5-2024

Reclamation: The Towns of the Virginia Coalfields

Craig Owens
East Tennessee State University

Reclamation: The Towns of the Virginia Coalfields

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Art &

Design East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art

---

by

Craig Bradley Owens

May 2024

Tema Stauffer, Committee Chair

Sage Perrott

Dr. Michael Fowler

Keywords: coal, coalfields, photography, Virginia, Clinchfield Coal Company, rural America, railroads, small towns, churches, Appalachia

ABSTRACT

Reclamation: The Towns of the Virginia Coalfields

by

Craig Bradley Owens

The photographer discusses his work in *Reclamation: The Towns of the Virginia Coalfields*, a Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibit held at the Tipton Gallery from February 12th through February 23, 2024. The exhibition focuses on coal towns located in the southwestern part of Virginia. The exhibition consists of 20 framed, archival inkjet prints. Each framed work is 36" x 24" and is representative of the artist's exploration of the towns. A catalog of the exhibit is included at the end of this thesis.

Owens examines formal and conceptual artistic influences, both historical and contemporary. Historic and contemporary photographic influences include Dorothea Lange, Victoria Sambunaris, Carol Highsmith, Andrew Borowiec, Stacy Kranitz, Frank Hunter, Mike Smith, and Builder Levy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members: Tema Stauffer, for her support and guidance during the creation of this thesis project; Dr. Michael Fowler and Sage Perrott for their advice, input, and for lending their expertise to my work.

I would also like to thank my family and friends for their love and support during my graduate school career, especially my mother, Lorine Owens, who accompanied me on many of my photographic excursions. I really liked the ones when we got lost.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT....2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS....4
LIST OF FIGURES....6
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION....8
CHAPTER 2. CONTEXT AND CONTENT....11
CHAPTER 3. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT....19
CHAPTER 4. PHOTOGRAPHIC INFLUENCE....25
Dorothea Lange....26
Andrew Borowiec....27
Builder Levy....28
Carol Highsmith....29
CHAPTER 5. PLACE AS INSPIRATION....31
Victoria Sambunaris....31
Stacy Kranitz....33
Mike Smith....36
CHAPTER 6. RECLAMATION: THE COALFIELDS OF VIRGINIA....39
CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION....46
WORKS CITED....49
CATALOGUE OF EXHIBIT....52
VITA....72

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Brad Owens, *Tiger Mart*, Haysi, Virginia, 2022, Archival Inkjet Print 12

Figure 2. Brad Owens, *Welcome to Clinchco,* Clinchco, Virginia, 2022, Archival Inkjet Print 13

Figure 3. Brad Owens, *Sunrise at the Overlook*, Tennessee, 2020, Digital Image 16

Figure 4. Brad Owens, *Dante Train Signal,* Dante, Virginia, 2023, Archival Inkjet Print 17

Figure 5. View of Middle Camp, Looking Northwest, Type C House No. 6 in Foreground – Trammel Middle Camp, Trammel, Dickenson County, VA Photos from Survey HABS VA-1344 22

Figure 6. Dorothea Lange, *Gas Station, Kern County, California,* 1938, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA 26

Figure 7. Andrew Borowiec, *The Blue Church,* Wheeling West Virginia, 2019 27

Figure 8. Builder Levy. *Coal Camp, near Grundy, Buchanan County, VA,* Brooklyn Museum, 1970, photogravure, sheet: 20 × 16 in. (50.8 × 40.6 cm) image: 10 1/2 × 11 in. (26.7 × 27.9 cm) 29

Figure 9. Carol M. Highsmith. *Alabama Motel in rural Alabama*. May 9. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/2010640170/> 30

Figure 10. Victoria Sambunaris, from *Taxonomy of a Landscape*, 2011 31

Figure 11. Brad Owens, *Bathhouse and Training Center,* Grundy, Virginia, 2023, Archival Inkjet Print 32

Figure 12. Stacy Kranitz, from A*s it Was Give(n) to Me,* 2011, published by Twin Palms, 2022 34

Figure 13. Brad Owens, *Dante Trains in Fog,* Dante, Virginia, 2023, Archival Inkjet Print 34

Figure 14. Frank Hunter, from *Appalachia,* 2023 35

Figure 15. Brad Owens, *Virginia City Presbyterian,* Virginia City, Virginia, 2023, Archival Inkjet Print 36

Figure 16. Mike Smith, from *East Tennessee Color,* 2023 37

Figure 17. Brad Owens, *UMWA,* Haysi, Virginia, 2023, Archival Inkjet Print 38

Figure 18. Brad Owens, *Riverside Gardens,* Clinchco, Virginia, 2023, Archival Inkjet Print ... 39

Figure 19. Brad Owens, *Jesus Will Last*, Duffield, Virginia, 2023, Digital Inkjet Print 41

Figure 20. Brad Owens, *Winter Bridge in Fog*, Gate City, Virginia, 2023, Digital Inkjet Print 42

Figure 21. Brad Owens, *Norton Train Crossing*, Norton, Virginia, 2023, Archival Inkjet Print.43

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

I was born in a small mining community in Virginia. My father was a coal miner, my grandfathers were coal miners, my uncles were coal miners, and most of my cousins wanted to grow up to be coal miners. The coal industry crafted my identity as surely as my family and the mountains we all called home, even though I tried my best to deny that reality. I never referred to myself as Appalachian. In fact, the first time I was called Appalachian was in college. I asked my family about it and they said that, technically, we were Appalachian, but we were really from the coal fields. By the time I was in high school, the coal companies were in decline, and the defining characteristic of the coal towns began to shift, as did my perception of my identity.

The towns of the coalfields were so closely tied to the mines that as the industry contracted, the towns shrunk in response. The promise of a prosperous future dissipated like an early morning fog in the valleys. What was left in the wake of the economic shift was an uncertainty that gave way to fear and trepidation. After I left the coalfields to pursue a life without coal, I developed a view of the towns that was a mixture of nostalgia and resentment. The coalfields refused to change, in my estimation, and they would be left behind because of this stubbornness.

I decided to go back into the coalfields with open eyes as an attempt to understand the modern reality of the region where I grew up. My current work is a photographic series focused on coal towns in Southwest Virginia, specifically those most closely associated with the Clinchfield Coal Company. While the initial intent of the series was to document the current circumstances of the towns as the coal industry declines, the series became more of an exploration into the remnants of the coal industry and the townscapes left behind. These towns, many of which were built by the Clinchfield Coal Company to exclusively house their miners, are mere remnants of their former selves but the modern residents are attempting revitalization

efforts to varying degrees of success. I've titled the project *Reclamation: The Coalfields of Virginia,* as a way to both identify my subject matter and to reference an industry term. Of course, the term has taken on a different meaning than when I was most familiar with it in the 1980s. According to the Virginia Department of Energy, reclamation is now called repurposing. Their definition includes the following statement,

> Mined Land Repurposing (MLR) is responsible for ensuring the reclamation of land affected by surface and underground coal mining activity. Major functions include regulating surface effects of coal mining, reclaiming abandoned mine lands, issuing permits, performing inspections, assisting small operators, and responding to citizen concerns. ("Mined")

I remember the reclamation project that occurred on the road to the house where I grew up.

My family lived in a holler in Dickenson County, Virginia. The only access to our house was a small dirt road that wound up the mountain. Across the valley, there was another mountain that a coal company owned. There was no coal, so the coal company that bought the land, cut every tree, removed as much dirt and rock as they easily could, and used the remnants as a dump. I watched as truck after truck, loaded with sludge, dumped their payload as I drove up this dirt road in the middle of nowhere. Eventually, they filled the valley, raising the creek that ran through it as they went. After filling it up with mining waste, they covered the entire thing with a layer of top soil. The law required six inches of soil. They planted pine trees and left. I wonder if repurposing is governed by the same regulations.

The ultimate purpose of the series is to document the resiliency of these communities, which is evident in their present-day circumstances, while acknowledging the shifting reality of the declining industry that has been such a part of the identity of the region for generations. I strove to maintain an objective distance from the subject matter, but I found that to be nearly

impossible given my history with the region. One of my inspirations, Dorothea Lange, seemed to have a similar situation while photographing the depression era and the lead up to World War II in America. Her images were seemingly intended to document, but they are fraught with emotion due to the subject matter. They unavoidably comment on the times. Instead of objectivity in my documenting the region, I tried to focus on my understanding of the identity of the region in an attempt to further define my own identity having grown up in that world.

These former coal towns exist in valleys between mountains, but they also survive in the juxtaposition of the ruins of a promising past with the uncertainty of the near future. This series represents the overall philosophy that governs my photographic work. It is grounded in a sense of place that the towns suggest, in a sense of awe that the mountains instill, and in a sense of reality that the present dictates.

I take many of my photographic cues from such photographers as Victoria Sambunaris, specifically with her expansive compositions; Carol Highsmith, with her individual take on abandoned spaces; Andrew Borowiec's series "Wheeling West Virginia," especially his treatment of small-town America; and Dorothea Lange, whose work during the Great Depression, particularly her images depicting the attitudes of the people living through the period, resonates with current attitudes toward Appalachia. These influences will be discussed more in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 2. CONTEXT AND CONTENT

I choose to focus on the coalfields of Virginia for two primary reasons. The first is that I was born there. I am familiar with the towns, the coal, and the people. The second reason was that discussions of the plight of coal miners in Appalachia are almost universally focused on either West Virginia or Kentucky. The Virginia Coalfields are often overlooked in the conversations, or they are actively ignored. In fact, the tradition of glossing over the Virginia Coalfields while discussing coal as a cultural motivator is illustrated in a report titled "The Appalachian Coalfield in Historical Context," produced by Springer International Publisher includes this comment:

> In 1742, a party led by J.P. Salley followed the New River into southern West Virginia, reaching a river where he observed outcropping coal seams, now the Coal River. In 1750, a party led by Thomas Walker traveled through the southwestern Virginia coalfield and through Cumberland Gap into eastern Kentucky. (Zipper et al., 8)

The discussion of the history of coal exploration then continues with Kentucky. While the coalfields are often too important to ignore in West Virginia or Kentucky due to their political importance, the coalfields of Virginia are overshadowed by northern Virginia's population density and that region's proximity to Washington D.C.

My exploration of the coalfields began with the coal towns with which I was most familiar. This included my hometown of Haysi, Virginia. Once a thriving coal town, Haysi has seen decline that has mirrored the decline of the coal industry. *Tiger Mart* (Figure 1) is a familiar sight in Haysi. I do not have a memory of the store being open, but the sign has always been there. This image speaks to my attitude regarding the coalfields, namely the remnants that are

left behind by a promising past, the emptiness that is filled with symbolic meaning, and the innate beauty of the region that is ever-present.

Figure 1. Brad Owens, *Tiger Mart*, Haysi, Virginia, 2022, Archival Inkjet Print

That initial foray into documenting the present-day coal towns led me to visit towns that have particular connections to the coal industry. One such town, Clinchco, Virginia, was literally named for the Clinchfield Coal Company and has traditionally been so deeply tied to the industry that it is difficult to form a description of the town without mentioning coal. The image titled *Welcome to Clinchco* (Figure 2) is one that highlights the late 20th century attempts at beautification in the region. Some of the revitalization efforts were met with more success than others.

In 1906, the Clinchfield Coal Company built the Clinchfield Railroad to better serve the coal mining industry. The promise of the railroad was more than just a promise of industry and a stronger economy. The promise included connection to the outside world, an end to the isolation that had been such a descriptive feature of the region, but that connection was never fully realized. A railroad grade was built between Johnson City, TN and Dante, VA in 1890, but

building past Dante was considered too expensive at that time. It would take George L. Carter to attempt to fulfill the promise after the turn of the century, but by the time of completion in 1915, Carter was much advanced in age. The lease was then given to the Atlantic Coast Line and Louisville & Nashville in 1924. This led to the headquarters of the newly formed Clinchfield Railroad moving from Dante, VA to Erwin, TN. The promise was beginning to fail. According to Ron Flanary, writing for Trains.com, by the 21st century, "With southbound coal traffic down to a trickle — and production in its own territory from a single mine at McClure, Va., — the former Clinchfield was downgraded in 2017 with remaining through traffic diverted to other routes." The railroad remains and is still used to transport coal, however, with the decline of the industry, much of the railroad's infrastructure has aged and fallen to disuse. The identities of the coal towns often were centralized around the railroad, and with its decline, the identities of the towns came into question. After all, what is a coal town without coal?

Figure 2. Brad Owens, *Welcome to Clinchco,*

Clinchco, Virginia, 2022, Archival Inkjet Print

My life as an artist has been focused on individual expression and personal vision. My work is an attempt to allow the viewer to experience my world for a brief instant by allowing them to feel what I feel through imagery that encompasses my dichotomous relationship with my upbringing. I focus on buildings and landscapes marred by industry in an attempt to elicit the

feelings of deferred progress that the industry's decline prompted, the serenity that the beauty of the natural world inspires, and the juxtaposition of those two things in the coalfields of Virginia. While I was born and raised in the coalfields of Virginia, a few of my formative years were spent in the Chicago suburbs, where my parents spent time working and judging city life as inferior to life on the side of a mountain in coal country. My vision for my art is fed by my formative years in the city, my isolated years in the country, and my desire to reconcile these two parts of my identity as an adult, which I believe is why my images feel empty and claustrophobic to me.

Furthermore, my art is an expression of my perceptions of myself as an outsider, always an outsider. Whether in an urban or rural setting, I have never felt fully at ease in either. Ideology, religion, sexuality, and political affiliation have always kept me from fully integrating into the places where I have found myself. My photography has a distance, a feigned neutrality, and a buffer between artist and audience. This project in particular examines my innate desire to stand back and observe without comment while still allowing my personal feelings to seep through with subtle commentary.

My undergraduate program was primarily concerned with acrylic painting; however, since graduating, I have discovered a love of photography, and that has been my recent focus. I am attracted to visually striking compositions with a strong emphasis on line and setting. My images tend to evoke a feeling of unbalance, a view that is slightly off center, and an idea of beauty that is a little bit wrong. I try to evoke moods in my imagery that mirror my own complicated emotional response to the region that formed much of my past identity. Those emotions include the dichotomous relationship between nature and desolation, between civilization and isolation, between belonging and not.

My photographic work is typically concerned with compositions that promote contemplation. I like for my images to be easily read from left to right, mimicking the way we

read books in the Western world. My background in English, having worked as an English instructor at Walter's State Community College for 17 years, has prompted this characteristic. I sometimes shift the balance in order to create a more engaging image and a slightly unexpected view, but the draw is often to the left of center. However, I do alter the focus within specific images that suggest more of a tension between subject and a more intentional, connotative analysis of subject matter.

As with any art form, there is a marriage of message to medium in my art. My images tend to elicit a complicated emotional reaction. Presently, my work has focused on serene landscapes and calm tones to offset the oppressiveness of the current political and social turmoil of the country. I completed a series on technology and visual media, which was an attempt to deal with the new reality of being solely online in work and most of life for nearly two years during the pandemic of 2020. Figure 3 is part of that series. It represents my perspective on the time period and on art. The view is slightly off center, subtly suggesting tension and discomfort, and the light emanates from the screen and not the natural world behind the device. The pandemic changed my perceptions of life and living. Isolation was a familiar feeling, but there was something more profound in this instance. I longed to find a part of myself that I had denied for most of my adult life, but where to start?

I began to revisit my art in the Spring of 2020 as a way to ease the anxiety of the pandemic. I had sporadically been practicing with no clear intent in mind, but taking an online class focused on photography changed that for me. I used the camera as a way to express my inner turmoil, and then I turned the lens onto my identity. For me, my identity has always begun in the coalfields of Virginia, so that is where I began my search for self.

Figure 3. Brad Owens, *Sunrise at the Overlook*,

Tennessee, 2020, Digital Image

During my first year pursuing my Master of Fine Arts in the East Tennessee State University's Department of Art and Design, I travelled to the coal towns. My first images were of a town that took the brunt of the damage caused by the coal company's abandonment—Dante, Virginia.

My experience with Dante had always been that the town was hidden, even from those of us who lived near it. The town, in my mind, was little more than a signpost pointing to an area there was no reason to enter. The reality of the town was that it had once been the center of a booming coal industry in the early 1900s. It had been the home of the headquarters of the Clinchfield Coal Company, but the company began to move away in the 1960s. The town began a rapid decline as focus for the coal industry shifted away from Dante to other areas. The image, *Dante Train Signal* (Figure 4), reveals the modern reality of the town that was once the northern terminus of the Clinchfield Railroad as disused tracks and abandoned buildings highlight the signal crossing in the downtown area.

Figure 4. Brad Owens, *Dante Train Signal,* Dante,

Virginia, 2023, Archival Inkjet Print

Some of the towns I explored have achieved some success with their revitalization projects. Appalachia, Virginia, turned one of their coal train tracks into a popular walking trail. According to the tourism website for Wise County Virginia,

> The Powell River Trail… sits on the former Louisville & Nashville Railroad bed, which was used to haul coal from Appalachia to the neighboring Big Stone Gap. More than a century later, this corridor is used by enthusiastic residents and visitors alike for walking, running, biking and walking dogs. ("Powell")

This revitalization of coal industry remnants has been fairly successful as targets for Eco-tourism, including hiking enthusiasts and ATV sporting sites. The access roads created by the coal mines for transporting coal from the mountains to the trains via coal trucks are often recycled as these trails, or parts of the trails.

The towns of the Virginia coalfields are fascinating in that they were the center of the last great expansion into the region and are still very much as they were when that expansion fizzled. They are stuck in time, seemingly comfortable with their new lot in life, but the reality of the 21st century is undeniable. The coalfields, like the rest of the country, must revitalize, renew,

and reclaim their identities in order to successfully enter a new century that is rife with possibilities, that is, if the past is put away and the future is embraced.

The promise of the coalfields still exists. It is a place with endless opportunities for development, advancement, and progress, but it seems that the entire country has gotten into the habit of ignoring the region; however, as Elizabeth Catte points out, "Whatever happens next for Appalachia, there are people here who deserve…to see their lives and history as something other than an incoherent parade of destruction and wretchedness" (132). While isolation and distrust of outsiders has marked much of the history of the region, that is not the full story. *Reclamation: The Towns of the Virginia Coalfields* was to be my attempt to show the reality of the towns without much commentary; however, with my history in the region, commentary was inevitable.

CHAPTER 3. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

In the early 20th century, towns in the coalfields of the central Appalachian Mountains saw a boom in economic growth. Due to the vision of a few wealthy entrepreneurs, the natural resources of the region began to look economically enticing. One such entrepreneur was George L. Carter, who founded the Clinchfield Coal Company in 1906. Carter's newly formed coal company began employing miners, but more than that, the company also spent resources to expand the railroad system, which linked the once completely isolated regions to the rest of the country through the Clinchfield Railroad.

The workers came from all over. The wildness and natural beauty of the region enticed people from many economic and cultural backgrounds, including minorities and immigrants. People flocked to the coalfields, drawn by the promise of steady, good-paying jobs, and others followed the miners, creating businesses and building communities to support the mines. The economic boom was sudden and extremely promising.

The success of the coal industry was also helped by the fact that the companies saw the relative lack of development in the area as an opportunity to build entire towns dependent upon the mines. These towns spawned, seemingly overnight, and grew to bursting with no end of growth evident. The end did come, however, and the decline of the coal industry led to the collapse of many of these burgeoning communities. Writing for the *Sociological Forum* in 2009, author Shannon Elizabeth Bell examines the effects of the coal industry on the southern region of West Virginia. Bell writes,

> Many residents argue that coal's influence in the local and state politics of West Virginia has allowed the industry to engage in highly destructive and unjust mining practices that

> have destroyed the health, safety, and livelihoods of many residents living in the southern coal-producing region of the state. (Bell 633)

The Coalfields of Virginia share more with West Virginia than just the veins of coal. They too have suffered the injustices of the coal industry's exploitation. These injustices have left visible marks on the region, including the potential danger of land that has been mined without the landowners being aware of the potential for sinkholes or entire collapse. In the early 21st century, the Virginia courts began a slow, arduous attempt to correct some of the past exploitative decisions.

Writing for *The Appalachian Voice*, author Molly Moore explains the current situation in the courts as a struggle between forces that want to continue the coal industry's dominance and those that want to strengthen the rights of property owners. Moore writes,

> In practical terms, H.B. 710 [signed into law in 2012 by Governor Bob McDonnell] allows companies to use mine voids as disposal sites for coal mining waste products. In fact, at least one mining company, CONSOL Energy, routinely used empty Buchanan County, Va., chambers for that purpose without landowners 'consent until 2008, when the company was found guilty of trespassing and eventually paid $75 million in damages. (Moore)

Traditionally, the coal industry has been provided with support from government officials, including this law that gave the power to the industry even when the coal was no longer part of the equation. The HB 710 ruling continued a precedent that had been established consistently by the courts, and the secrecy with which the industry performs its work allows for continued abuse.

Bell also points out that the visible impact of the industry in the region is accompanied by invisible effects. The psychological and emotional impacts of the industry's exploitation of the region is evident to those who know, most notably in the social environments of the

communities. Those impacts are hidden to most outsiders and are difficult to identify, but might manifest themselves as political and religious ideology. It is the visible remnants, which cannot be hidden or misinterpreted, that reveal much of the coal industry's influence, and it is those abandoned railroad tracks, decaying infrastructure, rusting equipment, old company buildings that I am interested in for this project.

Famously, in 1955, Tennessee Ernie Ford recorded a song about the coal industry, the idea of which was taken from the actual words of coal miners. Merle Travis, the author of the lyrics to "Sixteen Tons," uses strong language to illustrate the relationship between the miners and the company. Travis claims that his father used to say, "I can't afford to die. I owe my soul to the company store" (qtd. in Apostol). The long history of mine workers being exploited at the hands of the coal industry is well-documented, but still not enough to move the current residents away from coal and into 21st century industry, perhaps this is due to those invisible effects that Bell points out, perhaps it is just stubborn resistance to change. In any event, the idea of the company store has always fascinated me.

The company store with which I am most familiar is the one that served Trammel, Virginia. Trammel had always been an odd sort of place to me. The houses were identical, and as we would often drive through the center of what is known as the middle camp area, I would ask my mother about them and she explained they were from the old mining camp. They were small, closely packed, and old. The company store was the dominant building, visible immediately as a visitor entered the center of the community. Figure 5 is a survey photograph of the company store, the documentation for which, according to the Library of Congress, was compiled after

1933. This view of the building is very much like the view I found in 2023, just before the building was demolished.

Figure 5. View of Middle Camp, Looking Northwest, Type C
House No. 6 in Foreground – Trammel Middle Camp, Trammel, Dickenson County, VA Photos from Survey HABS VA-1344

The Trammel company store is no more. The history of the building, much like the town itself, is a mixture of fond remembrances and dejected views of the present. In essence, the company store enjoys the same benefits as the coal industry does in the region. The good is remembered, the bad is forgiven, and the loyalty to coal is renewed. The demolition of the company store made me think about the Tennessee Ernie Ford song; I wonder what happens to the souls that the store owns when the store is gone.

I'm not sure that the religiosity of the region answers this particular theological question; however, images associated with religion permeate the region as surely as coal mining does, maybe more now than ever. There are several images in my project that highlight the religiosity in the coalfields. Mostly, the idea of mountain churches, those little white-washed buildings that

seat fifty people but not comfortably, are the dominant stereotypical image of the coalfields; therefore, I included a couple of those. These are small, working churches that still serve their small communities. I have also included a couple of abandoned churches as part of my subtle commentary on the slow changes occurring in the coalfields.

The religiosity of the region grew out of necessity. The early development of the industry in the coalfields needed an inordinate amount of human labor. Immigrants fulfilled much of the labor needs. As Margaret Ripley Wolfe writes in her essay on religion in Appalachia, citing Alan M. Kraut's *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921* as her source for immigration history,

> The advent of the mining industry in the region sparked extensive railroad construction, which, without sophisticated earth-moving equipment, made brutal demands on human labor. From the perspective of the capitalists, the grueling, dangerous work of railroad construction, coke-drawing, and mining seemed ready-made for immigrants. (Wolfe)

Wolfe goes on to describe the early days of mining, citing it as akin to the frontier towns of the Wild West. She also points out that the immigrants brought mechanisms for controlling the violence of the nighttime camps, namely religion. So, religion in the region became necessary to preserve life as a multitude of cultures smashed into each other.

Diversity in the coalfields has historically been driven by economic need. The mines, the lumber camps, the supporting businesses all needed labor. The early days of the development process must have seemed like the sky was the limit, the possibilities were endless, but there was a limit and there will be an end. I drove around my former hometown and I recognized so much

of it. I remembered the associations I had, and I realized the associations I had developed. I had become an outsider, a stranger in a strange land that I no longer understood.

The historical context of the coalfields is complicated by secrecy and idealized remembrances, but the reality is undeniable. The coal industry's time in the region is soon to be over, and the remnants will need to be dealt with in some way. While the natural world will reclaim much of it, if the towns wish to survive, then there needs to be an honest reckoning with the past, a willingness to progress into the future, and a desire to reconcile with the present.

For many, that shift in perspective, that forced march toward the future, is going to be challenging because, as Elizabeth Catte writes in her book, *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia*, "In Appalachia, coal isn't just coal. It's the blackest part of a constellation of knowledge that tells us it is easier in our world to bury a person alive than lift her up" (130). The easy path, while philosophy and poetry might tell us is not often the best road to travel, reality tells us it is often the choice that is made. Exploitation is as traditional in the coalfields as mining, and traditions in the coalfields are difficult to break.

CHAPTER 4. PHOTOGRAPHIC INFLUENCE

As I began my exploration of my hometown and the surrounding regions, I contemplated the work that came before. Famously, in 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson began his "War on Poverty," an attempt to confront issues of poverty through governmental assistance programs. Much of the focus of Johnson's "war" was on the Appalachian region. *LIFE* magazine, barely a month after Johnson's announcement of his program, ran a 12-page photo series titled "Valley of Poverty" from John Dominis, which set the standard for photographing Appalachia. This series also crafted the origins of what critics would term "Poverty Porn." Reagan L. Neviska, defines "Poverty Porn" as

> …imagery that creates a shock value, and provides a gain for viewers or authors, whether that be financial, political, or individual feelings of morality and superiority. "Poverty Porn" is also understood to create an "othering" effect for the subjects portrayed. (Neviska 2)

Furthermore, the images published by LIFE included several images of children. These images would be mirrored 51 years later by Bruce Gilden in his series "Two Days in Appalachia" for VICE.

Both of these photographers, and many in between, used images of Appalachian people, many children, to draw attention to their work. While critics cheered Dominus' imagery, at the time Gilden was creating images, the stereotypes had been fully established and viewers were more capable of understanding the exploitative nature of the images. It was in this atmosphere, with intense sensitivity to the history of exploitative photography that I searched for inspiration. The first photographer I thought of was Dorothea Lange.

Dorothea Lange

The social realities of the coal fields in the 21st century is mirrored in historical representations of other challenging times from other parts of the country. I draw motivation, specifically, from Dorothea Lange's work during the Great Depression and leading into the War World II era. She is perhaps better known for her portraits of people during the time periods, but it is her documenting the settings that speaks to me and my work in the coalfields. She was able to capture the essence of the people without focusing on the people themselves, such as in *Gas Station, Kern County, California,* (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Dorothea Lange, *Gas Station, Kern County, California,* 1938, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA

This photograph, in particular, reveals an attitude towards the subject matter that is similar to my own attitude towards my subjects, namely the struggle between workers and

company owners. The implication of the sign warning against "the big man" is reminiscent of the attitude of the union workers striking against the companies that took advantage of them throughout the 20th century. The close cropping of the image also heightens the feelings of isolation and abandonment that is implicit in the compositional choices that Lange makes.

Andrew Borowiec

The decline of once promising communities is nothing new in Appalachia. Wheeling, West Virginia, saw significant decline due to the Great Depression. Photographer Andrew Borowiec documented remnants of the city's past and its attempts to revitalize the historic architecture. I am impressed by his photographic series titled *Wheeling, West Virginia*, and his imagery that speaks to a once promising future that is not reflected in the present circumstances of the city. *The Blue Church* (Figure 7) is of particular interest to me in that it illustrates the past, the present, and the future in one image.

Figure 7. Andrew Borowiec,

The Blue Church, Wheeling West Virginia, 2016

The past is reflected in the dilapidation of the church's exterior, the faded paint, and the crumbling facade. The old pickup across the street is indicative of the present in that it is obviously a work vehicle that is still engaged. This speaks to the regions trouble in moving on, of

putting aside the old ways, due to economic realities. The brick buildings in the background hint at a possible future where new construction is the key to success.

Builder Levy

Builder Levy's work in the coalfields during the 1970s propelled many of the ideas that I used for this project, particularly the images he captured that highlighted the dichotomous relationship between coal and nature. I chose the title for my project due to the inherent hopefulness of the word, but there is also a complication due to the industry's use of the term. Reclamation efforts in the coalfields have largely been superficial and cosmetic in nature. I remember my father explaining that a reclaimed plot of land was a pile of coal waste covered with around six inches of top soil. It is an interesting side note to know that pine trees and sycamores can grow in six inches of soil.

Levy's work from several decades ago highlights the industry just before the decline began and the domination of coal in the region is evident. In his photograph titled *Coal Camp, near Grundy, Buchanan County, VA,* Levy has captured an image from 1970 that could easily be confused with one taken today. The coal camp (Figure 8) is made up of the row houses that are a familiar sight in the region. The similarity of the housing units that the companies erected for their miners has created a homogenization, at least visually, of the region that provides a substantial portion of its identity, but also reveals much about the problems with economic growth and progress. The camps were never intended to be permanent when the companies built them, but the people who lived there felt differently. The people, many who had immigrated to the region for work, had nowhere else to go. The temporary houses became permanent homes and are now multigenerational family homes.

Figure 8. Builder Levy. *Coal Camp, near Grundy, Buchanan County, VA,* Brooklyn Museum, 1970, photogravure, sheet: 20 × 16 in. (50.8 × 40.6 cm) image: 10 1/2 × 11 in. (26.7 × 27.9 cm)

Carol Highsmith

Carol Highsmith's photographic work with abandoned spaces instills a sense of desolation that was present in many of the images I took. The ideas that her work promotes, namely the remnants of humanity as seen in Figure 9, has helped shape the themes of my work. Her composition suggests isolation created by what humans discard. The towns in the coalfields have many such examples, and while the isolation is present, the power of nature to reclaim is also on full display in my images. Nature quickly moves in when humans retreat and there are any number of buildings that are being reclaimed, especially those affected by an ill-conceived attempt at conservation that introduced an invasive plant called kudzu into the area.

The natural beauty of the coalfields is undeniable, even after many decades of mining. The natural world has a way of reclaiming the land and that will continue as more of the foundational development of the coal industry is abandoned.

Figure 9. Carol M. Highsmith. *Alabama Motel in rural Alabama*. May 9. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/2010640170/>

CHAPTER 5. PLACE AS INSPIRATION

Reclamation at its heart is a project about the exploration of place. While I try to incorporate the natural beauty of the region, which is a trademark of any photographic work centered in Appalachia, I have tried to capture places where there is a definite conflux of human construction and nature. Therefore, a strong sense of place is required to produce images that honestly represent the dichotomous relationship between industry and the mountains.

Victoria Sambunaris

One of the most recognizable features of the coalfields of Virginia is the natural beauty of the region. The mountains are beautiful and serene when viewed from afar, but they can be a bit claustrophobic and isolating from within. Victoria Sambunaris strikes an impressive balance between majestic and isolating in her photographic work (Figure 10). I take motivation from her ability to strike a tone of awe and desolation in a single image.

Figure 10. Victoria Sambunaris, from *Taxonomy of a Landscape*, 2011

The mountains in the coalfields are majestic, those that have not been strip mined, and they spark awe much like the wide-open expanses in Sambunaris's compositions. I have tried to capture this sense of expanse, twinge of isolation, and the discomfort of industrial imposition on nature in the image titled, *Bathhouse and Training Center* (Figure 11), which is composed to provide a view of the facility merging with, altering, and overtaking the environment. There is an illusion of oneness that is also present in Sambunaris' work. In *Taxonomy of a Landscape*, Sambunaris creates images that merge the trains that are her subject matter with the surrounding environment almost as if they were a natural part of the landscape and not an imposition. In the coalfields, these impositions tend to be more transformative and destructive.

Figure 11. Brad Owens, *Bathhouse and Training Center,*

Grundy, Virginia, 2023, Archival Inkjet Print

Stacy Kranitz

Stacy Krantiz spent time exploring Appalachia and her strong sense of place produced what I feel to be honest representations of the area. Krantiz explains her approach to photographing the people of Appalachia in an article for *Reading the Pictures*,

> I utilize photography to address how images fail at representing culture. This can confuse the viewer who might come across this image of the baby drinking the bright green liquid and see it as a confirmation of a known stereotype. For me, this photograph is valuable because it shows us how little we actually know when viewing this image, any image. How the circumstances of a people cannot be defined through an individual still photograph.

Kranitz's sensitivity and understanding of the limitations of any single photograph influenced my work. The emptiness that is filled with an uneasy conglomeration of nature and industry is the essence of my project; I think Krantiz captures this tone as well, especially in her images that do not focus on people.

In Figure 12, Kranitz has utilized the landscape to suggest a never-ending coal train. I utilized this idea in creating *Winter Train in Fog* (Figure 13). Whereas Kranitz chose to show the industry at work, I chose to capture the empty coal trains that are stored due to the decline of the industry. The kudzu is also present and attempting to reclaim the train cars.

Figure 12. Stacy Kranitz, from A*s it Was Give(n) to Me,* 2011, published by Twin Palms, 2022

Figure 13. Brad Owens, *Dante Trains in Fog,* Dante, Virginia, 2023, Archival Inkjet Print

Frank Hunter

Frank Hunter's work in Appalachia has also informed my project. The familiar starkness of photography in Appalachia is also present in his series, titled *Appalachia,* which contains images that highlight the reality of the modern region. There is a sadness, a sense of isolation, and the ever-present emptiness that is something other than empty.

Building upon the impression I got from Hunter's work, I produced an image of a church in the coalfields that reminds me of his use of isolation and seeming dilapidation to suggest a view of Appalachia that is off center and tricks the viewer into a possible misidentification of the subject matter. For example, in Figure 14, the center of the image is not easily identified and the subject appears to be the handwritten sign and not the church.

Figure 14. Frank Hunter, from *Appalachia,* 2023

With similar intent, I produced the image titled *Virginia City Presbyterian* (Figure 15), in which I centered the image to the side of the church building in an attempt to focus the view on the coal pile in the background.

Figure 15. Brad Owens, *Virginia City Presbyterian,*

Virginia City, Virginia, 2023, Archival Inkjet Print

Mike Smith

Mike Smith's work is from another state, namely Tennessee, that shares similarities with the coalfields of Virginia but is very different. His approach in capturing East Tennessee reveals another form of starkness, this one more to do with agricultural influence rather than mining. One image from his *East Tennessee Color* (Figure 16) series highlights the differences of the communities in Appalachia. Smith's composition reveals rolling hills and evidence of farming, whereas, my imagery often reveals the impact of coal on the environment.

Figure 16. Mike Smith, from *East Tennessee Color,* 2023

Smith's focus on composition and light informed many of my own images, particularly *UMWA* (Figure 17). Light is scarce in the coalfields. The valleys that hold the communities are nestled in the mountains, in the shadows, and devoid of sunlight; however, the top of the mountains are a different story. The UMWA building in Haysi, Virginia, is built atop a mountain, nearer to the sun and sky. My image captures the sunrise hitting the face of the building while dark trees stand sentinel in the background, whereas the farmhouse in Smith's image serves a similar purpose overlooking the foreground imagery.

The light on the brick facade of the UMWA building offers a glimmer of hope, but also reveals the desolation just below the surface. The building seems to retreat into nature, possibly through nature's attempts to reclaim the land, but also due to the loss of power that this building used to represent. The coal strikes in the coalfields are a violent reminder of the exploitation of the industry. These strikes, carried out by the UMWA, have become part of the story of

Appalachia and form a significant portion of the peoples' identities. They resist yet accept. The front facing light of this image, with the darkness behind, speaks to this element of identity.

Figure 17. Brad Owens, *UMWA,* Haysi, Virginia, 2023,

Archival Inkjet Print

CHAPTER 6. RECLAMATION: THE COALFIELDS OF VIRGINIA

The origins of my thesis rest in memories of my childhood. I was raised in the coalfields, I watched many members of my family give their lives to coal, and I experienced the injustices, hallmarks of the region, that have been inflicted by the coal industry's quest for profits. My photographic work reveals my own passion for the region as well as my sadness and quite a bit of anger toward the exploitation that has marked the area for generations. While I tried to maintain an objective eye with this project, I do feel that much of my personal experiences has made its way into the images. The image that I have titled *Riverside Gardens* (Figure 18) is a particularly stark representation of my attitude toward this project.

Figure 18. Brad Owens, *Riverside Gardens,* Clinchco, Virginia, 2023, Archival Inkjet Print

The image captures the remnants of a store that once provided products symbolizing the self-reliant nature of the region. As a greenhouse, the Riverside Gardens helped provide sustenance to the area, and was distinctively different than the company stores that often provided more profit to the coal companies. This store was owned by a community member and

served the entire community. Now, it is gone. The track sporting the name of the railroad, which promised connection, can be seen in the background and a simple sign in front of the tracks that reads “closed, thanks” speaks volumes about the region. The closure of a symbol of pride is met with a neutral, non-committal, resigned statement.

In essence, that sign in front of a closed business has become my personal summation of the people in the coalfields. They are resilient, yes. That is evident in the continued existence of the communities, in the things they built that are still there, and in the attempts at revitalization. The towns I visited have erected coal mining memorials, have murals adorning buildings, and have walking trails or ATV trails. They are progressing, but they are also resigned. They accept their fate in far too many instances, except one. They refuse to move on from coal. It is frustrating at the best of times and infuriating at others. It is, however, reality. “Closed, Thanks,” was the working title of this project for about a year. The phrase spoke to me on a personal level, maybe too personal, which is why I eventually changed the title.

Being resigned to one’s fate and accepting one’s fate with gratitude are two very different things. Conversely, I have come to believe that we make our own fate, so the resignation of the people of the coalfields feels performative to me. I want the people to fight the decline of their towns. I want them to progress, change, evolve, and survive. Too many of them seem content to merely survive. They seem to think that the only way forward is in moving backwards toward coal. The external forces that affect the region’s attitudes toward the outside world are still very powerful. A complex conglomeration of politicians and pastors keep the metaphoric fires of coal burning through the imaginations of the residents of the coalfields. Reality has little chance against the fantasies these forces have crafted.

A poem that appears on a concrete support for a train track near Duffield, Virginia, (Figure 19) illustrates what I mean by resigning to their fate. The poem, which had faded and was barely legible when I first began to explore the region, has been refreshed. It is now a primary feature of this scene. The poem is painted onto a concrete support for the railroad train. This juxtaposition of the two powers in the region creates a symbiotic relationship. The literal support of the coal train is the religion of the region.

Figure 19. Brad Owens, *Jesus Will Last*, Duffield, Virginia,

2023, Digital Inkjet Print

Religiosity is a particularly touchy subject in my life. The religion of the coalfields is incredibly dominant and nearly exclusively protestant. The religion also seems to teach the followers to accept the impermanence of life on earth, which suggests enduring rather than overcoming, accepting rather than fighting, and existing rather than living. I admit that my anger issues come to the forefront with this topic, but I also admit that my oversimplification of the religiosity of the region is an insufficient description of its reality.

The tone of my images from the coalfields often intimate isolation and loneliness. This is most likely an offshoot of my personal perception of the region. I feel isolated and claustrophobic in the mountains of my youth. I realize this is a holdover from my childhood on the side of a mountain, surrounded by family but feeling completely alone most of the time. Therefore, my images are filled with a sense of isolation and the feeling that there is so much more just past the edges of the image. The image that reveals this dichotomous tone the best is *Winter Bridge in Fog* (Figure 20).

Figure 20. Brad Owens, *Winter Bridge in Fog*, Gate City, Virginia, 2023, Digital Inkjet Print

This image shows a train bridge obscured by fog and the mountains. Reading the image from left to right, which is typical in Westernized cultures, might suggest that the train is emerging from the mountains and is heading off to what exists beyond this image. However, I have cropped the image to allow for a slight diagonal movement of the track from upper right to lower left. This was an attempt, along with the constrained color scheme, to create tension and a desire to read the image from right to left, which would lead into the mountains, into the fog, and

into whatever might be hiding there. Furthermore, the tracks appear to merge with the mountains becoming inextricably joined through obfuscation. While not necessarily inviting, the image is indicative of the emptiness of the region that is filled with natural elements and the suggestion of humans.

Also indicative of the towns in the coalfields, however, is the image titled *Norton Train Crossing* (Figure 21). The towns are still inhabited, and as is the case with Norton, they are growing as they accept the realities of the 21st century. The coal is still in the region and is still very much an economic factor, but many of the residents are not part of the industry, have never been part of it, and will not be in the future. These community members exist in and around coal but they do not have the same love or devotion to the industry that others have.

Figure 21. Brad Owens, *Norton Train Crossing*, Norton, Virginia, 2023, Archival Inkjet Print

I quickly discovered that being an objective observer of the coalfields was impossible for me. I was a resident for so much of my life that the traditional way to speak of the coalfields had permeated my very being. Residents do not air dirty laundry in public. We barely did it in

private. The tradition was to ignore the bad and idealize the good, and to subsist on scraps and be grateful for what you were provided. There was no use in longing for something better because the impermanence of human achievements meant that the only reward you can ever achieve in this life is an eternal afterlife.

The coalfields are so often defined by their stereotypes that it is sometimes difficult, even for residents, to know what is reality, what is brutally honest, and what is an insufficient pre-conceived notion. Religion further complicates the issues in the coalfields. There are the mountain churches where people still perform snake handling rituals and where speaking in tongues is not unusual, but there are also modern churches where, presumably, the spiritual overtones are less sensationalistic. Figure 15 is a church house in Virginia City, Virginia. This church is next to a coal processing plant and there is really nothing else in the valley.

In essence, this image speaks of the stereotypes of the coalfields in a way that words have difficulty conveying. The coal is behind the church building, partially hidden by trees and the landscape. The church itself is small, somewhat dainty, and pleasant whereas the coal pile behind it is obscured. The presented face of the image is pushed to the side so that the viewer will notice the coal. The neat, tidy, white-washed facade that religion provides the coal industry in the region is one of the most enduring stereotypes of the coalfields and this image is an attempt to side-step that to get a glimpse at the truth of the matter.

Of course, in the 21st century where truth is often customizable, I found myself wondering what the truth really is regarding the coalfields. Should the region be continually defined by poverty and backwards thinking? Is that a fair assessment given that the people often appear to live up to that stereotype? Can we just blame the coal industry's years of exploitation and manipulation? Is it the evil corporations that have kept the coalfields from advancing? Or is it the people's unwillingness to change? Is there a combination of those factors that explains it

all? I have constructed answers for myself, but I do not feel that my conclusions will change anyone else's perceptions. The outside world often has a firm perception of Appalachia, and I do not think that my project will alter those perceptions; however, I do believe that taking more than a cursory glance at these communities will prompt lasting changes to the persistent stereotypes.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION

Identity is a tricky thing. We are often handed an identity as children. Our parents put in pieces, our friends and family fill in gaps, and our larger community completes the picture. The identities of towns are no less complicated nor less constructed, at least initially, by external forces. The coal towns of the Virginia coalfields are struggling with their identities, as am I, as are many of us. They are coal towns still, but that singular identity is no longer sufficient.

The mountains that surround, engulf, and protect the towns have been ripped open and the coal has been extracted, but that does nothing to temper the passion the residents have for the industry. Unlike other industries that have left the coal fields, the decline of the coal mines has significantly impacted the cultural identity of the region. While much of the recent years of the decline have been filled with resistance to new ideas and longing for the way things were, the towns are moving slowly, cautiously, into the 21st century.

As I travel through the area now, I get twinges of anger that the people who were so exploited by the coal industry are still so very loyal to it, longing for it, and resistant to any replacement. It baffles me, but I do see progress inching in. I do see construction sites, revitalization efforts, and I have hope that the region will recover from the impact of coal just as they have recovered from the natural disasters, particularly fires and floods, that threatened to wipe them out. The resilience of the people has never been in question. I only hope that the external influences which will inevitably come into the efforts will be more cognizant of the history of exploitation and will not repeat the past.

One of my favorite images from this project is of the company store in Trammel, Virginia. This building has stood since being erected in 1919. In the summer of 2023, the building was demolished. I drove by recently and the building that, according to Tennessee Ernie Ford's song, once "owned" the souls of coal miners is a vacant lot quickly being overtaken with

weeds and bramble. I wonder if those souls can find freedom now that the store has gone away.

The primary take-away from *Reclamation: The Towns of the Virginia Coalfields* is that the area is a conundrum. It is at once beautiful, ugly, inviting, isolating, promising, and hopeless. My project, while I tried to document, became more about regaining understanding. I sought answers for why I was so angry at my former hometown. I recognized the symptoms of my anger namely the political climate, the refusal to change, the lack of critical thought about economics, but I was unsure of the underlying condition within myself. This project helped me realize that I had unrealistic expectations of the people of the coalfields.

I expected the people to be as frustrated by their condition as I was, but I failed to understand that they, many of them, are content with their lot in life. I convinced myself that they had been taken in by the charlatans running the coal companies, and then the ones running the churches, but I refused to see that they saw the exploitation, the unfair treatment, and they were content with it. The coal companies promised a better life, with more money, benefits that could not be obtained anywhere else in the area, and stability. At least, that was the promise. Furthermore, the coal industry was better for their worldviews as well as their pocketbooks. It was better for their own constructed identity. They do not want change, and not because they think the change will be worse than their current conditions, but because their identity is still very much crafted by their current conditions.

So, I discovered I am a part of the coalfields, but I am separate from it as well. I am the dichotomous reality of the region. I am a being of coal and mountains and stories and love and loss and hope and longing and, and, and. The complexity of human identity became the heart of this project and the ultimate lesson for my life. I think I am at peace with my former home. I think I can still advocate for them without becoming angry that they do not advocate for themselves. I think I can more fully accept their perceptions of reality without wanting to

scream. I still have more work to do, I know that, but this project has given me a pretty good start.

Reclamation: The Towns of the Virginia Coalfields has become a narrative. It tells the story of the towns from an insider's view as an outsider. It is a perspective that only someone with my experiences in the region could have told. It is full of sadness and a little hope. It is an honest look at a region that has not always been honest with itself. It is an attempt to finally say what I felt I could not say when I lived in the towns. This project is my attempt to honestly say that I believe in the towns of the coalfields. I believe that they can survive into the 21st century, but I'm truly not sure that all of them will.

How to define the coalfields? I have spent the last three years of my life attempting to construct a working definition of the place where I was born, apart from the imposition of external forces that have successfully, and insufficiently, defined the region for generations. I suppose the best that I can do at the moment is to reconcile the fact that the coalfields, while seemingly locked in time, are changing. They are progressing toward the 21st century with the rest of the country, maybe a bit slower than the average, but they are progressing. I see glimmers of hope, even in the places where I didn't expect it. There are blue skies throughout my project. Sometimes the blue is grey, sometimes the blue is completely hidden by fog, but it is there. There is light in the valleys, there is hope in the soil, and there will be a future in the coalfields.

WORKS CITED

Apostol, Summer. "'Sixteen Tons': Merle Travis, Tennessee Ernie Ford, and Beyond." *Birthplace of Country Music*, 17 October 2017, https://birthplaceofcountrymusic.org/sixteen-tons-merle-travis-tennessee-ernie-ford-beyond/. Accessed 28 September 2023.

Aoyama, Andrew. "The Photographer Undoing the Myths of Appalachia." Photographs by Stacy Kranitz, *The Atlantic,* 20 December 2022, www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/12/stacy-kranitz-photography-book-appalachia-harry-caudill/672261/. Accessed 17 October 2023.

Bell, Shannon Elizabeth. "'There Ain't No Bond in Town like There Used to Be': The Destruction of Social Capital in the West Virginia Coalfields." *Sociological Forum, v*ol. 24, no. 3, 2009, pp. 631–57. *JSTOR,* http://www.jstor.org/stable/40542695. Accessed 3 Feb. 2023.

Catte, Elizabeth. *What You are Getting Wrong about Appalachia*. Belt Publishing, Cleveland, Ohio, 2018.

Clinchco. Appalshop Films, 1982.

Couch, Jerry. "Trammel, Virginia: Remembering the Day a Town was Sold." *Clinch Valley Times,* 2021, https://clinchvalleytimes.net/2021/04/05/trammel-va-remembering-the-day-a-town-was-sold/. Accessed 28 September 2023.

Dreiser, Theodore, et al. *Harlan Miners Speak: Report on Terrorism in the Kentucky Coal Fields.* University Press of Kentucky, 2008. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt130jn9d. Accessed 28 Sept. 2023.

Flanary, Ron. “The History of Clinchfield.” *Train.com,* 2 January 2023, www.trains.com/trn/railroads/history/the-history-of-clinchfield/. Accessed 11 February 2024.

Helm, Robert A. *The Clinchfield Railroad in the Coal Fields*. TLC Pub., 2004.

Historic American Buildings Survey, Creator, et al. Trammel Middle Camp, Trammel, Dickenson County, VA. Documentation Compiled After 1933. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/va1754/.

Kiessling, O. E. (Oscar Edward), et al. *The Economics of Strip Coal Mining*. U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of Mines, 1931.

Krantiz, Stacy. “Stacy Kranitz: The Rape of Appalachia.” Reading the Pictures, 20 February 2014, www.readingthepictures.org/2014/02/stacy-kranitz-the-rape-of-appalachia/. Accessed 13 February 2024.

Lange, Dorothea, photographer. *Gas Station. Kern County, California.* Photograph. Retrieved from The Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/2017770791/.

“Mined Land Repurposing.” *Virginia Department of Energy,* 2021, https://www.energy.virginia.gov/coal/mined-land-repurposing/Mined-Land-Repurposing.shtml. Accessed 20 November 2023.

Moore, Molly. “Plundering Private Property Rights.” *The Appalachian Voice,* 11 June 2012, appvoices.org/2012/06/11/plundering-private-property-rights/. Accessed 15 October 2023.

Neviska, Reagan L. *Origins of Appalachian Poverty Porn in Photojournalism,* Ohio University, December 2022,

etd.ohiolink.edu/acprod/odb_etd/ws/send_file/send?accession=ohiou1667064403327539&disposition=inline. Accessed 13 February 2024.

"Powell River Trail." *Wise County Virginia,* 2023, visitwisecounty.com/places/powell-river-trail/. Accessed 5 October 2023.

Sick, Taylor. "Rural Tennessee is Losing More Hospitals Than Anywhere in the Country, But COVID-19 Isn't Fully to Blame." Photographs by Stacey Kranitz, *100 Days in Appalachia,* 15 July 2021, www.100daysinappalachia.com/2021/07/rural-tennessee-is-losing-more-hospitals-than-anywhere-in-the-country-but-covid-19-isnt-fully-to-blame/. Accessed 3 February 2023.

Timberlake, Richard H. "Private Production of Scrip-Money in the Isolated Community." *Journal of Money, Credit and Banking*, vol. 19, no. 4, 1987, pp. 437–47, https://doi.org/10.2307/1992612.

Wolfe, Margaret Ripley. "Catholicism and Community: Mountain Missions and "New" Immigrants in Appalachia." *Border States: Journal of the Kentucky-Tennessee American Studies Association*, No. 10 (1995), https://w1.mtsu.edu/borders/archives/10/Catholicism_and_Community_-_Mountain_Missions_and_New_Immigrants_in_Appalachia.pdf. Accessed 5 October 2023.

Zipper, Carl E., Mary Beth Adams, and Jeff Skousen. "The Appalachian Coalfield in Historical Context." *Appalachia' Coal-Mined Landscapes,* November 2020, Springer International Publishing, pp. 1-26, DOI 10.1007/978-3-030-57780-3_1.

CATALOGUE OF EXHIBIT

Brad Owens, *Welcome to Clinchco,* 2022, Archival Inkjet Print, 36” x 24”

Brad Owens, *Dante Train Signal,* 2023, Archival Inkjet Print, 36” x 24”

Brad Owens, *UMWA,* 2023, Archival Inkjet Print, 36” x 24”

Brad Owens, *United Coal Sign,* 2023, Archival Inkjet Print, 36” x 24”

Brad Owens, *Old Church,* 2023, Archival Inkjet Print, 36” x 24”

Brad Owens, *The Outhouse,* 2022, Archival Inkjet Print, 36” x 24”

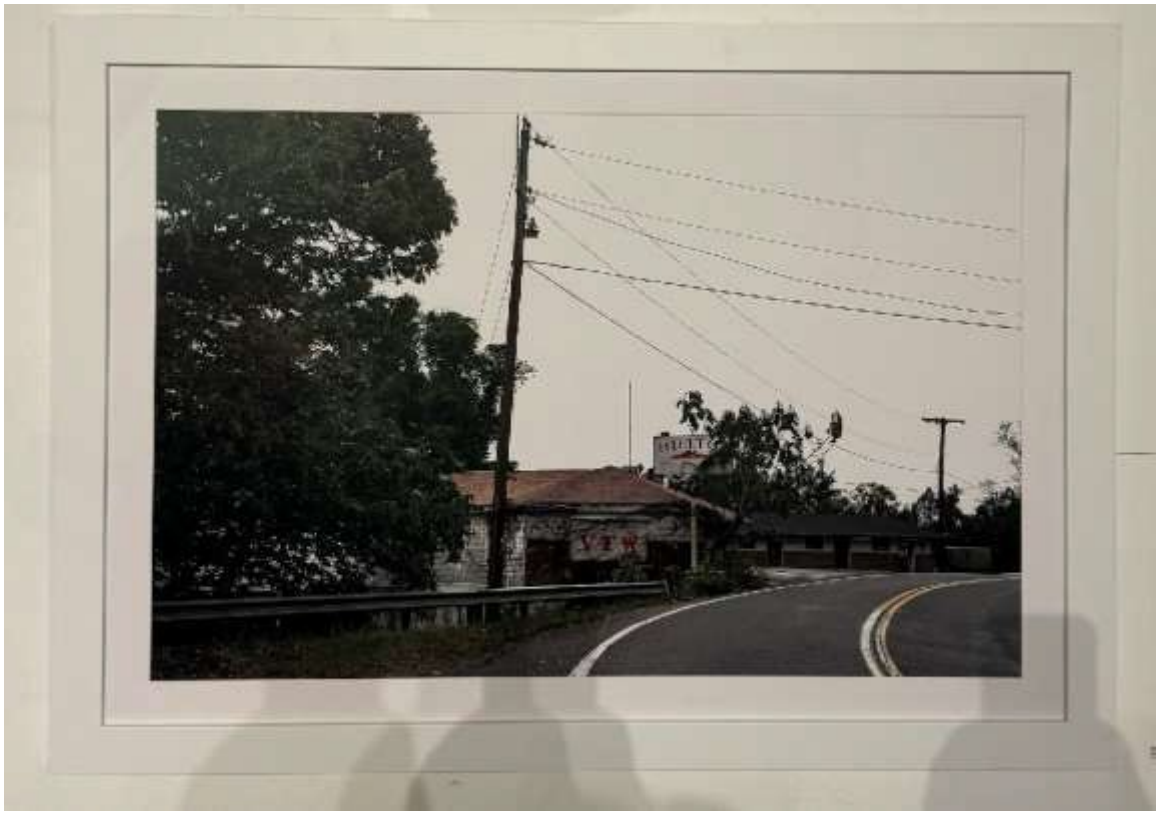
Brad Owens, *Winter Bridge in Fog,* 2023, Archival Inkjet Print, 36” x 24”

Brad Owens, *Norton Train Crossing,* 2023, Archival Inkjet Print, 36” x 24”

Brad Owens, *Dante Train Cars in Fog,* 2023, Archival Inkjet Print, 36” x 24”

Brad Owens, *Volunteer Fire Department,* 2022, Archival Inkjet Print, 36” x 24”

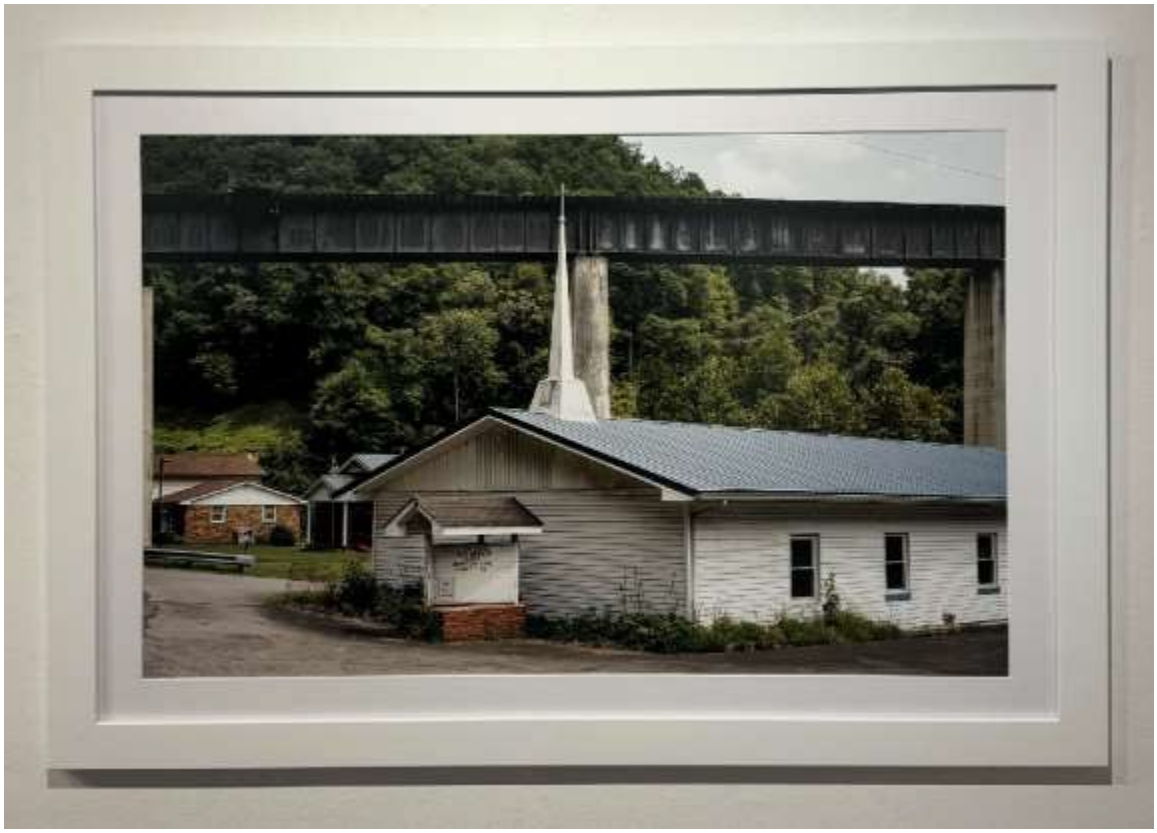
Brad Owens, *Bathhouse and Training Center,* 2023, Archival Inkjet Print, 36” x 24”



Brad Owens, *VFW,* 2022, Archival Inkjet Print, 36” x 24”

Brad Owens, *Dad's Church,* 2023, Archival Inkjet Print, 36" x 24"

Brad Owens, *Company Store,* 2023, Archival Inkjet Print, 36” x 24”



Brad Owens, *Church and Bridge,* 2023, Archival Inkjet Print, 36” x 24”

Brad Owens, *Riverside Gardens,* 2023, Archival Inkjet Print, 36” x 24”

Brad Owens, *Tiger Mart,* 2022, Archival Inkjet Print, 36” x 24”

Brad Owens, *Virginia City Presbyterian,* 2023, Archival Inkjet Print, 36” x 24”

Brad Owens, *Main Street,* 2023, Archival Inkjet Print, 36” x 24”

Brad Owens, *No. 6 Mine,* 2023, Archival Inkjet Print, 36” x 24”

VITA

CRAIG BRADLEY OWENS

Education: Haysi High School, Haysi, Virginia

King University, Bristol, Tennessee; English/Fine Arts, B.A. 1992

East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee; English, M.A. 1998

East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee; Studio Art, M.F.A. 2024

Professional Experience: 2007-2024 Associate Professor of English, Walters State Community College, Morristown, Tennessee

1998-2007 Adjunct Faculty, East Tennessee State University Johnson City, Tennessee

2005-2007 Workshop Presenter, Ronald E. McNair, TRIO Program, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee

2000-2003 Technical Writer/Marketing Assistant, Mattern & Craig Engineering, 403 East Market Street, Johnson City, Tennessee 37601 (423) 979-2220

1998-1999 Adjunct Faculty, King College, Bristol, Tennessee (423) 968-1187

1996-1997 Editor of East Tennessee State University's literary magazine: the Mockingbird, 1998.

Shows and Exhibitions: *Nostalgia, Nihilism, Necropsy*. Graduate Exhibition, Tipton Gallery, Johnson City, TN, 19 Jan. - 3 Feb., 2023.

Con-Figurations, William King Regional Museum, Abingdon, Virginia, 27 July - 1 September 2023.

Reclamation: The Coalfields of Virginia, solo exhibition, Tipton Gallery, Johnson City, TN. Feb. 16-Feb. 23, 2024.

Publications: "Gorgeous" and "Grandma's House." *Two Poems, Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, September, 2013

The First Story, a novel, 2018

30, a novel, 2023

Trial of the Elements, a novel, 2023