

NOT EVER AGAIN: A POSTCOLONIAL VIEW OF OPENCAST COAL MINING IN THE SOUTH WALES VALLEYS

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Coal and Injustice in the South Wales Valleys

UK Dependence on Coal

Despite its commitments to carbon reduction, in 2012 the United Kingdom (UK) depended on coal for some 30% of electricity production; that percentage rose to more than 40% in periods of peak demand in winter (DECC, 2012). European Consumer Centre statistics for 2015 reveal that coal continued to provide more than 20% of UK electricity. In terms of the greenhouse effect, coal is the worst choice of fuel, producing around 910 g of carbon dioxide (CO₂) per kilowatt hour, compared with 500 g for gas and no emissions for nuclear energy and renewables (EIA, 2013, figures for steam-electric generation). Nevertheless, the Westminster Parliament's Welsh Affairs Committee has reported a new industry enthusiasm for coal, noting the substantial reserves in South Wales, a significant proportion of which are suitable for opencast mining (Select Committee on Welsh Affairs, 2007).

Opencast Coal Mining in the South Wales Valleys

Although world coal prices have fallen since they peaked in 2007 and 2008, the first decade of this century saw a fresh surge in the authorisation of new opencast coal mines (strip mines) in the UK, most controversially Ffos-y-Frân near Merthyr Tydfil in Wales (Monbiot, 2007). Ffos-y-Frân is expected to have produced nearly 11 million tonnes of coal between 2007 and 2025. That amount, when burned, produces around 25 million tonnes of CO₂. Ffos-y-Frân is a vast mine, covering 367 hectares. Its developer, Miller Argent, has presented it as a land-reclamation project because it lies on the site of earlier mining. Established specifically for the Ffos-y-Frân project, Miller Argent is a joint venture between the two property developers, Miller Group Limited and Argent Group PLC, the latter a wholly owned subsidiary of the British Telecom Pension Scheme.

Just over the hill, near the small town of Rhymney, another opencast coal mine is proposed by the same developers, who applied for planning permission in October 2013. This application was made despite (1) Europe's being inundated with relatively cheap coal, particularly from the United States as a result of that country's own shale gas boom; (2) Scottish Coal going into liquidation in April 2013, leaving a number of opencast mines to be cleaned up, at a projected cost of £73 million (BBC, 2013); (3) plans for Glamorgan Power's "Varteg" opencast coal mine near Bleanavon being rejected by the Welsh government in November 2013 because it breached policy specifying a 500 m buffer zone between the mine and homes. If Nant Llesg surface mine received planning permission, it would produce at least 6 million tonnes of coal and be responsible for some 13.60 million tonnes of CO₂ emissions.

Climate Change in the UK and Wales

The UK is committed to achieving a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions of at least 80% by 2050, against a 1990 baseline, and 34% by 2020 (Climate Change Act, 2008). The Welsh Government subscribes to the European Union objective of cutting greenhouse gas emissions by between 80% and 95% by 2050 and is committed to cutting emissions in Wales by 3% per year from 2011 on in policy areas under its control. However, the Welsh Government has been criticised for a lack of leadership in reducing Wales's carbon footprint (National Assembly for Wales, 2008). One response has been the Climate Change Engagement Strategy, which aims to help communities understand how climate change connects to their home and working lives (Welsh Government, 2011).

Residual Injustice in the South Wales Valleys

According to the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney experience higher rates of deprivation in comparison with the average in Wales as a whole, with around a third of the areas being among the 10% experiencing the most deprivation (Members' Research Service, 2010). Life expectancy is lower, and proportionally more people have a "limiting illness." Moreover, some 30% of the working-age population are economically inactive, with 3.4% claiming Jobseeker's Allowance, both higher than the national average. With respect to prospects for green jobs, in 2006–2007, some 23% of municipal waste was recycled or composted, compared with an average of 30% in Wales (*ibid.*). The social injustice experienced by Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney results in their inhabitants being deemed—by segments of the media particularly—a work-shy, wantonly unhealthy, despised population. For instance, the Gurnos estate in Merthyr Tydfil has been dubbed Benefits Estate (de Bruxelles, 2014).

Current levels of deprivation continue a historic trend of social injustice in the area despite—or rather because of—the exploitation of its natural resources, most notably coal, which fuelled the steam-powered industrial revolution as well as Britain's merchant and military navies. Writing on the history, politics, and culture of Merthyr Tydfil, Mario Basini portrays the area as epitomising the postindustrial decay of the South Wales valleys, as well as the community's attempts to transcend its lot. Specifically on Ffos-y-Frân, he writes (Basini, 2008, p.75):

Ffos-y-Frân is the third part of a "reclamation" programme which had previously torn 1.22m tonnes¹ of coal out of this once breathtakingly beautiful part of East Merthyr. The scale of this latest development takes my breath away. . . . My family home is within a kilometre down the valley. But there is a good chance I will be dead by the time Ffos-y-Frân is fully "restored," perhaps into the sterile, plastic landscape that characterises so many "restored" opencast areas in Wales.

Critical Observation, Research Purpose, and Objectives

Although climate justice is nominally high on the UK and Wales governments' policy agendas, it is at the local scale where these commitments to global climate change mitigation and national energy security clash; continuing to mine and burn coal to spur economic growth and ensure energy security remain dominant practices. And the contradiction resounds discordantly

1. 1.22 million tonnes.



Figure 1: Ffos-y-Frân opencast coal mine with Brecon Beacons National Park in the background.
Photo: Chris Austin

through the South Wales valleys, especially in the deprived communities of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney. The experiences of such marginalized communities must be made public. In this undertaking, we take seriously Jasanoff's challenge to the interpretive social sciences to foster more complex communal, political, spatial, and temporal understandings around climate change (Jasanoff, 2010).

In response to observations on residual injustice, marginalised communities, and everyday subjectivities, we take a "postcolonial" conceptual approach (considering Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney as politically—though not historically—postcolonial), anticipating that it will shed new light on environmental conflicts in the supposed transition to low-carbon economies. We consider the meanings given to, and relationships constructed between, justice, environment and sustainability by communities that are experiencing injustice locally, in the places that are being made to fuel global unsustainability—in other words, climate change (c.f. Milbourne, 2012). In this, we are attentive to Walker's proposal that "there is a need for research that better deals with the procedural and recognition dimensions of environmental justice, using research methods that are more likely to be qualitative, experimental and participatory rather than involving the crunching together of statistical data sets" (Walker, 2012, pp.218-219). We note, too, Torgerson's argument that the

expansion of a global “green public sphere” must take into account the legacy of colonialism and develop a postcolonial political ecology, founded not on a single view of nature but on opposition to the domination of nature(s) and conquest of the earth (Torgerson, 2006). We propose that a postcolonial analysis might furnish such communities with data that support efforts related to environmental justice and political ecology (resistant constructions connected to the environment and sustainability) and more fully reveal and challenge relations of power, especially in the context of the communities’ historical particularisms and subaltern knowledge.

On Methodology

Research participants are mainly groups from the Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney area who have been mobilized by the readvent of opencast coal mining in the area. The most pressing issue during this phase of a longer-term and foundational participatory action research (c.f. Kondon, Kesby, & Pain, 2007; Mason, 2015), which began in 2007, was the proposed Nant Llesg mine in Rhymney. This paper is most focused on the main community group that opposes Nant Llesg, the United Valleys Action Group (UVAG), along with its constituent Rhymney Residents Association (RRA). UVAG also includes members of Residents Against Ffos-y-Frân (RAFF). At the time of this writing, in early 2016, mining has already been under way on a huge scale for more than six years. We also research the Green Valleys Alliance, a coalition of local businesses that will be adversely affected if Nant Llesg goes ahead with construction (www.greenvalleysalliance.co.uk). Other participants, including local councillors, are drawn mainly from contact with Rhymney Communities First, part of the Welsh Government’s flagship programme to improve the conditions and prospects of those living in the most disadvantaged communities.² Finally, we interview executives of Miller Argent, the would-be developer of Nant Llesg and operator of Ffos-y-Frân.

We employed an epistemological approach, striving to establish frank and open relationships with all research participants. We participated in regular UVAG meetings, held in an upstairs room of the Blast Furnace Pub in Rhymney, and we undertook some administrative and research tasks as part of the group. In addition, during July and August 2013, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 people involved in the conflict over Nant Llesg. The interviews began with questions around the proposed mine, but we also encouraged people to tell their own stories in their own words. When necessary, we followed up on these interviews with email exchanges

2. On 14th February 2017, the Welsh Government axed the Communities First scheme.

or telephone conversations (or both). Generally, interviews were conducted in the places where people felt most comfortable or were central to their relationship with the coal mine. In a majority of cases, then, interviews took place in participants' homes, but we also talked to workers at work, ramblers in threatened landscapes (while they walked), and commoners on the common. We even conversed with an ornithologist while he was bird-watching. In presenting excerpts from interviews, we use pseudonyms in accordance with accepted ethical practice on protecting the anonymity and confidentiality of participants. Finally, we analysed the documentation produced by participants, including website texts, minutes of meetings, and leaflets. Observations, conversations, interviews, and documentation were analysed in accord with our postcolonial approach, described below.

A Postcolonial Framework for Analysis

In considering Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney to be politically postcolonial, we hope to enliven the rigid and limiting way in which Wales has traditionally been historicised and spatialised (c.f. Williams, 2005). The analytical themes developed by Williams include postnationality and ambivalence, the latter encompassing both oppositional and coexistential aspects of postcolonial life. Citing R. Merfyn Jones, Williams writes that in moving "beyond Wales, we make it a place with citizens, not a cause for adherents, a place able to embrace the prospect of global democracy" (c.f. Williams, 2005). Such potential is pertinent in the face of global climate change, resonating with Whitehead's proposal of the everyday as a realm of experiential empathy and shared physical interaction, in which opportunities exist for one to know not only *of* the other, but also *for* the other (Whitehead, 2009). As we will show, Whitehead's conception of "residual injustice" has a particular resonance for the communities of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney.

Postcolonial scholarship furnishes us with an analytical framework applicable to opencast coal mining in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney. Sethi views postcolonialism as a metaphor for all culture affected by imperial processes of colonisation; colonialism is an anachronistic term that in this context stands for capital expansion (Sethi, 2011). She proposes that empirical studies of "despised populations" are needed "to recover voices of dissent which can be lost in the sweeping wave of 'corporatization'" (Sethi, 2011, p.113). Recovering the voices of a white Northern Rhodesian diaspora, Shurmer Smith problematises place and belonging (Shurmer-Smith, 2011): if tracing the lingering effects of colonialism on identities, social relations, and geographies is central to postcolonialism's mandate, how should the voices of colonialists be heard in postcolonial studies? Butz highlights two coherent themes that emerge in

the work of geographers (Butz, 2011, p. 42): a focus on something postcolonial analysis has forgotten—“ways that groups constitute themselves, experiences of subordination, diasporic identities, and ongoing peripheralizations” and “the effects of centre/periphery dichotomies.” The academy, Butz claims, has learned little from postcolonial studies’ epistemological and political imperative to attend to marginal voices to decentralise the production of knowledge.

As an epistemological approach, then, we suggest that postcolonial scholarship can focus on former colonised nations and colonial powers, on nations on the margins of colonialism, nations that resisted, complicit nations, and nations with hybrid histories. In short, everywhere. In making this claim, we in no way wish to neutralise the colonial experience. On the contrary, we seek to acknowledge colonialism’s reach, its global, cultural, economic and political impacts, while simultaneously highlighting the analytical potential in postcolonialism.

In summary, our analytical framework centres on power and its relations and circulation, particularly between centre and peripheries, its spatiality and territoriality. Through the narratives of “populations,” we focus on the role of institutions and capital expansion (including hearing the voices of capitalists and colonialists). We attend to how community groups are composed, especially with respect to class, age, gender, identity, alterity, and ambivalence. We ask how community is constructed while it is subject to subordination and peripheralization; how the other is represented; how the local, national, and global are in play; how justice and injustice are meted out and how institutions are implicated. What sort of communities and materialities are being created in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney with the advent of large-scale, opencast coal mines? What gets known as geography?

Central to this research is the translation of people, culture, and geography via relations to power. In its more metaphorical sense, translation is a way of describing how a group can be transformed by changing their sense of their own place in the physical and social world (c.f. Young, 2001). In the process of ‘de-translation’³, the methodological challenge we set ourselves is to convey meaning beyond local contexts without depriving the local of its specificity. In this we take a lead from Robert J.C. Young who presents postcolonialism through situated stories, elaborating a politics of the subaltern (Young, 2003, p. 8):

3. ‘De-translation’ is our attempt to allow the groups we research among to present their own sense of themselves in place *for* themselves.

[A] kind of photograph album, but not one in which you are just gazing at the image, made static and unreal, turned into an object divorced from the whispers of actuality. These are stories from the other side of photographs. Testimonies from the people who are looking back at you as you read.

Results: Narratives of Environment, Jobs, and Energy Security

We begin our empirical account with a brief local history. The area around

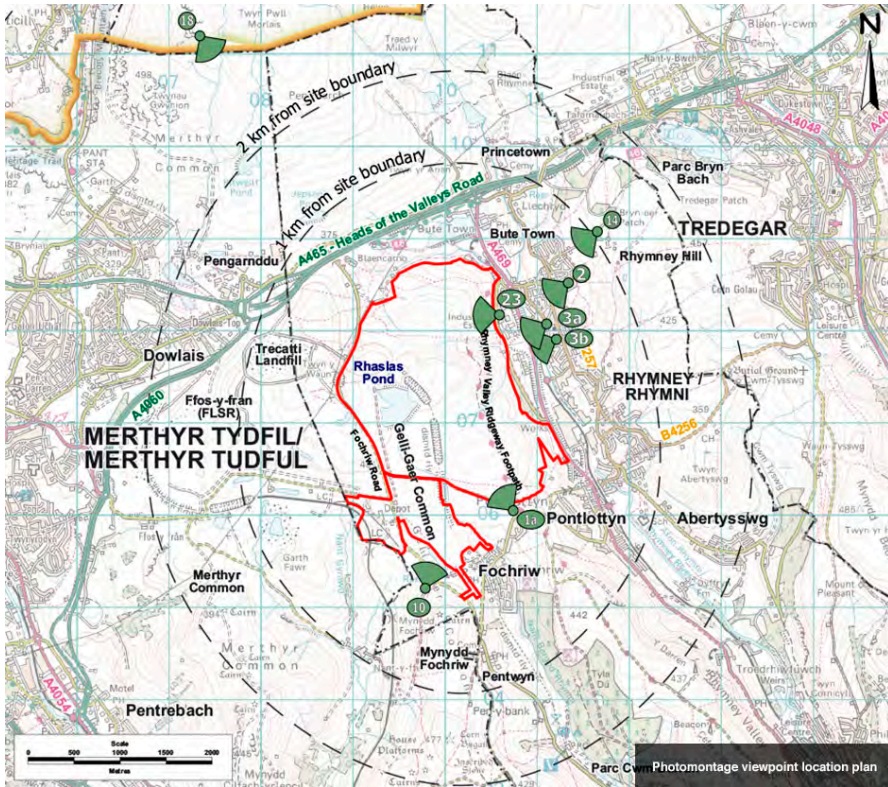


Figure 2: Miller Argent's map of the proposed mine at Nant Llesg.

Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney is known for reserves of iron ore, coal, limestone, and water (c.f. Edwards, 1974). During the industrial revolution, conditions for the development of ironworks were ideal. Their names are famous (or infamous): Dowlais, Cyfarthfa, Plymouth, and Penndarren (c.f. Edwards, 1958). The expansion of opencast coal mining through the 1970s and 1980s was linked to the rise of private mining companies and ran parallel to the crisis in the deep-mining sector marked by the miners' strike (c.f. Francis, 2009). This was an era of changing relations among coal, the state, private

enterprise, mining communities, and the environment (Benyon, 2000). Such relations are still contested territory worldwide (see, for instance, Lertzman and Vredenburg, 2005; Calvano, 2008; Whiteman, 2009; Imbun, 2007). In Rhymney, prospecting for coal deposits that were suitable for opencast mining continued in the 1990s. In a parliamentary debate on the “licensing of coal working, drilling, and boring,” Ted Rowlands, Labour member of Parliament for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney, stated that his community had had enough and was not prepared to further sacrifice their environment (Rowlands, 1990).

The United Valleys Action Group and Affiliates

UVAG is a contemporary grassroots group with a gender-balanced core membership of more than 20 people. No one under the age of 40 or so attends meetings regularly. With the support of Friends of the Earth Cymru (FoE Cymru), UVAG fought a successful campaign against a “monster” waste incinerator proposed by the energy company Covanta for Cwmbargoed near Merthyr Tydfil, and the group is buoyed by this victory. UVAG contested the energy-from-waste credentials of the incinerator and proposed alternatives that would create more green jobs in the area, through recycling and promoting the reduction of waste, for instance (FoE Cymru, 2011).

“Not again, not ever again” is UVAG’s rallying call against Nant Llesg. It is a quote from a woman to whom a group member handed a flyer; the woman vividly remembered the previous round of opencast mining at Nant Llesg, in the 1980s. Within UVAG there is no romanticisation of the history of coal exploitation or any industrial golden age. Quite the contrary (see, though, Jenkins and Jenkins, 1972, and Smith, 2010). One passionate activist, Alun Morris (throughout this paper, we have changed the names of interviewees in order to protect their privacy), believes UVAG is conscious of the cultural phenomena:

It’s the mind-set that is still here ingrained in the people of the Valleys of King Coal being the saviour of the Valleys—very blinkered and rose-tinted memories of what coal brought to the Valleys. Although it put food on the table, how many old miners do you see sitting around? You know, it killed. People didn’t get to enjoy their retirement out of that. They gave their lives for the industry and for, okay, a living wage, but we would say [they were] exploited.

UVAG’s argument centres on environmental injustice, namely the visual impact, dust, and noise associated with the proposed Nant Llesg mine and

the consequent impacts on health and quality of life. Alun Morris's family home is affected daily by dust and noise from Ffos-y-Frân. Exploiting a delay in implementing legislation on a 500 m boundary zone at Ffos-y-Frân, Miller Argent's mine comes within 40 metres of some homes. Morris expresses UVAG's perception of what the group is up against in opposing Miller Argent's plans for Nant Llesg:

This company doesn't operate on its own. All large companies, at the end of the day, work with the support or whatever of the government behind them—obviously because they could be brought to heel quite easily by a government organisation.

UVAG also focuses on jobs, arguing that Miller Argent has overestimated the number that will be created and that many more will be lost from existing local industries. The Merthyr Tydfil Friends of the Earth group, which participates in UVAG, has followed up on the successful campaign against Covanta's incinerator proposal with an ongoing green-jobs initiative, beginning with a seminar conducted in Merthyr Tydfil by the East London Green Jobs Alliance (<http://greenjobsalliance.org.uk/>). Some within UVAG are wary of adopting a wholly green agenda and wish to maintain an identity distinct from Friends of the Earth Cymru.

The proposed Nant Llesg scheme would cover approximately 1,190 acres of land in the county borough of Caerphilly. UVAG is aware of archaeological-heritage issues related to the site and thus canvass support from Cadw, the Welsh Government's historic environment service, though unsuccessfully. One UVAG working group concentrates on protecting "our ancient moorlands, our lakes and our wildlife—the lapwings, the skylarks, and the many kinds of migrating birds that stop over at Rhaslas Reservoir"⁴ (UVAG, 2012). For ornithologist Bob Price, known affectionately as Bob the Birds, there should be no question of burying the unique environment around Rhaslas Reservoir under an overburden dump built for an opencast coal mine. The man-made reservoir was originally part of the complex Dowlais Free Drainage System, which supplied water to Dowlais Ironworks. Bob has observed numerous species of birds in and around Rhaslas Pond including endangered curlews. He keeps a hand-written list of more than a hundred species that can be used as research data.

UVAG's first newsletter stated, "We want our energy to come from clean,

4. Rhaslas Reservoir and Rhaslas Pond are alternative designations for the same area of water.



Figure 3: Bob the Birds at Rhaslas Reservoir on the site of the proposed Nant Llesg opencast coal mine.

renewable sources that avoid the destruction of our beautiful surroundings” (UVAG, 2012). Unlike RAFF’s campaign against Ffos-y-Frân, however, UVAG has made the decision not to raise the issue of climate change locally, judging that it does not have resonance in the locals’ everyday lives; is too complex; and may be counterproductive, given the possible confusion on the part of the citizenry. UVAG members have not heard of, never mind interacted with, the Welsh government’s Climate Change Engagement Strategy. However, in a 2012 draft letter to Wales’s then minister for Environment and Sustainable Development, John Griffiths, the group does cite climate change. Their letter argues against continuing government support for Aberthaw coal-fired power station, the last of its kind in Wales.

We are an environmentally aware organisation and we do not condone the burning of fossil fuel. The argument used to justify digging up coal in the heart of the community is usually security of fuel supply for Aberthaw. . . . [W]e should not be encouraging or supporting extending the lifespan of the “dirty dinosaur” that is Aberthaw; we should and must be looking to the alternatives to replace Aberthaw in the future of Wales’ power generation.

Mary Watkins, a member of RRA, has always lived in Rhymney and worked

as a geography teacher in schools throughout the area, including on the Gurnos estate in Merthyr, where unemployment is particularly high, health is general poor, and life expectancy is low (see, for instance, Basini, 2008). If it goes ahead, the Nant Llesg mine will wholly dominate the view at the end of Mary's street, and she is adamant that she will finally be driven to move away:

I am not going to live here and look at the mountain black. I've seen the mountain black; I've seen how lovely it is now. . . . So why not start now. Let's think about other methods of energy that won't wreck areas and cause damage to the populations living nearby. Think about people for a change. I mean, I know it's an old thing, we need energy, but there's going to come a time when we have to think about the means of getting energy that is not as polluting.



Figure 4: View from Mary Watkins house towards the proposed Nant Llesg coal mine.

Local Councillors

If a boost to local employment were on offer, as councillors we have interviewed claim, it would likely influence many of their constituents to support Nant Llesg. Consequently, they base their own opposition to the mine predominantly on the issue of jobs. For some in UVAG, this blinkered view makes for a vexed relationship between constituents and the councillors whose stance might change according to this single measure. UVAG does not permit councillors into all of their meetings, not completely trusting the integrity of some stakeholders. Interviews reported here are with councillors whose families have resided in the area for generations, often working in the coal industry. They reveal another perspective: varying degrees of personal antipathy towards coal. Labour Councillor Harry Davies, for instance, posits something of a generation gap in knowledge:

Well, the young people haven't experienced it, so they don't know what's happening, and the older people are saying we don't want it because it will severely impact on our lives. And, I mean to say, you've only got to look at the older people in our area: my father had pneumoconiosis; seventy-three when he died, and they said his heart would have taken him on until he was about a hundred.

In his early twenties, Labour councillor Colin Bates acknowledges that being politically active makes him a rare breed among his peers. Bates facilitated understanding of the issues surrounding the Covanta incinerator through information table and “street surgeries”⁵ in communities that would be affected, offering help with making people’s voices heard in bureaucratically complex institutional processes of consultation. He is prepared to do the same with Nant Llesg. Although he is too young to have his own memories of opencast mining, Bates recounts his parents’ story of blasting at the previous opencast mine at Nant Llesg and a lump of coal coming through the window of the family home, narrowly missing the baby Colin. Although he is personally no fan of opencast mining, Colin still considers his key consideration to be the issue of jobs.

The Green Valleys Alliance

The proposed Nant Llesg mine would be sited on the hillside directly adjacent to the Heads of the Valleys Industrial Estate with only the 500 m buffer zone required by the now-implemented Coal Technical Advice Note (Welsh Government, 2009). The campaign of the Green Valleys Alliance is

5. Opportunities for people to access and question their councillor that are set up in public space.

coordinated by Fredrick Miles, who has lived and worked in Rhymney for twenty-six years and is managing director of a cosmetics-manufacturing company located on the Heads of the Valleys Industrial Estate. His campaign follows a course similar to UVAG's, patently drawing on the knowledge developed in RAFF. Miles remembers the previous period of mining: "I could look out the window and see all the mines on the other side. They are an eyesore, scar the land something rotten."

Although no one from the Alliance regularly attends UVAG meetings, the two groups work quite closely together. In its glossy brochure distributed in the area, the Alliance includes UVAG's newsletter. Presenting Nant Llesg as a retrograde step, the Alliance's brochure focuses on negative health impacts, landscape degradation, and a projected fall in house prices locally. It highlights the benefits of two decades of regeneration in the area, particularly in terms of attracting tourism. The loss of jobs is the main focus of the Alliance's campaign, however. If Nant Llesg goes ahead, Miles claims, his company will be forced to relocate, shedding as many as 120 jobs, mainly local women who work in production on the shop floor and who are often the chief breadwinners in their families. Another three factories on the estate, each employing similar numbers, may close entirely. Because the companies' products are things like cosmetics and medical supplies, the marketing strategy of all of them is intimately linked to "the clean air, water, and green landscape of Wales," Miles says. "And whatever Miller Argent says, the jobs that they could create will ultimately leave the job sector in the area very, very denuded." The Alliance commissioned a report from the Welsh Economy Research Unit and the conclusions supported the claims of their campaign (WERU, 2013).

Miller Argent

Miller Argent managing directors argue that they are mining to fulfil a continuing national (Wales and UK) need for coal, particularly to burn in the generation of electricity and the making of steel. In 2011, the UK consumed 51.2 million tonnes of coal, 41.8 million tonnes of which was burned in power stations—and indigenous production was only 18.3 million tonnes (DECC, 2012). Miller Argent is confident of political support from the Welsh Government, supplying as it does both the 1.55 GW Aberthaw power station in the Vale of Glamorgan and Tata's Port Talbot Steelworks, significant sources of employment.

Managing director David Redmond uses an app on his iPhone to confirm that electricity generation in the UK is 31% from coal (he claims it rises to 50% in winter). By his same digital measure, wind and hydroelectric power

contributed only 5.9% and 2.7%, respectively: “Now, for the environmentalists who turn around and say we can manage with the renewables—it’s absolute pie-in-the-sky at this moment in time.” If coal-fired power stations closed tomorrow, Redmond contends, so would half of the UK’s schools and hospitals, and a third of homes would be without electricity.

Given the lead time for developing alternatives, Miller Argent is confident that its market will sustain beyond even the life spans of Ffos-y-Frân and Nant Llesg. Moreover, Miller Argent is proud of its “land reclamation schemes” around Merthyr Tydfil, before and after pictures of which adorn the walls of the boardroom. The company also stands by its claims of local job creation and highlights the effort it puts into training to sustain that goal. At Ffos-y-Frân the company claims, more than 85% of around 280 jobs are local—defined as living within 15 km of the site boundary. Attitudes toward having an opencast coal mine on one’s doorstep depend, managing director Paul Johnson insists, on whether one sees a blot on the landscape or the prospect of a much-needed job.

Miller Argent pays £1 per tonne of coal mined at Ffos-y-Frân in community benefits, which it claims is generous in comparison with similar operations. Payment is made to Merthyr Tydfil Council, and funds are administered by a committee composed of councillors, representatives of Miller Argent, and invited local “dignitaries.” Miller Argent also runs a community minibus operation. It proposes a similar package of benefits for Nant Llesg, which falls under the authority of the Caerphilly County Borough Council. In both mining schemes, Miller Argent created consultative community forums populated with invited councillors and members of the Wales and UK parliaments; representatives of government agencies, such as Cadw and the Environment Agency (succeeded by National Resources Wales in 2013); schools and colleges; hospitals; and local organisations, including Communities First and RRA. UVAG and RAFF are excluded from the consultative forums, which they believe is because they have been labelled “trouble-makers” and (environmental) “extremists.”

“De-translation”

As previously, stated, when analysing power relations with a focus on subaltern struggles and the construction of justice and injustice, we will seek meaning beyond a local context—without losing sight of the specific case of Nant Llesg. Although the following key categories are thoroughly entangled and we consider environment as a crosscutting theme, we differentiate them here as a means of structuring the analysis:

- *Ambivalence*, which encompasses consideration of how capital expansion is in play and how power relations are institutionalised
- *Postnationality*, which involves political relations beyond the local, “knowing for the other,”⁶ as well as group constitution within subaltern struggles
- *Geography*, which considers how the local, regional, national, and global are in play, what sort of places are being made, and centre–periphery dichotomies.

Ambivalence: Capital Expansion and Institutions

Our analysis reveals that UVAG evokes the residual injustices seen in places that have long and repeated histories of exploitation. Although such injustices can be read in both the statistics for social deprivation and the scarred landscapes of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney, UVAG members point out that there is no sign of any residual wealth from coal mining and the ironworks. In the longer term, then, these places did not materially benefit from fuelling and smelting the industrial revolution and British naval power. Any prosperity that manifested locally came and went with the “notabilities” who expanded their capital to the detriment of labour and landscape (see, for instance, Edwards, 1974).

No one in UVAG or among other residents of the community interviewed succumbs to the temptation of romanticising a golden age of coal, refusing to consider “the dust of the coal” alongside “the sound of music,” “the awareness of language,” and “the splashes of humour” in any poetic representation of social conditions (Jenkins and Jenkins, 1972). UVAG considers “reclamation” and “remediation” to be dissembling strategies for promoting resource extraction and capital expansion.

Committed to extending social justice locally, UVAG is also acutely aware that institutional mechanisms that appear to offer a space for voices to be heard, from Miller Argent’s forums to planning-committee hearings, can at the same time render those voices ineffective. There is a perception in UVAG of underlying complicity between large corporations and government, which is fuelled by particular institutional arrangements. Moreover, institutional arrangements make no space for “knowing for the other.” Regarding climate change, complicity extends beyond local government to national government. For example, the office of the minister for natural resources in the Welsh government declined to “call in” the Nant Llesg application (in other words,

6. For us, ‘knowing for the other’ is a way of denoting our representation of subaltern people as part of trying to capture their “history told from below” as Antonio Gramsci phrased it.

to supersede Caerphilly Council's decision-making powers) because "this application does not raise planning issues of more than local importance." UVAG's relationships with local councillors are marked by a certain (mutual) wariness, with the group harbouring a belief that councillors will, at best, go with the flow of the opinion in their constituencies and, at worst, succumb to the temptation of community benefits or other inducements offered by Miller Argent. A similarly guarded view of the Green Valleys Alliance circulates within at least some quarters of UVAG. In short, UVAG believe their allies may be "bought off."

UVAG's efforts to create and sustain a communal voice are inflected with a suspicion that that voice will be rendered ineffective by institutionalised processes of justice within which historically skewed power relations are enshrined. Miller Argent's stated aims regarding justice focus on jobs created and community benefits paid, fostering public relations through the institutionalisation of consultative forums, adhering to the legal requirements of public consultation in the planning process, appointing a full-time environment liaison officer, and the reclamation and remediation of landscapes. The consortium is adamant that, within any constraints of employment legislation, it makes every effort to employ local people, tailoring training programmes to suit. And although Miller Argent claims that major community schemes have been funded and others are about to be launched, UVAG points out that the need for matched funding makes such schemes inaccessible to many local groups. Meanwhile, although there are some reservations, there is general agreement that Miller Argent's community bus scheme works well. This does not mean, though, that the community recognises this "benefit" as any sort of redistributive justice or compensation. Notably, a group such as Rhymney Communities First, constitutionally bound to neutrality on Nant Llesg, is aware that it could prosper from community benefits linked to the go-ahead of the mine.

Reflecting contemporary political concerns and, therefore, power relations, the arguments of all groups engaged in the issue of the Nant Llesg mine are dominated by concerns over economic recovery and growth, presented in terms of the net sum of jobs created and jobs lost. Nowhere does Miller Argent claim capital expansion or profit as an economic ethos, and neither for that matter does the Green Valleys Alliance, although money is surely the main source of conflict of interest between these parties. The contrast between Miller Argent and the Green Valleys Alliance serves as an example of the different scales and competing interests regarding capital expansion. Moreover, as with the white Northern Rhodesian diaspora researched by

Shurmer Smith, even the Miller Argent consortium is itself only a peripheral player in bigger and more centralised power plays around UK energy security and economic growth.

Postnationality: The Constitution of Marginalised Voices and Knowing for the Other

UVAG is conscious of the political focus on economic crisis in the UK, manifest in Wales mainly through the discourse on unemployment. So as an act of resistance to Miller Argent's move to dominate or preclude the debate, UVAG performs bases its campaign on jobs. Although this allows the consortium to set the agenda, UVAG's green-jobs campaign goes some way towards subverting that exercise of power. UVAG concentrates on the jobs that it is claimed will be created rather than the jobs that counterclaims say will be lost. In this, the group is also acutely aware of the specification of jobs as "local." In the case of Ffos-y-Frân, RAFF focused on the type of jobs created, arguing that a greater number of vacancies than Miller Argent claimed would be specialist and so could not be filled locally. In contrast to Miller Argent, RAFF defines "local" according to residence *before* rather than *after* employment. If jobs in the Heads of the Valleys Industrial Estate are lost more quickly than Miller Argent can create them at Nant Llesg, UVAG's case—and that of the Green Valleys Alliance—is already strong without the need to contest what proportion of jobs can be classed as local. The success of the Covanta campaign also contributes to UVAG's decision to focus on jobs.

Arising from everyday environments of ill health and landscape degradation, UVAG is invested with a class consciousness and "militant particularism" that shapes its struggle (c.f. Featherstone, 2005). UVAG's environmental justice narrative concentrates on the impacts on health and quality of life and amounts to a shared ethos, a product of what Veldman dubs "folk consequentialism . . . what people do to reason morally in everyday life" (Veldman, 2012, p.13). UVAG constructs the environment and, therefore, environmental justice as almost wholly a local issue, focusing on dust and noise and consciously avoiding framings such as climate change, which are thought to confuse and possibly alienate potential supporters. Lacking resources and under pressure to resist Miller Argent's jobs discourse, UVAG makes the strategic decision—perhaps incorrectly (see Capstick et al., 2013)—not to take up the challenge of fostering more complex understandings of climate change in the community. The working group concerned with sustaining the ecology in and Rhaslas Reservoir add a conservation stewardship dimension to UVAG's environmental justice (c.f. Mason, 2014).

Therefore, although UVAG has engaged with and supported other groups regionally, the group has consciously chosen not to enter into discourse on either national resource exploitation or a global justice perspective on climate change. RAFF also engaged with environmental justice struggles elsewhere, linking, for example, with the campaign against the Mainhill opencast mine in Scotland (<http://coalactionscotland.org.uk/mainhill>) and Shell to Sea in Ireland, which opposes Shell's exploitation of the Corrib gas field (<http://www.shelltosea.com/content/campaign-aims>, and see Mason, 2010). In contrast to UVAG, though, RAFF extended its alliances to nonlocal concerns, taking action on climate justice with Climate Camp Cymru. UVAG's stance is tactical and pragmatic, influenced by the contrast between the success of the campaign to stop Covanta's waste incinerator and the failure of direct action to stop Ffos-y-Frân. That said, the group readily accepts significant support from Friends of the Earth, which is principally concerned with the climate change–impact of coal.

UVAG's localisation of the justice agenda could leave the group open to charges of NIMBYism ["not in my backyard–ism"] (although see Devine-Wright, 2005, Devine-Wright, 2009), but it is advising and acting in solidarity with groups in other areas faced with incinerator or opencast coal mine developments (notably the proposed Varteg opencast coal mine) and, therefore, helps to foster other regional mobilisations (c.f. Boudet, 2011). That said, UVAG's decision to keep its campaign mostly local is likely to be effective in the disadvantaged communities that it is a part of (Burningham and Thrush, 2001). Councillors, RRA, and the Green Valleys Alliance tend to follow UVAG's example, construing all topics related to justice as local issues.

Geography: Scale, Place, and Peripheralisation

Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney are politically distinct locations, electorally Labour Party strongholds with predominantly working class populations and histories of struggle. Therefore, UVAG is savvy enough to know that neither a wholly green (c.f. Rätzzel and Uzzell, 2011) nor, indeed, a **resource-proprietary**–nationalist discourse is likely to play out to its advantage. Nationalist voices and support for Plaid Cymru (the Party of Wales) are not apparent in UVAG, though progressive elements of Plaid Cymru supported the campaign against Ffos-y-Frân. Plaid Cymru assembly member Bethan Jenkins, who comes from Merthyr Tydfil, is a particularly staunch ally. Jenkins is chair of Wales Against Open Cast Mining, which seeks to “facilitate a discussion on [opencast] mining applications across Wales, including the coal [Minerals Technical Advice Note], restoration issues, and any effects on the local community.”

Coal is undeniably part of the fabric of everyday life and culture in Rhymney, as present as the pneumoconiosis and emphysema suffered by ex-miners as well as in the extensive spoil tips (piles of waste rock left over from mining) that, for most people in the community, do not have “a spectacular beauty of their own” (Edwards, 1958, p.147). With the reported use of hydrogel (a polymer) to retain moisture and so grow grass on spoil tips in the area, the plastic landscape aesthetically despised by Mario Basini becomes material reality. Despite their refusal to romanticise industrialisation, however, UVAG members do tend to value the industrial history carved into the landscape: exploitation does become heritage.

Miller Argent construes the environment and environmental sustainability as both locally manageable and nationally engaged: whereas local landscape can be regenerated or remediated, the national landscape would be economically paralysed and in widespread darkness without coal. The energy security of the nation—assuming Wales to be a part of the UK—depends on coal, so there are inevitable challenges to the local environment. Dust and noise from excavation and transportation operations can be monitored and compared with baseline data to determine whether they meet legislative requirements. According to Miller Argent’s managing directors, the air quality in Merthyr is some of the best in Europe, and in an anecdote the company is fond of retelling, monitoring results show that dust from storms in the Sahara causes more pollution than coal dust from Foss-y-Frân. Unsurprisingly, RAFF contest such results and members carry out their own “citizen science,” monitoring both air pollution and noise levels.

The formation and mobilisation of RAFF and subsequently UVAG must be viewed in the context of disadvantaged and disaffected communities that are peripheral: interviews showed that local peoples’ dominant response to the prospect of Nant Llesg was apathy rather than antipathy or anticipation. Embodying residual injustice, with few material resources, not readily recognised or given a voice within institutionalised relations of power (whether centralised in Cardiff or Westminster), UVAG arises as a space for the emergence of subaltern voices. In this space its members share and debate a sense of place and belonging, values and community, arriving at a measure of consensus that allows them to act together. Therefore, UVAG derives the confidence to demand justice on behalf of a wider community. UVAG is a resistant, political, citizenly endeavour that seeks to transcend domination, exploitation, and subjection.

Conclusion

As tides of exploitation and regeneration have been visited upon them, the local environments of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney have swung between industrial black hole and green, pleasant land. The materiality of place is a relief map of the vicissitudes of institutionalised justice and injustice. Injustice in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney is residual and repeated, its effects economic and environmental, manifest in both the disadvantage of the community and the despoilment of the landscape.

Following Sethi (2011), we recognise UVAG as a “despised population” that is resisting a colonialism synonymous with capital expansion. The experience of domination and ongoing peripheralisation are evident in the composition of UVAG. Politically, however, UVAG refuses to be silenced by either inducement or institutionalised forms of exclusion. The opportunity to transcend local politics and NIMBYism (to know *for* the other, as Whitehead suggests) should be part of the fabric of everyday life in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney. However, the limited reach of institutions of government currently renders that opportunity null and void. For these communities, the everyday is a space that continues to be synonymous with struggle. We argue that it is through groups such as UVAG that places may begin to be made truly just and environmentally sustainable.

In the realm of the everyday, UVAG experiences the circulation and operation of power via material examples of resource mobilisation. This is evident in, for instance, the money that Miller Argent and, to a lesser extent, the Green Valleys Alliance are able to put into the dissemination of information to the public. If we are to build a postcolonial knowledge that is politically relevant to contemporary environmental and climate-justice struggles, we suggest that the voices associated with the competing scales (local versus global), processes, and social relations connected to capital accumulation should be heard in decision making. That said, such voices must be heeded only insofar as they support subaltern struggles. UVAG is also acutely aware of the institutionalisation of power and the seemingly disconnected processes that can serve to redefine justice and injustice and so (re)shape place. The observation of a particular species of fauna or the discovery of a valued archaeological artefact on the site of a proposed coal mine, for example, might bring into play institutions, beyond those of normal planning processes that would then have the authority to halt development.

Despite institutionalised (government) discourses on sustainability, including climate-change mitigation, some places are clearly being made to

fuel global unsustainability while experiencing injustice themselves. The determination of the government in the UK to secure energy at the lowest price in the short-term will, we contend, continue to clash with its rhetorical commitment to reducing carbon emissions to mitigate climate change, and this clash will manifest at the local scale. If subaltern voices such as those in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney are consigned to the silence of the archive, dominant power relations will construe this unsustainability and injustice as national fuel security and economic development, particularly via discourses of job creation. Such a pattern will be reproduced as more places are made locally unsustainable to sustain global unsustainability. What gets known as geography will amount to a retelling of colonial tales of conquest of nature and domination of the earth, although this time around in the guise of sustainability rather than civilisation.

Community is invoked by those engaged in the issues surrounding Nant Llesg in diverse and fluid ways. The concept can be differently constructed and mobilised (c.f. Bauman, 2001, Delanty, 2003, Aitken, 2012), as communities of interest, virtual communities, or communities based on communication and a shared sense of belonging, for example. Yet these communities are typically excluded from considerations of justice in cases of industrial development. Most often, power relations dictate that community is defined as being in, or at least proximate to, place. Power is then recognised and given voice only through the institutions of government and what is deemed civil society. So local councils and third-sector organisations, particularly—in this case at least—those groups concerned with economic regeneration, dominate the discourse. Further, people in the community are viewed as economic beings rather than citizens: the unemployed, employed, underemployed, job seekers, benefit scroungers, breadwinners, the work-shy, and so forth. Typically, these beings are seen as politically passive recipients of jobs and community benefits. As Lesbirel (2011) argues in the context of siting conflicts, defining community is no trivial task, and a political definition that extends beyond administrative boundaries is required in any given dispute.

A postcolonial analysis that includes the historical materialities of place can contribute much to our understandings of the social construction of—and relationships between—community, environment, justice, and sustainability in that place. Studies of oppressed communities plagued by different residual injustices and militant particularisms must seek to enable marginal voices to be heard and not drowned out by deafening discourses emanating from the centre. When considering the making of sustainable (or unsustainable) places, we should consider circulations of power and institutional processes,

including their unintended or incidental effects. We also have to remain sensitive to the scales on which environment is deployed by competing interests and attend to the reasons strategic decisions are made or opportunities are taken or missed.

Regarding Walker's call for research that reveals more of the procedural and recognition dimensions of environmental justice, we suggest that a participatory postcolonial approach, with its attentiveness to institutions and situated narratives, is well suited. Moreover, the production of everyday environmental justice must be founded on the willingness of groups such as UVAG to engage politically when renewed injustice manifests (c.f. Whitehead, 2009). These observations made, calls to remain sensitive to a broader range of relationships between environment, sustainability, and justice hold good: this case study problematises any universal or fixed construction of environmental justice. That said, we argue that analyses such as that presented here can contribute to the development of a postcolonial political ecology that, as Torgerson suggests, is more spatially differentiated, grounded in the everyday and community. If postcolonial places are to contribute to building global democracy, then knowledge of, solidarity with, and support for "the other" must be constructed across the range of scales.

Postscript

In August 2015, going against the recommendation of their planning officers and braving threats of legal action from Miller Argent, Caerphilly Council refused planning permission for Nant Llesg on the grounds of the mine's impact on visual amenity. In January 2016 Miller Argent applied to the council to enclose the common land on which Nant Llesg would be situated. This application and the appeal against Caerphilly Council's refusal of planning permission for the mine were paired and scheduled to be heard together by the Planning Inspectorate Wales in 2016. As of February 2017 this had not happened. In January 2016, Miller Argent was sold to a newly incorporated company, Gwent Investments. This has led to increased fear that commitments to restore the Ffos-y-Frân site will not pass to new owner. UVAG, backed by Friends of the Earth and the UK network Reclaim the Power, continue to resist coal extraction and burning on all fronts. In September 2016, the European Court of Justice ruled that, since 2008, Aberthaw power station had repeatedly exceeded limits on nitrogen oxide emissions. National Resources Wales wrote to RWE Generation UK PLC, the operators of Aberthaw, notifying them of an "intention to review and vary the environmental permit." As of February 1, 2017, RWE had not provided National Resources Wales with the information required to inform this variation. The

pressure is on Aberthaw to clean up its act or close is mounting. A report by Friends of the Earth estimates that “pollution from Aberthaw is responsible for curtailing the lives of 67 people in Wales every year” (FoE Cymru, 2016).

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