine in 1999 could have been avoided, but the company insisted on treating the people of Blair “like they were damn animals.” A white environmental activist, noting the prominence of Massey Energy Company in schools in their capacity as a “Partner in Education,” said they were indoctrinating kids to become future “coal slaves.”

These analogies illustrate that coal mining, both as a job and as a set cultural conditions, is in some sense antithetical to ideal white American citizenship. Although unionized coal mining was part of the Fordist white-male-dominated “labor aristocracy,” with high wages and good benefits, and even now is a popular career choice for young men coming out of high school, coal mining occupies a symbolically “low” social position. Laura, the white daughter of a coal miner, put it like this:

As time passed, each generation seemed to raise their family and [think], you know, I don’t want my kid to work in a mine. ... Little by little, people have more opportunity, and it may have hurt the coal industry, because now you can’t hardly get them to work in an underground mine. A lot of the boys say, well they ain’t working in the mines!

And Meredith, a middle-class white woman, described an insurance salesman and friend of her family this way: “he used to be a miner, but he’s come up some ...”

Corporations as ideal individuals

Meredith, a middle-class white woman with a liberal orientation to racial tolerance, in comparison with some more frankly racist people she knows, described for me the attitudes of some members of her community. Her comments limn the American racial logic according to which middle-class whiteness is the unquestioned standard to which Blacks and working-class white people must measure up. Within this racial logic, “blackness” is the signifier of ultimate racial difference, and is used as a metaphor for white class differences, especially regarding coal miners. She described for me the racist attitudes of some of her acquaintances; “I [know some people] who just—if it’s black—if the black has it it’s going to be torn up pretty soon, and nothing’s good about—you know what I mean?” Our (my and Meredith’s) shared middle-class whiteness forms the context for these comments, as signified by her rhetorical “you know what I mean?” This rhetorical question enacts our shared middle-class white status, me as a researcher, her as the wife of a businessman, people who are not commonly understood to be affected by race. This enacted whiteness necessarily recreated a discursive space in which the existence of less-worthy Others is part of the conversational commonsense, despite Meredith’s problematizing of this assumption.

In this white discursive space, businesses and corporations have special status as the ideal rational actors; like the ideal white citizen, in questions of moral worthiness they are given the benefit of the doubt. This assumption of moral worthiness is not extended to workers. Most significantly, her comments offer an insight into the way that racial logic structures corporate managerial practices. While she expresses difference in terms of her community’s individual-level ideas about race and class, she also

describes the way that this racial logic is (re)produced on a different order, by seemingly race-neutral, economically rational corporate practice. In a discussion of changes in the coal industry, Meredith described some of the difficulties coal companies face:

This is just a difference in people, Becky ... Now it's very difficult if a job is [ending]. ... Because I've heard enough [coal] operators ... who are hiring these people to do the work. They want to hire them and they try to keep them working, it's important. But if a job is coming to an end, [workers] will deliberately hurt themselves, so they can get benefits, or compensation. ... So that makes it hard on the companies, and yet they do it deliberately! They'll cut off a finger! Can you imagine? But they do it! They do it. Now, this isn't—I guess I'm making it sound like it's an everyday occurrence. It isn't, but [the companies] have to be aware of it, because they know that there's always, enough of it has happened, that they know it's a possibility. So they can't give these people fair warnings, that the job is gradually slowing down, you have to keep it from them and that's awful. See, I look at that as a lie; I look at it from a different side. I want to know that my income's coming in; I look at it different. And to think that men do that, just burns me up. Because it hurts everybody. That one person can hurt 20 people, that weren't guilty. OK, so I don't mean to let you think that it's something that's going to happen every time you close a job ... but it happens enough that they have to be very wary. And that's a shame.

Meredith clearly sees the injustice of companies not telling their employees when a mine is about to be mined out, yet she reiterates the corporate logic that places the blame for this practice on workers who maim themselves to gain unwarranted entitlements. She identifies with the innocent workers, but does not go (perhaps cannot go) so far as to imagine the perspective of someone who would go to such lengths. Total Otherness is evoked in her description of people who would cut off their own finger (“can you imagine?”) to gain worker's compensation. For workers, the (alleged) actions of a few—even the potential of this kind of action—justifies the companies' habitual dishonesty with the hard-working, innocent majority of their employees.

When it is a question of corporate malfeasance, however, a different moral standard comes into play. When I asked Meredith about Massey Energy Company, she responded:

Anything thing that has to do with Massey—they're always against Massey. That's the biggest coal company around and they blame them if a creek gets dirty, it makes no difference who—and now they can be guilty, too, there's times when they're really guilty. But there's times that they get blamed for it and fined for it when there wasn't a prayer that they were really guilty. But

people have to have someone to blame. Like suing people? You know how that's become so popular? OK, its the same way with the coal companies, they have to have someone to blame. And I'll grant you, sometimes they are [at fault], but not to the point that poor old Massey's guilty of everything. And that every coal operator is a crook. It's deceiving. It isn't true. Although some of them are, just like some doctors are not good, OK? Is there any difference in a coal company, the coal business, than anything else? I don't think.

Several things come out of these comments. The burden of moral proof has clearly shifted. Whereas a few bad workers can force all coal companies to lie to all their workers, a few, or even many corporate misdeeds, in this formulation, is not enough to justify a similar atmosphere of distrust for all coal companies. Workers must continually prove their worthiness; they are distrusted by default, but corporations are like ideal rational individuals; their mistakes are the exception. The phrase, "poor old Massey," anthropomorphizes the company, underlining its ideal individuality. Significantly, Meredith compares coal companies to medical doctors. This emphasizes the good character of coal companies, who are just trying their best to keep "these people" working. Like doctors, who are sued for bad outcomes even when they are the result of natural processes that could not have been prevented, Massey is victimized by people's (irrational) need for someone to blame. This comparison elevates Massey morally and naturalizes the damage caused by collapsed valley fills, slurry spills and subsidence.

Meredith's comments reflect a commonly held position in the "business-friendly" community in southern West Virginia, that union representation and benefits like workers' compensation are just ways for unscrupulous working-class people to gain unfair advantages against corporations. People in this community typically describe a world where workers will go to any lengths to get out of working, concocting painful schemes to defraud their employers. In this atmosphere, workers' compensation could only be considered fair if no one ever needed it; all accidents are presumed faked by the always-distrusted workers. This is a ghostly descendant of plantation whiteness; unlike the shiftless and

irresponsible workers, coal companies are constructed as a kind of super-citizen, an ideal liberal individual, whose pursuit of his own interest ultimately benefits everyone (Williams 221).

Despite her personal ethic of racial tolerance, Meredith's comments give voice to the silent, quasi-racial logic that frames seemingly race-neutral corporate practice. Workers compensation, in this logical system, correlates with affirmative action. Just as affirmative action is perceived as a threat to "fairness," or the historically accumulated advantages of white people, worker protection programs such as worker's compensation are a threat to "fairness," in this case, the right of corporations to accumulate capital. Like the historically amassed privileges of whiteness, the overwhelming dominance of corporate landownership in the coalfields is normalized through a discourse of private property, individualism and free market competition, which as Shawn pointed out, constructs the geography of the region as problematic and the region's poverty as natural.

Massey Energy Company is a perfect illustration of this ideal corporate citizen. The largest coal company in West Virginia, Massey euphemistically refers to its workers as members. In 2005, Massey CEO Don Blankenship proudly noted that of its approximately 5700 "members" 97% are "union free" (Blankenship 2006). Blankenship explained in a 2005 interview with *WVInc.* online magazine how labor laws and programs like workers' compensation hurt working people. Discussing the next political race he was interested in (he spent approximately \$5 million to defeat WV Supreme Court Justice Warren McGraw in the 2004 election), he mentioned liberal Supreme Court Justice Larry Starcher, and explained why he would oppose his re-election in 2008:

He doesn't understand that by voting in every case for workers' comp claimants ... or nearly every case ... he doesn't understand that he actually damages workers. His love for the working community and for unionism actually hurts both and it hurts the state ... and there's probably a few other individuals that far to the left that we need to defeat if West Virginia is truly to continue on a course of improvement (*WVInc.online* 2005).

Massey's "union-free" members face more difficult working conditions than miners in union mines. According to many people I interviewed, they are not allowed to take meal breaks during a shift and are frequently required to work overtime. In any case, Massey has chronically high turnover, and the company literature refers repeatedly to their efforts to improve retention (Blankenship 2005). These intensive labor practices make sense for the company because they serve the ultimate goal of increased profits. However, in his public face, Don Blankenship assumes the role of public benefactor. His \$5 million campaign to defeat Warren McGraw was managed through an organization called And For the Sake of the Kids. The group sponsored TV ads that accused McGraw of reducing the prison sentences of child molesters and other sex offenders. In his 2005 interview with *WVInc.* Blankenship clarified his position:

And that's what we really meant by And For the Sake of the Kids. We didn't mean Tony Arbaugh [a person mentioned in the ads] and pedophiles. We meant that children are being forced to leave the state because they can't find a job when they graduate. They don't have the same educational level that the rest of the children in the country have. They don't have the same soccer fields or the same baseball fields available to them for sporting events. They just don't have the same opportunity that the rest of the country has and they deserve that.

Massey's good citizen posture is summed up by the slogan they display on billboards around the coalfields, "Massey: Doing the Right Thing with Energy!" A TV ad for the company explains the corporate role this way, "Since the dawn of time, man has [sought to harness energy] to improve his life and the lives of others." In this ad copy, "man" clearly means the company, whose self-interested actions benefit all mankind. In this corporate discourse, the moral high ground is removed from those like Justices Starcher and McGraw, who claim to be on the side of working people. As in *Atlas Shrugged*, the only truly moral action is concerted pursuit of individual financial gain (Rand 1957). Don Blankenship claims this moral position at the end of his interview with *WVInc.* Asked what he would like people to know about himself, he responded, "I'm a good guy. I don't use drugs. I don't steal. I don't harass

people. I live my own life in privacy. I do what I believe in and anything I say I believe to be true” (WVInc.online 2005).

III. The micro-practices of whiteness in the coalfields

Civilizational standards in housing

In the early 20th century, as homeownership became the hallmark of the emergent middle class, the ideal of a property-owning citizenry fueled the demand for inexpensive standardized home kits, and provided copy for their marketing (Moskowitz 2004). The seemingly inherent value of the property relation was understood to create better citizens. “A family that owned their own home became part of the community in a way that renters did not, as their own ‘welfare and progress’ became inextricably linked to that of the community” (140). According to this ideology, owning property established an official and singularly meaningful connection between owner and place. Without the property relation, the only connection a person could have to a place would be the extra-legal concerns of inhabiting an environment in everyday life. Simply living in a place is not enough of an investment; property owners are the inhabitants who matter. As President Herbert Hoover put it, “It is mainly through the hope of enjoying the ownership of a home that the latent energy of any citizenry is called forth” (in Moskowitz, p. 140). The formal legal relationship of property ownership appears to override the substance of inhabiting a place. With the inexpensive mail-order homes that companies like Aladdin offered, new members of the middle class were able to become formally equal to the wealthy.

If proper American citizenship is related to homeownership, coalfield property relations once again fall short of that ideal. The structural interdependence of the economic dominance of the coal industry and the poor living conditions of many local residents is disguised through the language of private property. As I mentioned above, Steve, a white DEP agent, described for me the “legal snafu” that has prevented some coalfield homeowners from having proper sewage disposal. As the former

company houses were sold off by the company, they were often sold on lots too small to accommodate a septic tank. Frequently these former coal camps are rural and unincorporated—and thus have limited access to public services. Ironically, by granting individuals the right to own property, the sale of these company houses dismantled the community standards that existed during the coal camp days. In those days, the company provided services for the hygiene of its workers and their families. Once they were homeowners and nominally independent, the inhabitants of the former coal camps had too little leverage to control the environment outside their small holding. Perhaps those who rented from the company were better off, since the company in those situations maintained a minimal interest in the upkeep of the property. However, those who rented were subject to eviction.

Steve described the community of Rum Creek, a former coal camp, recently dissolved by its owner, Dingess Rum Land Corporation, which had evicted all its tenants and offered them spaces to rent in a nearby trailer park. The company was now leasing the land where Rum Creek had been located to a coal company for mining. He said:

We both knew people who'd rented a house [from Dingess Rum] for a long time, you know, and they'd rented it for \$50 a month. And they'd been there all that time. But they improved the property, they remodeled, they put money into it, they developed—they built them a nice home.

But Laura added, “*If* they were working people.” Laura and Steve were former residents of Rum Creek; they had lived in a trailer there. As a dual-income professional couple, they were in a good position to buy a house when they were forced to move, unlike many of the other residents of Rum Creek.

Jerry, another white Logan county educator, gave me a different middle-class perspective on the evictions, which eerily resembles Barbara Bush’s point of view on the condition of Hurricane Katrina victims. In his view, the residents of Rum Creek were better off, now that they were in trailers. To my questions about the eviction, he answered no, the people didn’t have any choice about moving, because they rented from the company that owns all the land. But since they were moved into trailers, they were

now in better houses than they had been before. He described the former coal camp community this way, “You can be poor, but you don’t have to be nasty.”

Possibly the most common type of residence in the coalfields is a trailer. At around \$20,000 for a used model, and with lots of fancier designs available, a trailer offers an easy way to buy a house. However, many of the trailers are old, and, in fact, most of the available rental units in the area are old trailers. As a kind of disposable housing, trailers are not constructed to stand up to flooding, or to last a family for generations. Although a new doublewide can be a quite comfortable place to live, many old, dilapidated trailers in the coalfields are in very poor condition.

In addition, trailers are loaded with shameful cultural symbolism. The private property of trailer dwellers doesn’t seem to immediately warrant respect. In the penalty phase of a lawsuit against Massey Energy Company (for property damage due to subsidence and for providing bad water to replace lost well water) the company’s lawyers played down the levels of damage claimed by one of the plaintiffs because her house was a double-wide trailer, not in that great of condition to begin with. The lawyers implied that given the poor original condition of the property, the fact that Massey’s undermining of her property made it uninhabitable was less significant. While cross-examining this plaintiff, Massey’s defense lawyer focused his questioning on the woman’s porch. The plaintiff was claiming that the porch was destroyed by undermining, which forced her to use a plank to access her door and created an unsafe situation for her family. The lawyer’s point seemed to be that the porch was unstable to begin with, because her husband had built it himself instead of hiring a contractor. The most astounding element of this defense strategy was that it was made before a jury of community members—people who very possibly lived in less than perfect doublewides themselves.

The example of the Massey trial also illustrates the fragility of individual rights to property and security in the coalfields. The plaintiffs were property owners, but the coal mine under their houses

ruined their wells and in some cases damaged their homes. There was no city water available, and until it could be brought to the community, Massey provided water in large plastic vats to replace the water from the destroyed wells. Several children were made very sick, possibly by e coli bacteria in the replacement water. Many of the residents simply mourned the loss of the free, fresh spring water they were used to drinking from their wells; they did not want city water. In the lawsuit, the company's defense lawyers tried repeatedly to establish that the community was better off now that they had access to city water. So much better off, that the fact that this switch was made against their will was negligible.

Whiteness, housing and hygiene

The problematic character of the people in the former coal camps is symbolized by those sewer pipes leading straight into the river. Both local residents and outside commentators frequently invoke the failure of coalfield dwellings to meet modern standards of hygiene as a testament to the residents' difference. The connection between indoor plumbing, hygiene and modernity has been consistent at least since the early 20th century, when the modern bathroom was promoted by manufacturers and social workers as a new necessity. Along with the "standard" fixtures of toilet, bathtub and sink, a new standard of hygiene and privacy was established. Moskowitz describes this new standard this way:

While bathing could be achieved anywhere with a basin of water, having a designated space within the house for the purpose of washing oneself lent an importance to the act that it might not have otherwise had and allowed for a greater degree of privacy for actions increasingly constructed as personal (Moskowitz 2004, 67).

Indeed, the new cadre of social workers who began managing the urban poor and European immigrants at the turn of the century saw the modern bathroom as essential to a hygienic modern American lifestyle.

As social worker Florence Nesbitt judged in 1908:

There should be toilet facilities in good condition with a door which can be locked, for the use of the family alone; running water in at least one room in the house besides the toilet. A bathroom is highly desirable and should be included wherever possible. It may be considered essential in

families where there are a number of older children in rooms which would not otherwise permit the necessary privacy for bathing (quoted in Moskowitz, 67).

Marketers and social reformers constructed bathrooms, formerly a luxury for the rich, as a new necessity for the middle class, and at the same time, promoted new standards of both personal hygiene and housekeeping. As a 1903 text on physiology and hygiene instructed, “The one important condition of public health is cleanliness ... [including] clean private residences ... and cleanliness of person and clothing” (quoted in Moskowitz, 66). According to Moskowitz, “Lessons about cleanliness were directed at all socioeconomic groups, but high standards of cleanliness were often seen as the marker of middle-class values, and were aggressively introduced as aspirations for the working classes” (66).

These new standards of public health and hygiene have greatly contributed to the increased life expectancy of most Americans throughout the 20th century. However, these new objects and practices were overdetermined; they were used and understood within a cultural context heavy with racialized understandings of cleanliness and dirtiness. Race and class distinctions were entrenched through differential access to cleanliness; segregated neighborhoods and tenement housing limited the ability of working class people, immigrants, and African Americans to achieve these new standards (Tomes 1998).

A British soap advertisement from the late 19th century exemplifies the racially coded nature of these practices and aspirations. The advertisement has two frames. In the first, a white child washes a black child in a tub. In the second frame, the black child has emerged from the bath to find himself “whitened” up to his neck (McClintock 1995, 213). This association was repeated in early 20th century Texas, where Mexicans found themselves in the “ethnoracial middle ground between Anglo Americans and African Americans.” For instance, Mexican children “could attend Anglo schools if they were ‘clean,’ which was often a euphemism for ‘white.’” Researcher E. E. Davis said in 1925, “The American children and the clean, high-minded Mexican children do not like to go to school with the dirty, ‘greaser’

type of Mexican child” (Foley 1997, 41). The connection with “cleanliness” and whiteness was explicit, as a Texan of mixed Anglo and Mexican parentage made clear by noting that “‘clean Mexicans with Spanish blood and fair complexions’ were allowed to sit next to Americans” (in Foley, 42).

The symbolic association of whiteness and cleanliness was also present in the marketing of the new, cheaper bathroom fixtures. Moscovitz writes, “The glossy finish of enamel, especially in pure white, connoted not only hygiene but also well-designed domestic goods, like the porcelain with which it was associated” (70). She also notes that “until the mid-1920s ... most ... companies produced wares in white only. In fact, competition between companies arose over the issue of who could create the whitest enameling powder” (71).

Paul, a white former miner and small business owner, was raised in a post-war coal camp where his father worked as a miner, and describes coal camp life from the perspective of a mining family. His stories demonstrate a preoccupation with cleanliness that reflects the way modern standards of hygiene were “aggressively introduced as aspirations for the working classes” (Moscovitz 66). Paul grew up in a family of eight that lived in a four-room coal camp house. As a boy, he shared a bed with his two brothers. They had an outhouse, and while the girls of the family were allowed to use what they called the “bean pot” at night, the boys had to go outside. One of the boys’ chores was to carry the girls’ “bean pot” out to the toilet in the morning. During the winter, it was often so cold in the house that the pot would be frozen solid in the morning. On nights like these, the family would have to sleep with “20 pounds of quilts and blankets on top of [them].” Referring to the crowded conditions in the house, Paul said:

But that would all be unsanitary, today, to try to do that. Three boys in the same bed, and then in the living room, that roll-away bed kicked out and two girls in there ... on the other side of the room there’s a curtain you pulled ...

As a boy, Paul had a lot of responsibility, both in taking care of the house and on the small farm that helped feed his family:

My dad worked evening shift ... [and] us kids, when we got up in the morning ... I always said I wouldn't make my boys do this, [but] when we got up in the morning, we would have to ... poke a fire in the grate, and then we'd take out the ashes, and we'd bring in the coal and the kindling, and everything ... then in the kitchen we'd have to build up a fire in the coal stove, 'cause Mother cooked on a coal stove. And then we'd go up on the hill and we'd gather the eggs, slop the hogs, feed the chickens, feed the horse, and curry the horse; I mean it had to be done. I mean that religiously. And then when the hog would jump up on the slats, they'd throw pig shit on you, so you'd have that on you ... and then you've got to go to school with all this. Then when you got on the bus ... the kids would poke fun at you, 'Pew, I smell pig shit!' And you'd feel about that tall. And us three brothers would go back there, and just hang our heads, and just sit down there, and we'd *take* that abuse. Well, I always said, with my boys, that they'd never have to do that. When they got ready to get on the damn bus, they could smell like a human being.

He also described the ritual of his dad's bath after work:

My dad would come in from the coal mines on evening shift, and we had a round ... number three tub, well, [we] had it figured to a science, now, how many buckets of water to put in it, and it would be there all evening, all night long, a-boiling. ... we had a piece of plywood ... that we laid down [on the floor], and we had a wash tub ... just like the one we had ... on the stove. ... we called that one the blacken tub and this one here was the clean tub. Then this tub sat down here on the floor ... [with] six or eight inches of water in it, we had it down to a science; how many buckets of water ... When my dad came in ... my mother'd fix him a bite to eat, he worked evening shift, he'd get in about one o'clock. Whatever *we* ate, she'd heat it up for *him*. There wasn't no damn microwave. It was on that coal stove. ... [When we had to get up to go to the outhouse, we'd see and wonder] why the hell's he bath like that? [sic] He would get down on his knees, he'd wash his head, wash his face, wash his neck, wash underneath his armpits, wash his arms, so he'd have the upper part of his body washed. Then he'd take his pants off, and then he'd get into the tub. And then he'd wash the rest of himself.

This detailed story of his dad's bath was part of a tale he'd evidently told many times, which ended with Paul getting up the nerve to ask his dad why he bathed that way, and his dad answering, "Hey boy, you never wash your damn face where you wash your ass!"

Paul's memories of growing up in a coal mining house indicate the importance of cleanliness to miners and their families. The temporal narrative of development inherent in these standards is indicated in Paul's comment that the conditions of his boyhood home would be "unsanitary, today." For

white coal mining families, the dirtiness of the job, and the difficulty of maintaining modern standards of hygiene in coal camp houses, perhaps uncomfortably evokes the experience of African Americans and Mexican Americans who have been racialized in terms of cleanliness or hygiene.

Meredith, a middle-aged white woman, is married to a white man who owns a coal-related business. Her comments reflect these racial and class logics of cleanliness, at the same time as she expresses a personal-level commitment to a liberal ideal of tolerance. In her description of life in a coal camp, Meredith remembered tolerating the differences and inconveniences she experienced there. But her story is expressed within a discourse of differential development and worthiness, and thereby reaffirms these hierarchies at the same time as questioning them.

When she and her husband were newly married, he worked in a coal-related field. At first, he didn't want her to live in the coal camp where he worked, so he commuted weekly and she stayed with her parents. She said, "He thought I couldn't live in a coal camp, that I just couldn't do that." But she grew frustrated with only seeing him on weekends, and eventually insisted that they move to the coal camp together. She described the house they lived in:

[It was a] four room house, I mean *four rooms*. A door in each corner, so the kids could ride their tricycles around ... an outdoor toilet. I was lucky, [my husband] put water into the house for me. So I could have a washing machine, and I could have water running and I didn't have to carry it. Now that's ... primitive! These houses were very—they put them up in a hurry. Because this job started, and they built these houses, and I'm sure the lumber was green and pretty soon you have cracks in it; it was ... kind of rough.

In her description of the coal camp, Meredith's comments illustrate how an economically rational corporate practice, the quick and slipshod construction of workers' houses, can determine, in part, the perceived character of the workers who had to live in them. The coal camp houses were "primitive," but Meredith stressed that most of the people were that she met in the coal camp were "nice." She said:

You made good friends, you helped each other out. ... I met some of the nicest people I've ever met there. And some that I—I don't remember meeting anyone that was really bad, but some

that I wouldn't have wanted to have been around a lot. But everybody was helpful, I didn't have any complaints.

Later, when we were discussing intra-regional stereotypes, the articulation of racial and class logics in coal mining became more explicit through a Freudian slip (parts of this longer passage were quoted previously in this chapter):

My daddy told me when I was moving to the coal camp, 'Now Meredith, you have to make up your mind; be careful, they are just different.' Well, they *are* different, but that doesn't mean that they are black—uh—bad. It's kind of like black people and white people. Just because they're black, they're not all bad. My perception of a lot of things is probably different from a lot of people's... like the example I just used with black. See, I have no trouble, I have no problems with it, but [I know people] who are just really terrible when it comes to black people, and the same way with coal miners or whatever. ... Well, I found some awfully nice people there. Then I [know some people] who just—if it's black—if the black has it it's going to be torn up pretty soon, and nothing's good about—you know what I mean? And yet in this town, some of my dear friends are black. And they are just as nice, and just as clean and they are just as smart.

Manufacturing whiteness: the funeral parlor aesthetic

The style of house construction and decoration that I came to call the funeral parlor aesthetic exemplifies the middle-class ideals of modern citizenship, cleanliness and privacy. The poorest coalfield communities, the ones most likely to suffer from chronic unemployment and drug abuse, are former coal camps, where residents often live in the remains of cheap old company houses, or sometimes in trailers. These old coal camps, and other working-class communities like the one suing Massey, with their ramshackle porches, old doublewides and stubborn attachment to well water, are exactly what the middle-class funeral parlor aesthetic is trying to leave behind.

The funeral parlor aesthetic is widespread in the coalfields. Often there are only small indications of it—like the fact that in Madison the florist sells mostly artificial plants and flowers, no fresh flowers, except a few corsages for special events. This aesthetic is most obvious in the newer houses and housing developments that dot the coalfield landscape. One type of new construction that exemplifies this esthetic is a large, new house of the design called "New American," for instance, built in

the center of a wide, empty lawn (eplans.com 2006). This house would have a sidewalk from the driveway to the door, and its front door would very likely have yellow-orange textured glass on either side, in the style of a well-funded protestant church. Or this house might be found in one of the new up-scale developments that are being constructed on reclaimed strip mines.

One of my (white) respondents lived in such a house. His home office was off to one side of the entryway. The house was immaculate and cooled by central air. Tiled stairs led to a carpeted hallway, and I could see a perfectly clean kitchen through the opening. Large green artificial plants decorated his office. It was clear that this couple worked hard on making their house look as though no one lived there; everything was in place, spotless, and chilled. My respondent had worked his way into the middle class. He was the son of a coal miner; his brother still was one, and lived in a rented trailer.

Houses like these are so far from the coal camp as to be in a different space entirely. They seem to have very little interrelationship with the surrounding environment—isolated in a large lawn, with minimal landscaping, they need air conditioning to remain cool. Or built on a reclaimed strip mine, they occupy a manufactured spit of flat land amid mountains all around. This trend towards sealed, cooled, immaculate and isolated houses begs for interpretation. It seems to indicate a problematic relationship with nature, which is understandable in the coalfields. There is a sense of unease among those people who live in the hollows and the mountains, perhaps due to the instability of nature in the shadow of coal. In less populated places in the coalfields, too, there is often unexpected danger—augur holes left from abandoned long wall mines, unexploded ordinance from old strip jobs, buried trash that someone didn't take to the dump. Often the most beautiful places in the coalfields bear scars of flooding, mining, and other trouble. Rum Creek, outside Logan, is one of the prettiest creeks I've ever seen, but when I was there, the trees along it hung with debris from the recent flood, resembling wet toilet paper, giving the creek the aspect of a sewer.

Interestingly, Massey's televised advertisement shows a housing development in a place unrecognizable as West Virginia. With the overdub talking about how man strives to harness energy to improve the world, the camera pans across a community on a manufactured lake. Each identical street in the development is surrounded by an identical strip of water, in a perfect scenic manufactured community. This ideal neighborhood is a literal utopia of middle-class comfort, and coal makes it possible. Meredith's comment about her family friend could be an expression of the hopes of the regional elites pushing MTR as a source of "post-coal" development. It used to be a coalfield, but it's come up some.

But another trend in coalfield house construction frustrated many of the middle class people I met. Frequently new, elaborate houses are built in very unlikely places, like immediately next to an old tar-paper sided coal camp house, or beside a flooded out trailer park. For some people, evidently, monetary property values are less important than location. This attachment to place is frustrating to many who wish there were more zoning laws to prevent this kind of mixing, and find it an indication of a "coal-mining mentality" that people don't think ahead to their house's resale value. The incongruity of new, elaborate houses (one that I saw even had a tennis court) located immediately next to poverty-level dwellings, indicates that there is more going on in the coalfields than the funeral parlor aesthetic. Local specificity, in the form of attachment to place and other idiosyncrasies, continues to grate against the desire for placelessness.

In the meantime, many white, middle-class coalfield residents are extremely conscious of their place in the national imagination, and strive to represent themselves as worthy national citizens. While environmentalists and community activists argue that coal is destroying Appalachia, other middle-class residents and coal industry supporters seem to desire an individualistic, placeless, modern American standard of living. The overwhelming dominance of the coal industry is naturalized through a racially-

coded discourse of individualism, private property, and free market competition. In this discourse, corporations are ideal white liberal individuals and citizens. While these ideal corporate citizens rapidly transform the Appalachian Mountains into “improved” flat land, some white coalfield residents struggle to claim the same kind of citizenship.



Twisted Gun golf course, Mingo County, WV

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