Shadow Places Network

V

Void[i]

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This is a reflexive piece that draws on ethnographic fieldnotes from a train ride along the Hunter and Mid-Western Coal fields in New South Wales, Australia, in 2016. The trip, organised by the environmental groups Lock the Gate and 350.org in cooperation with Wollar Progress Association, was arranged with the aim to bring more than 80 people onto the extensive Hunter Valley Coal Rail Network to see the consequences of mining on local communities and environment. By bringing city-dwellers into the valley and through the coal fields, the organisers wanted to bring attention to the other side of the coal boom, materialising in stranded villages and empty hollows.

Figure 1. Coal mine pit, Hunter Valley

It was still dark when we arrived at the station, soon to be filled with people seeking to get a first-hand impression of a region in flux. It was early spring 2016, a year when, in New South Wales alone, the coal industry claimed to have generated a resource production value of AU$24.7, export revenues of $22.9b, and $1.6b in royalties. The industry generated 27,600 jobs in direct employment, 110,000 jobs in indirect employment, and provided 80% of the State's energy supply.[1] The numbers offer a persuasive argument of the importance of coal for the region's economy, and, indeed, for many, the moon-shaped landscapes that characterise the extractive zones represent a link to a utopian future marked by prosperity

[1] NSW Government, *Improving Mine Rehabilitation*.

and wellbeing. These modernist interpretations are, however, contested. Others reject the positive views and instead position the extractive landscapes as symbols of destruction and death. For them, extractive activity is a temporal pathway from a distant past to a dystopic future, symbolised by the empty hollows that are, or will be, left as scars in the landscape.

These scars refer to the *final voids*; the unrehabilitated pits left at the time of mine closure. As mining expanded in the first 15 years of this millennium, the NSW Government showed little concern about what would happen with the disturbed landscapes. Many mining projects were approved without adequate rehabilitation plans and, according to a report published in 2016, a total of 45 pits, covering an area of 6,050ha, have been planned and approved for the State, with a 3,924ha of voids to be left in the Hunter Valley coalfields alone.[2]

In the simplest terms, a final void can be defined as the hollow that is left after mining; it is, as defined by the industry, "the location of the active mine pit at closure that is not backfilled by mining operations."[3] More specifically, as the NSW Government state, final voids can be explained by the process of mining by which "open cut mining involves the displacement of material to access an underground resource," often resulting "in the formation of large pits or voids where the material has been removed."[4] The final void, then, is the long-term legacy of mining operations. But are voids only material? Are the long-term legacies of landscape destruction only visible in physical environments?

As the train slowly made its way from the station, these questions lingered in the back of my mind. Mounds and open pits gradually replaced the character of regional townships. We passed Singleton and Muswellbrook, municipalities that—until quite recently—have seen the benefits of coal expand the towns and increase the wealth of its residents. While these regional centres today face the challenge of finding ways of transitioning into a post-coal future, other communities within the region are beyond transitioning and continue to exist only as shadow places, providing material and ecological support that, in the words of Plumwood, "elude our knowledge and responsibility."[5]

While the NSW regional economy has ridden the wave of coal prosperity, the small communities at the coal frontier have suffered. As the train travelled west from Singleton and Muswellbrook, we moved through landscapes and villages that once were homes to families and centres for social life. In the shadow of the mining boom, the viability of these rural communities has been challenged, townships have been depopulated and whole villages have disappeared. We passed Bulga, a community that is taking its last breath as Yancoal and the Mount Thorley Warkworth mine is encroaching over the Saddleback Ridge. We passed Warkworth, a township that is now nothing but some empty houses, shells of former homes. We travelled through Camberwell, an area where former dairy farms and agricultural lands today are owned by mining companies and former farms have been left to fall down. We passed Ravensworth, a village where only four families are left; "it was such a lovely community of people," Wendy Bowman, one of the few remaining residents of Camberwell explained as we passed the mine that surrounds her property. "The mines own it all now; the community is gone...now it is all gone."

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[2] Walters, *The Hole Truth*.
[3] Anglo Coal, *Final Void Management Plan*
[4] NSW Government, *Improving Mine Rehabilitation*, 9.
[5] Plumwood, "Shadow Places," np.

Figure 2. Houses left behind, Wollar

Coal is dug, in Plumwood's metaphorical interpretation of the word, downstream.[6] As such, the tension of place making sits at the centre of the extractive activity: on the one hand, it may be a saviour of place(s) through the affective bond it creates by means of variables such as employment, energy security and economy; on the other, it creates destructive competition of communities, marked by their peripheral spatial and temporal status. These are the communities "downstream"; the places at the coal frontier that are out of sight and out of mind for those within the coastal centres. Here, as coal has been dug, so has sociality, temporality and emotion.[7] As the physical landscape has changed, so has the sociality of the small villages neighboring the mines. These shadow places are marked by an emptiness; a present absence that leaves a ghostlike feeling of a time that once was.

In order to mine, what covers the mineral must be removed. This is not only topsoil but also those who inhabit that place—humans and non-humans alike. Thus, mines not only extract minerals but also people. At the coal frontier, people are relocated, moved for the purpose of extraction. But, as the physical landscape is characterised by a perceived boundary of impact, so is the social; as the mine's removal of rocks, minerals and dirt has a limit, so does its removal of people. Thus, in the same manner as the extraction for coal leaves a hollow, so does the social excavation. The void, then, is not simply physical but also social. It is marked by a temporal emptiness where questions of regeneration and future potentiality become ambiguous; it is not only marked by what is no longer there but also by how it speaks to what once was and what is no longer to come. As such, the final void is visible in the natural landscape as well as the emptiness and hollowness that now mark the lives of those few left at the coal frontier.

Can these social voids be filled? Or do the ambiguities surrounding the physical voids also translate into the social hollows? In order to get permission to mine, the companies that now own the land in the empty townships have themselves claimed the cessation of villages and, as in the case of the physical voids, they have not been required to put forward a plan of

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[6] Plumwood, "Shadow Places," np. See also Askland, "Mining Voids."
[7] Askland, "Mining Voids."

revitalisation.[8] That is not to say there may not be life among these capitalist ruins;[9] a process of healing and recovery might take place and a revitalisation of these spaces may happen. But, for those who once lived there, it is a time lost, it is a place lost.

On board the train, the locals from the now ghost-like communities that we travelled through displayed little optimism for recovery and rejuvenation. For them, the voids—physical and social—are marks of sorrow and betrayal, a lost past and a lost future. For them, the voids are both ruined *and* undefined post-industrial landscape scars; they denote abandonment and decay, as well as sacrifice and loss forgotten in collective memories.[10] Their place, marked by the physical and social voids, remain trapped in an unethical politics of place that leave the frontier villages at the mercy of those upstream. It does not have the restorative potential offered by Plumwood's ecojustice ideal whereby exchange of goods and bads between places leave none of the places "involved in the exchange better and no places worse."[11] Mining companies have become the main landholders within these villages and their future is in the hand of those who have willingly sacrificed these places to the benefit of others. As such, for those who remain, the voids seem final and these places will remain in the shadow.

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[8] Askland, "A Dying Village."
[9] Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*.
[10] Storm, *Post-Industrial Landscape Scars*, 7.
[11] Plumwood, "Shadow Places."

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[i] Askland, Hedda Haugen. “Void.” *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2020). https://www.shadowplaces.net/concepts

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