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A dying village: Mining and the experiential condition of displacement

Hedda Haugen Askland

Centre for Social Research and Regional Futures, School of Humanities and Social Science, Faculty of Education and Arts, The University of Newcastle, Callaghan NSW 2308, Australia

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ABSTRACT

The concept of displacement remains relatively underexplored in relation to mining. Whilst there is a growing body of work that theorises displacement as a condition, a lived experience of spatial and temporal dissonance and rupture, scholarship on Mining-Induced Displacement and Resettlement (MIDR) remains set in a conventional approach to the phenomenon and continues to approach migration and displacement as two interlinked process. In this article, I aim to illustrate how mining-induced displacement can occur without movement, yet how it is tied to mobility—of humans or non-humans—over time. I argue that analytical investigation of both place and time are central to understanding mining-induced displacement. Place, here, is defined as a biophysical, social and ontological phenomenon that is experienced in time with temporal references to past/s and future/s. Transformation in either of these three domains will often be paralleled with political contest and temporal inequalities, subsequently leading to experiences of loss and disempowerment. Through a case study from the Mid-Western Region of New South Wales in Australia, I seek to illustrate how displacement can occur in place through parallel experiences of involuntary immobility and what I call 'broken time'.

1. Introduction

Australia is one of the leading coal producers in the world, providing approximately 30 per cent of the global coal trade (Australian Government, 2017). Resource extraction has formed part of the Australian landscape for more than 150 years, with a centre for coal mining being the Hunter Valley and Mid-Western Region of New South Wales (NSW). Whilst these regions have a long history of mining, escalation of extraction, move to high-intensity open-cut mining and privatisation of the energy sector during the 1970s and 1980s altered the relationship between mines, governments and local communities. As coal operations expanded in size and intensity, a new contest for land took place, in which revenue-hungry governments and profit-seeking multinational companies liaised with local communities and individuals living at the coal face (Connor, 2016). Through processes of voluntary acquisition and workforce mobility, migratory patterns of both in- and out-migration transpired, changing the demographic and social composition of local communities. It saw regions and regional centres thrive, whilst, at the same time, it laid bare townships and villages at the coal frontier.

Today, as you drive through the Hunter Valley and the Mid-Western Regions, empty houses, overgrown fields and abandoned farms serve as reminders of a lost past. Whilst regional centres have prospered and the State coffers have grown, local communities at the coal face have been depleted. These empty villages are reminders of how mining goes hand in hand with movement and migration. In this context, movement and migration can hold the potential for renewal and rejuvenation, as well as depletion and dispossession. In this article, I focus on the latter.

Since the 1970s, the imprints of mining on rural landscapes in the Hunter Valley have increased significantly, with a distinct pattern of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2004) taking place. With technological advancement, mining activities moved from the underground world and manifested across rural landscapes. Rather than going deep, large scale open-cut coal mines, such as those characterising the landscapes of the Hunter Valley and Mid-West, go shallow and wide. They require extensive access to land and, most often, a redefinition of the meaning or purpose of landscapes. As such, they may unleash a potential conflict (Hilson, 2002). This conflict is pragmatic in the sense that mines require access to the land and, accordingly, removal of any obstacles such as residents or land uses occupying the surface from which the minerals are to be extracted. At the same time, it is symbolic and political, encapsulating questions of the meaning of land and landscapes, notions of continuity and discontinuity, temporality and power.

In this article, I explore an example of such a conflict through analysis of migration and movement in the small village of Wollar. The village, situated at the edge of the Great Dividing Range in the Mid-Western Region of NSW, is surrounded by three large, open-cut coal mines. I approach the notion of 'mining temporalities' (ÓAngelo and Pijpers, 2018, this issue) through the lens of migration and, in the words of Kirsch (2004: 182), present 'an ethnography of loss' that seeks

E-mail address: Hedda.Askland@newcastle.edu.au.

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to investigate how movement and migration shaped by mining relate to the multiple meanings of temporality outlined in the introduction of this Special Issue. I seek to illustrate how the shifts in temporal horizons materialises into experiences of loss and displacement. In doing so, I call for an expansion of the theoretical analysis of Mining-Induced Displacement and Resettlement (MIDR) to incorporate *involuntary immobility* (Lubkemann, 2008) as a source of disruption, disempowerment and, ultimately, experiences of displacement. Such immobility, I argue, is not only a matter of movement in space, but also matter of temporality by which temporal movement and local historicity (Hirsch and Stewart, 2005) are obscured.

Drawing on ethnographic material from Wollar, I argue that the people of Wollar have become victims of a slow-onset disaster by which they have become displaced in place. This, I proclaim, is a result of the failure of both the NSW Government and proponents—in particular Peabody Energy, which is the company that owns and manages the mine closest to the village—to consider temporality and movement as matters of both cause and effect in assessment of social impacts of mining. The article draws on data collected as part of an ongoing research project entitled *Land use, kinship and migration: large-scale resource extraction and the question of home*. This is an ethnographic study, initiated in April 2015, when the community was first faced with an expansion proposal that would bring the boundary of the mine to only 1,5 km from the village. Data has been collected through semi-structured interviews with villagers remaining in Wollar—including residents who have subsequently left—and former residents, as well as everyday engagement and participant observation at various community events, public meetings, protests, and consultation meetings between the planning department, the mine and local community. I will hone in on a specific part of the material collected, which concerns an experience of 'being stranded', 'being lost', 'left in limbo with nowhere to go'. As these quotes suggest, for the people of Wollar, time has frozen or been paused and the disjunction between time and space has collapsed where people are 'in place' but with this place 'having no future' and, as such, having become a 'non-place' (Augé, 1995).

The paper begins with an outline of existing scholarship on MIDR. Here, I argue that the emphasis on the mining lifecycle as the temporal frame and the implicit conflation of displacement and migration render invisible the impact that mining may have on local communities. Accordingly, I propose in the next sections, there is a need to advance the frames of analysis by expanding the meaning of displacement from movement to condition, and advancing the temporal frames for analysis and revisiting the meaning of 'place' as it incorporates the time-space dimensionality. I subsequently return to Wollar and present an empirical example of how people may become 'displaced in place' due to experiences of both spatial and temporal immobility due to mining.

2. Mining-induced displacement and resettlement

The story told in this article is a common yet often muted story of small villages and townships at the coal frontier (Hilson, 2002; Mcmanus and Connor, 2013; Munro, 2012). Over time, landscapes of the Hunter Valley and Mid-Western Region have attained a ghostly dimension, with villages deprived of life and, as Mazzeo (2018, this issue) writes about the former asbestos mine of São Felix, 'space and time […] paralysed and suspended'. These villages and the mine sites that surround them have not yet entered the state of heritage (see Oakley, 2018, this issue), by which they gain a temporal existence and social importance but rather remain suspended in between past, present and future realities. The mines have become 'wastelands' (Munro, 2012), landscapes scalped or blasted apart, and the small villages within their vicinity are today nothing but ghost towns (e.g. Pfeiffer, 2017; Singleton Argus, 2017). The notion of ghost towns points to a sense of mundane absent presences (Edensor, 2008; Gordon, 1997). Edensor (2008), writing about the ghosts of mundane spaces in the city of Manchester, explains how places can be saturated by absent presences, manifesting through an 'evolving "temporal collage" characterised by spatial juxtapositions and a host of intersecting temporalities which "collide and merge" in a landscape of juxtaposed "asynchronous moments"' (Edensor 2008: 324). Whilst the emergence of such temporal collages and the process by which they enable the past and the future to erupt into the present (Edensor 2008: 325; Hirsch and Stewart, 2005) will have to be subject for another article, it is worth noting the connection that Edensor makes between materiality and temporality and the way that a 'medley of past, present and future' emerges within ambivalent spaces created by emptiness or absence. This connection point to the sense of hauntedness that mark the mining villages in regional NSW; an atmosphere that emerges from the reconfiguration of space in the shadow of capitalism (Harvey, 1996). This reconfiguration ties in with multiple forces that shape landscapes, including land ownership, infrastructure, planning and technology. It also ties in with people and, more importantly in the context of this discussion, movement of people.

When a mine moves in, transformation of space will immediately be triggered. In order to extract, land must be cleared—of property, people and past purpose. Even though mining within settled areas is based on this very predicament, the issue of resettlement and migration remains underexplored outside the applied field of Development Induced Displacement and Resettlement (DIDR) (e.g. Reddy et al., 2015; Cernea, 1997; Oliver-Smith, 2009; Vanclay, 2017). This gap in research exists despite the issue of MIDR identified by Downing already in 2002. To date, little advancement has been made in terms of understanding MIDR as a risk to societal sustainability and individual well-being and, as Owen and Kemp (2015) contend in their critical appraisal of MIDR, knowledge building around MIDR is generalised, diluted and unfocused.

The concept of MIDR has primarily been employed in the context of developing countries, with the likelihood of MIDR being aligned with the convergence of eight factors: rich mineral deposits; relatively low land acquisition costs (in the global market); use of open-cast technology; high population density; poor definitions of land tenure; politically weak populations; powerless populations; and, indigenous population (Downing 2002: 6). According to this, Downing (2002: 6) argues,

> MIDR is unlikely to occur in Avondale and Peoria, Arizona. These affluent, politically powerful, highly populated, non-indigenous, urban communities sit on top of the state's most valuable deposits, but the problem of MIDR makes mining these deposits economically and politically implausible.

It is not the purpose of this article to present an alternative analysis of conditions underpinning MIDR but it should be noted that the story from Wollar shows that factors such as those forwarded by Downing also play a role in shaping opportunities for extractive activity and subsequent dispossession of local people in affluent countries such as Australia. It is, thus, not necessarily the level of political and economic development that determines the plausibility of MIDR but rather proximity to power as it relates to physical, cultural, symbolic and financial capital.

Efforts to establish a mining-specific focus, which incorporates a view of MIDR as a universal, global, phenomenon characterised by distinct critical factors (e.g. Owen and Kemp, 2015; Terminski, 2012) are undermined by an emphasis on displacement as movement across socio-spatial boundaries rather than as a condition, a lived experience of spatial and temporal dissonance and rupture (e.g. Bakewell, 2011; Lubkemann, 2008; Muggah 2011, 2015; Ramsay, 2018). Conceptualisations of MIDR tend to be based within a limited temporal scale (project lifecycle) and are restricted to physical movement across spatial boundaries (relocation). Within this framework, the sense of hauntedness and emptiness, loss and rupture, that characterise ghost towns such as Wollar become muted.