Anti-Blackness, Black Geographies, and Racialized Depopulation in Coalfield Appalachia from 1940 to 2000

By Gabe Schwartzman

In this article, I investigate the ways that anti-Blackness has shaped coalfield Appalachia's human geographies. I draw on Black Studies and Black geographies literature to inform my theorization of anti-Blackness. Beginning with the question of why Black people left Appalachia in greater numbers than their white neighbors, I find that Black people left the mountains largely due to the unequal effects of deindustrialization. Black communities faced a racialized hierarchy of labor in the coal mines, racialized exposure to hazards and environmental risk, and the pull of other places with friends, family, and better jobs. I argue that the experiences of Black communities in the coalfields illustrate the supposition in Black geographies literature that anti-Blackness shapes human geographies by reproducing assumptions that Black people are aspatial, as in "not producing and making space." I conclude with a brief analysis of the narratives that white people tell about Appalachian whiteness and identity, and I argue that Black people continue to be deemed out of place in dominant narratives about the region.

Introduction

A recent wealth of scholarship and media has focused on the history and present lives of Black people in Appalachia, and how their presence has made the region what it is today (Fossett 2017; Brown 2018; Fain 2019; Thom El-Amin 2019; McCommons 2020; Whang 2020; Wilkerson 2018; Wilson 2019; Turner 2021; El-Amin and Dennis 2021; Blunk 2022; Trotter 2022). As this scholarship notes, great numbers of Black people have also left the Appalachian region in recent generations. While the entire population of the Appalachian region has faced decades of depopulation, Black people have left the region at higher rates than white people. Just using West Virginia as an indicator for the wider coalfield region, census figures from 1910 and 1920 show that 20 percent of coal miners in West Virginia were

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Black (Burchett 1997), while today, only 2 percent of coal miners in West Virginia are Black (Pollard and Jacobsen 2021). Across Central Appalachian counties, Black populations peaked in 1930 at 108,872, declining to 54,724 by the 1980 census (Lewis 1989), and 37,107 in 2019 (Pollard and Jacobsen 2021). Today, Black-identifying people make up less than 5 percent of the population of Central Appalachia (Pollard and Jacobsen 2021).

In this article, I examine why Black people left the Appalachian region in disproportionate numbers as compared to their white neighbors, specifically focusing on the coalfields. I argue that the answer is, perhaps obviously, the effects of anti-Black racism. The processes are, however, more complicated than those of overt discrimination and racialized violence (although those are both factors as well). Building on the theoretical insights of Black Studies and Black geographies, I seek to understand precisely how anti-Blackness has operated to shape human geographies of coalfield Appalachia.

I draw on the concept of anti-Blackness as it is used in Black Studies literature. As Black geographers Adam Bledsoe and Willie Wright describe, anti-Blackness is a concept that originates in Afro-pessimist scholarship. This body of scholarship argues "that civil society as we understand and live it is (in)formed by the dehumanizing condition of chattel slavery" (Bledsoe and Wright 2019, 9), and, therefore, modern politics, economy, thought, and geography have been structured in opposition to all forms of Black social life, but yet require Blackness to function (Patterson 2018; Hartman 1997; Wilderson 2010; Sexton 2016; Sharpe 2016). Anti-Blackness has, therefore, also "(in)formed" the geography of Appalachia.

A series of studies, memoirs, and accounts of Black community life and industrial decline in coalfield Appalachia shows a complicated set of factors driving and pulling Black people out of the region (Turner and Cabbell 1985; Armstead 2002; Wagner and Obermiller 2004; Deaner 2004; Brown 2018; Turner 2021). Analyzing these and other sources that document Black life in the coalfields, I find, as Karida Brown aptly writes, that "Black people and their communities were systematically disappeared through the process of industrial decline and ruination" (2018, 6). In the process of deindustrialization that emptied coal camps and communities across the region, I find that Black people contended with a racialized hierarchy of labor, a racialized geography of the coal camp, and, in the words of Isabel Wilkerson, quoting Richard Wright (2009), the "warmth of other suns" (Wilkerson 2010, 13): the draw of places with more opportunity, freedom, and security. I also find vibrant and diverse Black communities in the coalfields, historically and in the present. I argue that the processes that dispossessed many Black people originated in part from white power brokers' assumption that Black people are aspatial: that they do not, and should not, make, control, or create their own space (McKittrick and Woods 2007; Bledsoe and Wright 2019).

I first briefly detail the ways that Black people made and make home in the region in spite of anti-Black racism. While documenting the ways Black communities have made home in the mountains is crucially important work for countering white narratives about Black aspatiality, much of that work is beyond the bounds of this article. Many scholars of Black life in Appalachia and the coalfields have and are currently doing this important work (Turner and Cabbell 1985; Wagner and Obermiller 2004; Trotter 2015; Brown 2018; Thom El-Amin 2019; El-Amin and Dennis 2020; Turner 2021; Trotter 2022).

Instead, I focus on the mechanisms through which dispossession and displacement of Black communities occurred, considering the ways that Black people's contributions to the production of place can be overlooked and hidden. By detailing stories of dispossession, I also highlight the many ways that Black communities have continually created their own space in the Appalachian coalfields and made this place their home, despite and against racist narratives, white terror, and material dispossession. Understanding and foregrounding processes of racialized dispossession counter simplified narratives about white possession.

As Karida Brown notes, "African Americans have also been displaced from Appalachia in the popular imagination" (2018, 6). The assumption of Black aspatiality is today most stark in a kind of public erasure of Black peoples' historical and contemporary roles in the region. In the conclusion of this article, I consider how narratives about the region, and narratives that people in the region circulate about themselves, construct a mythic whiteness that, at times, self-indigenizes Appalachian white people. I conclude that these narratives render Black people and other people of color out of place in an imagined white homeland.

Black Geographies and Appalachia

Black geographies is a body of scholarship that examines the ways Black people produce space (make home, build communities and neighborhoods, and more) and contend with the often violent racializations of space (racialized gentrification, racialized segregation, environmental injustices, unequal access to vital services, and more) (McKittrick 2006; Woods 2017; Bledsoe, Eaves, and Williams 2017; Hawthorne 2019; Bledsoe 2021). LaToya Eaves presents "Black geographies as an intervention into normalized regionalisms and the production of space" (2018, 92). In a region that is often naturalized as a "white space," Black geographies scholarship provides an approach to examine the ways in which anti-Blackness has operated to shape and define Appalachia's regional geography.

I draw on Black geographies scholarship to consider how white narratives about Appalachia facilitated the racialized depopulation of the

coalfields. Geographers Adam Bledsoe and Willie Wright (2019) discuss the ways in which spatiality is denied to Black people. Building upon Katherine McKittrick's discussion of how of Black space becomes rendered "ungeographic" (2006, x), Bledsoe and Wright (2019) argue that an assumption about Black populations lacking both humanity and agency in space was central to enslaving Africans. They write that "the assumed a-spatiality that defined conditions of chattel slavery continues to imprint the socio-spatial relations" of the present (Bledsoe and Wright 2019, 12). White narratives about Appalachia that erase Black presence operate on this assumption that Black Appalachian people are aspatial.

Yet, as Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods argue, "the invisible/forgettable is producing space—always, and in all sorts of ways" (2007, 4). Even throughout a century of dispossession in Appalachia, Black communities continue to produce space and make community across the coalfields. The evidence of these communities can be seen through an analysis of their dispossession and displacement and in their continued life and presence in the mountains.

Scholars of Appalachia have frequently returned to the question of race, whiteness, and Appalachia (Hartigan 2004; Scott 2010; McCarroll 2018). For instance, Barbara Ellen Smith notes the frequent and troubling elision between class and racialist logics when discussing stereotyping and "the hillbilly" (2004, 51). Rebecca Scott describes the particular nature of a marked whiteness in Appalachia, and the central place the region holds in white racial imaginaries in the United States (2009). Building upon these insights, I engage Black geographies as a route to consider how Appalachian geography—not simply identity—is produced through racial exclusion, and to consider other ways to think about place and identity in Appalachia. In the subsuequent section, I demonstrate how anti-Blackness has structured conditions of existence for Black and white communities in Appalachia.

Black Emplacement and Displacement in Coal Country

From the 1880s to the 1930s, Black people flocked to the coalfields of Appalachia. Enticed by the lack of *de jure* segregation in many coalfield states, such as West Virginia, and the comparative freedoms that coal mining offered over the sharecropping economy and regimes of raical terrorism in the Plantation South, Black communities made home in the coalfields (Lewis 1989; Burchett 1997).

Over the course of the subsequent several decades, Black Appalachians lost jobs, lost homes, and were exposed to unequal levels of environmental hazards compared to their white neighbors. Black people were positioned, and not simply because of their class positions, to experience the brunt of

deindustrialization and exposure to environmental hazards. The after-lives of segregation in jobs in coal mining, segregation in coalfield housing, and a coupling of the draw of growing and vibrant Black communities elsewhere with a violent overt racism in the coalfields drove Black people out of the coalfields. Importantly, central to each of these processes was the assumption that Black people could and would move, that they were not a permanent part of this place.

In the following section, I detail the historical geography of Black place-making and dispossession in the coalfields of Appalachia. Rather than focus on one case or time, I move between accounts and examples over several decades.

A Black Place

Black people have been a central part of Appalachian political economy and society since settler occupation. Black laborers worked on plantations and in salt works, and gold, iron, and coal mines in the Appalachian mountains since the early nineteenth century, often as enslaved peoples (Williams 1991). Coal mining did not become a central industry in the region until the development of railroads across and through the mountains in the late nineteenth century. This development was predicated on racially devalued labor. Railroad developments in the mountains began in the 1870s, a period coinciding with the post-Reconstruction Black Codes in many southern states, which allowed Black people to be arrested and put into bondage labor for any number of minor offenses, such as vagrancy or joblessness. State penitentiaries would lease their prisoners for use as laborers to various companies. In Virginia and other southern states, this convict leasing included the dangerous and hard labor of tunneling and laying track for the mountain railroads (Fain 2011). Most of the rail lines that were laid between the 1870s and the 1890s—after which the convict leasing system was abolished in Virginia and many other states—involved Black people working as leased convicts (Nelson 2008).

With railroads laid and industrial development beginning to take off, coal production became the major industry in Central Appalachia after the 1870s. In this early industrial mining, Black people were regularly forced to work in coal mines as leased convicts. As unpaid labor, this practice undercut white workers' wages. Only after striking white miners took up arms and freed Black convict laborers in the Coal Creek War in northeast Tennessee did the state legislature, in 1894, abolish the convict leasing system. Other Appalachian states followed suit, reducing the practice in coal mining through the 1890s (Shapiro 1998). It was not until 1928, however, that the practice would be abolished in all the Appalachian states (Mancini 1996).

As coal mining grew in scale and scope in the 1910s, Black labor became increasingly important. Like the vast majority of coal miners in the early twentieth century, Black people came to coal mining as migrants (Nyden 1974; Lewis 2009; Trotter 2022). As historian Michael Burchett notes, the Central Appalachian coalfields became a destination in the first Great Migration, Black people's migration out of the Plantation South (1997). Historian Ronald Lewis explains that Black coal miners made on average between three and seven times what agricultural laborers in the South earned, and at least 50 percent more to three times more than urban Black laborers in the South (Lewis 1989). Often, companies stoked racialized violence, employing Black workers as strikebreakers (Savage 1990). Many Black workers, however, also found steady work in the coalfields and created good lives and community as part of the coal economy in the first half of the twentieth century (Brown 2018; Trotter 2022).

Black neighborhoods and towns were established all across coal country. Scholars and historians have documented the vibrance of all-Black coal towns such as Lynch and Benham in Kentucky, where community members fondly remember schools, sports teams, and social clubs (Wagner and Obermiller 2004; Brown 2018; *Eastern Kentucky Social Club* 2020). Black people in coal country fought for their communities, in struggles for equal rights in education, such as in the fight for Black students services at Bluefield State College in 1968 (*James v. West Virginia Board of Regents*, 322 F. Supp. 217 [S.D.W.Va. 1971]). Such struggles have a long history in the region; as the first education civil rights cases in the nation, *Williams v. Board of Education* originated in a West Virginia coal town in 1898 (Rice 2007).

Racialized hierarchies of labor and risk, the racialized geography of the coal camp, and the draw of a better life elsewhere made life for Black people different from the lives of their white neighbors. Black people would join a wave of migration out of the coalfields beginning in the 1940s. Much of the literature on depopulation in Appalachia has taken a race-neutral approach. With some exceptions (Wagner and Obermiller 2004; Brown 2018), scholarship has focused on white experiences in moving to northern cities. Black out-migration was, however, perhaps the most pronounced of any group of people who had made home in the coalfields.

Racialized Labor

In Appalachia, coal mining relied on differentiated regimes of labor organized along racial lines. In what was termed the "hand-loading era," Black miners worked in some of the most physically strenuous and least-paid positions. By the 1940s, Black men were least likely to be skilled machine operators, and most likely to work the least-paid positions in mining operations, at times sorting coal as it left the mines (Lewis 1989).

Facing falling rates of returns, global fuel competition with petroleum, and the cost of capitulating to the demands of organized labor, coal companies worked hard to mechanize and downsize their workforce (Eller 2008).

Historian Ronald Lewis documents that mechanization meant a racialized deindustrialization of the mining workforce:

> Blacks were disproportionately affected by the introduction of machines because they were concentrated in the handloading and unskilled jobs that could be performed mechanically. Further increasing the probability of Blacks losing their jobs was the common practice prior to the late 1940s of laying off miners according to job classification seniority rather than to mine-wide seniority. As a consequence, the number of Blacks in the industry slid from 55,142 to 30,042 between 1930 and 1950, a decline of 46 percent. In the central Appalachian states, which contained the largest concentration of Black miners, their numbers fell from 31,534 to 19,380 during these same years, a decline of 38 percent. (Lewis 1989, 98)

After a tumultuous decade of wartime production and massive waves of strikes, in 1951, long-serving president of the mineworker's union John L. Lewis brokered a contract with the Bituminous Coal Operators Association that would set the trajectory of mine labor relations for forty years. The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), with far-reaching membership, agreed not to strike because of jobs displacement through mechanization, in exchange for pensions, high wages, and benefits packages for mineworkers (Price 2008).

Mining labor hierarchy was structured in anti-Blackness and had already positioned Black men to disproportionately experience more layoffs than their white co-workers in the past decades. Those layoffs of the 1950s and 1960s built upon prior losses. Ronald Lewis explains the effects of unmitigated mechanization:

> The postwar period saw the industry 'saved' by the introduction of the continuous miner, a technological marvel that integrated several stages of coal production from the face to the coal car into one machine. Although production was doubled, the work force was devastated, with the total number of miners declining by 73 percent, from 483,818 to 128,375 between 1950 and 1970. The effect on blacks was even more calamitous as their numbers fell by 88 percent from 30,042 to 3,673 during this same period. (Lewis 1989, 99)[1]

By the 1960s, the majority white UMWA membership was at its height of power and the greatest extent of its benefit packages (Mulcahy 2001). Black miners were included in the benefits that were extended to white

miners. However, atop the union's seniority policies extending only across job classification, racist attitudes pervaded among the industry management. "Management was responsible for hiring, firing, upgrading, and training, and many employers simply believed that blacks were either mentally incapable of operating sophisticated machinery or were too unreliable to be depended upon. As labor demand fell, these inherently racist ideas were easily acted upon" (Lewis 1989, 98). While many Black men and even some Black women had experiences of work that belied this trend, in the aggregate, Black people were disproportionately left of out the gains that miners made in the 1960s and 1970s.

In a place where coal was the central employer, to be dispossessed of access to a job meant displacement from the place. The result was, as Joe William Trotter documents, that "many African Americans again responded to declining economic and social conditions by adapting migration strategies" (2022, 23). States with large Black coal mining populations, such as West Virginia, witnessed rapid out-migration. Trotter details that "the state's total African American population dropped from a peak of 117,700 in 1940 to 65,000 in 1980, a decline from 6 to 3 percent of the total" (2022, 24).

Of the hundreds of thousands of people who left mining from the 1920s through the 1970s, it was Black people who disproportionately left the region for prospects of better jobs in northern industrial cities (Burchett 1997).

Geography of the Coal Camp

Black people in mining communities not only faced difficulty finding and keeping jobs; they also faced the legacies of racially segregated housing and the effects of deindustrialization that followed. Coal mining communities across Appalachia were often organized into geographies termed coal camps: strings of company-built houses, often strung back from a main road, and often heading up a mountain hollow. Geographer Mack Gillenwater notes that in Appalachian coal camps, Black communities were generally located farther away from the centers of town and in less desirable areas, such as near mine entrances and along steep hillsides (1972). Robert Armstead, a Black coal miner, describes this condition in his memoir. The company town, Grant Town, West Virginia, where Armstead was raised, "had three places where blacks could live: Inktom Hill, Black Bottom and Grays Flats. Like most black communities in the coal camps, they were either a long walk from the mine or were right next to the mine and the railroad tracks, where it was noisy and dirty" (2002, 17). Ronald Lewis also documents that "although integration prevailed inside the mine, segregation ruled on the outside, and the separate facilities often were not equal. Negro sections, such as 'N[-----] Town' in Stonega, Virginia, usually were the least desirable in the camps" (1989, 96).

In his memoir of Black life in a coal community in Harlan County, Kentucky, William Turner recalls a similar geography and inequality in housing stock:

> The houses occupied by Blacks, in the physical spaces reserved for them, such as Smoky Row and Machine Shop Hollow behind the coke ovens—where my mother was born—were significantly and conspicuously inferior to the houses in which most of the Whites lived. (2021, 213)

In an oral history of Logan County, West Virginia, Martin Mendez, who had grown up in a Mexican American family in the coal camp of Dehue, explained: "We were brown kids, so we lived about [in] the middle, but the Black folks lived all the way back at the end of the holler. . . . We had to walk all the way back up the hill with an ice cream, but those white kids lived right next to the store" (2012).

The racialized geography of the coal camp was not simply about who was closest to the stores and amenities, which were generally placed near the mouth of the hollow or the intersection with a main road. Farther up the mountain were often the coal tipples, or entrances to mines. As entrances to mines, these were sites of industrial noise and pollution. Large fans would move air through the mines, and massive conveyer belts would run all night, moving coal out from the mine, covering everything in its surroundings in coal dust. Armstead also recalls the proximity to coal waste: "Day and night, we smelled the slate dump, or 'gob pile,' near our home" (2002, 20). Slate dumps did not only fill the home and soak drying laundry with poisonous air from the burning coal waste pile, but slate dumps were also notoriously dangerous sites, spontaneously combusting in deadly explosions (Armstead 2002). Within the gendered labor of the coal camp, men often worked in the mines, and women often did the labor of caring for the family, enabling the miners to go to work again the next day. Many Black women who stayed home, therefore, faced disproportionate exposure to environmental risks (Armstead 2002).[2]

White people in coal camps were not spared the plague of coal dust or smoke. Indeed, many coal camps were integrated, with little differentiation in housing, such as the Red Jacket coal camp in Mingo County, West Virginia (Gourley 2019). Yet, as the numerous sources above indicate, in many other instances, Black people lived either long walks from amenities, infrastructure, and work, or close to the churn and the mess of the mines.

Coal companies began shutting down or selling off their company towns between the 1940s and 1970s. With declining labor requirements, companies had less use of extensive and costly operations, providing water, electricity, doctors, stores, and at times schools (Mulrooney 1991; Shifflett

1995). In some cases, companies evicted the remaining tenants and bulldozed houses, clearing space for larger industrial facilities or simply removing the potential risks caused by having homeowners near the mines. In other cases, companies offered the residents the opportunity to purchase their homes, which many people ultimately did (Shifflett 1995).

Black communities that were able to hold onto homes during deindustrialization faced novel risks in a new era of mining. Beginning in the 1940s and 1950s, surface mining, known as strip-mining, posed great dangers for those living on steep slopes and at the heads of hollows. Unregulated strip mines polluted waterways, triggered landslides, and sent rock and debris careening into houses, homes, and fields (Montrie 2003).

The legacies of racialized coal camp geography combined with new strip-mining practices to disproportionately expose Black people to environmental hazards, compared to their white neighbors. As accounts of inequality in coal camp housing indicate, Black communities were located on steeper slopes, farther up in hollows, in flood-prone bottoms, and closer to mine sites. These places faced more flooding and more mudslides and were closer to debris falling off sites than were homes closer to the flatlands of major roads and town centers (McCommons 2020). Many white people also lived in these same precarious geographies and faced the brunt of strip-mining's environmental toll. Many other white people, however, lived in safer locations near the historic town centers, while Black people generally did not.

In the years after the Surface Mine Reclamation Act was passed in 1977, mining practices improved, but strip-mining only expanded in size and scale. Mountaintop removal, or extensive strip-mining, became widespread across the coalfields from the 1990s into the 2000s. Not only did mountaintop removal pose significant risks of increased flooding and debris falling from sites (although risks of catastrophic landslides and flooding had been somewhat mitigated), but heavy blasting created new risks, as blasts cracked home foundations, dropped water tables, and made wells run dry, which sometimes depleted people's only source of water. Furthermore, communities directly next to mountaintop removal sites experienced floodlights all night, the sounds of heavy machinery, and clouds of dust that would roll into the hollows below mine sites (Shnayerson 2008; Scott 2010; Schwartzman 2013). Black coal camp communities, often still in the areas where they had purchased homes in segregated coal camps, were exposed to blasting dust, noise pollution, and the effects of blasting on wells and foundations.

In Boone County, West Virginia, a white resident remembered, as a child, playing with Black children far up a hollow in an old coal camp. As mountaintop removal came to the area, that part of the hollow also suffered

some of the most immediate impacts. The interviewee remembered that the families had left the area by around the mid-2000s (personal communication, July 18, 2020).[3] For Black coalfield communities, dwindling jobs, proximity of homes to environmental hazards, and the increasingly depressed economic condition of the coalfields after the 1970s compounded pressures to go elsewhere.

Furthermore, when Black communities experienced catastrophic environmental disasters from coal economy hazards, at times, they faced racist disregard. For instance, in 1977, forty-four families in the Black community of Sanctified Hill in Cumberland, Kentucky, located on a very steep hill, had to evacuate their homes due to a massive landslide that engulfed the community (Turner and Cabbell 1985). Strip-mining practices had destabilized the mountain slope where the houses were located. With over 150 people displaced from their homes, the community requested a federal disaster declaration; however, the government denied the request. Without a disaster declaration, the insurance companies deemed the damage an "act of God" and therefore refused to make payments. The city offered residents who generally owned their own homes rental housing in new Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funded apartments. Ultimately, the community was able to organize a nonprofit development corporation and secure over three million dollars in grant funding for the houses and community center. Yet this settlement took six years to come to fruition (McCommons 2020).

White elites frequently treated Black people as expendable and Black places as temporary. White communities, again, were often also exposed to these same environmental risks, exposures, and wanton government disregard for their well-being. Yet when Black communities dealt with the effects of strip-mining and industrial pollution and risk, they did so from within geographic legacies of racialized housing and discrimination. Therefore, when compared with the aggregate of their white neighbors, Black communities disproportionately faced these risks.

The "Warmth of Other Suns"

Part of the story of Black coal communities is that they had other places to go. As Black people faced a white power structure that frequently denied them the ability to make stable, safe, and permanent homes in the hills, many Black people decided that there were better places to be. William Turner writes: "We seemed to know, intuitively, that our Appalachian coal-town hollow was a temporary stopover to some other promised land" (2021, 2). Unlike many of the white families in the coalfields, many Black people had extended families, friends, and relations spread across urban America as a part of the long Great Migration. Historian Ronald Lewis explains: "Unlike white natives of central Appalachia who left only under

economic duress and returned home at the first employment opportunity, black migration from the region was more permanent" (1989, 101).

As Black people fled the regime of racial terror in the Plantation South that was rampant amid the decline of the cotton economy from the 1910s through the 1970s, the coalfields of Central Appalachia were only one stopping point. For Black people leaving the coalfields after the 1940s, migration was easier than it had been for the first generation of the Great Migration. As Karida Brown notes, "unlike earlier migrants, the second wavers had access to information and support from established migrant networks; they were more likely to know family, friends, or fellow home folks in potential urban destinations" (2018, 162). Black people had organized communities and neighborhoods in cities like Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago, and many of those people leaving the coalfields had places to go and people they knew in those areas. Furthermore, at that time, northern industrial cities, such as Detroit and Chicago, had growing industries that were readily hiring Black men into well-paying factory work, such as the auto industry. As it became clear that coal mining was not an industry with a growing future, at least for Black workers, Black families saw the pull of work, schooling, and a home elsewhere (Brown 2018).

This draw of other places was also in part the result of the racial terror and discrimination felt at home in the coalfields. For instance, William Turner recounts that the memories of the lynching of Black men in Letcher and Harlan Counties haunted his east Kentucky youth (Turner 2021). Three examples indicate how the coalfields of Central Appalachia were, at times, a home to racial violence that made the region an inhospitable and dangerous place to be Black.

First, segregated geographies of coal camps allowed for quotidian instances of racial terror. Brenda Thornton, in an oral history with Karida Brown about Lynch, Kentucky, in the mid-twentieth century, recalled that for Black children, leaving the segregated part of the community was, at times, both dangerous and necessary. For instance, Thornton discusses how

> "when we went to the big store we had to travel through some of these areas that were white. Before we reached the hospital—and I think it was on Church Street—these people would always sic their dogs on us, they were boxer dogs. So we actually really had to run for our lives with these dogs." (quoted in Brown 2018, 86)

Karida Brown discusses how Thornton's and other interviewees' experiences illustrate the ways that Black children were unable to avoid understanding their raicalized status (2018).

Second, the coalfields, like much of the rest of rural America, were home to "sundown towns," where Black people were expected to leave by

sunset, upon fear of brutal violence and death. Corbin, Kentucky, an eastern Kentucky town that was home to a violent white riot in 1919, is a prime example. Responding to dubious reports that two Black men had assaulted a white man, an armed white mob of white railroad workers rounded up all two to three hundred of the town's Black residents, including families, and forced them onto train cars headed for Knoxville, Tennessee, or Louisville, Kentucky, far away from their homes, with the message not to come back (Kenning 2020). From that time until the late-twentieth century, at the earliest, Corbin was known as a sundown town. Other Central Appalachian towns were also known as sundown towns, including Erwin, Tennessee where the memory of racial violence remains to this day (El-Amin and Dennis 2020).

Sundown towns and very real threats of racial violence extended across the Central Appalachian coalfields. Entire counties in West Virginia were known to be off-limits for Black people to reside or stay in, such as Nicholas County. Tara Brown, interviewing her white mother who grew up in Nicholas County, documented that racial violence extended into, at least, the 1960s, when a Black State Farm insurance adjuster's car was attacked, and the man was forced to leave Nicholas County (Brown 2020).

Another sundown town was Blair, West Virginia. One resident explained to me in 2012 that he still thought Blair was off-limits to Black people.[4] While he had gone to school with Black children, the families lived outside of Blair, at risk of violence and death, in what was called "N----- holler." That area was one of the first mountain hollows to be filled in with sediment as a "valley-fill" from nearby mountaintop removal mining in the late 1990s (personal communication, June 18, 2012). The presence and the likely preponderance of sundown towns indicate that the coalfields were also a landscape of racial exclusion, due to the threat of violence. Furthermore, sundown towns reflect the assumption that Black people might work in a place, but that there was no place, certainly not a permanent place, for them to stay in that geography.

A second example of the anti-Black exclusion in the coalfields is racial discrimination in economic development efforts. In a groundbreaking study published in 1980, Ed Cabbell reviewed the economic and social conditions of Black Appalachian communities from 1975–1978. His findings were scathing:

> I observed, or was told of, blacks living in dilapidated houses in the segregated or "colored" section of the villages and towns. Usually these sections lacked adequate roads, streets, facilities (fire hydrants, sewers, street lights). I rarely met blacks in the mountains with really good, reasonable jobs. . . . Affirmative Action programs,

> which usually existed on paper in local and county offices to meet the guidelines for federal funds, were almost totally ignored in the mountains. (Cabbell 1980, 49)

Cabbell additionally detailed that federal poverty programs, created to attend to deep economic depression of the Appalachian region, largely overlooked Black Appalachian communities. Cabbell writes that "the federal government has failed or refused to recognize the plight of black Appalachians in its 'War on Poverty' agencies and programs of the 60s" (1980, 50). Cabbell argued that racial discrimination and segregation continued in the mountains in ways that kept the flow of relief and development resources from Black communities, making the claim that the Civil Rights movement had "by-passed the mountains" (Turner and Cabbell 1985, 9). Once again, white elites had acted as if Black people and Black places were not there, as if Appalachian poverty programs were only for white communities.

In many instances, the mountains were not a hospitable place to Black people, and while cities across America were and are places rife with racism, the mountains offered no refuge (Trotter 2022). Black people left the region in great numbers due to racist and violent exclusions from space, dispossession from space, and racist provision of government services, alongside the pull of better jobs and family in other places.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most enduring elements of anti-Blackness in the region are the way that dominant narratives depict Appalachian people as stereotypically white, and how claims to Appalachian identity often draw on myths about whiteness and Scots-Irish or Anglo-Saxon heredity. Such narratives continue to obscure the role Black people have in making Appalachia what it is today. More than simply leaving Black people out of the story, the implication of these narratives is that Black people in Appalachia are out of place, migrants coming through a land of white people. This type of narrative typifies geographers' discussion of the assumed aspatiality and ungeographic-ness of Black residents in Appalachia.

Narratives about Appalachia's whiteness are exemplified in popular fiction and nonfiction accounts, where Appalachia is readily portrayed as a homeland and heartland for poor white people descended from Scots-Irish immigrants, often marked as different by their hillbillyness, their poverty, or their clannish ways (Billings, Norman, and Ledford 2000; Smith 2004; Scott 2009; McCarroll 2018). A recent example of the narratives about Appalachian whiteness appears in J. D. Vance's 2016 memoir of growing up poor in a central Ohio suburb, *Hillbilly Elegy*. A central feature of the book is the claim that Vance's upbringing of poverty came from his inherited hillbillyness—the literal inheritance of the Scots-Irish in Appalachia. Vance is

very clear that this "hill person"-hood has an "ethnic component" (2016, 2). As Vance writes, "I identify with the millions of working-class white Americans of Scots-Irish descent," believing that family structures, values, and poverty have remained constant within that ethnic group for centuries (2016, 3). Amid the mythic whiteness that Vance (2016) presents, the book has virtually no engagement with Black people.

Vance (2016) is hardly alone in his representation of Appalachian identity. For over a century, authors have looked to Appalachia as a repository of pure, unsullied, and authentic white Americans. Cecil Sharp and Maude Karpeles, folklorists of the 1910s, found Appalachia to be a repository of old English ballads, only because they refused to collect songs from Black or Indigenous singers, despite consistently encountering non-white communities (Walkowitz 2010). As John Inscoe has noted, William Faulkner, whose works of southern fiction focus on dimensions of race and class, relies on Appalachia as a place to draw characters who are unfamiliar with Black people and distanced from the troubling questions of race in America (Inscoe 2009). These and many other instances reproduce a myth that Appalachia is a place of whiteness, with a place-based identity built around mythic whiteness—a myth that is today articulated through claims to Scots-Irish ancestry.

White people in Appalachia at times reproduce these very discourses about their connections to early white settlers as a claim to identity and to place. Stephen Pearson details how in dominant discourses about identity, white Appalachian people often portray themselves as almost Indigenous when discussing their relationship to land, what Pearson (2013) argues is a reproduction of settler colonialism. These same discourses of Appalachian identity also render Black people out of place, depicting white people as "land-based" and leaving Black people as aspatial actors.

In recent years, the decline of coal has ushered in a new round of national sympathy for the Appalachia region. News and media reports continue to spotlight the region and its coal miners as victims of industrial decline, of environmental regulation, and a failure to support workers in an energy transition (Wright 2020). Attention to these issues is certainly well-merited and long overdue. The way that the attention has often been positioned, however, comes in familiar tones, often portraying stalwart white male miners and white working-class coal families, with generations of connections to the hills, facing a tragic decision to leave or stay. These portrayals are connected to the construction of mythic whiteness, and they position the white mining families as in-place. Drawing on a settler myth of Appalachian whiteness, these portrayals further an assumption that the Black people, who were central to mining economies, and who continue to make home in the hills, are out of place—that they are not "real" Appalachians.

Notes

1. See also Barnum (1970).

2. The unique ways that Black women faced uneven exposure to environmental risk deserves much more attention than provided here. As Trotter (2022) writes, "the intersection of race and gender is largely absent from historical treatments of Black life in the Mountain State" (104)—something true for coalfield Appalachia more broadly. Existing primary sources about Black coalfield life, whether memoirs or oral histories, heavily favor men's perspectives. Future research should focus particulary on Black women's experience in coalfield communities.

3. The interviewee wishes to remain anonymous.

4. The interviewee wishes to remain anonymous.

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