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# Mining Memories with Donald Trump in the Anthropocene

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Arthur Rose

Coal provided a useful catalyst for political affect in Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and in the first year of his presidency. Journalists analyzing Trump's election results have noted that coal-dependent counties overwhelmingly supported Trump. In Harlan County, East Kentucky, where historically the formal economy is based on coal, Trump's vote share for the 2016 presidential election was 84.9% ("2016 Kentucky"). One former coal miner declared, "I voted for Trump—I mean, a coal miner would be stupid not to" (qtd. in Paterson and Frazier). Trump won their support by promising to bring back coal mining jobs. Were it fulfilled, this promise would have real economic consequences in Harlan, where, between 1950 and 2016, employment of on-site personnel in the coal mining industry dropped from 13,619 people (Estep) to 764 ("Kentucky Quarterly Energy Report"). Trump refuted efforts to demonize coal and ignored associations between job losses and automatized mining practices. Rhetorically, his resuscitation of King Coal paralleled his appeals to white identity; both relied on a nostalgia for a past that never existed, a past untouched by either the dust of coal itself or the wider issue of racialized violence in the United States.

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These local and regional identity politics may seem parochial when cast against the sinister connotations of digging coal in the age of the Anthropocene. But, with Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, his evisceration of the Environmental Protection Agency, and his Executive Orders supporting coal mining, such politics have material consequences. Based on Trump's own climate change denialism, his Cabinet's ties to the energy industry, and his endorsement of coal, Naomi Klein has argued, *inter alia*, for strong links between Trump's presidency and Anthropocene catastrophism. Given these links, the way scholars conduct "Anthropocene reading," to use the title of Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor's recent book, must shift profoundly in the wake of Trump's presidency. Menely and Taylor's *Anthropocene Reading* navigates two interconnected imperatives: "to read the Anthropocene as a literary object and at the same time to recognize the Anthropocene as a geohistorical event that may unsettle our inherited practices of reading" (13). In the age of populism, however, Anthropocene reading may need more regionalized approaches, including the political economy of coal mining communities. If the Anthropocene demands that we attend more closely to the consequences of deep time, I suggest we might also focus on the consequences of coal identity politics. By reading memoirs and fiction about Kentucky coal mining communities, I draw attention to, in the height of their nostalgia, the entangled complexities of health, race, and class faced by such communities. Long-term health conditions like black lung, as well as the uncomfortable engagement with white supremacy and racism, attaches to but does not define coal identity politics. They demand a more nuanced reading of communities all too easily denounced as the basket of deplorables.

This essay develops an Anthropocene understanding of coal identity politics by reading the Donald Trump presidency against cultural texts related to East Kentucky coal mining. My underlying assumption for this essay is that coal, specifically, has real and lasting effects for human-induced climate change and by extension for the inauguration of the geological event known as Anthropocene. Coal plays an important role in efforts to reframe geological time according to human intervention. In "The 'Anthropocene,'" Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer suggest 1784 as the onset date for this new geological period, the year James Watts invented the steam engine, which greatly accelerated coal burning. Subsequent writing has nuanced the dating, naming, and importance of the Anthropocene, but coal remains an important referent. Karen Pinkus and Andreas Malm have demonstrated how coal use, often generically condemned in

Anthropocene commentary, must be understood as part of a political economy that focuses on energy relations. By shifting our focus away from coal itself, a mere source of potential energy, to coal's utilization in energy networks, Pinkus shows how the infrastructure of an energy grid and the access it gives to a continuous energy supply comes to be synonymous with life itself. "The grid," she writes, "is life itself . . . even the most committed entities working toward decarbonisation take it for granted that 'we' cannot tolerate any disruption in the smooth flow of electricity on demand" (328). Malm demonstrates a historical link between increased coal use in the nineteenth century and a general push to extricate capital associated with the mill industries of New England from its dependency on hydroelectricity, and, concomitantly, geographical location.<sup>1</sup> "Unlike water," argues Malm, "coal could be *transported* to mills and *stored* in warehouses, without the need for further attention, passively awaiting combustion. For the first time in history, the converter and the source of mechanical energy—the engine, and the mine—were disassociated in space" (39–40). Both Pinkus and Malm draw our attention to the ways in which coal use is driven more by the preservation of comfort (either for capital or for consumers) than by economic sense.

My interest here is to expand Pinkus and Malm's focus on coal's energy and capital dimensions in the political economy by considering the expectations of coal communities. Despite Trump's victory, coal identity politics carry important and complex relations to health and race that demand more than simple condemnation. bell hooks's memoir, *Belonging*, which tells the story of growing up Black in East Kentucky coal country, recalls complex intersections of actual working coal miners: "the world of shared work brought folks together across the boundaries of race" (199). She reports of miners and their families, "when we went down in that coal pit, it didn't matter if you were black or white because we all black. We all came out black." hooks's *Belonging* recalls a black Appalachia in the midst of "the white supremacist South" (62). But she also relies on something unspoken happening "down in that coal pit" (199). In order to work out what that unspoken something might gesture toward, I turn to Elmore Leonard's Raylan Givens narratives and the television series *Justified*, which Leonard's works inspired. Reading Leonard (and *Justified*) alongside hooks reminds us that the three toxicities that have emerged out of Donald Trump's coal identity politics—whiteness, masculinity, and environmental harm—are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for all coal identity politics. Leonard's concerns about black lung, considered in relation to reali-

ties hooks has described as “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (*Belonging* 19), will make a wider point about how coal identity politics may speak to the impact of regional politics on the Anthropocene.

## Toxic Nostalgia

Leonard’s 2001 novella, “Fire in the Hole,” begins and ends with the phrase “dug coal together” (57). Set in coal mining Harlan County, the novella follows Boyd Crowder, a white supremacist bank robber, and Raylan Givens, a Deputy US Marshal, as the latter pursues the former for his paramilitary attack on a Black church. Raylan eventually kills Boyd in a shootout at their mutual love interest’s dinner table, but his initial reason for pursuing Boyd problematically recedes into the background: concerns about the church evaporate as the novella focuses, increasingly, on the two men’s enigmatic relationship. In the final scene, Art Mullen, the Marshal in charge of the Special Operations Group in Harlan County, asks Raylan whether he is sorry he has killed Boyd. Raylan responds with the cryptic: “I thought I explained it to you . . . Boyd and I dug coal together” (112). Underlying their opposition, as lawbreaker and law keeper, is a shared history of digging coal together that seems to defy description to lovers or friends.

Raylan’s apparent non sequitur echoes the novella’s opening line, “They had dug coal together and then lost touch over the years” (57). However, the opening and closing sentences for “Fire in the Hole” have significant grammatical differences. The aspect has changed from the pluperfect to the simple past, and Raylan’s speech shifts from reported to direct, signaling, perhaps, a closer relationship after Boyd’s death than the free indirect narrative anticipates in their meeting “as lawman and felon.” Leonard’s mirroring of the opening and closing lines implies a structural symmetry in the text, in effect apologizing for Raylan’s violence by stressing his continued connection to Boyd, beyond the instant of his death, through digging coal. But this formal parallelism occludes an important point: Raylan has never explained what it means for them to have “dug coal together.” He hints, somewhat inadequately, “we weren’t what you’d call buddies, but you work a deep mine with a man you look out for each other” (70). Otherwise, the phrase remains unexplored.

This lack of explanation is, if anything, exacerbated by bracketing the narrative with such an obvious parallelism. The phrase “digging coal together” refers to the experience of digging coal, as a habitual activity extended over time; however, in lieu of a fuller

description of coal-mining life, these words also refer to the incommunicable nature of this experience and the forms of companionship it entails. The experience remains inaccessible to Art Mullen and, by extension, the reader, who have not “dug coal together.” Raylan rebuffs Art’s efforts to respond to the relationship with Boyd as something that might produce either regret or sadness, by returning the conversation to enigmatic coproduction. The concept of digging coal together forges connections that are resistant to articulation, literally and figuratively subterranean, and materially distinct from regret and sadness.

“Fire in the Hole” gives Raylan, a stock neo-Western character from two previous Leonard novels, *Pronto* (1993) and *Riding the Rap* (1995), an origin story in Harlan County and a villain to match. The combination of Boyd and Raylan was so effective that, when “Fire in the Hole” was adapted for television by Graham Yost, the series *Justified* did not follow the novella in killing off Boyd. Instead, it ran their relationship as a central story arc for its full six seasons. Critics recognized that the dynamic between the two characters, set against the backdrop of Harlan County’s economic decline, was the show’s most compelling feature. As a result of *Justified*’s critical success, Leonard would resurrect Boyd in his final novel, *Raylan*. But across all three texts, the dynamics of the relationship between Boyd and Raylan continue to rest on coal identity politics, a shared, subterranean history of looking out for each other that remains largely uncommunicated and incommunicable.

The relationship’s incommunicability both defines it and opens it to misrecognition and exploitation. This is particularly evident when comparing the conclusions of “Fire in the Hole” and *Justified*. In the final episode of *Justified*, “The Promise,” Raylan visits a still-living, now-incarcerated Boyd.<sup>2</sup> Boyd asks why he has come as far as he has just to deliver the news that Ava, their sometime lover, has died. Raylan responds that “if I allow myself to be sentimental after all that has occurred, there is one thing I wander back to. . . .” Boyd completes the sentence with the phrase, “we dug coal together.” *Prima facie*, the phrase, an echo from the novella, emphasizes the same unspoken camaraderie as “Fire in the Hole,” where the gunfight over Ava reinforces bonds of homosocial loyalty between Raylan and Boyd beyond the moment of Boyd’s death. In “The Promise,” however, all this—the conjoined statement of solidarity and the shared ethic built on subterranean work—serves to blind Boyd to Raylan’s real reason for coming. Raylan has recently seen Ava, and he has agreed to lie to Boyd about her death to ensure that she can begin a new life. In

“Fire in the Hole,” the phrase implies a nonverbal understanding between men for whom an unspoken code of behavior operates as a means of assurance in lieu of legal measures. In *Justified*, however, the phrase subverts this homosocial loyalty, explicitly evoking it as a form of sentimental cultural memory, or nostalgia, in order to distract Boyd from Raylan’s true intention: misinformation about Ava.

The antipathetic treatment of digging coal in “The Promise” and “Fire in the Hole” mirrors a similar collision between the blatant cynicism of Donald Trump and the implicit confidence invested in him by his coal mining supporters. Trump was heralded as a savior in coal communities. Frequently, supporters would sport banners that read “Trump digs coal” at rallies in these communities. At one point, in West Virginia, Trump performed a poor impression of a miner digging for coal, here described by William Finnegan in an article for *The New Yorker*:

One of the many funny-painful moments of the 2016 campaign came during a Trump rally last May in Charleston, West Virginia. Trump was presented with a white miner’s hardhat, which he reluctantly put on. Then he began to mug, very strangely, with pursed lips and thumbs raised, seemingly playing a pouting club character of some type. He pantomimed a couple of swipes with a shovel—that thing that miners presumably do. Afterward, he fussed for a long time with his hair, asking the crowd for reassurance that it looked okay after the hat interlude.

Finnegan gives a detailed description of Trump’s actions: his reception of the hat, his digging motions, and his concern about his appearance. Trump’s gestures provoke Finnegan’s ridicule because they are crude, repetitive, and easily copied. To focus on the gestures as objects, however, ignores their role in communicating Trump’s incommunicable attraction for his supporters, what Coates identifies as an all-pervasive “whiteness.” Trump, as an election phenomenon, is often referred to as a gesture of frustration thrown up by white America, whatever the ostensible reasons given for electing him. But if the general quality of Trump’s whiteness explains his victory, it does not explain the affective power of his gestures at rallies like those in West Virginia. In digging for coal, Trump was pantomiming his mining supporters: incorporating a series of gestures that could present, without affirming, his apparent support for coal. This unspoken communication, this gesture, was cynical because, after Trump used it to attain his office, he used that office to eviscerate precisely those few protections that many of these supporters still counted on.

These included environmental protections, of course, but perhaps of most economic significance was his decision to eliminate the Appalachian Regional Commission from the federal budget. Finnegan reports that this constituted an abandonment of coal country in real economic terms.

Even without removing an organization that, since 1965, has spent \$23 billion in support of job creation, land reclamation, and social services, there was little basis to Trump's claims that he could bring back coal jobs lost to automation or coal power supplanted by natural gas and renewable energy sources. Trump's pantomime of an old-time digger had little to do with recent developments in the coal industry. The implicit understanding that Trump would bring back jobs when he was elected was met with obvious dishonesty about the reality of the situation, combined with a wanton exploitation of the sentimentality that halcyon memories of a flourishing industry would inspire. The result was a form of toxic nostalgia that evacuated from the coal industry all recollection of its immediate and long-term risks to health and the environment.

The dangerous ambiguity of this nostalgia is evident even in hooks's *Belonging*, when she eulogizes the beauty of coal: "Coal is one of earth's great gifts. . . . Coal was awesome. . . . Colored the deepest shade of black, it was both beautiful and functional" (26). By suggesting the functional beauty of the color black, hooks subtly associates coal's utility with the Black is Beautiful movement. But the result is not simply a powerful image that links the exploitation of both black labor and coal to the utile beauty of both laborer and substance. hooks draws into her nostalgia an awareness of the painful realities attached to human-powered mining practices: "there is no child raised in the culture of coal mining who does not come to understand the risks involved in harvesting coal. In the world of coal mining without big machinery, coal mining has a human face" (27). In the contrast of beauty, function, and risk, hooks identifies an older world where coal mining lacked "big machinery" and had "a human face." More recent developments in mountaintop removal—"when the summit of the mountain is removed to extract coal" (26)—have eradicated the "human face." hooks acknowledges the need to "enable our nation to break with unhealthy dependency on coal" (27). However, her environmental concerns in *Belonging* largely obtain in the field of regional politics. She takes as the primary problem with mountaintop removal its pollution of the local environment, rather than the carbon consequences accrued from the ways it speeds up already existing cycles of extraction, transportation, and combus-



tion. By separating human-powered mining from its automated successor, hooks allows her regional concerns to occlude the global consequences of coal mining in the *longue durée*.

While hooks does hazard a regionalized nostalgia about human coal production, thereby potentially effacing the long term consequences for climate change and the unfolding Anthropocene, she qualifies her nostalgia by reflecting on the real risks of coal mining. We find similar, health-related nuance counterpointing regionalized nostalgia in Leonard. Before we can comment on this, however, we must subject the identity politics of Leonard's works to a hooks-led critique.

### **"Imperialist White-Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy"**

"I often use the phrase 'imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy' to describe the interlocking political systems that are the foundation of our nation's politics," writes hooks in *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love* (17). Her point is that patriarchy describes a systemic logic that may be as harmful to the men it ostensibly prefers as the women it marginalizes. In order to grapple with its complexity, one must also consider how patriarchy intersects with systems of imperialism, which seeks to impose power relations, white supremacy, which claims the pre-eminence of whiteness, and capitalism. Given the interlocking nature of these systems, it is useful to consider how Leonard's works develop a partial critique of the problems hooks raises, but also to critique Leonard for failing to address Black and female life more explicitly in his Raylan works.

"Fire in the Hole" relates white supremacy and political economy through the character of Boyd Crowder. Boyd favors the eponymous phrase, "fire in the hole," from his mining days. Raylan recalls this key piece of evidence linking Boyd to an attack on a Black church: "You'd hear him call [it] out . . . to clear the shaft. She'd blow and we'd go back in to dig out the pieces" (70). But even before the attack is described, Leonard presents Boyd as a character whose post-mining life has curiously entangled white supremacy, evangelical Christianity, and libertarian economics. He begins the second paragraph of "Fire in the Hole": "Boyd did six years in a federal penitentiary for refusing to pay his income tax" (57). He then describes Boyd's gradual transformation into the leader of "a cadre of neo-Nazi skinheads": "they were all natural-born racists and haters of authority, but still had to be taught what Boyd called 'the laws of White Supremacy as laid down by the lord,' which he took from Christian Identity doctrines"

(57). This culminates in them becoming “Crowder’s Commandos,” “sworn to take up the fight for freedom against the coming Mongrel World Order and the govermint’s illegal tax laws. Boyd said he would kill the next man tried to make him pay income tax” (58).

Leonard compresses Boyd’s evolution from tax defaulter to neo-Nazi militia commander into a single paragraph. He signals the material consistency running through his description by bookending it with descriptions of Boyd’s antipathy to income tax. But he also ties Boyd’s problems with the “govermint” to a white supremacy identity politics. In the aftermath of the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally, the protest it occasioned, and the vehicular homicide of Heather D. Heyer, Leonard’s flippant deconstruction of Boyd’s cynical white supremacy takes on a different aspect. Leonard’s treatment of Boyd may expose the material motivations that underpin marginal forms of white supremacy, but the problem has transformed since Trump’s election.

In “The First White President,” Ta-Nehisi Coates argues that Trump’s “ideology is white supremacy, in all its truculent and sanctimonious power.” But Coates nuances this declaration. The election did not give rise to white supremacy, it legitimized forms of white supremacy that were previously simply passive. Trump, according to Coates, is the first white president because his election can be wholly attributed to his identity as a white man, and to no other factors: “But that is the point of white supremacy—to ensure that that which all others achieve with maximal effort, white people (particularly white men) achieve with minimal qualification.” The ideological confusion in Leonard’s white supremacists masks a blatant cynicism: their antipathy to the “govermint” originates in the state’s power over the “mint,” the currency. In the Trump election, when white supremacists have effectively captured the state, not even cynicism—with its claim to speak truth to power—seems to apply. Whiteness is exposed as no more than another baseless, ideological claim to privilege.

In the post-Trump context, Leonard’s marginalization of Black Appalachia becomes more apparent. Further investigation reveals that the Black church targeted by Boyd was, according to Art Mullen, “a dope store passing as a church” (72). When Black Appalachia appears in the Raylan works, it is usually in stereotyped form. This is a symptom of a wider trend, documented by hooks and fellow Kentuckian Wendell Berry. Berry begins *The Hidden Wound* by acknowledging the erasure of Black history: “It occurs to me that, for a man whose life from the beginning has been conditioned by the lives of black people, I have had surprisingly little to say about them in my other

writings" (3). hooks makes an even stronger point: "Living in modern society, without a sense of history, it has been easy for folks to forget that black people were first and foremost a people of the land, farmers" (*Belonging* 36). Both Berry and hooks seek to recover this lost history for reasons that link anti-racism to the environment: "Like Wendell Berry, I believe that we can restore our hope in a world that transcends race by building communities where self-esteem comes not from feeling superior to any group but from one's relationship to the land, to the people, to the place wherever that may be" (183). By advocating a renewed engagement with land stewardship, hooks does not simply gesture to a sustainable race relation for Appalachia, she also addresses the entanglement of mountaintop removal with whiteness, capitalist exploitation, and misogyny: "the lack of empathy for the lives that are devastated by mountaintop removal reminds us of the overall crisis in human values generated by dominator culture, by imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (29).

Folded into Trump's whiteness is his misogyny. As Coates notes, "Trump is also the first president to have publicly affirmed that his daughter is a 'piece of ass.'" Again, the parallels with Leonard's white male hero figures are striking. When Leonard puts Raylan into situations in which he shoots a woman, his decisions to do so are framed as a regrettable necessity. In Leonard's final novel, *Raylan*, for example, Raylan is involved in a case with a nurse who harvests human kidneys from unsuspecting criminals. In the course of the showdown, he shoots her. The shooting gives rise to an extended conversation between Raylan and Art Mullen on whether it is right to shoot a woman. Leonard's casual gender violence is troubling, though Raylan's performance of aversion is, perhaps, more so. Art frames this aversion when he opens the conversation: "'You don't think of your manners and let the woman go first,' Art Mullen said, 'not when she's pointing a gun at you'" (126). By framing the aversion to gender violence as a matter of cultural practice (letting the woman go first) regrettably sidelined, both Raylan and Art endorse normative gender conservatism. There seems to be little wrong with a protocol that attempts to limit gender violence. But in this case it serves to justify Raylan's violence as a matter of necessity. "Tell me what else you could've done," asks Art Mullen (126). Art and Raylan cast the dilemma as a matter of rival wills to power, wherein archaic cultural practices are problematized not because of their innate sexism, but because they interfere with this acceptance of power and its concomitant responsibilities.

hooks appears to offer an alternative solution to this dilemma by reframing it as an antagonism between power and meaning: “In dominator culture the will to power stands as a direct challenge to the cultural belief that humans survive soulfully because of a will to meaning” (*Belonging* 29). Rediscovering the will to meaning, hooks suggests, may open new pathways to roles as witnesses, custodians, and care-takers, rather than as patriarchal, misogynistic dominators. The problem with this alternative obtains when the gesture is misinterpreted as a measure of cultural greatness. For hooks’s alternative to work, it requires a degree of sincerity that is all too likely to be exploited to similarly cynical ends. Therefore, it demands that we attach this sincerity to real effects, on bodies and environments. Anchored by the body and the environment, the solution is less inclined to suffer from the kinds of gestural slippages I have pointed out above. This recourse to the realities of the body and the environment is, of course, nothing new, except insofar as I want to focus on a particular process that sharply brings together my entangled concerns: the ability to breathe.

## Black Lung

Recent breath-related interventions, from Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*, through Black Lives Matter’s iterations of Eric Garner’s final words, “I can’t breathe,” to Ashon Crawley’s *Blackpentecostal Breath*, constellate breath as a metaphor for the somatic effects of racialized violence in the US. In her complex meditation on “the wake” of Black life (19), Christina Sharpe distinguishes between two understandings of “aspiration” (112): as “opportunity” and as “what it takes, in the midst of singularity, the virulent antiblackness everywhere and always remotivated, to keep breath in the Black body” (112–13). Sharpe signals racial concerns that emerge concurrently with layered examinations of health and environment: corollaries that Trump, in his tacit endorsement of white supremacy, has been happy to subvert. Sharpe’s distinction between aspiration as opportunity and aspiration as raw effort to survive points to an implicit common interest with coal miners, white or black, who are at risk of black lung.

Black lung, otherwise known as coal workers’ pneumoconiosis (CWP), describes the health condition that evolves in response to the accumulation of coal dust within the lungs. Nodular aggregations of anthracotic macrophages (or the cellular material that engulfs the coal dust particles) release a combination of products that lead to inflammation and fibrosis. As this develops from simple CWP to

complicated CWP, progressive massive fibrosis (PMF) spreads across the upper area of the lungs. The build-up of coal dust in the lungs may eventually cause necrosis of the lung tissue. At the same time, the person who suffers from this debilitating condition is often subject to chronic bronchitis and breathlessness. As Alessandro Portelli notes, this slow and steady evisceration of the lungs presents a striking contrast to the mine's more dramatic dangers of cave-ins and machine failure: "[D]eath in the mines comes also softly and slowly, in the form of progressive gasping breathlessness cause by inhalation of rock and coal dust in the lungs" (152). Given the hiddenness of the lung within the body, black lung, as a medical condition, requires a medical eye, mediated by chest radiography and spirometry, and a medical ear, mediated by the stethoscope. These strategies excavate the medical condition from its invisible interiority even though its social and emotional consequences are experienced as difficulties sleeping, speaking, or moving around. In *Memory of a Miner: A True-life Story from Harlan County's Heyday*, Michael Ruth recalls the last quarter of his father's life: "Dad struggled with shortness of breath and diminished stamina, the result of black lung. Not infrequently he would awake at night due to difficulty breathing ('smotherin'). With black lung, breathing is often harder lying down. So he would sit up during those 'spells' and like his father before him, sleep in a chair."

Ruth's description of the painful realities of end-phase black lung marks quite clearly the constraints on the body felt by sufferers of the condition, constraints that Trump, for one, dismisses. In a blistering attack on the coal industry and Donald Trump, the host of comic newscast *Last Week Tonight*, John Oliver, connected Donald Trump's use of coal-mining identity politics in the election to an interview he gave to *Playboy* in 1990. Oliver attended specifically to how hypocritical Trump's approval of coal miners appeared, when compared to his dismissive attitude in the interview. In it, Trump describes what he calls an "it" quality: "the ability to become an entrepreneur, a great athlete, a great writer. You're either born with it or you're not" (Trump). He goes on to clarify what he means by the "it" quality: "I like the challenge and tell the story of the coal miner's son. The coal miner gets black-lung disease, his son gets it, then his son. If I had been the son of a coal miner, I would have left the damn mines. But most people don't have the imagination—or whatever—to leave their mine. They don't have 'it'" (Trump). Sharpe's two aspirations are set side by side in Trump's callous response to sufferers of black lung. They, lacking aspiration in its first sense, become victims of its second. What in Trump's interview is tragedy becomes farce in Ben

Stiller's *Zoolander*. When fashion model Derrek Zoolander, played by Stiller, returns to his family, he joins his coal-mining father and brothers "down the mine." After a work montage, the Zoolanders find themselves at the local bar. Affecting a slight cough, Derrek complains that he's "got the black lung." His father, played by a surly Jon Voigt, notes he's only been down the mine one day. The incongruity is signalled by Stiller's affected cough. The cough, as a gesture, throws the rugged, manly healthiness of the Zoolander father and brothers into relief, since they have been down the mine for years. It belies the seriousness of a condition that has historically affected significant numbers of coal miners. Although he is the satirical object of the scene, Derrek has "it": he has left the mine. But nothing in Stiller's lampooning delivery suggests that Derrek has "the imagination—or whatever." Rather like Trump, Derrek is born the accidental beneficiary of privilege.

Black lung, as used by Trump in his *Playboy* interview or by Ben Stiller in *Zoolander*, is stripped of its medical implications and its affective consequences. It is a fait accompli of coal mining that they, with their "it" quality, have successfully dodged. For both Trump and Derrek, the implication is that black lung is containable within the mine, and that if one escapes the mine, one can escape the condition. Again, this perpetuates the nostalgic understanding of a mine as a hole, whose modern correlatives, strip mining and mountaintop removal, have mitigated the risks to workers, if not the environment. As Carol Conlan, the coal mining executive in Leonard's *Raylan*, suggests, "mining from the top" leads to "a lower incidence of black lung" (148). This perception accords with a long-standing belief that surface mining operations, such as mountaintop removal, are less likely to cause black lung even though a recent study by Laney, Wolfe, Petsonk, and Halldin has shown that surface mining still carries significant risk that people may develop the condition. Risk of black lung is not defused in the transition to automated mining practices; it diffuses from workers to the local population.

*Raylan* figures its concern with black lung through a conflict between Carol, the executive for M-T Mining, and Otis, a former miner. Otis's wife, Marion, has "black lung from breathing the air, not ever having gone down a mine shaft" (107). By his own report, "my wife's never been belowground, but she's dyin of black lung, sleepin next to me forty-seven years breathin my snores" (113). For all that Otis seems to acknowledge some responsibility for Marion's condition, the context suggests his phrase be taken ironically. After all, Otis says this when Carol attempts to affirm her relation with coal

country. Carol quotes “that old coal song” (113): “we have to dig the coal from wherever mother nature puts it.” Otis is less amenable to manipulations of nostalgia than supporters at Trump’s coal rallies. He responds, sardonically: “It don’t mention the mess . . . strip-minin makes of your home. You ever live in coal country you know that.” Carol reveals that she “was born and raised in Wise, West Virginia,” but Otis is not impressed: “Was any soot on you . . . it’s gone now.”

Otis lives with the realities of strip-mining: his wife is ill, his pond is polluted, and his house has been destroyed by M-T Mining’s thugs. But he is also a character created to respond to the coal company’s logic of concession from a position of ideological strength. He refuses to compromise because he represents salt-of-the-earth Appalachia. When Mr. Gracie, another representative of M-T Mining, tries to suggest that fish still live in the pond, Otis pushes him in, remarking, “Hard to breathe in there, huh?” (107). Otis justifies his action as a matter of time served: “‘Forty years in mines,’ Otis said, ‘the whole time yes-sirin these company pimps. Well, not no more.’” It is this uncompromising strength that eventually provokes Carol to shoot him. Yet he, too, is a nostalgia object. For, if he is meant to represent Appalachian masculinity, he does so through his capacity to resist the coal companies, a key element in historical Harlan.

His protest needs to be set against a history of coal mining strike action in Harlan County, particularly the 1973 Brookside Strike, which was the subject of Barbara Kopple’s *Harlan County, USA* (1976) and Tony Bill’s *Harlan County War* (2000).<sup>3</sup> The strike occurred in the wake of the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969, which mandated health and environment standards for coal mines and provided for the compensation of miners suffering from black lung. The Federal Safety Act, together with the Black Lung Benefits Act of 1973, meant that issues of safety and compensation were of primary importance for both the miners and the mining company. Otis’s manner of standing up to Carol and her goons about his wife’s health repeats a trope, itself a repetition of Harlan County history, wherein Harlan County miners resist the mining company’s proxies, often simply understood as thugs hired to intimidate. If this resistance is presented rightly as an effort to assert basic rights to a fair wage, decent health care and just compensation for occupational illnesses, it carries a nostalgic effect that simplifies an actual mangle of practice into an oppositional narrative where the weak resist the strong.

While it does sustain this white-washed idealism about resilient coal miners, *Raylan* remains ambiguous about black lung. Marion is the only character explicitly described as having black lung. But when



she reports back on her diagnosis after Otis's death, the results are surprising: "He told me I only had a touch of black lung, my cooked lungs was from smoking reefer all my life" (228). Smoking reefer, of course, raises much less sympathy than black lung: smokers report much higher levels of guilt and personal responsibility than people suffering from illnesses based on occupational or environmental exposure. Moreover, smoking, construed as an intentional act, is a complicating factor in struggles around compensation for black lung, an involuntary consequence of labor. In *Black Lung: Anatomy of a Public Health Disaster*, Alan Derickson quotes Ian Higgins on the compensation issue: "It is impossible in the individual to say how much his bronchitis and emphysema is due to his work or to his smoking or to other factors in the causes of these diseases. It is not practicable to compensate all persons who have bronchitis and emphysema" (178). *Raylan* dismisses its black lung sufferer with a rhetorical sleight of hand, analogous, if not identical, to Trump's association of black lung with a failure of autonomy. However, by entangling black lung with reefer-related lung damage, the novel does gesture to the relation between coal pollution and wider problems with addiction in coal mining economies. But it also links the more materials-based analyses of the Anthropocene to the recent turn to addiction, advanced by Catherine Malabou. Marion's reefer, in other words, prepares us to reconsider our addiction to coal against the more regional addictions represented in the Kentucky coal mining texts I have discussed.

### Economies of Addiction

The expression "addiction to coal" features in op-eds and academic discourse to describe the continued commitment to the coal industry. Malabou, following the work of Daniel Lord Smail, explicitly links the Anthropocene to addiction processes in the brain, which she understands to be "an essential intermediary between the historical, the biological, and the geological" (45): "The brain maintains itself in its changing environment by becoming addicted to it, understanding 'addiction' in the proper sense as a 'psychotropy,' a significant transformation or alteration of the psyche." The brain, then, constitutes the gesture Malabou will use to interrogate the Anthropocene, as something unthinkable. Rather, she argues, the brain adjusts to the enormity of the Anthropocene by enervating the subject: "There necessarily exists a mental effect of the numbness and paralysis of consciousness, a mental effect of the new narcoleptic structure of



humanity's (impossible) reflection on itself" (52). Reading about coal in the Anthropocene is likely to progress very quickly into discussions of deep history, to similarly narcoleptic effect. This may be because coal can be understood as a form of fossilized time or because its role in energy production lends itself to *longue durée* analyses of fuel economies. What it does not factor is the presence of addiction at the local level of coal communities.

When represented in popular culture, failing single resource economies such as those in coal country often replace the historically dominant industry with illegal addictive substances.<sup>4</sup> In the second season of *Justified*, this replacement strategy is foregrounded in the main narrative arc. Mags Bennett and her sons run the marijuana industry in Harlan County. Marijuana, although illegal, acts as the local commodity, providing employment for the inhabitants of Bennett's Holler. Since the marijuana dealers are either ex-miners or the children of ex-miners, the series makes it clear that drug production has replaced coal production as the dominant industry. Mags, however, is interested in turning her drug empire into a legitimate business. In order to do so, she makes a deal with a coal company, Black Pike. She will acquire the local land on their behalf. Since the local inhabitants are unwilling to sell their land to the extraction industry, she endeavors to buy all the land to facilitate an easy, and uniform, transfer of mining rights. To add a further layer of complexity, she buys the land ostensibly to protect its owners from Black Pike's predations. Using a narrative of eco-protectionism, Mags suggests that the local community will be best served if the land is held by her in trust.

Mags's attempt to transition from the illegal marijuana business to the legitimate industry of coal production reverses Harlan County's earlier transition from coal to marijuana. As dominant industries decline, so new forms of production emerge in order to sustain the local economy. As the coal industry declined in fictional Appalachia, so new forms of illegal enterprise emerged. *Justified* must be understood as signalling a flow in what was previously an ebb in coal capital. But this ebb and flow are not symmetrical. The means of production, once based on human energy, has become automated. It no longer has what hooks calls "a human face." Capital no longer trickles down to the local population.

Raylan recognizes this when he comments on the shrinking communities around the M-T site, the company in *Raylan* that serves the same function as Black Pike in *Justified*: "At one time . . . there were ten thousand people living here. Population's down to eight hundred, not much deep mining now. Towns change as the style of

mining changes. M-T's blasting away at the ridgeline, stripping the side in layers" (116). At the same time, the miners themselves have changed their appearances: "you can't tell by lookin' at 'em, can you? They might get dust on their coveralls sittin' up on a dragline, but not a bit of coal dirt on them" (117). Like Otis, Raylan uses the image of "coal dirt" to criticize new mining practices. Here, he is not nostalgic for old habits: "I remember my buddies leaving high school, marrying a girl they knew all their life and going down the mines . . . wears herself out raising kids while he's out drinkin' if he ain't down the mine. He gets a hunk of shale fall on him, he's laid up and can't work, so they fire him" (116). But where previously the threat to life was an immediate consequence of work in the mine, the new labor pattern replaces occupational danger with environmental degradation: "No jobs . . . and coal dust settling on everything you own" (118).

The asymmetry between older and more contemporary mining practices has these obvious environmental consequences. But it also relies on dissimulating the value of the communities that Mags Bennett claims to be protecting. "To justify dehumanizing coal mining practices," hooks writes,

the imperial capitalist world of big business has to make it appear that the plant and human life that is under attack has no value. It is not difficult to see the link between the engrained stereotypes about mountain folk (hillbillies), especially those who are poor, representations that suggest that these folk are deprived, ignorant, evil, licentious, and the prevailing belief that there is nothing worth honoring, worth preserving about their habits of being, their culture. (*Belonging* 30)

Critical to this enterprise is the manipulation of perception, or what Pinkus identifies as the process of making round-the-clock energy production synonymous with life itself: as she writes, "The grid is life itself, by this logic" (328). In order to render hooks's "plant and human life" valueless to capital, it must be presented, and then represented, either as without worth or as a necessary sacrifice for the social betterment enabled by energy.

As Raylan drives, he notices the signs of this compromise: "Coal keeps the lights on. Raylan read the signs, the coal company rubbing it in. You want coal to heat your house? You have to accept surface mining and the mess it makes; the film of coal dust on your car sitting in the yard" (72). Labor and energy are necessary to "keep the lights on" and "heat your house." When Raylan escorts Carol to a

town hall meeting, protesting miners have signs that also signal a compromise. One sign reads: “COAL KILLS” (128). Another sign demonstrates a commitment to labor, rather than the environment: “GOT ELECTRICITY? THANK A MINER” (152). Both sets of signs share the logic that coal is a necessary part of Pinkus’s heated, electrified modernity.

These signs do something more than signal the otherwise invisible, domestic dependency on coal. By asserting the cost of domestic energy, they shift attention away from the gesture that makes coal so affectively important to people in the coal industry. This gesture indicates their necessity for the functioning of a wider network of cultural practice. Carol, the coal company executive, appreciates the affective importance of this necessity when she refers to a latent stoicism in mining communities: “Do we quit minin coal cause it’s dirty? My dad use to come home so filthy all you could see were his eyes” (136). Underneath this assertion, however, there is a gesture of implicit solidarity: “Carol said, ‘My dad mined coal in West Virginia. I grew up in coal camps, so I know what you are talkin about,’ her accent taking her closer to West Virginia as she spoke” (134). Carol attunes herself to her audience by suggesting, in their accents, that she has shared their experience. She exploits what, in hooks, is the means to develop community: “Our vernacular Kentucky language resonates with the richness and warmth of our land” (*Belonging* 32). With Trumplike cynicism, Carol uses the gesture to imply a connection she no longer feels. Someone with Trump’s “it” factor, Carol has managed to “escape the life” (134).

hooks indicts the mass media for helping to manipulate perception in representations of poor folk, such as those perpetuated by Carol, Derrek in *Zoolander*, and Trump, because they “convey the notion that poor people are in dire straits because of the bad choices they have made. It pushes images that suggest that if the poor suffer from widespread addiction to sugar, alcohol or drugs it is because of innate weaknesses of character” (*Belonging* 30). “Fire in the Hole,” *Justified*, and *Raylan* all participate in these images, whether positive or negative. While *Justified*’s Mags Bennett and her sons evoke negative stereotypes of drug-dealing hillbillies, *Raylan*’s Otis also depends on the positive stereotype of the hard-working (white) miner. In all three texts, poorer characters are weak, particularly because they are manipulated through intoxicants, physical or ideological. These may be the straightforward material intoxicants produced and consumed by Mags—marijuana and moonshine liquor. But there are other forms of addiction at work. Otis is addicted to a form of patriarchy

that will ultimately kill him. Harlan County itself is addicted to coal. On 1 June 2017, Trump withdrew from the Paris Agreement on the grounds that “it undermines [the US] economy” (United States) and “puts [the US] at a permanent disadvantage” (United States). In 2017, Trump also signed a House Joint Resolution and a Presidential Executive Order in the presence of workers from the coal mining sector. The first, signed in February 2017, disapproved the Obama era Stream Protections rule, which was designed to protect US waterways from filling by mining companies. Filling describes the practice of transferring the earth removed in mountaintop removal (also known as the overburden) to a nearby valley or river. The second, Promoting Energy Independence and Economic Growth, was signed on 28 March 2017. It lifted “any and all moratoria on Federal land coal leasing activities” (sec. 6) and rescinded “certain Energy and Climate-Related Presidential and Regulatory Actions” (sec. 3), namely those measures passed by Barak Obama to implement the 2015 Paris Climate Change Agreement and other policies related to climate change. In both cases, the purported intention was to save coal jobs. In actual fact, Trump could have done little to preserve jobs in coal country, and many of his actions have obstructed efforts to develop meaningful alternatives. His ends being purely cynical, there appears to be little value in considering the unspoken gestural mediality of how he used coal. And yet, perhaps it is by considering this gesture that we can begin to understand the addiction to coal that Trump so successfully tapped for his election, given its role in the election of Donald Trump and given the threat Trump poses to efforts to ameliorate anthropic climate change.

In this essay, I have argued for coal’s affective power in specific communities. This power lies less in its energy potential, usefully explored by Pinkus, than in its emotional charge for mining communities and for their spectators. Implicitly, I have tried to challenge the notion that all Anthropocene reading need respond directly to weighty questions of deep time. Rather, I suggest, these questions need parsing in the communities whose contribution to the climate change debate remains marginal when compared to their role in its production.

## Notes

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1. Compare this to Mitchell’s argument in *Carbon Democracy* that coal mining in the nineteenth century led to increased democratization, since it led to unregulated energy production that challenged entrenched oligarchies: the “position and concentration” of “specialised bodies of workers . . . gave them opportunities, at certain moments, to forge a new kind of political power . . . by employing the ability to slow, disrupt or cut off [the coal] supply.” (19)
2. In the first season of *Justified*, Raylan does shoot Boyd in the chest, but Boyd survives.
3. In 1931–32, Harlan saw an earlier series of strikes, also known as the Harlan County War and reported on, inter alia, by Theodore Dreiser and John Dos Passos. Both strikes were dubbed wars because of the violent actions between strikers and thugs, hired by the coal companies to beat the striking miners. The 1931–32 series of strikes happened in response to a wage cut. Brookside was also a matter of wages, as well as preserving the right to strike. However, two additional factors complicated Brookside. The strike received national attention as a repeat performance of the 1931–32 Harlan County War. The popularity of this re-presentation drew activists from across the US. As one miner, Jerry Johnson, recalls, “We had a lot of Communists here in the seventies. The only thing, they weren’t real people. . . . Snake handlers. They were about as fanatic as snake handlers” (qtd. in Portelli 317). In effect, the 1973 strike was already a nostalgia movement for a prior political moment, largely imagined, in the 1930s.
4. Grausam has noted a similar tendency, in relation to the nuclear industry, in the crystal meth production that forms the basis for Vince Gilligan’s *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013). Grausam argues that Walter White’s crystal meth, as envisioned by Gilligan, functions as an analogue for nuclear material, but, more importantly, the covert conditions that led to White’s meth production (his cancer and his impoverishment) may be linked to his previous work in the nuclear industry and to an implicit association between the decline of that industry and his decision to become a high school chemistry teacher.

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