



“Soft, airy fairy stuff”? Re-evaluating ‘social impacts’ in gendered processes of natural resource extraction

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ABSTRACT

Within the global extractive industry, emotions continue to be the subject of regulation and erasure. In recent years, the dismissal of emotion within much of the extractive sector has been underpinned by particular hegemonic forms of masculinity which position emotions as ‘irrational’ and ‘irrelevant’. The ramifications for the way in which this form of masculinity dismisses and erases emotion have been critiqued primarily within the context of those working within the sector (Mayes and Pini 2010, 2014; Pini et al 2010). However, this intervention has yet to take place to the same extent for those *outside* the sector, who are navigating its consequences for their communities and places. This paper argues that dismissing emotion has particular implications for the ways in which ‘social impact assessments’ are conducted, and for what is counted or classified as a ‘social impact’ by the sector. Drawing on women’s experiences of opposition to the development of extractive projects throughout the New South Wales (NSW) Hunter Valley, this paper uses emotional geographies to emphasise the ways in which the masculinist regulation and erasure of emotion within the extractive sector also facilitates the dismissal of the distinctly emotional consequences of resource extraction for people and place.

1. Introduction

‘I come from the Czech Republic, from Prague, and at the time, it was a communist country ... We listened to radio through Europe for the voice of democracy ... Then when the NSW government went with Rio Tinto against us, I lost that last belief in that so-called democracy of the West. Completely and totally. As far as this place goes, I just want to die here in peace ... I just want to stay here, and die here, and not to be moved anywhere else! That’s it! No! We love this place, we all love this place. There is something about it, it’s very hard to describe ... Because when you come here, under the mountain, you are home’ (Mary).¹

When transcribing the conversation I shared with Mary, the full effect of her tears, her fury and her unwavering determination is lost, yet what remains is troubling enough. Mary is one of many who find their homes and communities in the wake of expanding large-scale open cut coal mining projects in the Hunter Valley, New South Wales (NSW), Australia. The increasing encroachments of these extractive projects on communities throughout the Hunter Valley, and the consequent transformations of place-based relations and identities, continue to trouble people in a profound and harrowing way. Fundamentally, there are deeply emotional ramifications of resource

extraction within the Hunter Valley. However, these distinctly emotional consequences continue to be more or less disregarded in efforts to identify (and address) the sector’s adverse impacts.

In this respect, the Hunter Valley is no anomaly. Practices of natural resource extraction have long been acknowledged to pose significant and often problematic consequences for people and place throughout the world (Jalbert et al., 2017). However, whilst ‘impacts’ determined as being ‘economic’ or even ‘environmental’ in nature have been subject to a range of mitigation and remediation measures by government and industry (to varying degrees of success), the recognition of adverse consequences that are *emotional* remains sparse. This is despite the advent of terms such as solastalgia², a concept increasingly used to articulate “the lived experience of negative environmental change” and the emotional and psychological “pain or sickness caused by the ongoing loss” of place through unwanted transformations, particularly through processes such as natural resource extraction (Albrecht, 2010, 227).

When considering the challenges of legitimising the emotional consequences of the sector’s activities, it is important to consider the ways in which the extractive sector has predominantly served as “a spatial context traditionally gendered as masculine” (Mayes and Pini,

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¹ Unless otherwise noted, participants have been de-identified in this paper using pseudonyms.

² For an overview of the use of solastalgia in the NSW Land and Environment Court, see Kennedy, 2016.

2010, 236). Whilst masculinities must be understood as multiple, and “infused” with intersections of “race, class, sexuality and other forms of difference” (Leap, 2017, 13), the particular form of hegemonic masculinity pervading the extractive sector is one which privileges “emotional restraint”, “hardiness” and often a complete “lack of emotionality” altogether (Pini et al., 2010, 571). This particular construction of masculinity, and the ways in which it normalises the dismissal and erasure of emotion for those working within the sector, has formed the subject of important critique in recent years (Laplonge, 2011; Mayes and Pini, 2010, 2014; Pini and Mayes, 2012; Pini et al., 2010). However, less attention has been paid to the ways in which this marginalisation of emotion bears implications for those outside the sector, who navigate its unwanted (and deeply distressing) emotional consequences for the places and communities to which they belong. This is particularly important when navigating Social Impact Assessment (SIA), one of the few formal structures used by government and the extractive sector to identify ‘impacts’ pertaining to the social world.

Far from given, the questions of what count as ‘social’ and as ‘impact’ are important. Like all phenomena, the way in which ‘social’ and ‘impacts’ are determined are shaped by their ontological and discursive contexts. What role might the ontological and discursive terrain of the extractive sector play when determining its legitimate (and illegitimate) ‘social impacts’? As one participant in this research reflected, consequences of resource extraction that fall outside a reductionist rationale continue to be dismissed as “soft, airy fairy stuff”. There is much to be made of this, particularly the correlation of ‘softness’ with insignificance. However, it also alludes to the ways in which there continues to be a “bifurcation of man/masculinity/rationality and woman/femininity/emotionality” (Pini et al., 2010, 568), where emotional and affective registers that fail to conform to ‘hardness’, ‘objectivity’ and ‘measurability’ are discounted and erased. As this paper demonstrates, this has horrendous consequences for those grieving the intrusions and incursions made by mining and resource extraction. In viewing emotional consequences as intangible, ‘airy fairy’ and irrelevant, the very real, tangible and embodied emotions and affects experienced in transformed places and communities are dismissed.

Building on the work already begun in critiquing the adverse consequences of hegemonic masculinity within the extractive sector, this paper extends this critique to considering the consequences of resource extraction for those grieving the transformation of place. Drawing on interviews with 16 women involved in resisting the expansion of the extractive sector in the Hunter Valley, this paper considers the ways in which the profoundly emotional consequences of natural resource extraction are dismissed as ‘soft, airy fairy stuff’, and advocates for the ongoing dismantling of problematic masculinities that underpin this erasure. To do this, this paper firstly situates this research within the case study of the Hunter Valley, and surveys current critiques of the erasure and regulation of emotion by masculinist discourse within resource extraction. It then considers the implications of this discourse for determining ‘impacts’ for places like the Hunter Valley, and the consequences of the erasure of emotion and affect for those navigating the immense transformations it generates.

2. Mining the Hunter Valley

The NSW Hunter Valley is often characterised as “Australia’s major coal exporting region” (Evans and Phelan, 2016, 330), with a history of coal mining dating back to the 19th century (Connor, 2016; Cottle, 2013). With one of the world’s largest coal ports located in Newcastle, the region’s major city (see Fig. 1), and over 30 coal mines operating throughout the region (Hunter Valley Coal Chain Coordinator, 2012), the Hunter Valley has often been defined in terms of its extractive industry. However, as is often the case, there is more to this narrative.

Whilst coal mining has taken place within the Hunter Valley for some time, this industry has formed part of a diverse range of economic practices throughout the region, including agriculture, viticulture and

thoroughbred horse breeding (Cottle, 2013). Furthermore, the nature of coal mining within the Hunter Region has also shifted significantly over the last few decades. Following the ‘resources boom’ of the 1990s, practices of primarily “labour-intensive underground mining” have been replaced by large scale “capital-intensive, dragline, open-cut mining” projects (Cottle, 2013, 209). Importantly, the expansion of open-cut mining has also been underpinned by ongoing support from the NSW state government, who also maintains “ownership of coal deposits” which supersede the rights of landholders (Connor, 2016, 234). Consequently, the “property rights” of Indigenous people, local residents, and “dairy farmers, cattle raisers, horse breeders [and] wine-makers” have continued to be “overridden” as the extractive industry has expanded with the support of the state government (Cottle, 2013, 210).

With “dozens of villages and many thousand hectares of productive rural properties” having “disappeared into mining voids” left by expanding open cut projects, intense and “protracted conflicts” between communities and mining proponents throughout the Hunter Valley have consequently increased (Connor, 2016, 238). Critically, intense resistance by communities affected by expanding open cut coal mines has been primarily understood as “local conflicts over land use development” (Connor, 2016, 238). However, the somewhat utilitarian conceptualisation of this conflict in terms of ‘land use’ and ‘development’ overlooks the immensely complex relations shared between people and place which are ruptured through these expanding extractive practices.

More than primarily ‘economic’ in nature, this paper explores the profoundly emotional consequences of the loss of place through expanding open cut projects within the Hunter Valley. Furthermore, it emphasises the immense harm wrought by the dismissal of these emotions, particularly as the rapid expansion of the size and scale of resource extraction in the Hunter Valley simultaneously expands the depth and breadth of the consequences for those in the wake of these projects. It remains paramount to consider the ways in which the intense emotions saturating the loss of place through resource extraction are erased by the masculinist norms pervading extractive practices in places like the Hunter Valley.

3. Mining and masculinity: extracting resources, abstracting emotions

It is increasingly recognised that mining and resource extraction, like all social processes, are deeply gendered phenomena (Laplonge, 2017; Pini et al., 2010; Lahiri-Dutt, 2011). Einwohner et al. (2000, 682) assert that viewing a particular phenomenon as gendered recognises the ways in which it “elicits a certain set of social meanings because of its association, actual or assumed, with femininities or masculinities”. Willow and Keefer (2015, 97) have further emphasised that in recognising something as gendered, it “need not be associated in any obvious or conscious way with gender roles or hierarchies” for gender to still “guide” processes and outcomes in particular ways. Furthermore, while emotions themselves are not gendered pre-socially, problematic representations of emotions as ‘feminine’ have been central to “the control and marginalisation of women as irrational subjects”, and the control and marginalisation of emotion itself as ‘irrational’ (Ey et al., 2017, 159).

The extractive sector specifically continues to be “identified as a particularly masculinised industry which preferences hyper masculinity and rejects femininity” (Laplonge, 2017, 307). In particular, the large-scale mining projects dominating natural resource extraction in the 21st century are underpinned by a “taken for granted conflation of men, with institutionalised authority, expertise and privilege, institutions, laws and structures of governance that favour these entrenched hierarchies, and technologies that pose to be gender-neutral” (Lahiri-Dutt, 2011, 329). This claim to gender neutrality conceals the deeply problematic and hegemonic “discursive, cultural and ideological

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