

Putting Kinship to Work:  
Gender and Relatedness in a Wyoming Coal Mining Community

by

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For my parents,  
Mike and Juanita

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## Chapter I

### Introduction: Putting Kinship to Work

Reflecting on her twenty years as a coal miner in northeastern Wyoming's Powder River Basin, Kelly most fondly remembers helping to start up the mine that would become one of the most productive in the region.<sup>1</sup> After having previously felt alienated at one of the basin's largest mines, she appreciated working with a smaller group of people who felt like family. As we sat down to have lunch, she told me the story that stands out for her in thinking about those early years, before the mine became so focused on production that people lost touch with one another. "Your dad was one of the first people I met," she said. I smiled, anticipating a story about my father, who at the time of our winter 2007 lunch had worked as a heavy equipment mechanic for the same company for the past twenty years. Kelly told me about how the employees were so few that they all carpooled in a company Suburban for the hour drive to and from the mine.

He came over and picked up a couple of us. I was real flustered. I had just started and I was racing out there to catch the sedan, and I was just filthy, but I didn't want to keep them waiting on me. He looks at me and he goes, "You know, Kelly, we've got time if you want to clean up and relax a little bit." He said, "It's okay, don't worry, I won't leave you."

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<sup>1</sup> The names of all individuals are pseudonyms. To protect the confidentiality of the mines where I engaged in onsite research, I do not name them in this dissertation. I only identify mines and companies when they appear in the public record.

Kelly could not underestimate the significance of his simple act of kindness. “I just thanked him so much. I just wanted to wash my face!”<sup>2</sup> She paused and explained, “It was just one of those nice little things that people don’t have to do for each other, but they do anyway, to treat you like a fellow human being. That makes your day.”

The fourteen surface mines surrounding Gillette, Wyoming, are some of the most productive and safest coal operations in the entire country. In 2007 alone, the roughly 4,000 direct mine employees produced over 430 million tons of coal, accounting for over a third of all coal burned in U.S. power plants. The industry is often characterized as an exceptionally masculine one, but women miners comprise up to twenty percent of most production crews in this northeastern corner of Wyoming.

Like Kelly, the majority of miners in the basin are approaching retirement after having worked with the same crews since mines opened in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The rest are younger workers in their twenties and thirties who are just beginning their careers.<sup>3</sup> Although many derive personal satisfaction from operating and fixing the gigantic equipment that makes the mines so productive, most of them point to their close relationships with coworkers as their primary reason for enjoying their jobs. Created through decades of working and enjoying leisure activities such as hunting trips together, most miners talk about their crews as a second family. As a family, they engage in

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<sup>2</sup> One of the reasons I chose this opening vignette is that it disrupts a common and offensive trope that animates most popular and many academic representations of coal miners. Movies spanning *How Green Was My Valley* (1940) to *October Sky* (1999); books such as Barbara Freese’s *Coal: A Human History* (2003) and cultural historian Bonnie Christensen’s *Red Lodge and the Mythic West: Coal Miners to Cowboys* (2002); and television, radio and print news media all focus on the dirtied faces of miners after a day of work. This representational trope evokes blackface and marks the miners and their labor as Other (Duke 2002).

<sup>3</sup> There are very few miners between these two cohorts because after the original booms, a declining national coal market put a halt on new hiring until the late 1990s and early 2000s when the coal market expanded and the majority of Powder River Basin miners began approaching retirement.

myriad deceptively ordinary acts that recognize the personhood of their coworkers: delaying a carpool so that a coworker can wash up; starting up a pick-up or haul truck ten minutes before the start of shift on a winter morning so that the next person does not have to sit in the cold; buying two Cokes instead of one during a trip to the vending machine; offering advice to perfect a coworker's technique one-on-one instead of in front of the entire crew; swapping shifts so that a father can attend his daughter's school play; and spending the last few moments of the shift cleaning up a work area instead of rushing to the locker room so that the next person can start their workday on a good note.

Kinship figures heavily in both fictional and non-fictional accounts of work in the coal industry. These relationships are most often expressed as inter-generational occupational ties between fathers and sons. A few of these accounts also mention the type of social or fictive kinship otherwise unrelated coworkers craft with one another, such as the workplace families that are prevalent in the Powder River Basin. Missing from both types of portrayals, however, is close attention to women's involvement in these relationships, even though they have comprised a significant portion of the mining workforce since at least the 1970s. This oversight is linked to the mining industry's discursive location within a series of binaries: public/private spheres, work/home places, instrumental/affective action, and masculine/feminine persons.

Throughout this dissertation, I trace how this set of oppositions has been mapped onto ethnographies of mining communities, anthropological theories of kinship and work, and the emerging field of feminist technology studies. By looking at workplace families – including the gender dynamics implicated in their creation, their ties to family relationships at home, and their entanglement with corporate visions of relatedness and

social responsibility – I hope to offer a more textured gendered perspective on the everyday, processual creation of relatedness and its links to larger structures of political-economy. Along the way, I seek to replace stereotypes of the exaggerated masculinity of the mining industry with a careful consideration of the particular contexts and social configurations within which gender comes to matter in a Wyoming mining community.

Popular and academic accounts of miners tend to portray the men as either noble working class heroes or stubborn defenders of masculine shop floor privilege. When women appear in accounts of mining communities, it is most often as the miners' wives who support strikes and other labor activities (e.g. Finn 1998; Nash 2003 [1979]). Scholarly attention to women miners is scarce and often focuses on their struggles to participate in a male-dominated industry. Those authors seeking to analyze the roles gender plays in organizing workplace social relationships often fall into a trap of portraying men and women as inherently different. In conversation after conversation during my fieldwork, men and women alike criticized this idea. As a shovel operator named Mary put it during the day I spent with her at the mine, "Gender is not always the most important part of my day. There are lots of other interesting things that people should care about." When I asked her what that might include, she paused briefly and deftly maneuvered the shovel bucket over the bed of the truck she was loading. She watched as the dirt emptied into the bed and then said, "Like *human* needs. How to be a human out here, not how to be a woman out here." She honked the horn, signaling for the truck driver to pull away. As he did, she got on the radio and told him a joke in response to one he had told her earlier in the shift. She chuckled to herself as she scooped the next bucket and waited for the next driver to make his approach. As the next

driver pulled in, she refocused, sighed and criticized the repetition her job demanded, saying, “Here we go again.”

When Mary said that gender was not the most important part of her day, she did not mean that gender did not matter at all. In fact, she spoke very poignantly about some of the cultural (some men not liking to take directions from women) and practical (no easy access to the pit’s portable bathrooms) factors that discouraged many women from taking jobs as shovel operators. In this conversation she seemed to invoke the word gender to mean differences between men and women. Along with many of her coworkers, she became frustrated when women emphasized their femininity in order to seek favor from supervisors, attempt to get out of undesirable tasks or try to get people they disliked fired.<sup>4</sup> Like many women who were reaching middle age during my fieldwork, Mary had spent her time at the mine consciously trying to play down gender differences by proving herself as a skilled operator and laughing along with the guys’ humor. Now enjoying a position of leadership as a shovel operator, she loves her job and the people with whom she works. She considers her crew an extended family, which breaks up the monotony of their jobs and makes the days go by faster. In addition to telling jokes to each other on the radio, they often play practical jokes on one another when the opportunity arises. Mary peppered our conversation at the mine that day with stories of memorable jokes from years past, appearing to relish the chance to tell them again. As a family, they also support each other when someone encounters a personal tragedy, such as an extended illness or death of a loved one.

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<sup>4</sup> A few women in the basin have developed reputations for falsely claiming sexual harassment in order to get a disliked coworker fired. I am not in a position to evaluate the validity of these claims.

Mary, Kelly and many other miners in the basin often said that their crew families made their work enjoyable and meaningful. One of Mary's coworkers, a truck driver named Sue, said that this sense of family was important because "it means that you're treating people like a fellow human, not some number or a machine." Sharing a sense of family also makes many miners feel safer at work, since as family members they "watch out" for each other. When I took my first job as a truck driver at a small mine in the basin, my father was happy because he thought the small size of the crews would mean that everyone would look after each other's safety. He was right. On my first day of training, one of my new coworkers filled me in on what they called the different "personalities" on the crew. Referring to one of the most experienced men on the crew, she said, "He'll be just like a father to you. He'll watch out and make sure you're safe."

Studying women's involvement in workplace families not only helps to disrupt the discursive masculinization of the mining industry, but it also makes key theoretical interventions in shedding light on the mutual construction of gender and kinship (cf. Rubin 1975; Yanagisako and Collier 1987) as well as the reproduction of gender-segregated workplaces (e.g. Williams 1989). The literature on women's integration into male-dominated blue-collar occupations tends to posit sexual harassment as a limiting factor for women's participation (e.g. Schultz 1990, 1998; Williams 2000; Yount 1991, 2005).<sup>5</sup> In contrast, I will argue that idioms and practices of kinship frame the Wyoming

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<sup>5</sup> It is problematic when sexual harassment is considered the domain of working rather than middle class people. Joan Williams, for example, argues that the "hidden injuries of class" (2008: 78; Sennett and Cobb 1973) prompt blue-collar male workers to assert their masculinity by harassing women. She describes blue-collar sexual harassment as "severe" (2000: 78), "virulent" (82) and "well documented" (2000: 84) while acknowledging that sexual harassment "sometimes" happens in white-collar work as well (2000: 84). Many of the Wyoming women involved in the mining industry specifically left white collar occupations because they found the harassment and discrimination to be far worse in those workplaces compared to the mines. In

women miners' understanding of harassment and lead them to consider frequent sexualized banter a valued mode for crafting relatedness.

This chapter begins by exploring why scholars associated with recent innovations in the anthropological study of kinship have yet to engage the processual creation of relatedness in workplaces. I then critically reflect upon and situate my research in relation to two major bodies of literature that inform the dissertation as a whole: studies of industrial workplaces and family relationships, and ethnographies of mining communities. I conclude by offering an outline of the dissertation and situating it within local criticisms of how coal miners and communities are represented in popular media.

### **Theorizing kinship, work and gender**

Many crews in the Powder River Basin consider themselves to be members of the same family because they spend over half of their waking lives together. These relationships would have been considered fictive kin by earlier generations of anthropologists – though fictive in the sense that it was crafted and made, not in the sense that it was false. These types of relationships are common the U.S., such as when children call their parents' close friends uncles or sorority members call themselves sisters. In recent years many anthropologists have moved away from this term in favor of Janet Carsten's (1995, 2004) conception of relatedness, perhaps because it allows for local variation without

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contrast to these dominant accounts of working class misogyny, Barbara Ehrenreich (1983) argues that working-class masculinity is not an issue of dysfunctional or immature men, but a strategy for generating power in confrontations with management. "Working-class male chauvinism' might be an expression of class rather than gender antagonism" (Ehrenreich 1983: 135). See Baron (2006: 145-146) for a recent critique of the scholarly reliance on the "crisis of masculinity" to understand workplace gender dynamics.

inadvertently implying that non-biological relationships are somehow variants of “real” kinship. This theoretical innovation has revitalized anthropological studies of kinship, opening up an avenue for cross-cultural comparison that does not rely on or reproduce distinctively EuroAmerican assumptions about personhood or biological relatedness.

These so-called “new” kinship studies have carved out pertinent areas of research, especially in the area of new reproductive technologies. This body of literature unpacks conventional EuroAmerican assumptions about the biological basis of relatedness. It also challenges the relegation of kinship studies in these countries to the private sphere by training an eye on how these technologies and their use are embroiled in larger political-economic structures and processes (Carsten 2004; Franklin 1997; Kahn 2000; Ginsburg and Rapp 1995; Strathern 1992a, 1992b). Similar sets of questions have also been taken up as they relate to adoption practices (Carsten 2007; Edwards and Strathern 2000), gay and lesbian kinship practices (Carrington 2002; Weston 1991) and other forms of caretaking that fall outside conventional notions of family (Borneman 1997).

Given these intellectual pursuits, it is surprising that this body of literature has yet to critically engage the workplace and the practices of relatedness animating it. For example, the flourishing of nuanced studies of houses and the practices of people who live together (e.g. Bahloul 1999; Carsten 1995a, 1995b, 1997; Mueggler 2001; Yan 2003) has yet to be matched by systematic analyses of workplaces and the kin-like practices of people who work together.<sup>6</sup> Homes may form a privileged site for these studies because

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Dunn (2004) does consider the ways in which the ideas and practices of kinship shape interactions on the Polish shop floor where she did research. Specifically, she notes that many women in the factory viewed themselves as “mothers preparing food for children rather than as industrial workers making an abstract commodity” (2004:144). Thinking of themselves as mothers therefore provided them with “an alternate basis from which to value both the products they make and themselves as producers” (2004: 143). At the same time, they also demanded that

they evoke the feelings of warmth and affection that EuroAmerican anthropologists often identify with kinship (e.g. Edwards and Strathern 2000; Franklin and McKinnon 2001).

Yet workplaces can also engender feelings of belonging, and studying the social relations that animate them would help to foreground the disconnections that are also implicated in kinship practices.

A further reason that anthropologists may have been slow to engage questions of kinship and work is the lingering aversion for the 1970s and 1980s Marxist-inspired theories that considered kinship in segmentary societies to be relations of production (e.g. Meillassoux 1981). In his review of kinship studies in the last half-century, Peletz (1995: 354) characterizes these approaches as “mechanistic and reductionistic.” A crucial problem with this type of scholarly project is that it exports EuroAmerican theories (Marxism) and categories (labor) to places where they might not be appropriate (Strathern 1986, 1988). In the same vein, the 1970s and 1980s were also characterized by the efforts of feminist anthropologists to account for the global subordination of women based on their restriction to the private sphere (Rosaldo 1974: 41; Ortner 1974; Ortner and Whitehead 1981). This line of research was quickly critiqued for applying EuroAmerican analytic distinctions to places where they might not be salient. These authors (Ortner 1996; Rosaldo 1980) later moved away from this approach following

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their managers treat them as parents would treat children (2004: 151). Dunn argues that in so doing, however, they “constantly recognize and even naturalize their subordination... They were not fighting against their subordination. Rather, they were fighting to determine the way in which they would be subordinated” (2004: 161). Dunn’s identification of this paradox – in which women submit themselves to disciplinary control in their attempts to revalue their work – seems apt, but I wonder how differing kinship roles influence these relationships, given that the women ask their managers to treat them as children, but they also view *themselves* as mothers. In my work I focus on horizontal ties of relatedness crafted among workers that does not simply give shape to subordination, but actually changes corporate policies. See pages 81-86 and 253-258 for discussions of workplace safety programs.

critiques of its reliance on a Eurocentric, tautological relationship between women and the domestic sphere, as domesticity was identified by the presence of women (Strathern 1988: 73; Yanagisako and Collier 1987).

The first generation of scholars working within the “anthropology of women” paradigm assumed not only a universal sisterhood and global division of public and private spheres, but they also relied on a transcultural notion of labor (Moore 1988). Marilyn Strathern (1986, 1988) was influential in drawing early attention to the EuroAmerican notions of personhood underlying the dominant feminist theory and research of the 1970s and 1980s. Because anthropologists imported commonsense notions of singular personhood, alienable labor and the ownership of the products produced through work into their research in Melanesia, she suggests that they misunderstood men’s supposed dominance over and exploitation of women (Strathern 1986; 1988: 138-58).

Like Strathern, Donna Haraway (1991) argues that as material feminists successfully expanded the category of labor to include women’s activities in other cultural contexts, they also flattened the diversity of these practices. “The unity of women here rests on an epistemology based on the ontological structure of ‘labor’... The essentializing move is in the ontological structure of labor or of its analogue, women’s activity” (Haraway 1991: 158). These cogent critiques raise a perennial question for anthropologists: How might we theorize work or labor in a way that allows for both cross-cultural comparison and sensitivity to culturally specific categories and definitions? The conceptual tool of relatedness has resolved this contradiction for studies of kinship, but comparable efforts have not been made for studies of work. Rather, anthropologists

have limited their studies of gender and work to industrialized contexts, taking factories and hierarchical, routinized organizations of the labor process as evidence of “work” (Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Freeman 1993, 2000; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Ong 1987; Pun 2005; for recent reviews see Mills 2003 and Ortiz 2002). This flight to industrial non-U.S. contexts has paralleled larger trends of outsourcing factory work to the developing world.<sup>7</sup>

The scarcity of studies of workplace relatedness may also be attributable to Marxist-inspired assumptions that kin-based relationships become increasingly marginal in capitalist organizations. At the same time as anthropologists studying kinship have shied away from work, many scholars interested in work have shied away from kinship. For example, in his reinterpretation of Marx’s critical theory, Moishe Postone (1993: 150, 157) argues that the uniqueness of capitalism lies in its fundamental social relations being constituted by labor instead of kinship and other personalized relations. Some empirical research seems to confirm this theory. James Carrier (1992), for example, draws on David Halle’s (1984) ethnography of New Jersey chemical plant workers to argue that in capitalist contexts, kin-based workplace social relations have been replaced by economic ones:

Though many at Imperium were related and perhaps even beholden to relatives who helped them get jobs at the plant, kin ties did not determine the actual relationships within which production took place. Production relations did not reflect interpersonal relations. The fathers who got jobs for their sons did so as a favor, not because they had to draw on close kin in order to produce; the sons whose fathers worked at Imperium did not work for their fathers, they worked for Imperium; they were not paid by their fathers, they were paid by Imperium. Here, then, sociality was added on (somewhat furtively) to the more purely economic

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<sup>7</sup> Important exceptions to this trend include Kathryn Dudley (1994, 2000), Louise Lamphere (1987; Lamphere et. al 1993), Sherry Ortner (2003) and Karen Sacks (Sacks 1984; Sacks and Remy 1984).

relations that existed at Imperium; it did not permeate economic relations in the way that occurred in older production regimes. [Carrier 1992: 550-1]

In his discussion of emerging alienated work relationships in the development of capitalism, Carrier identifies a general trend in the shifting organization of workplace relationships that partially holds true for the mining industry. Beginning in the 1920s and accelerating through the 1930s miners were no longer directly supervised by their family members but by professionalized managers. Instead of working together as a family in small rooms, they worked in large rooms with many people (Long 1989; cf. Hareven 1982 for a comparative example of a New England textile mill). Instead of receiving their pay directly from the contracted miner, who was paid on a per-ton basis from the company, all miners and support employees received standardized wages from the company.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, separating and assigning different importance to the domains of social – in Carrier’s case understood to be kin-based – relationships and economic ones misses the point this division is an analytic abstraction that has been “mistaken for the actual processes through which people formulate action” (Yanagisako 2002: 5). Home and work, kinship and political-economy, have always been mutually imbricated in everyday life and purified only in scholarly analysis (Descartes and Rudd 2008; Richardson 2006: 168; Yanagisako and Collier 1987: 3). In fact, Carrier fails to note Halle’s detailed attention to the workers’ elaboration of kin-like work relationships and also discounts the “dense kin and friendship networks” animating the plant (Halle 1984: 5, 47). To return to the case of the mining industry, the reorganization of the labor

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<sup>8</sup> This move toward standardized wages instead of a family-based contract system was part of national trends that culminated in the National Recovery Act of 1933, which recommended a minimum wage of \$5.42 a day (Montgomery 1987).

process did not result in the total “de-kinning” of the workplace. Rather, workers continued both recruiting their family members to work in the industry and creating close kin-like relationships with their coworkers.

This dissertation thus contributes to recent innovations in anthropological studies of kinship by theorizing the processual creation of relatedness in an American workplace. For the miners, idioms and practices of kinship help to mitigate the alienating tendencies of their work and help them recognize each other as humans, to use Mary’s terms. Miners also draw on ideas of relatedness to make claims both about how coworkers should treat each other and how company officials should treat them (cf. Richardson 2003, 2006, 2007). These ideas and practices are especially evident in talk about safety programs. Prompted by the miners own efforts, company officials have integrated discourses of relatedness to frame their interactions with employees. As my examination of recent shifts in safety programming reveals, the miners have been able to challenge many of the hierarchical features of the company visions of workplace relatedness and safety programs to bring their own, more egalitarian ideas about workplace families into practice.

In theorizing the “work” that idioms and practices of kinship perform in the mines, this research fills a notable and problematic gap in the existing literature. By focusing on relatedness in homes at the expense of the workplace, anthropologists unintentionally reinforce the public/private binary that so many have critiqued and attempted to move beyond. Focusing my analysis of relatedness in workplaces as well as homes helps to unsettle this binary and the gendered motivations for social action that underlie it. In their foundational call for unifying the study of kinship and gender,

Yanagisako and Collier (1987) argued that studying domains of social life separate from one another created exaggerated accounts of gendered social action: men appear in a public sphere animated by rational self-interest and women are relegated to a private sphere in which altruistic love, exemplified in the bond between mother and child, reigns. They linked this trend to Meyer Fortes' (1962) analysis of Tallensi kinship, in which he argued that the politico-jural domain was governed by external or public sanctions that could involve force, whereas the domestic domain was governed by private, affective and moral norms such as altruism. In contrast, they argue that assigning motivations to differentiated domains does not account for the ways in which people's thoughts and actions crosscut analytic and institutional boundaries (cf. Yanagisako 2002: 6; Medick and Sabeen 1984).

Analyzing social wholes rather than domains offers a more nuanced perspective on the gendered dynamics of creating relatedness. Focusing on the home as a privileged site for these relationships has created a rich body of ethnographic research surrounding the roles that women play in this process. Focusing on women's kinship practices was important for correcting previous generations' almost exclusive focus on men (e.g. Carsten 2004: 11; McKinnon 2000), but the unintended result of this research has been a lack of attention to men's caretaking activities.<sup>9</sup> Matthew Gutmann (2007 [1996], 1997)

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<sup>9</sup> Using a critical gendered lens to theorize kinship has prompted a reconsideration of many canonical texts, such as Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* (1940). In his account of segmentary lineage organizations, his focus on "political institutions" is hindered by his definition of the "political." He identifies political structures as "relations within a territorial system between groups of persons who live in spatially well-defined areas and are conscious of their identity and exclusiveness," and distinguishes these from "local groups of a different kind, namely domestic groups, the family, the household, the joint family, which are not, and do not form part of, segmentary systems, and in which the status of members in respect to each other and to outsiders is undifferentiated" (1940: 4; cf. 92, 114). He effectively cuts off politics at the level of the village, completely ignoring household and inter-household politics where women exert the most

has been instrumental in calling for more scholarly attention to men's kinship practices, especially as they concern fatherhood. He argues that even dominant work-related conceptions of men as breadwinners are also implicated in the everyday practices of home life (2007 [1996]: 147; cf. Townsend 2002). Like Gutmann, my concern is with the performativity of theory, or the ways in which theory making can obscure or bring to light alternative ways of being in the world (Gibson-Graham 2006: xxi). The separation between public and private spheres emphasizes gender difference, making men and women appear in specific, disparate ways: women as caregivers and men as (sometimes wayward) providers. Anthropological studies of gender and kinship have also tended to focus on gender difference, or the ways in which men and women have been made to appear different from one another (Yanagisako and Collier 1987: 15). In this dissertation, I will argue that scholars must also critically consider sociocultural processes that challenge binary understandings of gender (cf. Carsten 2004: 69; Rubin 1975: 180). This type of analysis is sorely lacking in contemporary studies of EuroAmerican practices of relatedness, perhaps because our own understandings of kinship are so closely tied to heterosexual marriage (Butler 2002; Povinelli 2006; Rubin 1975; Weston 1991). I will show that studying workplace relatedness in the Powder River Basin mines highlights the

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influence. Salient to this discussion is the fact that it might be within these spheres that women would be the most influential. He himself notes that families often work together, and that these interfamily relationships are sometimes more important than the ones with the clan (1940: 203). Commenting on his work, Audrey Richards was one of the first to question his division of domestic and political systems, arguing that "the two systems seem to me to grow out of the other, and in the dynamics of a social situation constantly to overlap" (McKinnon 2000: 35). In her reinterpretation of Evans-Pritchard's ethnographic data, Susan McKinnon (2000) suggests that Evans-Pritchard's creation of three distinct analytic domains – a politico-jural one based on unilineal descent, a domestic domain based on bilateral kinship and marriage, and a cultural one based on religion – was the product of his own cultural notions of gender and kinship.

deceptively mundane ways in which men and women sometimes reinforce and other times challenge strictly gendered kinship practices and persons.

By not studying relatedness in the workplace, anthropologists are also failing to account for a very significant imaginative and social practice in contemporary U.S. workplaces. It has become commonplace for news stories about plant closings to feature interviews with workers who talk about their coworkers like their own family (see Dudley 1994 for an academic account). In everyday talk, many ordinary Americans as well as politicians express their reverence for family businesses, perhaps because they are assumed to operate on a more ethically sound set of principles. For example, Wal-Mart has portrayed itself as a caring, family business established through the hard work of an ordinary and fatherly man, Sam Walton. These representations are intended to counteract and conceal widespread criticisms of the corporation's labor practices (e.g. Ehrenreich 2001; Lichtenstein 2006).

Whereas such corporate paternalism has been effectively historicized and critiqued (Fine 1993; Jacoby 1997; Kalb 1997; Meyer 1981; Tone 1997), markedly less scholarly attention has been paid to workers' own elaborations of workplace relatedness. These kin-like relationships are often mentioned and then passed by, taken to be self-evident. In contrast, this dissertation carefully questions the work that notions of kinship and relatedness perform for people thinking about their labor and for the companies that organize it. In Chapter Five, for example, I argue that the idioms and practices associated with the miners' beloved crew families provide them with the tools to mitigate the alienating tendencies of industrial work and to hold companies accountable for workplace safety. But keeping in mind Yanagisako and Collier's (1987) call to study social wholes

instead of domains, I counterpose this perspective with careful attention to the creation of relatedness at home and in the community.

### **Ethnographies of work and family**

Although the new kinship studies have yet to engage questions of relatedness in the workplace, other anthropologists and historians have explored the relationship between industrial work and everyday family practices. In this section I situate my research in relation to these previous studies. Because most anthropologists who have studied workplaces and families have relied on biological conceptions of kinship, they have missed other pertinent ways in which practices and ideas of relatedness have animated workplaces. They have also tended to concentrate their efforts on the force of companies to shape family life, even if they espouse a commitment to studying their mutual influence. Here I focus on the work of five exemplary scholars – Tamara Hareven, Louise Lamphere, Don Kalb, Janet Finn and Sylvia Yanagisako – to illustrate, critique and contribute to this body of scholarship.

Though not an anthropologist by training, Hareven (1982) is a crucial figure in the field of historical family studies. In her research about a 19th century New England mill town, she was one of the first historians to argue that industrialization did not eliminate, but rather depended on family structures, especially in recruiting and socializing workers. With great historical detail, she shows that people adjusted different “family times” such as moving out of the childhood home, getting married and having children to industrial cycles. Intriguingly, she also notes that in addition to kin working together at the mill, coworkers also often came to think of themselves as family. She

suggests that these feelings of “community” – notably she does not include them under the rubric of kinship – gave meaning to people’s work and invested them in the company (1982: 72). The primary drawback of her approach is that even though she ostensibly seeks to show how the families and the mill shaped each other, the families do not seem to influence the mill or the organization of work. Even though she offers a few hints that workers attempted to establish control on the shopfloor, she focuses on individual and family adaptation to changing historical and industrial circumstances (1982: 8).

Louise Lamphere’s research with women factory workers in the northeastern (1987) and southwestern United States (Lamphere et al. 1993) suffers from a similar problem. Her work is important for thinking through how to attend to differences among women without losing a feminist project, as well as for theorizing the impact of women’s workforce participation on household divisions of labor, support networks and childcare strategies. At the same time, she tends to focus on how women “respond” to structural processes rather than how they might shape them (e.g. Lamphere et al. 1993: 96). Especially with her work in the Southwest, these strategies seem to spring mechanistically from structural conditions and contradictions, rather than women’s creative maneuverings within them. Moreover, this research tends to focus almost exclusively on women. For example, she and her colleagues make general statements that working-class men end up doing a greater share of the childcare than previously thought, but do not offer any hints to how these practices influence men’s visions of themselves as fathers (Lamphere et al. 1993: 190). These gaps in the research may be linked to the type of fieldwork she and her colleagues undertook, as they did not interview many men and rarely spent time with people outside of the plants.

Don Kalb's (1997) research compares two industrial communities in the Netherlands: one a shoemaking district and the other a boomtown tied to the enormous electrical corporation Philips. Like Hareven and Lamphere, he argues that the "regime of basic mass production of the electrical plants... was socially preconditioned by, and built upon, aspects of class, gender and household economy that originated outside the immediate sphere of industrial production and the labor market" (1997: 146). He coins the term "flexible familism" to capture Philips' practice of employing their (male) workers' daughters. In so doing, he argues, the corporation could rely on fathers to socialize and discipline their daughters, reinforcing and combining paternal authority and industrial discipline (1997: 91). He also argues that this method of labor recruitment fostered company loyalty since the availability of a cheap and ample reserve labor force meant that they could hire and fire the daughters along with swings in the industrial cycle, leaving their permanent employees continually employed.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Hareven and Lamphere, his account of Catholic "solidarism" efforts shows that workers and their families made efforts to "make the best of their world as well as to their unchosen need to find the friction-ridden alignments to do so" (1997: 3). The main shortcoming of his work is his treatment of gender. He seems to presume an almost natural subservience of the daughters (1997: 96, 104, 126).<sup>11</sup> This assumption is odd given that he would never do so in an analysis of class, as he forcefully argues that scholars cannot read people's

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<sup>10</sup> Kalb's theory suggests that the Powder River Basin mines' summer student program could also be considered flexible familism that draws on employees' children as a reserve, temporary labor force.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Kalb argues that the "great care, quietness, obedience, and dexterity required by the highly subdivided and minute tasks on relatively costly and vulnerable materials performed at the Philips plant made young east Brabant females, accustomed to subservient carefulness, ideal workers" (1997: 104).

thoughts and motivations based on their public actions (1997: 86; cf. Scott 1985, 1990 and Gal 1995a on hidden transcripts).

Drawing on her fieldwork in copper mining communities in Montana and Chile, Finn (1998, Finn and Crain 2005) makes an important intervention into this scholarship by drawing attention to women's everyday activities of family and community caretaking, or what she calls "crafting the everyday" (1998: 3, 168). It is there that she locates the women's agency in "creatively defining, reworking, and mobilizing the resource potential of their situations, and, at times, shifting the balance of power along the way" (1998: 17). This "craftswomanship" involves their powers of "contra-diction," or talking back to the forces that shaped their lives as a part of the process of "reclamation," a clever play on a technical mining term (1998: 14). By reclamation, Finn means women's efforts to create meaningful histories and identities that maintain their dignity (1998: 18). She offers women's labor history groups as models of this type of activity (1998: 170).

At the same time, Finn is careful not to underestimate the power of the Anaconda company to influence the everyday lives of community members. In textured detail, she traces how the everyday demands of mine work and cycles of labor contract bargaining shaped the rhythms of family life, from daily standing in line at the company store in Chuquicamata to making life plans in three-year increments to factor in the possibility of a strike in Butte. She also analyzes how company interests and activities were implicated in the construction of gender and class subjectivities that men and women reinforced, challenged and reworked in their own efforts in self-making. These efforts sometimes resulted in concrete improvements in the community, but they also sometimes served the

interest of the company. For example, she shows that even the women's efforts in supporting their families had the paradoxical effect of bolstering company strength during strikes. "Women mobilized to preserve family and community life in the short run. In the long run, their efforts served to bolster the structure of corporate-community relations that both devalued and exploited them... women's work benefited the company" (Finn 1998: 155).

This kind of careful attention to the interplay between the everyday practices of families and larger capitalist structures also animates Yanagisako's (2002) research about Italian family firms. She argues that two significant gaps in Marx and Weber's theories of capitalism – their failure to provide theories of capitalist motivation and to include kinship and gender in their theories – are "different facets of the same omission" since kinship and gender are key in the production of persons and classes (2002: 174). In other words, capitalist persons, motivations and institutions are culturally constructed, and gender and kinship play a key role in these processes. To approach these questions ethnographically, Yanagisako reintegrates the analysis of work and family, spending time in textile mills as well as homes and interviewing men as well as women. She suggests using the analytic category of "sentiment" (2002: 10) to blur the gendered dichotomies between emotion and thought, home-life and work-life, and draws on her ethnographic materials to consider sentiment as a force of production. This move simultaneously challenges narrow Marxist interpretations of the capitalist labor process and illustrates how the motivations of family capitalists cannot be reduced to either competitive, rational economic thought or altruistic, affective family emotions.

Like both Finn and Yanagisako, in this dissertation I examine the mutual construction of everyday life in workplaces and homes – what people in Butte referred to in their oft-repeated statement that workers “brought home to the mines and they brought mining home” (Finn 1998: 141; cf. Richardson 2006 on the family in the workplace and the workplace in the family). While keeping an eye to the force companies held in shaping the possibilities for community practice, I also seek to draw attention to the ways in which workers and their families shaped company practices and the conditions under which they labored. My contribution to the existing research is a focus on the interplay between families understood to be bound by shared genetic substance and those created through everyday work practices.<sup>12</sup>

### **Mining gender**

The other unique contribution of my work is an extended practical and theoretical engagement with women miners. Thus in addition to anthropological theories of kinship and work, this dissertation engages ethnographies of mining communities, specifically the ways in which gender has or has not been integrated into the analysis of social practices in the industry.

Mining is frequently characterized as the most masculine of all masculine industries (Campbell 1984; Duke 2002; Lahiri-Dutt and Macintyre 2006; Mercier and Gier 2006, 2007). Kathy Robinson (1996: 173) writes that the powerful visual and

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<sup>12</sup> Finn (1998) touches on these types of relationships in her discussion of men’s attachments to their coworkers. Pete Richardson (2003, 2006, 2007) has also engaged in this type of work in his research on union sibblingship, specifically the ways in which workplace familism provides a moral discourse for making claims about rights and obligations on the shop floor. Perhaps because the Powder River Basin miners chose to not unionize, they do not use the language of sibblingship as much as more general notions of family. But like Richardson, I trace the ways in which discourses of kinship animate the miners’ claims on coworkers and companies.

metaphorical images of mining as “gargantuan, dangerous, heroic and mysterious... incorporate the imperatives of physical strength, endurance and filth, all characteristics of masculinized work.” Marxist scholars and labor historians have claimed miners as favored subjects, so much so that the “image of the militant, class conscious coal miner has played a powerful role in constituting knowledges of ‘the working class’ and ‘working-class struggle’” (Gibson-Graham 2006: 208; cf. Orwell 1959). Bea Campbell (1984) argues that the romance associated with miners is linked to their status as both victim and hero, which makes them irresistible. “Life itself is endangered, their enemy is the elements, their tragedy derives from forces greater than they, forces of nature and vengeful acts of God... This romance is duly mirrored in working class politics – miners are the Clark Gables, the Reds of class struggle” (Campbell 1984: 97). In fact, miners were the only group of workers named by Engels during his dramatic speech at Marx’s graveside (1977 [1883]: 682).<sup>13</sup> Yet even though popular and academic portrayals of miners treat the miners as gendered subjects, this masculinity tends to be naturalized (see Yount 1991, 2005; and Vaught and Smith 2003 [1980] for functionalist accounts).

Major gaps exist in the existing scholarship surrounding women miners.

Noteworthy research has been done tracing the everyday efforts of mines’ wives to support their husbands, community and the entire industry through “crafting the

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<sup>13</sup> The full text of this reference, which appears at the very end of the speech, reads: “And, consequently, Marx was the best hated and most calumniated man of his time. Governments, both absolutist and republican, deported him from their territories. The bourgeoisie, whether conservative or ultra-democratic, vied with one another in heaping slanders upon him. All this he brushed aside as though it were cobweb, ignoring it, answering only when extreme necessity compelled him. And he died beloved, revered and mourned by millions of revolutionary fellow workers—from the mines of Siberia and California, in all parts of Europe and America—and I make bold to say that though he may have had many opponents he had hardly one personal enemy. His name will endure through the ages, and so also will his work!” (Engels 1977 [1883]: 682).

everyday” (Finn 1998; cf. Ferry 2005; Finn and Crain 2005; Gibson-Graham 2006; Giesen 1995; Nash 1993 [1979]). While I critically consider the wives of miners in my research, I also draw attention to the many women who work in the mines as equipment operators in the Powder River Basin. Doing so helps to dislodge popular portrayals of the industry that are out of touch with its current diversity. The image of the headlamp-wearing, pick-axe toting male miner who toils underground appears as an icon of the industry even though most mines in the U.S. – including those in the Appalachian region where this image originates – are now surface operations in which men and women alike operate incredibly large and complex pieces of heavy machinery to extract and process the mined materials.

### *Wives and class*

Because miners have been favored subjects for Marxists, scholars have paid particular attention to their wives’ class locations and practices. J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006) identifies ambivalences in their representation. Members of the working class by virtue of their marriage, they have been portrayed as both militant supporters of class struggles and as “political chameleons” whose class loyalties are compromised by their desires for economic stability (Gibson-Graham 2006: 208). These patterns are present in influential ethnographies of mining communities. In her pathbreaking study of a Bolivian tin mining community, June Nash (2003 [1979]) theorizes the spheres of work and home as enmeshed in class struggle and argues that women and children participate in the production of class consciousness at the point of consumption. Barbara Kingsolver’s (1989) journalistic investigation of the 1983 Arizona mine strike reveals tensions not only

between miners and the company, but also between women agitators and the male-dominated unions. At the same time, she illustrates the positive influence of women's fathers on their decisions to join unions in mining and other industries as adults.

Finn (1998) traces the gendered and classed identities produced, reinforced and sometimes creatively transformed by men and women through their everyday practices of self-making. In her portrayal of the men, she distinguishes among miners, Big Shots and men in the middle (supervisors and managers), but finds it difficult to create a similarly tidy analysis for women (1998: 127). A focus on women's activities during strikes leads her to conclude, "Through their labors, women's lives have crisscrossed class lines, creating opportunities for both building support and negotiating power" (1998: 136). She suggests that this complexity may be linked to the dominant images of femininity being tied up in ideals of motherhood that de-emphasize class as a salient marker of difference, whereas men defined themselves and were defined by class-based distinctions in their working lives (1998: 146).<sup>14</sup>

Union strikes have provided fertile ground from which to analyze the negotiation and transformation of gendered ideologies and practices. Finn argues that strikes brought about major reorganizations of gendered behavior, particularly in the relative slowdown and rechanneling of men's productive activity and the increased pressure on women to provide emotional and financial support for their families (1998: 152-154). Kingsolver identifies a similar development in Arizona, in which women extended their daily activities of taking care of families to the community at large as a part of their developing

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, dominant images of motherhood are inflected with class distinctions; the idealized stay-at-home mom never reflected the experiences of working class women who have had to work outside the home to help support their families (Kessler-Harris 1982; Lamphere 1987; Lamphere et al. 1993; Sacks and Remy 1984).

class consciousness (1989: 109; cf. Beckwith 1998; Reichart 1998; Seitz 1998). In the process, they redefined their relationships with kin, especially by renegotiating domestic responsibilities with their spouses (Kingsolver 1989: 103, 107). Similarly, historian Caroline Merithew (2006) challenges common portrayals of non-wage-earning women as traditional and supportive of their husbands through her investigation of the 1930 union fight between the United Mine Workers of America and the Progressive Miners in Illinois. She shows that the wives and daughters of coal miners used this dispute to critically examine and renegotiate their gender and class identities in the face of their changing political consciousness.

This ethnographic and historical research raises larger questions about the relationship between gendered ideologies and practices, especially since mining communities have been portrayed with particularly strict divisions of gendered identities and activities. Gibson-Graham emphasizes the theoretical benefit of distinguishing between naturalized binary gender ideologies and actual everyday practices:

So while discursive examples of mutually exclusive binary gendering might be quite common, such genderings are only infrequently and temporarily embodied. In this way we are able to represent the social space as a space of gender diversity and overlap, while acknowledging the existence and even the dominance of mutually exclusive gender in the discursive realm. [2006: 218]

This perspective enables scholars to acknowledge the force of binary gender ideologies – such as those animating conceptions of mining as naturally masculine – without losing sight of their creative and sometimes contradictory embodiment in actual practice. A focus on women miners helps to shed light on the complex and oftentimes contradictory embodiment and reworking of gender ideologies.

### *Women miners*

The histories of EuroAmerican women miners reveal the contestation that accompanied efforts to make mining appear as the “natural” domain of men. Angela John (1980) and Patricia Hilden (1991) document the processes through which Victorian-era bourgeois reformers influenced public opinion and introduced legislation to associate western European underground coal mining with masculinity. John finds evidence that women had worked in British mines along with their families since at least the sixteenth century, though actual numbers are not available because only the lead miner was paid directly and registered on company books (1980: 20). But “the very fact that female labor could have remained unheeded for centuries emphasizes the way in which women were traditionally accepted as part of the family economy” (John 1980: 26).

Beginning in the Victorian era, western European legislators began attempting to ban women from this underground work because it upset the bourgeois cult of motherhood linking women with homes and cleanliness (cf. McClintock 1995). In Great Britain and Belgium, passing this legislation required propaganda to shift public opinion of women miners from acceptance to concern for their moral behavior. Reformers argued that working in close proximity to men in dark environments both encouraged sexual improprieties and contributed to the “un-sexing” of the women through altered physiognomies, personalities and dress (Hilden 1991: 412; John 1980: 31, 219). After women miners were pushed out of the industry in Belgium, years later they were eventually reintegrated into the national imagination through painting and sculpture, but this process required another shift in their portrayal from “fearsome, unnatural women, targets of bourgeois reformers’ wrath into icons of industrial labor who helped

romanticize the dangerous but necessary world of coal mining” (Hilden 1991: 433). Despite legislation in both countries that officially banned women from underground work, many continued working underground until they lost their jobs following the industry’s mechanization and slumping coal markets after World War II.

Similar processes were also at work in the United States. Women in preindustrial America worked alongside their male kin to extract coal for their households, and historical documents reveal that female slaves were forced to work in a Virginia coal mines (Moore 1996; Tallichet 2006: 5). As the mines industrialized, seventeen states including Wyoming passed laws banning women’s work underground, even though oral histories reveal that many women ignored these prohibitions. Comparatively fewer historical references to Wyoming women miners exist, perhaps because the state’s coal mines opened late and industrialized quickly compared to other regions due to its isolation and dominance by the railroad (Gardner and Flores 1989; Wolff 2003).

Faced with a labor shortage and increased demands for coal, however, in 1943 the general manager of Union Pacific and the president of the United Mine Workers of America District 22 signed a controversial Memorandum of Agreement that temporarily allowed the employment of women as miners until the men returned home (Larson 1954: 277). By June 1944, one hundred women were working for Union Pacific in the shops and on the tipples, averaging a wage of \$213.29 per month as union members (Larson 1954: 278). Women made the same wages as men in their positions, but were not allowed to take higher paying jobs underground. For the most part, the men’s return from war and declining coal markets in the 1950s resulted in women leaving the industry until the next nationwide boom in the 1970s.

The challenges faced by Appalachian women seeking work in the coal industry have largely come to define the academic agenda for researching women in mining. Beginning in the 1970s, Appalachian women in search of well-paying jobs began protesting the coal companies' decisions to pass over their applications in favor of equally- or less-qualified men. The Coal Employment Project (CEP) was founded in 1977 as an advocacy group for women coal miners. Drawing on the Equal Opportunity Act's conception of affirmative action, in 1978 women represented by the organization won a settlement in their lawsuit against CONSOL, one of the largest coal companies, for sex discrimination in hiring practices. The company was forced to institute hiring quotas, establish affirmative action practices, and pay back wages to the women, who were eventually hired along with many others (Baker 2007: 72). The CEP also offered technical training sessions, held national conferences, and eventually turned its attention to understanding and combating workplace sexual harassment (Baker 2007; Hall 1990; Moore 1996). Following a decline in national coal markets during which many women were laid off as a result of "last hired, first fired" policies, the CEP disbanded in 1999. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five, the few scholars who focus on American women miners have highlighted their struggles with sexual discrimination and harassment, a move that dovetails with the efforts of the CEP (Tallichet 1998, 2006; Yount 1991, 2005).<sup>15</sup>

Recent years have witnessed increased scholarly attention to women miners in non-western countries. Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and Martha Macintyre's edited volume *Women Miners in Developing Countries* (2006) offers a wide range of case studies

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<sup>15</sup> For exceptions to this trend see Espley et al. (2002) and Keck (2000). The de-emphasis on sexual harassment in these articles could be due to their sponsorship by a Canadian nickel mining corporation.

including the Amazon, Bolivia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines. Even though the editors seek to offer culturally and historically specific perspectives on women's mining activities, some of the contributions fall short of this goal. The chapter on women's involvement in artisanal and small scale mining (ASM) in Africa, for example, generalizes mining communities across the entire continent (Hinton et al. 2006). One of the most salient contributions of the collection, however, is precisely its attention to different mining methods and their implications for gendered divisions of labor. Whereas industrialized mining tends to be heavily dominated by men, women are estimated to make up 30 to 50 percent of ASM miners in developing countries (Lahiri-Dutt and Macintyre 2006: 9). Compared to their industrialized counterparts, work in these mines is much less regulated by state labor, safety and environmental standards.

Laurie Mercier and Jaclyn Gier also offer a global perspective on women miners in *Mining Women: Gender in the Development of a Global Industry, 1670 to 2005* (2006). The wide range of the essays contributed to this volume provides ample material for cross-cultural comparison and brings to light salient patterns in gender relations in the industry. For example, they find that as mines increasingly industrialize and centralize, women become more and more marginalized (Mercier and Gier 2006: 5). Yet the focus on gender difference found in their introduction as well as in most of the essays is problematic, especially since Mercier and Gier view gender as nothing more than the "sex roles for men and women" (2006: 1).<sup>16</sup> This reductive formulation, in which gender

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<sup>16</sup> Mercier and Gier (2006: 3) suggest that the book's fifteen essays "help advance our understanding of the historical process by which men and women came to be viewed as 'different' and thus were assigned social, economic, political and cultural roles within one global industry." The introduction is full of stories of superstitions surrounding women's entry into

is simply the social construction of biological sex, is surprising given that the authors reference Joan Scott, an influential poststructuralist historian of gender and labor, who argues:

Gender is the social organization of sexual difference. But this does not mean that gender reflects or implements fixed and natural physical differences between women and men; rather gender is the knowledge that establishes meanings for bodily differences... Sexual difference is not, then, the originary cause from which social organization ultimately can be derived. It is instead a variable social organization that itself must be explained. [1988: 2]

Following Scott, the link between perceived bodily difference and the social organization of gender should be problematized, not naturalized.

While two these volumes appropriately draw attention to the gender dynamics that are often erased in simplistic portrayals of mines as masculine places, their near exclusive emphasis on gender *difference* is problematic. Despite variations in geography and time, nearly all the authors in these compilations portray mines and mining communities as characterized by separate spheres, practices and modes of thought for women and men. Instead of assuming gender difference on the basis of differently sexed bodies, I would ask where, when and how gender difference comes to matter in mining places. It is imprudent to assume the gender difference is everywhere and always the primary social process at work. In this dissertation therefore I explore not only the situations in which gender becomes a salient mode of social differentiation, but also those in which it may not. For example, gender clearly plays a central role in how Gillette miners create work families or engage technology and imagine technological expertise, but it plays a distinctly less significant role in local critiques of shifts in corporate practice. This research contributes to the important work of denaturalizing the

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mines and stereotypes of aggressive male miners.

masculinity of the mining industry while maintaining a more nuanced approach to the role that gender plays in everyday life.

At the same time, this theoretical project also entails more textured portrayals of male miners. All too often attention to gender in mining contexts results in flattened stereotypes, particularly when it comes to sexual harassment and sexism (e.g. Ferguson 1999: 188; Vaught and Smith 1980; Yount 1991; 2005). In her analysis of women working in Papua New Guinea's mining industry, for example, Macintyre (2006: 141-2, 133) contrasts the "modern and globalized" mine work environments with the sexism of Melanesian customs and familial obligations. She did not interview male employees, which may have contributed to the monolithic portrayal of Papua New Guinean men (2006: 141). In my research, I spent time with and formally interviewed just as many men as women, and in this dissertation I aim to disrupt simplistic stereotypes of American men who work as coal miners. I came to know men who may appear to be cantankerous shovel operators while at work but are patient and meticulous gardeners at home, and I will show that men who enjoy cold beers and the occasional off-color joke are also often the first to support women's advancement in the pit and their own daughters' independence.

### **Overview of the dissertation**

Far too often the spheres of home and work have been purified and separated analytically in the anthropological study of kinship and relatedness, theories and histories of labor, ethnographies of mining communities, and feminist technology studies. This analytical distinction not only fails to appreciate or apprehend the messy complexities of everyday

life, but it also builds up reductive notions of personhood, places and social processes. This dissertation reasserts the interdependency of home and work with an eye to how broader political-economic processes condition and are conditioned by the seemingly mundane details of creating families and pursuing jobs in the Powder River Basin. In this way, I examine the contexts and social configurations within which a tenacious series of binary analytic divisions – public and private spheres, work and home places, masculine and feminine persons, and rational and affective actors – is invoked and routinely reworked in a northeastern Wyoming coal mining community, specifically as it relates to the history of the region (Chapter Three), family life at home (Chapter Four), workplace relatedness (Chapter Five), place and labor (Chapter Six), everyday mine radio talk about technical expertise (Chapter Seven) and corporate social responsibility (Chapter Eight). Together, these chapters seek to replace naturalized assumptions about gender, kinship, technology and personhood in the American West with fine-grained accounts of how these categories are produced, contested and reworked in relation to one another in everyday practice.

Each chapter or set of chapters is organized around a key contradiction that animates social life in the community and mines. Chapter Two explores the tensions that emerge from doing research in one's own community while simultaneously engaging a discipline better known for its association with the exotic and adhering to university regulations which assume that research begins with written informed consent. While it may seem natural for Powder River Basin mine employees to identify with the larger history and cultural associations of U.S. coal mining, Chapter Three considers why they overwhelmingly identify with the histories and cultural ideals of cowboys and ranching.

Chapters Four and Five explore the contradictions between work and family. Even though most miners originally sought their work in order to support their growing families, the rotating shift schedule creates disconnections between the miners and other family members. In other words, the creation of kin-like work relationships is paralleled by the simultaneous risk of these relationships dissolving at home. Chapters Five and Eight trace the tensions that emerge when miners and management differently envision appropriate forms of workplace relatedness, especially as it concerns that negotiation of production and safety. Miners carefully create workplace relations that emphasize egalitarian ties among employees, whereas managers oftentimes reinforce hierarchical differences even as they try to create a sense of family in the workplace. Finally, Chapters Six and Seven investigate the mismatch between the prevalent appeals to gender-blindness that run alongside heavily gendered places within the mine, ideologies of technical expertise, and patterns in everyday mine radio talk.

Engaging each of these contradictions requires bringing together a variety of interlocutors and debates. Chapter Two uses insights from debates about native anthropology to critically assess the implications of Institutional Review Board regulations for ethnographic research. Chapter Three brings into dialogue histories of labor and the American West, as western miners are often absent from more general labor histories. Chapters Four and Five on work and family bring together theories of the labor process with new anthropological approaches to kinship and relatedness. Chapters Six and Seven, which focus on gender at the minesite, are located at the intersection of anthropological theories of gender, feminist technology studies and linguistic anthropology. Finally, Chapter Eight uses current approaches to property to theorize

corporate social responsibility.

I turn now to sketch out the main themes and questions of each chapter. Chapter Two offers an in-depth consideration of my fieldwork methodologies, especially as they concern the category of native anthropology, and compares the audit cultures of Institutional Review Boards and mine safety programs. After introducing the research setting and methodologies, I examine how my position as a native anthropologist and the IRB process of informed consent engendered particular opportunities for research and types of fieldwork relationships. Taking a cue from the companies' efforts to create safe workplaces, I argue that the increasingly popular behavior-based safety programs present a possible model for more flexible yet accountable IRB regulatory processes.

Chapter Three provides historical background for the rest of this study by situating current developments in the Powder River Basin within larger trajectories of the industry and region. Drawing on Richard White's (1991) argument that popular imaginings of the American West have influenced how people make sense of their own experiences, I trace how Gillette residents have critically interpreted and reworked three common tropes used to think about minework, the town's energy boom, and women's employment in the industry. First, I argue that in the last major union drive, company officials drew on popular ideas about ranching as independent, non-exploitative work to encourage local workers to distance themselves from miners in other parts of the country. These images were meaningful for miners who grew up on ranches or moved to the area to pursue that kind of lifestyle. Second, I show that journalists covering the town's population expansion in the 1970s and 1980s and 2000s drew on western tropes of wild boomtowns to portray Gillette as a lawless town full of uncontrollable and foolish people.

They largely based their portrayals on one psychologist's conception of the "Gillette Syndrome," which pathologized particular ways of adjusting to economic growth. I draw on media interpretation work I conducted with local high school students to critique these representations, particularly the ways in which they reproduce particular stereotypes about "naturally" transient workers. Third, I explore how women miners have drawn on gender egalitarian ranching imagery to naturalize and make sense of their work in what might otherwise be considered a non-traditional occupation.

Chapter Four documents and theorizes the interdependency of home and work in the basin. It is primarily ethnographic, exploring how miners, their spouses and children imagine and enact family relationships. I begin by tracing how scholars have theorized the relationship between myths of family life – what cultural historian John Gillis (1998) terms the "families we live by" – and everyday practice. I investigate the mismatch between myth and practice as it relates to sharing time and opportunities to engage in meaningful work. In particular, I show that a gendered division of labor in the mining sector, coupled with demanding rotating shift schedules, has created a gendered division of labor in the home that is particularly challenging for miners who are also single mothers. I also show that the efforts made by parents to educate their children and prepare them for other occupations stem from the criticisms they make of their own employment experiences, particularly the excruciating shiftwork, the boom-and-bust cycles characteristic of the mining industry and the declining opportunities for people without advanced degrees. I conclude by suggesting that the popular summer student program – in which I participated myself during college – may provide a way for parents and children to mend the ties of relatedness that years of shiftwork put into peril. This

perspective that adds a more hopeful twist to concerns that work is becoming like home and home is becoming like work (e.g. Hochschild 1997, 2003).

Chapter Five explores the miners' creation of crew families to theorize the role that kinship plays in the workplace. Recent innovations in anthropological approaches to kinship call for scholars to study relatedness as a process that is entailed with relations of dominance and exclusion as much as care and belonging (Carsten 2004; Franklin and McKinnon 2000, 2001; Edwards and Strathern 2000). This chapter brings recent anthropological approaches to kinship directly to bear on workplace social relations. Drawing on recent critiques of substance-based approaches to kinship (e.g. Bamford 2007; Carsten 2004; Weston 2001), I pay particular attention to the non-substance based ways in which miners create relatedness with one another, including sharing unique rhythms of time and engaging in practical jokes. I suggest that idioms of kinship provide miners with the tools to counter the potential alienation of industrial work and to critique recent changes in the labor process.

Chapters Six and Seven trace the construction and mitigation of gender difference in the mines. In Chapter Six, I return to familiar themes of feminist anthropology – gendered divisions of labor and place – to explore how gender difference becomes anchored and sometimes unmoored in production. Miners and academics alike often describe mines and miners as exceedingly masculine, but I argue that it is crucial to analyze distinct places *within* the mines and the variety of ways in which people embody gender identities. I trace the contested construction of masculine and feminine areas and work assignments within the mine. Moreover, in order to navigate the sometimes

contradictory expectations for gendered behavior, I show that women miners have positioned themselves as tomboys and upset dichotomous notions of gender difference.

Whereas Chapter Six traces the women's successful embodiment of an alternative gender category, Chapter Seven considers the countervailing reification of binary gender difference through everyday work with and talk about mine equipment. I offer a linguistic perspective on this process, showing how everyday talk stems from and builds up gendered ideologies of technological skill. To trace the step-by-step construction of the links between masculinity and technical expertise, I focus on two arenas of talk. First, I consider the processes of iconization and erasure at work in the production and interpretation of mechanical problem reports and direction giving on the mine radio. Second, I examine the ways in which miners reframe women's technical abilities as examples of feminine caretaking or bossiness. To conclude, I argue that pairing anthropological theories of gender with the emerging field of feminist technology studies can provide a productive approach from which to theorize the co-production of gender.

Running throughout these chapters is an examination of corporate attempts to craft workplace families, with a focus on their representatives' efforts to make the workplace seem more like home: sharing meals, giving gifts and encouraging coworkers to care for one another. These practices, intended to cultivate feelings of loyalty and trust, evoke the ideals of the private sphere as it is conventionally theorized. In Chapter Eight, however, I show that the efforts of corporate representatives to craft their companies as trustworthy and responsible actors also include what Corinne Hayden (2004: 118) calls publicization, or "the construction of various kinds of 'publics' – public domains, public spheres, public accountabilities." To contextualize the efforts of local

companies to craft themselves as responsible corporate actors, I begin by outlining the history of property rights in northeastern Wyoming, specifically how changes in federal homesteading policies split surface and subsoil rights and created a legacy of tensions between ranchers and energy companies over contemporary development. After arguing that scholars must remain vigilant in examining the gaps between discourses and practices of corporate social responsibility, the remaining sections analyze three modes through which coal mining companies in the basin have legitimized their mining activities by crafting themselves as socially responsible actors. The mines present themselves as community partners who contribute to the good of Gillette and the state of Wyoming; as environmental stewards who responsibly manage a public good for the public's benefit; and as energy providers whose activities serve the national public interest in providing a reliable domestic energy source. All three implicate notions of the public – public property, public service and public accountability – and I also show that these imagined publics are bound to corporate interests.

As a whole, this dissertation makes two main arguments concerning the anthropological study of kinship and gender. I argue that studying relatedness at work as well as in homes unsettles the private/public binary that animates the existing literature. I show that miners and managers create workplace families to make claims on one another and create the type of workplaces they value, even as I also trace the contradictory motivations that underline these practices, particularly concerning production and safety. Second, I argue that theories of the co-construction of gender and kinship must consider not just the ways in which men and women appear different from one another, but also the sociocultural processes that challenge binary understandings of gender. I show that

studying workplace relatedness in the Wyoming mines highlights the deceptively mundane ways in which men and women sometimes reinforce and other times challenge strictly gendered kinship practices and persons.

### **Caring at a distance**

In addition to these theoretical arguments, the dissertation as a whole also draws attention to the social implications of energy development that are often obscured in national debates about energy policy. During one of my interviews with Patty, who had worked her way into management from starting as a general laborer, I asked her what she would like people reading this dissertation to learn about the mining industry in the Powder River Basin. She criticized the negative and “backwards” reputation of the industry that is prevalent in popular media:

We do so much to protect the land. We’re supplying power basically to the country. We do it well. We are careful with the land, the animals and the people. I would like people from other parts of the country to know that it’s clean, safe – not the *Coal Miner’s Daughter* mentality. I don’t know how you say all that. But we’re pretty normal out here.

Poking fun at stereotypes of Wyoming as an empty space where people still ride horses to one-room schoolhouses, Patty laughed and said, “We have electricity!” Then she paused and added, “Because we dig coal!”

One of the biggest frustrations of many Gillette residents, especially those with close ties to the mining industry, is that too many people in the U.S. do not know where their electricity comes from. John, an engineer who works in management, put it this way: “Half of every lightbulb in the U.S. is lit by coal... but a lot of people can’t think behind the wall.” People in Gillette can see the power plants, the railroads, the mine

infrastructure, the workforce and the support industries that all make possible the production of the coal that eventually finds its way into power plants around the U.S. They know that keeping the coal moving down the railroads to be burned to create electricity requires not just infrastructure, but also the second-by-second efforts of men and women miners to work safely and productively while most people are asleep at home. They know that it also requires daily adjustments by entire families in the seemingly most mundane of activities, such as rearranging mealtimes around the shiftworker so that parents and children can eat together or strategically scheduling social activities so that busy children do not disrupt their parents while they are sleeping during the day in preparation for a nightshift.

I suggest that in these wishes for people around the country to recognize Powder River Basin miners as the producers of national energy, miners and their families construct an organic critique of what Robert Foster (2007, 2008) calls disjunctures and misrecognitions in product networks. He traces the efforts of both activists and corporate representatives to link spatially distant people around a particular brand-name or category of consumer goods. For activists, “product-centered politics make visible what is hidden in plain view, namely, the shared concerns (as opposed to shared identities) of people linked, however tenuously, by associations with a worldly thing” (Foster 2008: 237). Corporations such as Coca-Cola also seek to make such connections, especially in their advertising campaigns that draw people around the world into an affective relationship with a brand (Foster 2007: 708).

The structure of the coal industry presents a unique perspective from which to study the construction of product networks. Unlike the corporations and brands studied

by Foster, there is no direct interface between mining companies and the people who consume their product in its final form (Kirsch 2006: 204). Consumers buy electricity from cooperatives or local governments, who in turn purchase it from power plants. Even if people know where these power plants are located, it is unlikely that they also know from which companies and which mines the coal originates. Conversely, miners in Gillette keep the network in view (Kirsch 2001) by keeping track of the power plants to which their companies sell. These networks, however, do not usually attain public representation.

The industry's most recognized product networks center around corporations and residents of communities impacted by mines.<sup>17</sup> Foster notes that de-territorialized social movements often organize around corporate externalities, or the costs of conducting business that companies pass onto other people and institutions, such as pollution clean-up or health care (2007: 710). Critics of the coal industry have engaged in such a project in their efforts to make visible the links between electricity, coal and miners and draw attention to the mountaintops removed and humans exploited in order to mine coal. For example, journalist Jeff Goodell has covered the industry from the near disaster in July 2002 at Quecreek Mine to the energy boom in the Powder River Basin. In his 2006 book *Big Coal: The Dirty Secret Behind America's Energy Future*, he draws his readers' attention to the fact that every time they flip a light switch, plug in a laptop or power up an iPod, they are burning coal. He tries to convince his reader that the average 20 pounds of coal consumed by every American comes at extraordinary environmental and health costs.

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<sup>17</sup> Kirsch (2006: 204-5, 2007 and 2008) shows that downstream residents from the Ok Tedi mine were able to bring public attention to their criticisms of the mine and BHP by publicly tracing the global circulation of ore.

Yet I would suggest that in constructing this type of product network, industry critics have (perhaps unintentionally) created a disjuncture of perspective with many miners. Though Goodell raises many pertinent points that should be considered in debates about national energy policies, he also creates caricatures of Gillette residents as ignorant power-hungry individuals and mine employees as cowboys rather than “real” miners – presumably the underground miners he came to know in the East. The first chapter opens with descriptions of people he met during his visit to the area: a woman who runs on her home treadmill while turning on all the lights, stereos, TVs and electrical appliances because she likes to “feel the energy” and a car dealer who jokingly calls fuel-efficient vehicles “high-birds” that they “shoot... out here” (Goodell 2006: 3). He describes one of the few workers he interviewed as looking “more like a cowboy than a miner: big silver belt buckle, tight Wranglers and a bit of swagger,” and suggests that he does a job that requires “a lot of dexterity and judgment, but very little muscle” (Goodell 2006: 65). In fact, in this book and in national articles he suggests that mining coal in Wyoming surface mines is so easy that one might dig it out with a “spoon” (e.g. Goodell 2006: 5). Portrayals such as these – as well as the host of articles written about the “Gillette Syndrome” discussed in Chapter Three – give Gillette residents good reasons to pause before picking up a non-local newspaper article about the region or tuning into a national news broadcast about its energy boom. Understandably, miners and their families do not recognize themselves in these exaggerated stereotypes, which further obscure any links between their daily activities and the electricity that people around the country rely upon.

When people in the Powder River basin express their desire for people around the country to recognize them as the producers of energy, I would suggest that they are calling for what Foster calls caring from a distance (2008: 240). This practice first requires moving beyond commodity fetishism, in which social relations between persons are made to appear as relations between things (Marx 1978 [1887]: 321). In the case of the coal industry, relationships between electricity consumers, producers and coal miners appear as relations between coal, money and electricity. But the miners and their families are not simply seeking to correct this misrecognition of people and things; they are also seeking acknowledgement of the “the moral relations and ethical responsibilities implicit in the movement of products from one set of hands to another” (Foster 2008: 240). Caring from a distance is an ethical engagement that “hinges on the respectful and serious regard given by people, connected to each other as agents in a product network, for each other’s concerns: a politics of mutual recognition” (Foster 2008: 240). Such a politics of mutual recognition is sorely lacking in contemporary debates about national energy policies, which focus on global warming, the environmental devastation of particular mines or the tragic loss of human life in specific disasters at the expense of sustained, careful consideration of the everyday experiences of the thousands of other industry workers who continue going to work everyday.

Thus in addition to tracing the ways in which a set of EuroAmerican binaries has influenced the ways in which anthropologists and other scholars have theorized kinship, work and gender, this dissertation is also an effort to counteract the disappearance of Wyoming miners and their families from national imaginations and debates about coal, electricity and energy policies. I do so not to romanticize them like so many Marxists or

demonize them as so many critics, but to make an intervention into how they are commonly represented and bring to light their everyday thoughts, hopes and challenges at home and work.

## **Chapter II**

### **Methodological Considerations**

Few scholars interested in the mining industry have been able to do onsite research outside of a few brief tours. To grasp the links between the everyday practices in the mines and family homes, I complemented my research in the community with onsite participant-observation at four mines owned by two companies.<sup>18</sup> This time built on and was facilitated by my previous three summers of experience as a mine employee for a different company as well as my childhood growing up in Gillette. Conducting this research raised questions about my own unique positioning in relation to the community and the mines, and it shed light on current debates surrounding the implications of Institutional Review Board (IRB) regulations for the practice of anthropological research. In this chapter, I introduce the research setting (both the city of Gillette and the mines) and then examine how my positioning as a native ethnographer and the IRB regulations engendered particular opportunities for research and types of fieldwork relationships. In particular, I argue that the mines' shift to behavior-based safety programs present a possible model for more flexible yet accountable IRB regulatory processes.

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<sup>18</sup> One of the agreements I made with each of the companies was that I would not identify the parent company, local subsidiary or individual mine in my research.

## **Research Setting**

The Gillette where I conducted ethnographic research was in many ways very different from the Gillette that my friends, family and I knew growing up. The coalbed methane boom that began in 2005 has almost doubled the town's population from 20,000 residents to at least 35,000. During my year of fieldwork from June 2006 to August 2007, houses and apartments could not be built fast enough for the new arrivals and available spaces for trailer homes were scarce, so it was not uncommon for entire families to live in RVs parked on streets and in store parking lots. Infrastructure also lagged behind, though there were plans on the books for an expanded community college, a new recreation center and a new events complex. The restaurant industry perhaps struggled the most. Most people who would have otherwise sought minimum wage jobs in the service industry found high paying work in the methane fields, leaving a shortage of waiters and other customer service specialists. Some families completely stopped going out to eat because there were so few restaurants compared to the number of people wanting to eat in them, and the dearth of wait staff translated into slow service. While some local businesses have expanded, many residents continue to make the 280-mile roundtrip drive to either Casper or Rapid City, South Dakota, to do most of their major shopping. Many residents also travel 340 miles south to Denver, Colorado, the nearest metropolitan area, for shopping and entertainment.

People who lived through the oil and coal booms of the 1970s and 1980s often likened those early years to the current rapid growth, housing shortage and sense of excitement. However, they found themselves differently positioned to the boom and the new residents it brought. When oilfield workers and miners moved to Gillette three

decades ago, they sometimes found themselves the target of complaints from ranching families who were skeptical that the newcomers would fit in with the way of life enjoyed by longtime residents (cf. Tauxe 1993, 1998). In the current boom it is now this generation of workers who waxes nostalgic for the *gemeinschaft*-like relationships they previously enjoyed, such as regularly seeing friends and coworkers while they shopped for groceries and personally knowing all of their neighbors, the families of their children's friends, and school and government officials. This sense of loss is particularly acute for those who grew up in small towns and sought to replicate that experience.

Talk about the booms and the influx of new workers have reinforced existing patterns of racial markedness. In the 2006 census, 93 percent of Gillette residents and 88 per =cent of Wyoming residents identified as white non-Hispanics.<sup>19</sup> According to the 2004 census, 97 percent of Campbell County residents identified themselves as white non-Hispanics, compared to 95 percent in Wyoming and 80 percent in the United States overall. One of the first things people said to me during my fieldwork was that the town had changed so much so that they “don’t even recognize anyone around town anymore.” Many times they followed up this type of comment with one about the large number of Hispanics moving in and changing the community.<sup>20</sup> The census did not note a drastic increase in this population between 2000 and 2006, but it is unclear if one would even appear in an official survey. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some of these workers are single men who intend to stay only briefly and eventually return to the families they support in Mexico, while others are extended families who migrate along with housing

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<sup>19</sup> Data available online: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/56/56005.html>

<sup>20</sup> Individuals have pushed against this marking. On his first day at a new mine, an equipment operator was asked if he preferred being called black or African American. He responded, “You can call me Sam.”

booms. Even if there is no official record of this local immigration, community service providers have noted a dramatic increase in the number of Spanish-speakers who seek their services, prompting some to begin offering materials in Spanish. The school district has also recently begun arranging classes specifically for students who do not speak English as their primary language. The majority of these workers have found employment in construction rather than the mines or methane fields, which remain dominated by whites from the surrounding region.

The booms have also turned Gillette into a 24-hour town due to the mine's rotating shift schedules and the seasonal fluctuations in work hours for people in the methane and oil industries. Most retail stores and banks have extended hours; churches offer additional services besides the traditional Sunday morning one; pick-ups are parked outside of bars in the early morning after the nightshift ends; and the greatest traffic jams often happen not just around 9 am and 5 pm, but also in the early morning and late evening at shift changes. For many people, social life in Gillette revolves around school events, especially football and basketball games. Yearly community celebrations such as holiday concerts and summer picnics are also popular, and many adults also belong to social clubs and church organizations. Miners who work rotating shifts often cannot regularly participate in these activities because of their work schedule.

Gillette is the population center of the Powder River Basin, but the mines also draw workers from the considerably smaller communities of Wright (population 1,600), Moorcroft (population 900) and Upton (population 900). A few even brave the extra 70-mile drive from Buffalo (population 4,500). Moorcroft, Upton and Buffalo were historically small ranching communities, whereas Wright was originally developed in the

late 1970s by Arco to offer employees a place to live that was closer to their large mine (Richter 1985). The town is still primarily populated by miners and their families who appreciate the feeling of living in a small town and a fifteen minute rather than an hour commute to work. A significant number of miners also rent apartments in Wright, staying in them while they are working and then returning to their hometowns on their days off.

Neither Gillette or Wright are company towns in the conventional sense of the word: people own their own houses and land; businesses and public services operate independently of the mining companies; business leaders and government officials have attempted to diversify the local economy; and some residents anticipate staying in the area after they are finished working at the mines. At the same time, many residents describe themselves as transplants who will move somewhere else once they retire or quit their jobs. When contemplating retirement, they oftentimes relocate to be closer to their children, many of whom leave the town and the state to pursue career opportunities not available closer to home. What Gillette and Wright most share in common with other company towns, however, is their overwhelming economic dependence on the mining industry.

### *The mines*

The four mines where I engaged in onsite research span the range of mine sizes in the basin. The first was one of the largest in the basin, employing approximately 1,000 people and producing about 90 million tons of coal per year. The second was one of the basin's smallest, employing around 200 people and producing less than 20 million tons a

year. The other two fell in the middle. Family friends and acquaintances facilitated my access to these sites by introducing me to management personnel who could in turn introduce me and my project to the people in a position to grant permission for my research. Figuring largely during our meetings was my own positioning as a former Gillette resident and mine employee whose father worked for one of the mines. These personal connections created rapport and trust with the mine officials, most of whom were otherwise wary of granting site access or interviews to non-employees due to negative portrayals of the industry in the news media.

At three of the mines I rotated with one crew. When they went in for night or day shifts, I did as well. While onsite, I split my time between transcribing the mine radio conversations from the dispatch room and spending the shift with people as they were engaging in their everyday work. Most often, I spent an entire twelve-hour shift riding around with one person in their piece of equipment, taking notes about their life histories, families and opinions of the industry as we bumped along the haul roads. On my crew's days off, I interviewed that company's office workers and continued my work with other community members. At the mine where I did not rotate with a crew, I focused my time in the office with engineers and administrative personnel.

These mines are surface operations. Because most popular understandings of the industry are based in underground mines – and because the type of mining operation greatly influences the creation of workplace relationships – I next offer a brief overview of the surface mining process. This background also helps to contextualize the jobs of the miners discussed throughout the dissertation.

Extracting, processing and shipping millions of tons of coal a year requires the close coordination of many different people working in many different areas of the mine. One of the most salient distinctions exists between people who spend their days in the office – managers, engineers and the administrative staff – and the production workers in the shop, the plant and the pit. At some mines, this distinction is made immediately visible by the clothes worn while at work. The office staff tends to wear jeans and button-up shirts, while most company policies encourage the technicians (hourly workers) to wear company-issued coveralls on top of their work wear while on the clock. The office staff generally works “straight days,” meaning that they go work in the early morning four or five times a week at the same time each day. Conversely, most production technicians work a series of twelve-hour rotating shifts so that the mine can operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week. To do so, they organize the miners into crews of anywhere from fifteen to one hundred people, depending on mine’s size. One example of a common four-crew, four-week schedule includes four nights, three days off, three days, one day off, three nights, three days off, four days and seven days off. Each crew has a supervisor who acts as an intermediary between the workers and the office staff, coordinating the miners’ activities to achieve the official goals while simultaneously modifying the inappropriate or inefficient protocols as revealed by the miners’ practical knowledge.

The actual extraction of the coal happens in the pit, which can extend up to two hundred feet deep at the largest mines without ever being technically underground. One equipment operator described his job to his son by saying, “I’m not some mole underground. I get to look at the big, blue sky all day.”



Figure 1: The progression of an open pit with multiple benches of overburden and coal. Photo courtesy Bureau of Land Management/Wyoming state office.

The pits are dug out and filled back in or reclaimed by miners operating large pieces of heavy equipment. First, scraper operators remove and specially store the delicate topsoil. After the overburden, the dirt and rock layer covering the coal seam, has been drilled and blasted, miners operating draglines, shovels and haul trucks move it to a pit that has just been emptied of coal and is ready to be reclaimed. A dragline is an extremely large piece of equipment operated by only two people: an “oiler” or maintenance technician person and the operator who uses a set of controls to maneuver a large bucket that picks up, moves and then drops material into an out-of-the-way place. One of the largest draglines in the basin weighs 6,700 tons and took three years to assemble at a cost of fifty million dollars. Its 133-yard bucket is supported by a 120-yard boom. Shovels are also used to

remove overburden, but they rely on haul trucks to move the material they dig. In this type of operation, the shovel operator digs the overburden and empties it into the bed of a large haul truck, which can often hold up to three hundred tons of material. The truck driver then hauls it to a “dump,” where the overburden is placed directly into old pits or stored until needed for reclamation, the final step in the mining process and one of the Powder River Basin’s greatest areas of recognition.



Figure 2: Haul truck on a coal road. Photo courtesy *The Gillette NewsRecord*.

Once the coal is exposed and blasted, shovel or loader operators extract it in a process similar to removing overburden. The main difference is that the truck driver hauls their load of coal to the crushers, dropping it into a series of machines that break it down into manageable chunks for later processing by power plants.



Figure 3: An aerial view of a coal pit and surrounding grassland. Photo courtesy Peter Gartrell.

At this point the coal enters the plant, a series of buildings connected by conveyor belts and machines that process and transport the coal. After the coal has been crushed into smaller chunks, it drops onto conveyor belts that carry it to the silos for storage. Train tracks run through the bottom of these silos, and plant personnel load trains by pushing a button to open up the shoots through which the coal falls down into the slowly moving train cars below. When people working in the plant are not loading trains, they are responsible for minimizing the collection of dust in the buildings and for keeping the maze of machines that process the coal in good working order. If dust is allowed to collect in any of the buildings, it could spark a fire, and machines in poor working condition could cause damage to other machinery or people in its vicinity.



Figure 4: A train waiting to be loaded at the silos. Photo courtesy Peter Gartrell.

The process of preparing, extracting and transporting overburden and coal in the pit relies on a variety of support equipment. Large dozer operators prepare the pits, shape

the dump, build roads and push down coal and dirt to put it within the reach of smaller loading equipment. Operators running blades clean up coal spills and smooth out the roads to minimize damage to equipment caused by potholes and to give their coworkers a smoother ride. Scraper operators transport the most fragile layers of topsoil, but they also put down rock on icy winter or slick roads. Especially in the summer, these roads can become extremely dusty and dangerous, so water truck drivers spray water on them to help keep down the dust. Some mines also rely on backhoe operators to form the first highwalls of a new pit.

Equipment operators are responsible for monitoring the condition of their machinery, but maintaining all of this equipment in good working order necessitates the expertise of a large number of mechanics who perform on-the-spot troubleshooting and regular preventative maintenance. Depending on the specific circumstances, the mechanics fix equipment in the shop and outdoors. The shop is also the home base for people who staff the warehouse, disbursing and keeping track of inventory.

Safely coordinating all of these activities requires the great skills of both the supervisors and the miners. At the beginning of their employment all mine employees must pass an initial forty-hour safety course certified by the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) that includes onsite training. Every year each miner must attend a one-day refresher that reviews basic hazard management and covers new areas of concern that help miners guard their own safety and that of their coworkers. For example, truck drivers are constantly on the lookout for smaller equipment that might enter its many blind spots, as the truck's sheer size and the placement of the cab on the extreme left side creates large blind spots that obscure anything within seventy-five feet

of the right side of the truck. Drivers operating smaller pieces of equipment have to follow procedures to make sure that they stay within view of the trucks. When working on the dump, the truck drivers and dozer operators also monitor the condition of the dump as it expands: small cracks indicate that the dirt is shifting, and these fault lines could cause the entire dump to fail and slough off if not carefully fixed. Truck drivers also assist shovel operators in monitoring the condition of the highwalls: if too many small chunks fall from above, it could indicate that a section of the wall is about to collapse and potentially bury the equipment beneath it. Moreover, if smoke starts appearing on the exposed coal, it could signal the development of a coal fire. Nearly all of the miners work together to ensure that the berms, or large piles of material on the edges of roads and dumps, are tall enough to safeguard the largest pieces of equipment from sliding through them.

People working in and walking through the shop are also confronted with a number of potential hazards as well, such as dormant machinery, spilled oil or fuel, electrical wires, and bright welding lights. Moreover, mechanics working on mobile equipment have to make sure that it is safe to be near it or under it. They do so by putting down chock blocks behind the tires to immobilize them and by securing any overhanging or suspended pieces that could potentially fall down and injure someone working below. Furthermore, mechanics have to place tags near the key or the steering wheel of potentially mobile equipment – a practice called “tagging out” – so that no one starts the equipment while it was being serviced.

Injunctions to follow these safety practices are often framed in terms of kinship.<sup>21</sup> Miners and managers alike state that the goal of safety programs is to make sure that everyone returns home to their families at the end of shift. They also argue that being a workplace family obligates coworkers to work safely and make sure that everyone else is doing the same. These feelings of family are so strong that miners rarely leave crews once they think they have found a good fit.

### **Native anthropology?**

American coal mines are not the prototypical anthropological fieldsite, and doing fieldwork in one's own community is still a relatively rare practice. As anthropologists increasingly reconceptualize and expand established notions of "the field" and fieldwork beyond the discipline's historical traditions (Clifford 1997; di Leonardo 1998; Ferguson and Gupta 1997; Jackson 1987; Marcus 1995; Nader 1969; Ortner 2003; Passaro 1997), more and more find themselves in a position to critically reflect upon the question of native anthropology.<sup>22</sup> What value might the category hold for presenting a critique of disciplinary practices? What drawbacks could be entailed in claiming it? Keeping in mind the cogent critiques of the term, in this section I present a case for its continued usage, though in a more limited sense compared to many of my interlocutors. I argue that the category has the potential to provide scholars with a strategic mode of positioning themselves in relation to previous research concerning the communities where they work and live. In a more limited usage, it could also bring together a cluster of methodological issues unique to people doing fieldwork in the communities where they grew up.

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<sup>21</sup> For a more detailed analysis of these practices, see pages 253-258.

<sup>22</sup> Similar discussions of multiple accountabilities and positionalities have also emerged in relation to "halfies" (Abu-Lughod 1993; Ryang 2005).

Kirin Narayan (1993) presents the most influential argument against adopting the category.<sup>23</sup> First, she aptly notes that all anthropologists are multiply situated in relation to the people they study, with different strands of their identity becoming highlighted in various situations (1993: 671). Hence she argues against the possibility of an anthropologist identifying wholly with “their” community, since this identification is complicated by factors such as “education, gender, sexual orientation, class, race or sheer duration of contacts” (1993: 672). Given these multiple identifications, she argues that the large variety of people who could be subsumed within the category – American minorities, white Westerners, Third World elites working at “home” or in the U.S., and anthropologists who have engaged in long-term fieldwork with a community – renders the category analytically imprecise and unproductive (1993: 677). Second, she argues that the category maintains rather than disrupts colonial power relations and potentially ghettoizes scholars from non-western or other minority backgrounds.<sup>24</sup> Arguing that the

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<sup>23</sup> Kirsten Hastrup (1995: 159) presents a more polemical and problematic criticism of the category: “There is no way in which one can simultaneously speak from a native and an anthropological position.” She considers the “objective conditions for the production of knowledge” a precondition for “anthropological results to be theoretically and historically significant” (1995: 159). Furthermore, she suggests that “there is no way of incorporating such an objective viewpoint” for the native person such that “native anthropology” is a “contradiction in terms” (1995: 159). Most anthropologists would question her reliance on objectivity as a precondition for the production of knowledge, especially given cogent feminist and postmodern critiques of objectivity and the widespread move to thinking about ethnography as the construction of situated, partial truths (Behar and Gordon 1995; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Flax 1987; Haraway 1988; Hartsock 1987; Scott 1988; Visweswaran 1994).

<sup>24</sup> This concern of ghettoization is also raised by Rey Chow (1993) and Sonia Ryang (2005). Ryang (2005) argues an uneven distributions of power within the academy makes it difficult for marginalized or beginning scholars to “native” status as compared to their ore established colleagues. In discussing her own choice to avoid writing reflexively about her “native” position in relation to her project, she writes: “I was aware that I was writing my first career book, the book that would send me off to the job market... Certainly, I did not want to sell myself as a native; I wanted to be an anthropologist. For some... reflexivity is available as part of ethnographic practice; for others, including myself back in 1996, it is not available and is self-evidently ludicrous, due to their marginal status in the profession, in society, and also in the ‘field’ due to the departure one had made to study abroad in the first place” (2005: 153).

term native has served as a marker of racial difference and darkness (1993: 677), she traces how “natives” who reflected on their own society were christened as anthropologists only after an educational institution sanctioned their work, and even those approved were limited in the ways they could contribute to the discipline (1993: 681). One of these constraints was being limited to studying their own communities: “A ‘native’ anthropologist is assumed to be an insider who will forward an authentic point of view to the anthropological community” (Narayan 1993: 676). For Narayan, the label native anthropologist has historically marginalized those whom it includes.

Narayan is right to draw attention to “shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations” (1993: 671), and her call for intellectual effort to be focused on improving the quality of relationships between anthropologists and community members is commendable (1993: 672). Her concern that the category might further ghettoize non-traditional academics is also well founded (cf. Chow 1993; Hurston 1935; Deloria 1944). Yet none of these points necessarily negates the benefits to be gained from careful use of the category. Claiming the category does not require erasing many other salient axes of differentiation between scholar and community. In fact, some of the most persuasive work of people who engage the category specifically highlights and problematizes the differences among them and the people they study (e.g. Behar 1993; Finn 1998; Jacobs-Huey 2002; Myerhoff 1978; Limón 1994; Zavella 1997). This sensitive work is a far cry from fears that simplistic claims to “insider” status might create false confidence in scholarly authority.

Advocates of the category’s continued use often argue that focusing on intersubjective, reflexive relationships between the anthropologist and others may help to

disrupt the discipline's association with the Other (Asad 1973; di Leonardo 1998; Harrison 1991; Said 1978; Trinh 1989; Trouillot 1991). In synthesizing work being done on native anthropology, Lanita Jacobs-Huey (2002: 792) identifies decolonizing western anthropology as the common goal uniting this research:

Scholars who self-identify as native ethnographers, or situate their work within a long-standing tradition of native anthropology, may do so not as a noncritical privileging endeavor. Instead, foregrounding native in relation to anthropology, or oneself as a native anthropologist, can act as an empowering gesture and critique of the position of natives in the stagnant slot of the Other.

At the same time, others follow Narayan in arguing that the category actually reinforces the discipline's legacy of alterity. Matti Bunzl (2004) argues that claiming the position of Other reinforces the very binary the scholar might be attempting to move beyond. In his view, the native ethnographer "can do little but function as a perpetual reminder" of the power relations that mark some people as native (2004: 436). Bunzl seeks to unite Boas's historicism with Foucauldian genealogy to create an anthropology that does not rely on reified boundaries between Selves and Others. In such a project, "cultural difference needs to be dislodged from its position as the enabling principle of ethnography and turned into the very phenomenon in need of historical explanation" (2004: 440). He does not defend the category native anthropology because his vision of anthropological research requires "charting the ethnographic reality of cultural alterity without recourse to its performative reification" (2004: 441).

The argument that continually referencing the category "native" performatively brings the distinction between anthropological Self/Other into being is incisive. Perhaps in response to this concern, another group of scholars have preferred the term "anthropology at home" (for early examples see the contributors to Jackson 1987 and

Messerschmidt 1981). Yet Sonia Ryang (1997, 2000, 2005) critiques the latter category for its equation of anthropology and anthropologists with the West. She argues that because works identifying themselves as “anthropology at home” are done by European anthropologists studying European places, they position the discipline’s home in the West. “The anomaly of anthropology at home is often seen as the anomaly of the location of field (in Europe), while the anomaly of native anthropology comes from the fact that the ethnographer’s personal origin is native, not Western” (Ryang 2005: 145). She argues that the professional integrity of Western anthropologists studying the West is not questioned, whereas

the case of native anthropology directly confronts the professional integrity and the identity of the anthropologist concerned: a particular native/halfie anthropologist could do this particular fieldwork because she was already positioned as such and, therefore, her skill as anthropologist is only half required... the native anthropologist, as anthropologist, therefore, is suspect. [Ryang 2005: 146]

Upsetting the racialized patterns of who adopts which category – native anthropology versus anthropology at home – is one of the reasons I have chosen to adopt the former over the latter.

Another line of critique comes from anthropologists who argue that long-term fieldwork enmeshes anthropologists in personal relationships that put them in a similar position as a “native.” For example, in her ethnography of television viewing in India, Purnima Mankekar (1999) eschews the category of native ethnographer and instead seeks to extend the project of doing fieldwork “at home” to “all scholars with enduring emotional and political ties to the communities in which they do their research” (1999: 32). She broadens Narayan’s call for attention to the multiple identities of research by

suggesting that ethnographers' positionalities in the field are "also shaped by the emotional and political alliances we forge through our fieldwork practices" (1999: 32).

Jennifer Robertson (2002) presents a similar argument for long-term ethnographic and archival research:

Confidence in one's authorial "voice" ought not to lie in genealogical claims or childhood experience, but in the assiduous fieldwork and archival research necessary to generate historically resonant, thick descriptions and subtly evocative interpretations of people's lives in all their messy complexity. I would be the last person to dismiss the advantages to an ethnographer of the profound familiarity that long-term residence in a place can afford. However, such familiarity is most effectively conveyed not by superficial claims to "insider" status, but in the thoughtful choice of ethnographic subject and the caliber and subtlety of research undertaken to elucidate it. [Robertson 2002: 788]

In this sense, Sherry Ortner's (2003) summary of the debates about native ethnography seems apt. She suggests that this positioning "makes the work both easier and more difficult, no more and no less complex than standard other-culture fieldwork, but certainly differently complex" (2003: 17).

The "differently complex" nature of native ethnography does not justify abandoning the category, however. My main concern with critiques of native anthropology and anthropology at home is that they are usually waged by and address scholars working in the same country where they or their parents were raised. On the other hand, the strongest advocates for the category are those who engage in research in the very communities where they grew up. While it is common for anthropologists to become intimately involved in the communities they study, often to the point of being considered kin, people studying their own communities do face particular representational questions and methodological challenges that the term can highlight and bring together.

José Limón's (1991, 1994) extended ethnographic essays on cultural poetics in Mexican-American South Texas embody these creative tensions. He does not offer an extended meditation on native anthropology, but suggests that the entire book "implicitly addresses" the issue (1994: 9). Limón frequently refers to the men and women with whom he researched as "my people," but he also careful to note the differences regarding race, class, gender, and education that also influence his relationships with them. Though "born and bred" in that place, he has "also become simultaneously of another place as well, a child of the Enlightenment, of high literary modernism, of classical anthropology" (Limón 1991: 116). His unique contribution to this literature is the way in which he addresses not only "his" folks, but also "those who have studied them" (Limón 1994: 22; Limón 1991: 118). Limón found that before he could attempt to write about his own research, he had to address the lingering discursive presence of his precursors, from Army ethnologists to folklorists. The entire first half of the book contextualizes the race, class and nation dynamics animating the research done before his own. Limón thus finds some political significance in keeping and using the term native anthropologist: by signifying that a person who was once written about is now writing back, it helps to decolonize the discipline.

The second benefit of maintaining the term is that it sheds light on some methodological issues common though not exclusive to native anthropologists. When Finn (1998) returned to her childhood home of Butte, Montana, she found that her kinship ties conditioned the interactions she had with residents; they "created a frame of reference" for the relationships she developed (1992: 22). While she argues that her role as daughter and sister "opened doors to intimacies that may never have been divulged to

an outsider” (1998: 22), she is careful to note her own multiple positioning in the community.<sup>25</sup> Unlike most other families, hers was not directly employed by the mining company, and they lived in a middle-class neighborhood. As a teenager who worked in her father’s laundry, she was both asked to join the union as a fellow worker but not attend the meetings as the boss’s daughter (1998: 21). Along with her continuing education, these differences remained salient during her ethnographic research.

In my opinion, the biggest methodological challenge faced by native anthropologists is the following: whereas many anthropologists create fieldwork relationships that become kin-like, native anthropologists turn existing friendships and family ties into research relationships. Finn (1998) writes eloquently about the ethical dilemmas attendant to this kind of intimacy. “Friendship, kinship and scholarship make odd bedfellows... As I tell here the stories of the mining community, I am fully implicated in the tensions of trust and betrayal. I have a mandate to tell some stories and guard others” (Finn 1998: 22). In this dissertation I follow a similar strategy for managing these tensions and obligations (cf. G. Kirsch 2005: 2163). Engaging in ethnographic research with people with whom I had enjoyed close relationships before becoming an anthropologist – family friends who had watched me grow up, friends who had gone through school with me and coworkers who had spent countless hours with me working and avoiding work – presented a more immediate intimacy and rapport than did my interactions with people I met for the first time during my research. These challenges may emerge for ethnographers after years of work with a community, but for native ethnographers they appear on day one. Negotiating these interactions took careful

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<sup>25</sup> Ruth Behar (1995) writes eloquently about these dilemmas in her discussion of her father’s reaction to his unfavorable portrayal in her book *Translated Woman* (1993).

framing on both our parts. I learned to identify cues – a subtle change in tone or register, a shift in body language or an explicit metacommentary – indicating that a conversation had crossed the line from a friendly catching up to potential ethnographic data and back again.

The first time I stepped foot onto a coal mine in the Powder River Basin, I was in elementary school. The mine where my father had recently begun working as a heavy equipment mechanic was hosting a family day, and my parents took my sister and me to see where my dad worked (cf. Hamper 1986: 2). I remember being awed by the giant machines and earth-shaking dynamite blast. Just over ten years later, I returned to the mines once again, but as an employee. Most mines in the basin hire the college-age children of employees as temporary summer workers, both to maintain production levels while many regulars take vacations and to provide their employees with an added benefit: money for college expenses. Having recently taken my first course in anthropology at college, I was fascinated by my new experience of working in the plant. My crew taught me how to wash down the plant machinery and load coal trains that stretched over a mile long, but they also taught me how to play the best practical jokes and be a good sport when I found myself the target of one. Three summers later I returned as a recent college graduate about to begin a doctoral program in anthropology. As I spent the summer driving a 290-ton Caterpillar haul truck in the pit, I could not help but think ethnographically about the mine and the social relations I was experiencing. Two summers later in 2005, I returned to the same mine to drive truck and begin formulating a larger dissertation fieldwork project about gender, kinship and labor. The people who

took me under their wings during those three initial summers profoundly shaped the questions that would eventually make up the backbone of my research project.



Figure 5: Smith during her employment as a truck driver

Many summer students like myself enjoy the kin-like relationships they developed with their coworkers. The first two crews I worked on were very small, less than ten people each, and I often felt as if I had inherited at least five or six new parents who treated me like one of their own children. These men and women were most often friends of my parents through work or community activities, and they often had children around my age. I was able to interview many of these coworkers when I returned to Gillette for a year of fieldwork that began in the summer of 2006. These talks were in some ways a bit different – they signed informed consent forms, and I took notes and digitally recorded most of our talks – but still very reminiscent of those we used to have before the start of shift, during lunch breaks or on the bus ride back to the main office at

the end of the day. The summer student program presents myriad opportunities for miners to talk with the students about their work histories, evaluate company practices and outline their hopes for their own children. As a younger coworker, I had enjoyed these conversations, and these themes were also prominent in my later ethnographic research.

My parents also connected me with their friends and former coworkers, whom I interviewed and spent time with in their homes with their families. Most of these conversations began with talk about how they knew my parents and continued on to discussions of their own families, especially if they had children around my age. These aspects of our relationship often translated into a focus on parenting and raising children. Focusing on the positive development of their families did not, however, preclude them from talking about perceived missteps or lingering frustrations with their careers or families.

At the mines where I engaged in onsite participant-observation, on the other hand, I met people for the first time through my research. This different positioning presents a fruitful counterexample to my work with family, friends and former coworkers. At each of the mines I was introduced to the crews by human relations personnel or upper-level managers. Because very few people were familiar with anthropology or ethnographic field methods, many initially viewed me as an office-type person who was there to monitor and evaluate their work practices. The supervisors of two crews even encouraged this association by offering me specific material items associated with management: one insisted that I carry a clipboard with me as I visited different areas of the minesite and the other offered me a company pick-up truck – normally reserved for

supervisors, managers and the most experienced technicians – to drive around the property.

My first interactions with miners usually involved clarification of my project that was then passed along among the workforce. One case is telling. After spending the morning with the water truck operator, we stopped for fuel. As the mechanic running the fuel truck began making small talk with me about my family and my project, the operator told him, “Yeah, she’s even coming in for nightshifts!” The mechanic’s eyebrows shot up and he asked, “Nightshifts? Why in the hell would you want to do that?” I told him that I was there to get the whole perspective of what it was like to work there, and that I knew that the mine was an entirely different place at night. He cracked a smile and said, “Well, I suppose you’ve got a point there.” Our conversation then turned to my prior work history and the day’s gossip. After the truck was fueled, he gave me a pat on the back and said, “You’re alright, kid.” The mechanic’s original surprise that I would work nightshifts with the crew indexed his association of me with office people who only work days, and my choice to also work nights partially realigned me with the technicians. This temporal syncing also influenced their view of my project as an attempt to understand their perspective rather than an evaluation from above.

During my first shifts with a crew, most people treated me like a trainee. This positioning made sense because training is the only other situation in which two people ride in equipment together and because I had expressed a desire to learn about their work and their lives. Crewmembers often made jokes to and about me and the person with whom I was working: “Is she ready to run that shovel by herself now?” When the person I was riding with made a mistake, their coworkers made fun of them by asking if I was

the one behind the wheel, thereby equating their performance with that of a novice. As time went on, many of the miners with whom I developed the closest relationships began treating me like a coworker or even coconspirator. A woman who worked in drilling and blasting gave me stakes to help her mark out the next drilling pattern and helped me learn how to operate the drill. A man who drove truck shared all of his tricks for avoiding their supervisor while maintaining the look of a busy, diligent employee. Some dispatch operators eventually showed me the games they played on the Internet during slow times.

Being positioned as a trainee or coconspirator shaped my relationships with people differently than when kinship ties foregrounded our relationship. In conversations with both my former coworkers and family friends, my parents' presence was palpable even if they were not immediately present. My interlocutors often referenced them while telling stories, and I think that they often shared information or opinions with me that they wanted my parents to know. And while full of good-natured teasing and lively debates, my daughterly interactions with family friends and coworkers my parents' age tended to be steered by those in the parenting role. Authority rested with them according to local ideas about parent-child relationships, though I sometimes challenged them as their children would have. The deference characteristic of these relationships was rarely found in those where I first met people as an anthropologist doing research. My initial positioning at the mines created expectations that I was the one asking questions, even though our conversations became more dialogic the more time I spent with new acquaintances.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Many native anthropologists appropriately signal education as a differentiating factor in their relationships with people at home (Behar 1995; Finn 1998; Limon 1994; Myerhoff 1978). In my case, this difference did not generally translate into any simple kind of authority. Not only did most of the miners make more money – upwards of \$100,000 a year with overtime – than I ever

In addition to the methodological considerations of native anthropology, my research also presents an opportunity to critically reflect upon its decolonizing potential. Like Limón, I found that I could not begin writing about my community without first accounting for the ways in which coal miners had been portrayed by previous writers, including both researchers and journalists. Coal miners hold a particular space in both popular and academic imaginations as oppressed yet hypermasculine workers (Campbell 1984; Duke 2002; Lahiri-Dutt and Macintyre 2006). The history of this referential power stretches back across centuries and national borders, from novels such as Emile Zola's (1885) *Germinal* to American films including *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980) and *October Sky* (1999). The emphasis on dirt, darkness and danger – cultural historian David Duke's (2002) three D's of coal mining – places miners in a discursive space similar to Trouillot's (1991) "savage slot" by portraying them as industrialized and oppressed Others. In Victorian England, these factors coalesced in coal miners being regarded as a separate race and often drawn with stereotypically "black" features (John 1980). In the U.S. media, underground and especially Appalachian coal miners continue to be portrayed as a "breed apart," marked by their speech as well as their unfathomably risky labor.

Though miners and their families in Gillette tend to ignore these representational tropes because they find them both inaccurate and offensive, they creep into conversations each time someone makes a self-deprecating joke about being "just a dumb coal miner" or criticizes stereotypes about the industry in general or Gillette in particular. In the next chapter, I focus specifically on local critiques of these representational

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would even as an established professor, but years of pitting their practical experience against well educated but inexperienced engineers had firmed their belief that a college education did not automatically index intelligence (cf. Dudley 1994: 109).

practices. The entire dissertation, however, is also intended to disrupt these stereotypes. In doing so, I find myself walking a thin line between simultaneously humanizing and de-romanticizing the miners I came to know. While miners have been romanticized as heroes of the working class, they have also been dehumanized as a “breed apart.” It is my hope that this dissertation conveys my utmost respect for them and their work, but I also believe it would be disrespectful and a disservice to the complexity of their everyday lives to write from behind rose-tinted glasses. The same is true of my relationship with the Powder River Basin mining industry and its corporate representatives. In this dissertation I write about people, a place and an industry that I care about and will fiercely protect, but it is my obligation as an ethnographer to include stories about challenges, missteps and careful criticisms of family members and corporate actors as much as it is to also celebrate their successes. I think that people back home would expect nothing less.

### **Auditing research, auditing safety**

The second key methodological question addressed by my research concerns audit cultures and the practice of anthropological research. Since the 1980s, auditing practices that originated in finance and accounting have increasingly expanded into many different spheres of social activities and organizations (Kipnis 2008; Power 1997; Shore and Wright 1999; Strathern 2000). Michael Power (1997) argues that ambiguities in the term’s definition are precisely what have enabled this expansion. “The ambiguity of auditing is not a methodological problem but a substantive fact” (Power 1997: 6). He suggests that scholars understand auditing as a “cluster of definitions which overlap but

are not identical” (1997: 4). For him, these include independence from the subject of investigation; evidence gathering and evaluation; and a clear object of the audit (Power 1997: 5). For Marilyn Strathern (2000: 2, 3), auditing unites the “twinned concepts of economic efficiency and good practice” and can be difficult to criticize because it “advances the values that academics generally hold dear, such as responsibility, openness about outcomes and widening of access.” She calls for scholars to critically evaluate the new social practices forms of accountability they engender, especially when they concern anthropological practice (2000: 14).

In this section, I compare the auditing practices of the University of Michigan’s Behavioral Science Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Powder River Basin mines. Both are “bureaucracies of virtue” (Shannon 2007: 230). According to its mission statement, the IRB “seeks to protect the rights and welfare of human research subjects recruited to participate in research activities conducted under the auspices of the University of Michigan.”<sup>27</sup> The mines seek to protect the health and safety of their workers as a part of their larger goals of crafting their companies as responsible corporate actors. IRBs have come under heavy criticism by anthropologists concerned about the implications of their regulatory processes on the practice of fieldwork. Here I trace how the mines have already dealt with a similar set of issues in their management of workplace safety, and suggest that insights from this process could shed light on possible strategies for making IRB regulations more amenable and accountable to actual anthropological research methods.

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<sup>27</sup> Available online: <http://www.research.umich.edu/irb/Mission%20&%20Goals.html>.

*Anthropological critiques of IRBs*

Audits in the guise of institutional review boards are playing ever increasing roles in shaping the conceptualization and practice of ethnographic research. Anthropologists have critiqued some of the implications of such involvement, including their distinct and problematic creation of research subjects. Rena Lederman (2006) and Strathern (2000) argue that whereas sound ethnographic research is predicated on the informality of fieldwork and the blurring of work-life distinctions, IRB regulations require anthropologists to conceptualize their research as clearly bracketed in the biomedical tradition of lab experiments. Strathern argues that this model of research can

hold a new way of being demeaning to informants. It pushes the exploratory, indeterminate and unpredictable nature of social relations (between ethnographer and his or her third party) back onto a “point of production” with the ethnographer as initiator. However much talk there is of collaboration or of conserving the autonomy of subjects or recognizing their input into the research or taking power into account, this aspect of ethics in advance, of anticipated negotiations, belittles the creative power of social relations. [2000: 295]

The audit regime of IRBs potentially ensconces the ethnographer as initiator in research relations and precludes the creative elaboration of social relationships and research questions. In her comparison of the informed consent procedures of her graduate institution and the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), Jennifer Shannon (2007) traces the fieldwork relationships that these two processes engendered. She argues that Cornell University’s standard written informed consent document followed a “contractual model” for ethics, legalistically detailing the rights of research subjects vis-à-vis the institution and protecting the rights of the institution as they concerned future use and publication of the materials (2007: 237). After a representative for the Native American people she wanted to work with in Chicago criticized the form’s

lack of flexibility, she successfully petitioned her institution's research board for oral consent. This procedure more closely followed the "collaborative ethic" of the NMAI, "where its accountability is based on an iterative process of meeting with Native Americans who, as cocurators, coproduce content in the exhibit gallery" (Shannon 2007: 237). Oral consent allowed each person the chance to define and redefine the bounds of their participation in the research, whereas these were prefigured in the written document – a type of "ethics in advance" (Strathern 2000: 295).

In the course of applying for IRB approval for my dissertation research, I was required to draft informed consent forms for interviews and focus groups that included the following information deemed pertinent by the board: the goals of the project; the approximate length of participants' commitment; their rights as research subjects; the potential risks and benefits of participating in the project; their opportunities to discontinue participation; information about confidentiality and the handling of notes and recorded material; and contact information for myself, my advisor and the IRB should they have further questions or complaints. Participants were required to sign these forms before any official "research" – in the view of the IRB, interviews – began. Marking this beginning seemed artificial for people whom I had known before I became an anthropologist, but it was sometimes helpful as an explicit framing device for understanding our interactions as research-oriented.

As Shannon eloquently documents, requiring research participants to read and sign such informed consent forms engenders particular fieldwork relationships. I applied for and received permission to waive the requirement of having every mine employee sign a written form. During my first general meeting with each crew, I explained all of

the information normally included on the form in an “oral script” I was required to turn in with my application, and then confirmed consent with each person with whom I spent time researching.<sup>28</sup> Marked differences emerged between my interactions with people who signed the consent form and those who did not. People who signed the form, other than high-ranking officials accustomed to such legalistic language, often expressed surprise at its contents. The form reframed what they and I had initially understood as a somewhat directed conversation into a formal and binding legal agreement with particular expectations for our behavior: according to the form, I would be the one answering questions and they would be the ones choosing to answer. Moreover, the language of even minimal risk raised suspicions about my intentions and larger project: some of my participants questioned why I had that warning on the form if the risk was truly minimal as I had claimed.

The majority of my closest friends simply joked and brushed off the form as yet another bureaucratic hoop to jump through, but those whom I had recently begun to know shaped our interview to meet the form’s expectations (cf. Shannon 2007: 234-5).<sup>29</sup> Whereas people who either played down the significance of the form or never had to sign one often took it upon themselves to ask me questions about my own work history, family and opinions about mining, those who took the form seriously shaped our interactions into unidirectional question and answer sessions, which made it difficult for

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<sup>28</sup> I argued that waiving the written informed consent forms would be in the best interest of mine employees, since written records could potentially identify them to their superiors. Other colleagues of mine working in the post-Soviet world have received similar waivers by arguing that written forms index authoritarian regimes and using them in their research would compromise their ability to recruit participants and gain their trust.

<sup>29</sup> Intriguingly, the comparison most of my research participants made was between my institution’s IRB and MSHA. Both institutions had good intentions of safeguarding people, but actually reaching that goal was impeded by their overemphasis on paperwork and regulations that were not specific to the site.

me to explore new areas of thought or interest with them. Moreover, the all-encompassing strict requirements of confidentiality contradicted local norms for sharing information through social circles. Instead of being able to use my own, locally informed and shared judgment for passing along news among social networks, I was bound to keep all information – including that which participants would have been happy to share – private. Even though it was based in the best of intentions, this practice sometimes gave me the appearance of a spy rather than an engaged ethnographer.

Research participants should be aware of their rights, and it is the responsibility of anthropologists to ensure that they are protected and that research is conducted in an ethical manner. As they stand, however, IRB approved informed consent forms do not necessarily guarantee that these things happen. In order to “officially” participate in our research, people must subjectify themselves according to the standards of the IRB as potential victims who respond to but do not ask questions and must be on guard to protect themselves throughout the course of the project. What is concerning to me is that these regulations do not even fully address the ethical concerns anthropologists must grapple with on a daily basis, such as what Shannon identifies as the iterative dynamics of truly collaborative research. Feminist scholar Gesa Kirsch (2005: 2168) also points to an expanded concept of “confirming consent” to address power differentials of research contexts. Giving participants the opportunity to renegotiate consent after the research is completed could be potentially threatening to scholars, but it would allow people to shape their representation in the research results. Informed consent assumes that outside of continuing to comply with the necessary confidentiality precautions, the scholar’s obligation to research participants ends along with their face-to-face interaction.

Extensive IRB audits of research projects and regulations for monitoring its enactment may serve more as “rituals of verification” (Power 1997) that create a sense of ethical security rather than concrete modes for creating ethically sound and theoretically rigorous research projects.

The intense scrutiny with which my project was treated at the IRB was not replicated in the process of seeking mine approval for my research. The mine managers were surprised by my request for the official permission letter required by the IRB that outlined the confidentiality guidelines of my research that we had already established in our preliminary meetings. Though they signed the letters at my request, they asked nothing more of me than to go through both Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) and site specific safety training. Two explanations for this radically different audit of my research are plausible. First, my arrival onsite with personal connections to multiple mine employees and managers may have served as a pre-screening or endorsement. By presenting my project and introducing me to persons with the authority to approve it, employees vouched for my background and intentions.

Second, corporate officials may have approved my project in order to broaden their own “social audits” (Welker 2006). Linked to the broader corporate social responsibility (CSR) movement, mining companies have increasingly expanded their financial audits to encompass what many call social and environmental audits of their practices in these areas of public concern. Chapter Eight deals with these developments in more detail, but here I would suggest that corporate officials may have been receptive to my project because of its potential to highlight their successes in encouraging an inclusive and generally content workforce. In presenting my research to both miners and

corporate officials, I focused on my interest in countering the prevalent stereotypes of the mining industry based on our overall positive experiences in the basin. One human relations manager who took an early interest in my project did so because he thought my focus on women miners would serve the larger corporation's initiative to highlight the diversity of their workforce. Another mine manager patted me on the back as I was about to leave on my last day and said, only somewhat jokingly, "We'll be reading what you have to say. Don't make me regret letting you come here." Tellingly, the other manager standing beside me reminded him of my close kinship connections to the industry: "If she's anything like her dad, she won't."<sup>30</sup>

The auditing practices of both the IRB and the mines were similar in some ways – they both sought to clarify relationships of accountability – but strikingly different in others. The IRB was primarily concerned with auditing *processes*, such as the ways in which I obtained and documented informed consent, managed project recruitment and withdrawal, stored documents and recordings, and guarded confidentiality. Although the internal audits company employees conducted in anticipation of the MSHA inspections usually concerned process in the form of industry "best practices" – such as the safest and most productive ways to operate and repair equipment or the correct way to report and address accidents – when it came to auditing my project, they were primarily interested in the results. They did not dictate with whom I spoke, how I secured their consent or what

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<sup>30</sup> Based on the conversation we had been having, I took this last comment as a partial dismissal of the manager's concerns. We had just been discussing his admiration for my father's work ethic, and he said that he was excited about the research I had proposed to do. Rather than seeming suspicious of my intentions and thus in a position to remind me of my obligations to tell a positive story, he seemed to be defending me against the other manager's accusation that I might publish something negative about the mine or the industry.

we discussed, but did express an interest in my results and how they would be made public.

The critiques of IRBs outlined in this section share a concern that top-down research regulations stemming from a biomedical model of research cannot account for the inherent (and desirable) flexibility of locally embedded ethnographic research. Ethnographers who seek to follow official IRB regulations while conducting the open-ended type of research to which they are accustomed often find their hands tied. In fact, Jack Katz (2006) argues that because these official regulations are impossible to follow in the everyday course of fieldwork, even the most well intentioned ethnographers become “IRB outlaws.”

#### *Institutionalizing workplace safety*

The Powder River Basin mines found themselves in a comparable position concerning workplace safety programs. Like IRBs, company officials sought to protect the health and safety of people on their worksite, but they found that overarching, top-down regulations were rarely followed in everyday practice. People knew the rules existed, but the multiplicity of situations in which a variety of “official” procedures could be invoked varied too much to make them practical. As many miners like to say, if they followed the rules to the letter they would never get any work done.<sup>31</sup> Many miners thus found themselves in a comparable position to Katz’s IRB outlaws: even if they wanted to follow company regulations for working safely, actual working conditions made it impossible to do so on a daily basis. The result was low participation in official workplace safety

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<sup>31</sup> In fact, this is the exact reasoning behind “work-to-rule” labor activism, in which workers slow down production by following rules to the letter, all the while protecting their own jobs because they never technically strike.

programs. In this section, I trace the shift in mine safety programming from top-down disciplinary systems to bottom-up, behavior based initiatives.

Before 2005, most companies in the basin relied elaborate bureaucratic procedures through which miners were encouraged to report violations that they instigated, experienced or observed. By reporting an incident, miners initiated an elaborate audit process that involved what many workers describe as a criminal-like investigation and series of testimonials that culminated in the mine officials publicly assigning blame to specific persons. When miners were found to be negligent, they are channeled through a series of disciplinary “steps” designed to encourage proper behavior, or what the industry calls “best practice.” Most miners got off with a warning for first offenses, but the most extreme cases sometimes resulted in the termination of employment. Even though first warnings sound innocuous, miners still felt strongly about them since they include public affronts to their dignity and competence as workers, and because they result in the placement of papers describing the incident in an employee’s permanent file. Most mine employees appreciate the detailed investigations that follow major accidents and fatalities, but they question their utility for minor incidents.

These procedures for reporting accidents and “near misses” (situations that easily could have turned into accidents) were rarely utilized by most miners. The humorous yet pointed criticism of this type of program is evident in the nickname miners assigned to a program in which employees who turned in a coworker were eligible to receive a free meal at a local restaurant: “Squeals for Meals.” Instead of involving company officials and their bureaucracy, they preferred to handle their issues on a face-to-face basis with

the involved parties. Take the example of a miner observing a coworker handling the shovel cable without the required hot gloves. Instead of filling out a form, most would approach their coworker directly and explain why they were concerned about their practices. They preferred this method because no papers were filed and no one ended up looking like a tattletale or dunce in front of the entire crew. “It’s more respectful that way,” a miner said to me. “You handle it like adults instead of little kids who need someone to take care of them.” They argued that this unofficial system created safer work environments because people are more likely to informally tell a coworker they have made a mistake than they were to involve the company in the issue. Yet mine officials claimed that this system was not good enough. “We can’t learn from each other’s mistakes,” a different miner explained. “That’s the whole point of having an investigation: everybody sees what the problem is so it won’t happen again. Otherwise you might have to correct six, seven different people for the same issue.”

Miners used to counter that it is possible for the crew to learn a lesson without singling out one person to be blamed. For example, at the beginning of every shift, each work group sits down together to discuss the day’s activities. A major feature of these meetings is the safety section, in which miners volunteer suggestions for improvement. One strategy utilized by many was to speak in the abstract about problems they observed. To continue with the previous example, they might say, “I’m not pointing fingers, but I’ve been noticing a lot of people picking up the shovel cable without hot gloves. I know it’s tempting to take shortcuts, but we really should use them every time we handle the cable.” The offending parties remain nameless and preserve their dignity, yet the entire crew still learned from their mistakes. These informal discussions have been effective in

addressing potentially risky behaviors, but for company safety personnel, the downside was its lack of any official records of patterns of hazards and unsafe behaviors. The new programs are designed to create such a paper trail without exposing individual miners to disciplinary action.<sup>32</sup>

Beginning during my fieldwork in 2006, many mines in the basin shifted to behavior based safety programs, the main innovation of which is a system of formalized peer observations. Miners volunteer to be trained as “observers” who spend a few shifts away from their normal duties observing their coworkers’ work behaviors. As they are watching, they fill out a form that categorizes and rates their coworker’s behavior according to specific areas of concern identified by the committee based on a survey of incident reports, such as tool use and equipment handling. After ten minutes, the observer shares their findings with their coworker, taking particular care to emphasize the good practices they noted first before discussing the potentially unsafe ones. The two miners then discuss and evaluate the degree to which the safest behavior was or was not enabled by the surrounding conditions. In the example of the hot gloves, the safer behavior would be considered “enabled” if the hot gloves were tested and available in pick-ups, “difficult” if the gloves had been moved and the miner would have to drive back to the shop to pick them up, and “non-enabled” if there were no gloves available on the worksite. The information from these sheets is then supposed to be compiled so that the committee can identify patterns of problems and brainstorm solutions for them. In turn, the team’s management sponsor should evaluate and implement them.

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<sup>32</sup> Keeping the observation interactions anonymous, however, has proven to be difficult, especially at the smaller mines. Observers often have to use the public mine radio to make contact with their coworkers to initiate the observation, and their pick-up trucks can be clearly noted by others in the vicinity of particular individuals and their work areas.

When introducing miners to the new programs, management has made efforts to highlight their differences from the previous top-down approaches. At one mine where I did fieldwork, the new program was introduced to each crew during an extended meeting. A committee of hourly employees who had volunteered to help design the program sat up front facing their coworkers, while the mine manager stood off to the side along the wall near the rest of the crew, perhaps as a way to underscore the frequent assertion that the program belonged to the employees, as committee members were fond of saying. One of the committee members asked his coworkers, “How many of you are satisfied with safety here?” Only half the room raised their hands. Acknowledging their frustration, he promised that the new program was a long-term strategy for making the mine a safer place to work. He then compared their current “reactive” practice of raising hazards awareness after an accident occurred with the new “proactive” approach that would address the underlying behaviors leading to such accidents. Like many other safety personnel in the basin, he spoke about the false sense of security that came from engaging in unsafe behaviors without any negative consequences. “Once you get away with it once, twice, three times you start thinking that it’s safe and that it’s not a risk anymore.” According to him, the new program was designed to identify and correct such entrenched behaviors.

In discussing the program informally with me in interviews and among their coworkers in conversations, miners most appreciated the program for moving away from the previous disciplinary-centered approaches to managing safety. As one relatively new miner said,

There’s some guys who take safety the wrong way and think, you know, they need to belittle people when they’re telling them to be safe. They do it in front of

a whole bunch of people and say, ‘Hey, you’re not doing this or that or wearing your seat belt.’ But I think a one-on-one with somebody is the best way to do it, and the new program covers that real well.

A key part of this shift is movement away from top-down safety regulations. Instead of drafting a list of rules to be uniformly applied throughout the mines, a committee of miners at each mine compiles data on accidents and near misses to identify primary areas of concern. In collaboration with their coworkers, they brainstorm a set of best practices that are adaptable to each individual context.<sup>33</sup>

### *Freeing IRB outlaws*

The explicit goal of IRBs to protect research participants from dangerous or ethically questionable studies is admirable, but the ways in which this protection is thought to be best secured often bring about ethical and methodological problems of their own. Both IRBs and mine safety programs are concerned with processes, believing that the best practices will create the desired results: ethical research and safe workplaces.<sup>34</sup> Whereas the IRB asks anthropologists a predefined set of questions that often have little to do with

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<sup>33</sup> This discussion about the process-oriented nature of mine safety programs offers a crucial perspective on critiques of the corporate social responsibility movement. Many critics of auditing practices and CSR more generally suggest that these efforts focus on corporate governance rather than concrete results on the ground (e.g. Conley and Williams 2005; Gledhill 2004; Power 1997). Mining industries in particular have been appropriately criticized for mismatches between corporate discourses and actual practices of social and environmental responsibility (Finn 1998; Kirsch 2006; Moody 2002; Welker 2006). My research shows that whereas the mines were certainly not disinterested in the results of my research – various officials at different levels all conveyed their hope that I would highlight the good things they had accomplished – they also remained committed to achieving concrete results through innovative practice-oriented safety programs.

<sup>34</sup> This approach represents a direct reversal of the mission and practices of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Following a series of reforms first proposed by the Clinton administration, OSHA has shifted from monitoring processes to tracking results, evaluating its success on numbers of injuries rather than on the correct following of best practices. The “new OSHA” now “partners” with employers, offering those who voluntarily institute safety programs decreased penalties and focusing their inspection attention on those refusing to comply (OSHA 1996).

the local context of the research, the mines have learned that the best way to ensure participation in their programs is to design them from the bottom-up. By starting with the miners' own knowledge of workplace risks and their strategies for mitigating them, these companies are building best practices that miners are more likely to adopt in their everyday work practices. This approach does not preclude the identification of persistent patterns of issues or categories of concern, it simply builds them from the ground up. Though it would take a great deal of effort, it is not unreasonable to imagine a similar system for IRBs. Based on their own fieldwork experiences, anthropologists could generate their own plans for conducting research that protects research participants. Like the mine committees, researchers could also work together to identify common sets of concerns – such as confidentiality – that individual scholars could address in ways specific to their fieldsites. This type of research regulation would speak more directly to issues specific to each project and allow for more flexibility in its elaboration.

## **Conclusion**

My research in Gillette and the surrounding mines offers the opportunity to critically reflect on the category of native anthropology and disciplinary critiques of Institutional Review Boards. My positioning as a former local resident, summer mine employee and daughter of a current mine mechanic helped me to establish rapport with mine officials and workers at the same time as it entangled me in particular relationships of accountability concerning the eventual publishing of my materials. Work done by scholars claiming the title of native anthropologist helped me to contextualize and reflect upon the representational and methodological issues specific to my project. Thus in this

chapter, I presented an argument for the continued use of the category. Critics of the term focus on its potential to performatively reinforce notions of otherness that have long plagued the discipline and further marginalize anthropologists with non-traditional backgrounds. While this potential development should be closely monitored, I argue that a more limited use of the term – specifically by scholars who engage in research in the communities (not the countries) where they grew up – brings together a cluster of methodological issues unique to these fieldwork situations and offers an avenue for disrupting the representational tropes used to describe these places.

The auditing practices of the mines and the IRB also engendered particular opportunities for research and types of fieldwork relationships. Anthropologists have critiqued IRBs for asking them to bound off research practices from everyday life, the usual subject of their research. They have also expressed concerns that documents such as those required to acquire and record informed consent preclude more flexible negotiations of the substantive and temporal guidelines for this consent. To suggest a possible strategy for addressing these criticisms without losing all ability to monitor ethical research practices, I compared the IRB auditing process with mine safety programs in the Powder River Basin. Mine managers found that very few workers participated in their official safety programs because they could not address the infinitely variable working conditions and because they violated the sense of egalitarian camaraderie valued by their workers. Instead of maintaining a top-down approach to safety, they shifted to behavior-based programs that relied on miners to identify and address possible safety concerns from the ground up. These programs have successfully integrated otherwise skeptical miners into a common strategy for protecting the health

and safety of everyone on the worksite. A similar type of IRB program might be effective in remedying anthropologists' most strident criticisms of them and thus encourage more scholars to actively engage these boards in their research design and implementation. Rather than producing more and more IRB outlaws who want to follow regulations but find doing so to be impossible in the everyday course of fieldwork, this approach might help ensure that IRBs meet their stated goals of protecting the people who make research possible.

This chapter provided the methodological background for the research discussed in the following chapters. The next chapter continues this contextualization by outlining a few pertinent historical trajectories that shaped the fieldsite and the research that I was able to conduct there.

### **Chapter III**

#### **Re-imagining Wyoming and the West**

What does it mean call a place or the people who live there “western,” or for people to use the word when describing themselves? “The West” has meant many different things for many different people. For Frederick Jackson Turner, arguably the most influential early theorist of the West, it was a process that created American democracy: “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development” (1920: 28). Turner’s frontier thesis set the terms of western history until critics emerged in the 1980s and 1990s to challenge his romantic view of western expansion and emphasis on white, English-speaking men (e.g. Kolodny 1984; Limerick 1987, 2000; White 1991; Worster 1992). These “new” western historians draw attention to the race, gender and class dynamics shaping western history. They also deconstruct the assumptions of masculine self-sufficiency and independence that underpin Turner’s thesis and point to the continuing salience of 19<sup>th</sup> century federal government policies for contemporary struggles over the meaning of labor and land.

Popular and academic understandings of “the West” have always been entangled with the mythic Wests present in media representations of the region. Turner’s thesis both drew on and reinforced the romanticized West that appeared folklore, novels and

films that captured the imaginations of many Americans thinking about the region.<sup>35</sup>

These works produced iconic characters – the gun-slinging cowboy hero, the villain in the black cowboy hat, the prostitute with a heart of gold, and the noble Indian – and places, such as the vast expanse of Utah’s Monument Valley, that encouraged viewers to imagine blank slates and new beginnings (Hausladen 2003; Rollins 2005; Rony 1994).

Although these myths have very little to do with everyday life for people living in western states, historian Richard White (1991) encourages academics to take them seriously:

The actual West and the imagined West are engaged in a constant conversation; each influences the other... As people accept and assimilate myth, they act on the myths, and the myths become the basis for actions that shape history... The mythic West imagined by Americans has shaped the West of history just as the West of history has helped create the West Americans have imagined. The two cannot be neatly severed.” [1991: 615-616; cf. Papanikolas 1995: 73 on the power dynamics of western myths]

White’s eloquent argument remains salient for scholars and public intellectuals, providing the tools with which to interpret everything from the everyday practices of Wyoming miners to the success of an Ivy League educated businessman who portrayed himself as a folksy rancher to win a presidential election and then practice a unilateral form of “cowboy diplomacy” during his administration (Boris 2007; Silverstein 2003; Wright 2001: 2).

Popular western myths have shaped not only the ways in which the “official” history of Wyoming’s coal industry has been written, but also the ways in which the

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<sup>35</sup> Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* is emblematic of these genres. Papanikolas critiques Wister for leaving out labor in his iconic portrayal of an independent cowboy: “Its cult of the cowboy individualist a sort of forlorn wish for an ‘innocent’ capitalism far from the tooth-and-claw economics of Wall Street and the Trusts so busy creating fortunes for the few and misery for the many. The Virginian himself, at first glance that splendid, free-spirited pagan, is, on closer examination, a gunman, a racist, and the promoter of a convenient kind of Social Darwinism that pitted the ‘expert’ against lesser men and justified success by any means. When it comes to choose between lynch law and a democracy overrun by poor settlers and Populist cowboys, the Virginian chooses the rope” (1995: 77).

state's residents have imagined their own work practices and family migrations. This chapter thus contributes to new western history by tracing the ways in which revisiting the history of Wyoming coal mining reinserts crucial questions of class, race and gender into the historiography of the region. Specifically, I examine the ways in which community members and company officials rework three common tropes for thinking about social life in the western U.S.: the independent cowboy as the quintessential western laborer; the wild boomtown; and the masculine subject of western and mining history. Scholars must pay critical attention to these mythologized tropes because people engage them to make meaning in their everyday lives.

### **Western work: Cowboys and coal miners**

This section begins by outlining the theoretical foundations for thinking about western work in order to consider why cowboys have been considered more prototypical western laborers than coal miners. To challenge those assumptions and the dominant historical narratives, I then sketch out the development of the coal industry in Wyoming, paying particular attention to conflicts surrounding labor – who should do it and under what conditions. Although I gesture to the early industry in southwestern Wyoming, my focus is contemporary developments in the northeastern Powder River Basin since much less historical research has been done for that area. I then turn to a convergence of the cowboy trope and the mining industry in a relatively current labor dispute, showing that the companies had a vested interest in encouraging their employees to think about themselves as cowboys rather than coal miners.<sup>36</sup> I take care, however, to show that this

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<sup>36</sup> Though I lack the space to pursue the following suggestion, Gloria Miller (2004) argues that the Canadian oil industry is characterized by a frontier masculinity. She finds that one oil

imaginary practice was not imposed from above. Rather, locals found the image of the cowboy meaningful in thinking about their own working lives, specifically their relationships with coal companies and unions.

### *Theorizing western work*

Historical archaeologists Randall McGuire and Paul Reckner argue that out of all the relationships comprising western history, class struggles are the “most inimical” to the notion of the romantic West (2002: 45). Drawing on critical work done by these and other new western historians, in this section I argue that the exclusion of wageworking miners from the region’s historiography can be traced back to idealizations of western labor that resonate more closely with cowboys and prospecting miners rather their wageworking counterparts.

In her foundational work critiquing Turnerian western history, Patricia Limerick argues that the type of labor popularly associated with the West emphasizes non-exploitative independence, in which people “simply gathered what nature produced. The laborer was to be self-employed; and the status of laborer was to be temporary, left behind when the profits made escape possible” (1987: 97). The popularly imagined cowboy, not the miner, embodies this type of egalitarian labor. Donald Worster (1992: 35-6) and David Iglar (2001, 2004) draw on Limerick to suggest that associations of the West with open, sunny spaces evoked portrayals of ranching labor as relatively

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company CEO was popularly described as “a miscast cowboy,” a “brash, tough-talking Texan,” a “Texas gunslinger who follows the only rule that matters: survival of the fittest and fastest” who “plays the corporate takeover game with guts and gusto” and who “played by his own rules, which meant being fast on the draw, and making sure his opponent was dead before he hit the ground” (Miller 2004: 62). Similarly, one of his women colleagues was described as “ever restless and fond of new frontiers” and enjoying “going where nobody has gone before . . . not for the glory, but mostly because it takes courage” (Miller 2004: 62).

nonrepressive, especially since cowboys often worked outside in relative isolation. In many genres of Western novels (e.g. Wister 1902) and films (e.g. Ford 1939, 1956; Leone 1966, 1968), cowboys are portrayed as hopelessly independent, working free from government regulations as well as capitalist business pressures. As Iglar (2004: 93) writes, “The Marlboro Man works precisely because Philip Morris situates him in a landscape free from the big cattle companies and daily wages that structured the lives of real cowboys.” Even more bluntly, Will Wright (2001: 6) argues, “The mythical cowboy is not always a working cowboy in the sense of herding cattle... The ‘cowboy’ of the myth is defined by his strength, honor and independence, his wilderness identity, not by his job.”

Class dynamics have animated the cattle industry since its beginnings but are tellingly absent from the most popular representations of mythic cowboys.<sup>37</sup> Contemporary popular and scholarly portrayals of the ranching industry (e.g. Starrs 1998) have tended to strip it of its exploitative class dynamics, collapsing actors as diverse as the big cattle barons to the hired hands into the figure of the independent middle-class rancher (Merrill 2002). Cultural historian Bonnie Christensen locates the power of this trope in its the fusion of the cowboy’s romanticized free outdoor work with the responsibilities and independence of capitalist land ownership (2002: 112). Zeese Papanikolas traces this practice back to Wister’s influential novel, in which his iconic cowboy turns out to be “an incipient capitalist” that serves to calm an eastern audience,

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<sup>37</sup> A rare exception is Jack Schaefer’s novel *Shane* (1949), which follows a gunfighter who helps homesteading families avoid being forced off their land by wealthy cattlemen. Though not technically a Western, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) also sharply critiques the economic hardships faced by a poor family of sharecroppers who confront natural disasters, a lack of labor rights and the collusion of corporate farmers in their search for land, jobs and dignity.

“assuring them that in spite of the six guns and chaps the Virginian is no threat to either their morals or their ideology, but rather their defender. In fact, the Virginian is only another version of themselves” (1995: 77). Though not all cowboy characters took on practices associated with the bourgeoisie like the Virginian did, the trope of the independent, business-savvy rancher looms large in this genre of popular writing and film.<sup>38</sup>

These depictions obscure the “cowboy proletariat” responsible for the daily functioning of ranch life. These cowboys sometimes organized formal protests against their working conditions, including an 1883 strike in Texas (Curtin 1991: 56-9; McGuire and Reckner 2002: 49) and an 1885 strike in Wyoming’s Sweetwater County (Papanikolas 1995: 75). Recent historical research details the hierarchical, capitalist labor relations that shaped the cattle industry from its inception (Iglar 2001; Merrill 2002; Sheridan 2007) and provide a corrective for these romanticized images that continue to permeate many contemporary scholarly and popular accounts of ranchers and the cattle industry. Papanikolas writes that without his horse, the cowboy was “but one more seasonal worker attached to the industrial world by railroads that led to Chicago stockyards and ranches owned as often as not by Eastern bankers or Scottish investors” (1995: 75). Similarly, Karl Marx’s daughter Eleanor writes that cowboys were and thought of themselves as “distinctly members of the non-possessing and yet producing and distributing class, that they are as much at the mercy of the capitalist as a New or Old England cotton-operative, that their supposed ‘freedom’ is no more of a reality than his” (Aveling and Aveling 1969 [1891]: 155).

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<sup>38</sup> The differences in these portrayals can be traced back to a slippage between cowboys (independent workers) and ranchers (owners of businesses and land) that animates even in the academic literature on this subject.

Those social processes that have encouraged and shaped popular imaginations of freedom loving cowboys are the same ones that have contributed to particular exclusions and inclusions in the history of western mining. These romanticized myths of western labor arose as eastern urbanized Americans imagined escapes from increasing industrialization and its concomitant social ills (Cronon 1995; Limerick 1987; Papanikolas 1995; Worster 1992). “Westerns primarily appealed to people in the urban East, where factories and cities had long replaced any sense of a wild frontier. The cowboy became popular as America became industrial” (Wright 2001: 7).

Mining – especially coal mining in Wyoming – does not fit easily into such narratives because the mines industrialized early and quickly, setting limits on the possibility that rank-and-file miners might strike it rich, the dominant narrative organizing dominant histories of the industry. Limerick (1987) notes in western history an enduring fascination with the relatively brief period of speculation mining exemplified in the Black Hills and California gold rushes. This type of mining fits well into these dominant narratives due to its association with labor that is temporary, egalitarian and a non-exploitative gathering of nature’s bounty; prospecting and panning were done outside, with the miners searching for precious metals among equals who all conceivably had a chance at striking it rich. Even though this type of mining was limited to a very brief period, it plays a large role in how many Americans think about the industry and how many former mining communities have strategically chosen to market themselves to tourists. For example, tourists are encouraged to reenact windfall mining in tourist communities from the Black Hills of South Dakota to the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. Though offering tourists the opportunity to pan for gold in a stream or man-made water

source may appear trivial, such venues nevertheless play a significant role in shaping the ways in which residents and visitors imagine mining communities and their place in larger histories of the industry. These notions of the frontier and their contemporary enactments belie the violence, destruction and competition implicated in the process of frontier making (Tsing 2005).

Tellingly, prospecting and its touristy reenactments bear little resemblance to the industrial mining that quickly replaced it. As the metals and minerals that could be easily accessed in streams or shallow digs became depleted, it became substantially more difficult for miners to run independent operations. Digging deeper into the earth's surface required machinery more easily financed by emerging corporations than individuals, and these operations often engendered stricter socioeconomic divisions between the mine owners and workers. Most early mining in the West was done by miners in a contract relationship with companies, giving an appearance of partnership that was nonetheless eroded in actual struggles over workplace conditions (Gardner and Flores 1989; Long 1989; cf. Manning 2002). Limerick suggests that industrial mining practices were left out of most western histories because "this version of life in the Wild West did not strike the imagination of the time or appeal later to the novelists or moviemakers: the scene made it too clear that the West was hardly a refuge from industrialism" (1987: 108). Historians and archaeologists have recently begun reintegrating the capitalist class processes of extractive industries into western history (e.g. Gregory 2004; Jameson 1998; McGuire and Reckner 2002; Saitta 2004, 2006; Wolff 2003), but more work remains to be done integrating a rich body of western labor history with the new western history.

If industrialized mining in general has been obscured in western histories, coal mining in particular has been even more categorically excluded. When reading both academic and popular works about mining, one might imagine that coal is found only east of the Mississippi River in Illinois and Appalachian states such as West Virginia or Kentucky. In the past two decades western mines have produced far more coal than their eastern counterparts, but they have yet to dislodge the tenacious regional associations that contribute to the dearth of coal mining in western historiography.

In addition to regional associations, the industry may have been passed over by western historians because coal has never held the same mythical rags-to-riches appeal as gold, silver or copper mining. Even though coal played a key role in the Industrial Revolution and subsequent capitalist expansion (Freese 2003; Lynch 2004), it commands none of the glamour that those other metals hold in their potential to produce fantastic amounts of wealth. Outside of a few speculative capitalists, individuals seldom sought out or mined coal to get rich in the West. As Robert Righter (1985) writes, “Coal mining had always been a corporate frontier. It takes capital – vast amounts of it – to play a part in the energy frontier.” Furthermore, coal mining has more often been associated with basic needs – heating homes, stoking railroad furnaces, etc. – rather than luxury items. Coal miners themselves have also been popularly linked to poverty rather than economic success, and the industry has also almost always been associated with underground wage labor, not the sunny skies and independence associated with western work. Yet the coal industry and its workers have played a pivotal role in western history, not the least in engaging in mass migrations and making railroad expansion possible. Drawing attention

to this industry continues the important work of tracing the capitalist processes that shaped and continue to shape the West.

### *Early coal mining in Wyoming*

Although the Colorado Coalfield Wars and especially the Ludlow massacre have come to be emblematic of western labor disputes (McGuire and Reckner 2002; Long 1989; Papanikolas 1995; Saitta 2002, 2004; Wolff 2003), struggles over who should labor, how and in what conditions also played a key role in the development of the coal mining industry in Wyoming.<sup>39</sup> Dudley Gardner and Verla Flores (1989) as well as David Wolff (2003) have offered detailed histories of the late 19th and early 20th century coal industry in southern Wyoming, particularly concerning labor relations in the areas surrounding Rock Springs. Rather than recapitulate that research, here I focus primarily on the industry in northeastern Wyoming's Powder River Basin and gesture to major events preceding development in that region. Although it may be tempting to view contemporary issues in this region as a radical departure from earlier styles of mining and negotiating workplace conditions and relationships, I place these contemporary practices within the larger trajectories of mining in the state and region.

The first efforts to use coal as a fuel source in the West did not result in industrialized mining. Traces of lignite in a fire hearth dating back 4,000 years ago in western North Dakota provide the first archaeological evidence of Native Americans

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<sup>39</sup> The Ludlow Massacre has been described as the “most notorious example of open class warfare in American history” (Saitta 2006: 200). On April 20, 1914, the Colorado National Guard opened fire on tent colony of 1,200 striking miners and their families at Ludlow. Twenty people, including two women and eleven children, were killed in the day-long fight. The massacre prompted a ten-day battle between miners and militiamen throughout Colorado that ended only when President Woodrow Wilson sent in federal troops to disarm both sides.

burning coal in the West (Gardner and Flores 1989; Tauxe 1993). Coal outcroppings were observed by beaver trappers in the early 1800s and by overland immigrants and frontier army surveyors the 1840s, and many of the first settlers relied on this easily accessible coal to provide fuel in a region characterized by its lack of trees (Gardner and Flores 1989: 3-4; Wolff 2003: 2-3). The first coordinated efforts at extracting coal were undertaken by families on land recently acquired from the federal government as a part of homesteading policies.<sup>40</sup> It is significant that the family's activities did not hinge solely or primarily upon coal mining, but rather on farming or ranching. Farmers and ranchers used pick axes to dislodge the coal, and their sons assisted by loading and hauling the coal to the surface. These mines were called wagon mines since the families used mule-driven wagons to transport the coal to neighboring homes. Coal provided a domestic fuel supply as well as something to trade with neighbors. Homesteaders in the Powder River Basin were trading larger quantities of coal for money by 1891, as evidenced by advertisements in the Sheridan newspaper (Kuzara 1977: 55).

Mining gradually expanded as incipient companies contracted with families to extract the coal, a process common throughout the national development of coal industry. The contracted coal miner, called a "practical miner," was paid by the ton. He owned his own tools, hired his own assistants, set his own hours, and took responsibility for envisioning the entire drilling and blasting process (Long 1989: 60-61; Wolff 2003: 19). These miners considered their work a "craft" and worked with an "independence that was the envy of other workers" (Montgomery 1987: 333; cf. Wolff 2003: 19). Before 1920,

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<sup>40</sup> When federal officials crafted the 1862 Homestead Act, they expanded the rectangular land-survey system that rewarded farmers' labor with 160-acre holdings with an eye to creating a growing class of Jeffersonian farmers whose prosperity would enhance the economic development of the entire nation (Limerick 1987: 190, White 1991: 142-3).

the term miner was reserved for these practical miners, not for those working in support positions (Long 1989: 36). The practical miner was assisted by a helper who loaded the car and received a small percentage of the contractor's earnings. These loaders were often the teenage sons of the miners. In this way, miners kept the per ton contracted wage within the family and drew on ideas about appropriate parent-child relationships to discipline their assistants (Humphries 1988: 106). Thus the earliest underground mines in Wyoming and the West were characterized by groups of primarily agnatic families working *as families* to extract and transport coal to the surface.<sup>41</sup>

Industrialization occurred rapidly in Wyoming due to generous land grants made by the government to the intertwined railroad and mining companies (Gardner and Flores 1989; Long 1989; Wolff 2003). In Wyoming, this development centered around the Union Pacific railroad line running through the southern portion of the state along what is now Interstate 80.<sup>42</sup> In fact, the vast known coal reserves along this path comprised the primary reason why the railroad was designed to follow this route along what was previously the Overland Trail (Gardner and Flores 1989: 8). Carbon, the aptly named

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<sup>41</sup> Non-kin workers were spatially isolated from the families. "Company men" earned wages based on an hourly salary instead of a per ton rate and included haulers or drivers for the mules, timbermen, blacksmiths, track layers, mule tenders, masons and pump men, in addition to the fire boss and mine boss in charge of supervising (Gardner and Flores 1989: 38; Montgomery 1987: 334). Tensions between miners and the company men derived from the ability of company men to delay the miners' transfer of coal to the surface: miners could not load coal if they did not have carts (Gardner and Flores 1989: 110). The mine also employed old men, primarily those without families to care for them, and young boys, particularly orphans, as pickers or breakers. Their job was separating out good coal from the trash coal. They often worked in large rooms, but their tasks did not require close coordination with others (Gardner and Flores 1989: 39). Wages were extremely low, and they were not able to draw on the support of kinship relations at the mine have the kinship relationships of boys underground (Long 1989: 75-6). It was difficult for these pickers to move up in the ranks, since boys who started out helping their fathers usually began as helpers, moved their way into mule driving as adolescents and then became adults once they were assigned their own rooms and were in a position to hire their own laborers (Long 1989: 36).

<sup>42</sup> Virginia Scharff (2003a) humorously notes that Wyoming was unique in that the railroad preceded the people.

first coal community, was founded in 1868, and other towns quickly followed as mines opened along the railroad (Roberts 1982). In 1874 Union Pacific took control of the majority of those mines and consolidated them into their own venture. Controlling both the railroads and the mines provided the company with a virtual monopoly over the Wyoming coal industry, and the company profited considerably from using the coal as fuel, selling it at high prices and charging steep freight rates (Gardner and Flores 1989: 26).

Labor conflicts characterized the early industry. In the 1870s, miners in Carbon first unionized in order to secure better wages and working conditions and to protest the company store (Wolff 2003: 22). When the miners struck in 1871, Thomas Wardell, one of the principal founders of the first major Wyoming coal company, established a precedent for handling labor conflicts in the area: “call on the military for support, fire the troublemakers, and bring in new workers” (Wolff 2003: 23). These tactics were employed by many coal operators through the early 20th century. For example, Patrick Jay Quealy, who operated a collection of coal mines around Kemmerer, often wrote to business associates in order to warn them of potential union agitators and took care not to hire any known organizers. In 1905, he wrote to his mine foreman:

I have been reliably informed that there is a party of Finlander miners started for Wyoming camps from Ishpeming, Mich., who are iron miners, and expect to work in the coal mines. These men are coming here for the purpose of getting work and then promote Unionism. Will you please make careful investigation of all Finlanders making inquiry for jobs. Find out where they are from before letting them go into the mine, and employ none of these men that you can find out came from Michigan iron mines. Please look carefully after this matter in my absence. [Quealy 1905]

Like other operators of his time, Quealy also brought in large numbers of Japanese workers in order to decrease labor costs and discourage his employees from unionizing.<sup>43</sup> In Rock Springs and Almy, Union Pacific brought in Chinese workers who could serve as a reserve, mobile labor force (Wolff 2003: 100) and divide the workforce. Jay Gould, who masterminded Union Pacific's expansion in southern Wyoming, instructed the operator of a new mine at Almy to hire Chinese workers so that "with Chinese at Almy and native miners at the other point, you can play one against the other and thus keep master of the situation" (Gardner and Flores 1989: 43).

Purposefully creating divisions among the workforce led to countless everyday conflicts as well as large-scale revolts. In 1885, the coal market slumped and the Union Pacific gave the Chinese workers around Rock Springs preferential treatment while laying off many white miners who had organized with the Knights of Labor. On September 2<sup>nd</sup> two white miners found a Chinese crew in a room they claimed to have been assigned to work. The fight underground quickly turned into a riot that spread throughout the streets of Rock Springs. "Throughout the town, whites unleashed their hatred of the Chinese – killing 28, chasing 600 others into the desert, and burning 100 homes to the ground" (Wolff 2003: 101; Gardner and Flores 1989: 46-8; Gardner 1990: 32).<sup>44</sup> Union Pacific called on federal troops to "restore order" under the guise of

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<sup>43</sup> Paying attention to Asian-American miners helps to challenge the white/Native American ethnic dichotomy present in much western history (Limerick 1987).

<sup>44</sup> No miners or community members were ever convicted for their role in the riot. The grand jury investigated the riot issued the following statement more than a month later: "Though we have examined a large number of witnesses, no one has been able to testify to a single criminal act committed by any known white person on that day. Whatever crimes may have been committed there... the perpetrators thereof have not been disclosed by the evidence before us, and therefore, while we deeply regret the circumstances, we are wholly unable, acting under the obligations of our oaths, to return indictments.... While we find no excuse for the crimes committed, there appears to be no doubt of abuses existing there that should have been promptly

protecting the railroad against damage. Railroad conductors were instructed by officials to pick up all fleeing Chinese, who were promised safe passage to Evanston and then San Francisco but were actually forcibly brought back to Rock Springs (Bowers 1999; Gardner and Flores 1989: 48). Under the watchful eye of federal troops, about one hundred of the original 331 Chinese workers returned to the mines along with only a few white surface workers and laborers, since the majority had been fired by the company for their participation in the riot (Bowers 1999; Wolff 2003: 101).

The riot had long-reaching effects for western labor relations. Not only did it spark other conflicts between Chinese and white workers in southern Wyoming and northern Colorado, but it also increased pressures within the labor movement. Union Pacific used the massacre to justify mechanizing its mines, reduce the number of employees and discredit and crush the unions (Gardner 1990: 32). Immediately following the massacre, the company president wrote a general manager:

Such an opportunity as the Rock Springs massacre is not likely to offer itself again. I shall be greatly disappointed... unless this matter is brought to a head. If the Knights of Labor [can] be compelled to stand before the country with their organization in direct alliance with murderers, desperadoes and robbers it would be worth to us almost anything. [Bowers 1999: 49]

The Knights of Labor were put in the difficult position of not condoning the violence while still challenging Union Pacific, and tensions increased between the Coal Miners' Amalgamation and the Union Pacific Employee's Protective Association, two umbrella labor organizations active in southwestern Wyoming (Wolff 2003: 104).

Labor conflicts continued in Wyoming throughout the early 20th century. By 1907, the United Mine Workers of America had organized most coal miners along the

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adjusted by the railroad company and its officers. If this had been done, the fair name of our Territory would not have been stained by the terrible events of the 2d of September" (Bowers 1999: 49).

Union Pacific Railroad (Gardner and Flores 1989: 116; Wolff 2003: 222-3) after first succeeding in Dietz in northern Wyoming in 1903 (Garceau 1997: 27). Though Quealy's personal letters suggest that the furor of the 1913-14 Colorado Coalfield War and the massacre at Ludlow did not inspire similar revolts and violence in southwestern Wyoming, the state's miners did participate in national strikes, including major ones in 1919 and 1922. In 1927, however, Wyoming miners did not join the eastern strike due to a recession (Gardner and Flores 1989: 159). Following a protracted slump in the coal industry, labor activity resumed on a large scale once the market once again expanded in the 1970s. For example, in 1975, miners in Hanna, Sheridan and Decker struck against Peter Kiewit and Sons. Evoking previous labor conflicts, the governor promised to use the state patrol to "restore order." However, striking miners later accused the officers of using tear gas and hitting, kicking and stomping on the backs of those arrested (Gardner and Flores 1989: 210).

Although brief, this summary of major labor conflicts shows that even though Wyoming, as a right to work state, is often considered by both public figures and locals to be an exceedingly pro-business state that lacks the labor disputes associated with other regions (e.g. Hendrickson 1977: 128), labor struggles played a significant role in the development of one of the state's major industries. When the center of coal mining activities shifted from the southwestern to the northeastern part of the state, company officials took this history into account in their great efforts to reorganize industrial relations and avoid labor conflicts.

*“The Saudi Arabia of coal”*

The Powder River Basin was one of the last areas of Wyoming to be developed for mining because it was occupied by Native Americans the longest. The land consisted of key hunting grounds included in the Sioux treaty lands, but prospectors sought to open it for development. In 1870, members of the Big Horn Association publicized their Manifest Destiny vision for the basin in a major Cheyenne newspaper:

The rich and beautiful valleys of Wyoming are destined for the occupancy and sustenance of the Anglo-Saxon race. The wealth that for untold ages has lain hidden beneath the snow-capped summits of our mountains has been placed there by Providence to reward the brave spirits whose lot it is to compose the advance-guard of civilization. The Indians must stand aside or be overwhelmed by the ever advancing and ever increasing tide of emigration. The destiny of the aborigines is written in characters not to be mistaken. The same inscrutable Arbiter that decreed the downfall of Rome has pronounced the doom of extinction upon the red men of America. [Brown 2000 (1970): 189]

The association’s position echoes a Lockean link between work and property. Locke’s labor theory of property, enshrined in 19th century federal land policies via Jefferson’s figure of the yeoman farmer, held that private investments in land increased its productivity for the benefit of all.<sup>45</sup> Jefferson thus justified the original seizure of lands governed by Native American customary and communal land ownership that would be repeated as the U.S. government continually expanded westward.<sup>46</sup>

The Black Hills gold rush of 1874 brought large numbers of white settlers and federal troops to the area, violating the existing treaty of 1868 that prohibited the entry of

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<sup>45</sup> Locke (1964: 294) writes, “He who appropriates the land to himself by his labor, does not lessen but increase the common stock of mankind. For the provisions serving to the support of humane life, produced by one acre of inclosed and cultivated land, are (to speak much within compasse) ten times more, than those, which are yielded by an acre of Land, of an equal richnesse, lyeing wast in common.”

<sup>46</sup> Locke himself was not a disinterested figure in the practical management of American land. Tully (1993) reminds readers of Locke’s role in the British colonization of North America, as he had invested in an agricultural venture in the Carolinas, where he also was an architect of the land laws (cf. Humphrey and Verdery 2004).

white men into the region without permission from the Sioux (Brown 2000 [1970]: 276). After threats of rationing and forced removal to the south, in 1877 Red Cloud and other tribal leaders eventually signed the document that gave the Black Hills to the U.S. government (Brown 2000 [1970]: 289). The Burlington Railroad quickly followed, expanding through the area between 1887 and 1915 and linking the incipient mines around Sheridan and Newcastle with larger markets (Gardner and Flores 1989: 66-7).

Whereas these and all other early mines in the state were all underground operations, the mines near Gillette have almost always been surface operations. Small underground coal mines were established around the area by 1909, though homesteaders had frequently burned surface coal to heat their homes. The Peerless mine was the largest, operating from about 1918 to 1925. The Wyodak mine was developed in 1924 near the Peerless, but established a new precedent of surface mining (Gardner and Flores 1989: 159). The coal was located in large seams, 90 feet thick, just 25 feet below the surface and was much softer compared to the material being mined in other regions – all factors that contributed to the development of surface mining. Operators found additional benefits to the new method: they did not have to invest in expensive infrastructure such as ventilation systems, drainage pumps and long hauls to the surface. Moreover, these mines tended to be safer and required a reduced number of workers (Gardner and Flores 1989: 160). In 1925, Wyodak miners were averaging twice the production per person as their underground counterparts, which inspired underground operators to further mechanize in order to remain economically competitive (Gardner and Flores 1989: 161). By 1939, all three counties surrounding Gillette had one strip mine (Gardner and Flores 1989: 167).

The Powder River Basin coal boom did not begin in earnest until the 1970s when two major historical developments prompted rapid development. The Air Quality Act of 1967 made the basin's low-sulfur coal an attractive option for power plants that needed to meet new air quality standards without investing in new technology, such as scrubbers. In fact, in the year following the passage of the Act, oil and mining companies leased 78,000 acres of Campbell County coal lands (Gardner and Flores 1989: 194). Second, the 1973 Arab Oil Embargo sparked a national energy crisis. As oil prices rose and the public became increasingly concerned about the country's dependence on foreign energy sources, industry officials began touting the estimated fifty billion tons of low-sulfur Powder River Basin coal as an All-American solution to the crisis. In fact, journalists and industry officials frequently referred to Gillette as the "Saudi Arabia of coal." By the mid-1980s fourteen mines had begun major operations in the area. In 1973, the state produced a total of 14 million tons. In 1981, that number reached 102 million, propelled primarily by the boom in northeastern Wyoming (Gardner and Flores 1989: 196). Because these mines utilize large machinery to extract and process the coal, they rely on considerably less workers than did operations in the eastern U.S. In 2007, for example, Wyoming's 6,179 surface miners produced 450,746 million tons of coal. In that same year, the 18,893 total Appalachian miners produced 377,800 million tons.<sup>47</sup>

The two mines in operation before the boom were both union operations. The Wyodak mine and power plant unionized in March 1973. All but four of the mine's qualified employees voted in the election, and workers joined the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) by a final tally of 139 to 86. The election was significant because only three years earlier, employees had turned down the union in an

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<sup>47</sup> Data available online: <http://www.eia.doe.gov/cneaf/coal/page/acr/table18.html>.

election. In May 1984 Wyodak mine workers voted to join the UMWA. Out of the 53 workers, 32 cast ballots for the UMWA, 17 voted to stay with the IBEW, and four abstained. Power plant employees remained affiliated with the IBEW. Two years later, the 40 remaining workers at Wyodak voted to decertify, partially because they were earning an average of two to three dollars an hour less than their nonunion counterparts in the basin.

Belle Ayr, the region's first large-scale mine, was opened in 1972 by AMAX, a coal company based in Indianapolis. Steeped in traditions from the central and eastern coal regions in the U.S., management initially tried replicating many of their previous labor practices in Wyoming. For example, they required all miners to join a union even though many had never previously belonged to one nor especially wanted to join. Yet the miners were sufficiently committed to the union so that in November 1974, they voted 45-3 to maintain their representation by the UMWA after the Progressive Mine Workers received permission from the National Labor Relations board to hold an election.

A few months later on January 12, 1975, Gillette's only major strike began when Belle Ayr miners walked off the job at the behest of the national UMWA leadership. At issue was the company's refusal to pay royalties into the union's welfare and retirement fund and to coordinate the contract of the Belle Ayr miners with those in the eastern U.S. By the end of March of that year, after months of stalled negotiations, AMAX reopened the mine, announcing that they would take back any strikers who wanted to return but that they would also hire new workers if needed. By the beginning of April, 39 out of the 52 striking workers opted to return to work given the conditions of the company's final offer, and the company hired an additional six new miners. Miners and their families

continued picketing the mine through the summer, and a few even traveled to New York in July to picket outside of an AMAX stockholders meeting. Throughout this time, the UMWA published full-page ads in the Gillette newspaper to drum up popular support for the strikers.

In December 1975, a labor organization called the North East Wyoming Affiliated Coal Mine Employees (NEWACME) filed a petition for certification at Belle Ayr with the support of 73 out of the mine's 83 employees. Local UMWA officials publicly speculated that AMAX was behind the new union and urged their former coworkers not to join and lose the bargaining power stemming from affiliation with an established national union. The election was postponed because of existing negotiations between AMAX and the UMWA. In January 1976, a settlement had still not been reached between AMAX and the UMWA, and a smaller group of miners continued the strike with the support of the national union. In the years that followed, NEWACME, UMWA and the International Union of Operating Engineers engaged in a three-way battle until the NLRB allowed representational elections to take place in 1979. Out of the 405 votes cast in the election, the unions collected only 33, 16 of which were contested ballots. In the end, the prolonged strike would be remembered in the community for producing or exacerbating tensions among the workforce without reaching its goals.

Thus even though locals and labor historians usually think about unions and strikes in relation to the long established and long unionized mines around Sheridan, located about ninety miles northwest of Gillette, labor disputes also played a significant role in Gillette's history. In the 1970s and 1980s, miners engaged labor unions in their own efforts to create the workplaces and work relationships they wanted. Sometimes

their interests aligned, such as when the Wyodak workers unionized twice or when the Belle Ayr miners went on strike. At other times, they seemed to be working at cross-purposes, and miners dissolved their existing relationships with national labor organizations. In the next section, I analyze in-depth the basin's last major union campaign, the UMWA's 1987 election at Black Thunder, which is significant for two primary reasons. First, the decisive loss by the UMWA signified organized labor's last major coordinated attempt to gain a foothold in the increasingly important coal region. Second, during the lead-up to the election miners, union officials and company executives all drew on and reworked a major trope for thinking about western labor: the cowboy.

#### *Debating western tropes in a union drive*

In 1987, a few Black Thunder Mine employees turned to the UMWA when they became frustrated with decisions being made by a management team undergoing personnel changes. Many miners were upset that they had been left out of decisions to change seniority policies and to move to twelve-hour shifts. They were also concerned that the mine's turn to contract labor in the midst of a soft coal market would put their jobs at risk. Union organizers collected sufficient cards to order an election, and the entire community became embroiled in discussions about the benefits and disadvantages of unionizing. Though the cards had been collected by late summer and early fall, the election was postponed until after the fall hunting season, which gave the company more time to present their position to the miners. When the votes were finally tallied, all but

eleven of the 374 workers had participated in the election and had voted overwhelmingly against the UMWA by a six-to-one margin.

Considering that union officials said that they would not conduct an election without the commitment of 60 to 70 percent of the workforce, the eventual decisive defeat of the unionization measure merits close attention. How did debates about unionization develop during the campaign? What issues became salient, and which terms became dominant for framing them? How did these terms evoke particular notions of personhood and valued workplace relationships?

Letters to the editor written in the local newspapers during the campaign and interviews with former and current miners reveal job security – specifically, whether unions or corporations could offer a better guarantee – as a primary concern for miners. This issue was crucial for miners given their previous experiences with frequent boom-and-bust cycles that compelled their families to move around the state and region in pursuit of work. Alternative employment opportunities for blue collar jobs with the same pay in the state were rare. Union organizers tried convincing Gillette miners that unionizing was their best bet for job security by arguing that bargained contracts were superior to the handbooks offered by the companies.<sup>48</sup> During the 1987 drive, however, this argument did not withstand the many testimonials of miners who had been fired from unionized workplaces. One worker who lost his job in Minnesota slyly remarked that unions just prioritized the order in which people were fired, while another wrote that his experiences in Arizona’s copper mines proved that job security came from the market since even the unions could not save their jobs in the midst of a downturn.

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<sup>48</sup> Whereas contracts are legally binding agreements, the employee handbooks that describe company policies and promises are not.

Moreover, Gillette residents actually viewed the possibility of strikes incurred by unionizing to be the greatest threat to their job security. Discussions about unions often spark memories of strikes that put family, friends and entire communities out of work. Many miners and their spouses point to abandoned mines throughout the state, speaking bitterly about high-ranking union officials “ordering” them to go on strike from despite their own inclinations. The threat of a potential strike was even more concerning for the miners because the high mine wages offered by the companies in order to discourage them from unionizing had provided many families with their first chance to “get ahead.” Suddenly earning incomes they had never before dreamed possible, many families immediately put money down for new homes as well as expensive cars, boats and all-terrain vehicles. These financial liabilities coupled with their newfound earning power made even the slightest possibility of a strike unacceptable for most miners (cf. Durrenberger and Erem 2005). One miner wrote that since the UMWA could not guarantee that strikes would not take place or that they would deliver on their promises to improve working conditions, unionizing would be a “high-risk investment... We cannot put everything we have on the line for vague promises of a better return.”

Underpinning each of the arguments about job security are different positions on appropriate forms of personhood and workplace relationships. Analyzing the debates reveals strikingly different patterns in how union representatives, company officials and miners imagined themselves and other parties. Whereas company officials and most miners emphasized self-sufficient individualism and made explicit use of the trope of the independent cowboy, union representatives emphasized interdependence and brotherhood.

The best example of this practice can be found in an open letter written by Jim Herickoff, the president of the coal company, and published in the town newspaper. In it, he wrote:

The people of Campbell County, the state of Wyoming, and the West have established a proud tradition of standing tall and then facing and beating whatever hardships might come their way. From the early days to now, Wyoming people still hold these values steadfastly and place a premium on dealing person to person, eyeball to eyeball and honoring a handshake which closes a deal...<sup>49</sup> We built into our employee programs opportunities for employees to grow and develop into the kind of person who stands on his/her own two feet and is proud of the ability to operate and repair some of the largest machinery in the world.<sup>50</sup>

He then argues that the solution to the problems at the mine can be found in their own history: “Proud Westerners have fiercely defended their right to deal straight on with a person when a problem develops – not through some third party who takes their money and really can’t deliver.”<sup>51</sup>

The images painted by the company president accomplish two main things. First, he highlights the technical aspects of operating and repairing heavy equipment, linking employees with the imagery of hard-working yet independent ranchers. In so doing, he encourages the employees to identify with a specifically western heritage of hard work

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<sup>49</sup> This language evokes nostalgia for the past, before legal contracts. In a conversation with me not regarding the union drive, one man who had worked in mining nearly his entire life recalled, “We had so much freedom forty years ago, less confusion. Thirty years ago, a handshake was just as good as a gosh darn contract, and your word was just as good as a contract.”

<sup>50</sup> This rhetoric is also present in Wyoming history. Bill Bragg, noted Wyoming writer and historian: “The economic future of Gillette and Campbell County is almost dazzling... Impact, in all of its toughest aspects has already visited the town and county. The citizens, together with the big corporations, are meeting impact head on and winning the battle. The characteristics of the early ranchers and cowboys who settled this huge and beautiful area had a strength of character that pulled them through the blinding blizzards and staggering heat. The same strength of character is still evident in Gillette and Campbell County” (Bragg 1987: 20; qtd. in Gardiner 1985: 7).

<sup>51</sup> This language was also present in the open letter he published in the town newspaper after the drive ended: “For everyone’s benefit, I intend to lead our company utilizing a philosophy of mutual trust and respect, and honoring the time-tested heritage of individual freedom, self reliance, employee participation and group pride.”

rather than a national heritage of mining.<sup>52</sup> In fact, in the letter he refers to the employees as technicians, *not* as miners, perhaps because the term is heavily associated with unionization and the Appalachian coal industry. Second, he argues that western workers have no need for unions or any other mediating party to settle their problems because they are strong enough to do so themselves. He portrays the miners as enjoying relationships of mutual trust and respect with the managers, with whom they can stand “eyeball to eyeball,” which obviates the need for unions and contracts. The trope of the independent cowboy thus dovetails with the themes of trust and partnership, the proposed pillars of the “new” labor practices envisioned by corporate officials.

Likening Powder River Basin miners to ranchers had been a well-established management practice since the early years of the coal boom. As corporations began opening mines in the late 1970s and early 1980s, their officials began publicly highlighting the distinctive “westernness” of the new operations. For example, a 1981 Washington Post article focused on the efforts of the companies to “best unions at benefits game.” The author quoted E.H. Lovering, the employee relations manager of the Carter Mining Company, explaining why the nonunion approach was appropriate for the new workforce: “The individuals out here seem to be open, free, primarily rancher-types from small-town backgrounds. They’ve battled the elements all of their lives and survived. They don’t take too kindly to being organized” (Brown 1981: A2).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Thanks to Paul Durrenberger and Karaleah Reichart for bringing this point to my attention.

<sup>53</sup> Quealy’s personal letters suggest that this association between western mining and ranching stretches back to the earliest years of the industry. In addition to operating the Kemmerer Coal Company mines, Quealy maintained a ranch. But perhaps even more strikingly, he emphasized the western nature of the mining community in his correspondence with the Kemmerer family, who financed the operations. For example, in a 1901 letter to the daughter of his business partner, he writes: “I have a broncho I am training to jump in true western style and broncho fashion, to subdue if possible, your ambitions to ride a western broncho. I understand lately that

What both the author of the Post article and the coal company president fail to mention is that company officials simply did not “find” such independent, cowboy-like workers already in Gillette, but they specifically recruited workers to move to the city from rural non-union farming and ranching communities in order to decrease the chances they would unionize. As one manager who studied the history of union relations in the basin explained, the companies “went and recruited at vocational schools in the Dakotas, looking for young people with good farm values who had no union background, no family union experience. More of what you find in Wyoming, the quote rugged individualist, with all of the point to stay out of a union situation.” Here the manager notes the strategic and symbolic importance of the figure of the “rugged individualist” while acknowledging that it is a cultural construction that may have little to do with people’s everyday lives.<sup>54</sup> The companies also offered them higher wages and better benefit packages than the UMWA had established in their mines. Corporations did not just happen to find an “independent” workforce, but actively created and encouraged it in order to meet their own business goals. As Lovering also explains in the article, “The union-free approach is a very practical thing... For one thing, we don’t have strikes or other work disruptions.” He also mentioned that with more flexible work rules, companies have better control over production since they can move employees into the positions where they are needed the most (cf. Gardner and Flores 1989: 213).

These images of miners as independent ranchers stand in stark contrast to the common tropes utilized by union organizers in their speeches and letters. They most

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you have developed into a master equestrian, I am therefore ambitious to see you on a broncho, boots and spurs in cow-boy fashion.”

<sup>54</sup> This manager also acknowledged the importance of the union in securing better working conditions in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and criticized the notion that everyone should be left to take care of themselves.

often emphasized the image of “union brothers and brotherhood,” in which men would work together to achieve common goals in the face of oppression from management (see Richardson 2007 for a discussion of union sibliingship). The main UMWA organizer, Keith Barnhart, saw his role in the community as an educational one, stripping away the images of unions as corrupt strongmen and replacing them with images of family-oriented workers who want to help others protect themselves against corporate greed.<sup>55</sup> He was quoted in a newspaper article at the beginning of the campaign as saying, “We’re going to be here. We’ve made that commitment. The coal companies have the Wyoming Mining Association, and the miners will sooner or later realize they need us. It’s a matter of unity” (Daly 1987: 13).

Very few miners adopted this language of mutual assistance and brotherhood, even though they often spoke about their coworkers as being “like family.” In other words, they rejected the union’s notion of a family-like class of workers because they thought that joining it would imperil their nuclear families at home. The miners believed that working through a union would compromise their independence and that potential strikes would take away their ability to provide for their families. Workers’ view of unions as another source of power over them is a common concern in scholarship about union organizing, particularly in the West. For example, Janet Finn (1998) shows that both miners and their wives in Butte, Montana, worried about getting “stuck in the middle” between unions and management. In these circumstances, the Gillette miners espoused a regional rather solidarity, preferring to deal with local corporate officials who

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<sup>55</sup> Community members were less persuaded by this argument, as one miner went so far as to write that it was the “duty of a company to make money.” Indeed, many letters to the editor about union dues suggest that many miners came to think of the union instead of the corporation as the unnecessarily greedy party.

they knew instead of unknown union officials based in the eastern US. They spoke about trusting the people whose kids went to the same school as theirs more than “outsiders” who were believed to simply want their dues in order to keep their waning organization afloat. One miner calculated that the dues from miners at Black Thunder would generate \$175,000 a year for the UMWA and concluded: “Sounds like a profitable business to me. And what do we get? Thunder Basin Coal Company is here today in the Powder River Basin because they make a profit. The UMWA is knocking on our door to enhance their own profits. If we continue to support Thunder Basin Coal in their efforts to profitable, then we all become winners.”<sup>56</sup>

Even though many miners adopted ranching idioms in talking about their own work, it is crucial to note that mine management did not control this western imagery so much as make use of it. These images of cowboys and ranchers were particularly meaningful for many of the miners with ranching experience. Before the first oil boom in the 1960s, Campbell County was primarily a ranching area, and Gillette was a small town where families could buy supplies and socialize. Though many new mine employees in the 1970s and 1980s were recent arrivals to Gillette, a significant number were local ranchers who had sought employment in order to keep the family ranch afloat during lean years. Many others intended to use their earnings to finally buy a ranch of their own, including those who had previously worked as ranch hands or grown up knowing

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<sup>56</sup> Company officials also used this line of reasoning. The president of the local subsidiary publicly speculated that the unions were in trouble financially and searching for new members because more efficient nonunion operations were out-producing them. A newspaper reporter quoted him as arguing: “The only time a person has a job is if you have a profitable company. If you don’t have profits, you don’t have a company and you don’t have jobs. And of course, the union will say you’re making an unreasonable profit and all those kinds of things, but the fact of the matter is that the best way to remain secure in your business is by being a low-cost producer.”

ranching families.<sup>57</sup> Even those with no ranch experience came to embrace this idealized image of independence upon moving to the region, so much so that local ranchers often joked about wearing sneakers to distinguish themselves from the “wannabe cowboys” (see Tauxe 1998 for a similar discussion of the idealized image of the heartland farmer in a North Dakotan mining and farming community). A 1977 article in the Sheridan newspaper makes the link between ranching and coal mining explicit. Entitled “Independent, hard-working, they’re called new cowboys,” the article examines the similarities in mine and ranch work and then explores the memories of past and the dreams of future ranch experiences held by the miners (Temple 1977).

The individualistic aspects of the ranching imagery may have been particularly meaningful for miners who took deep pride in being able to make their own informed decisions. The merits of individuality dominated their letters to the editor. Evoking the sentiments of many other letter writers, one miner explained, “I personally have no desire to be represented by any union and feel that it is much better being able to speak for oneself.” Another criticized a previous union experience and emphasized his own individuality: “I’m still paying my ‘dues’ for someone to talk for me... Since my past farewells, I have decided I like to be my own individual. I like to talk ‘myself.’” Others cast union workers as “complainers,” and one even suggested that union supporters hid behind their “wives’ skirts” and let their spouse do their leg and mouth work for them. Another vehemently criticized the union for insinuating that anyone who supported the company had been duped, stating that their decisions not to unionize “doesn’t make us mindless machines that are intimidated and manipulated by company officials and their policies.” Statements such as these challenge the idea that the non-unionized miners are

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<sup>57</sup> Tensions between ranchers and mining companies are addressed in Chapter Eight.

victims of false consciousness who have failed to recognize and act upon their own interests.<sup>58</sup>

The miners' adoption of ranching symbolism also points to their own complex class identities. In the campaign, the organizer tried arguing that the coal miners rightfully belonged to a larger group: the working class. Throughout his speeches in Gillette, he referred to the miners as *laborers*, a term that the miners had not previously used to describe themselves, and he urged them to take their rightful place alongside the rest of the American working class. This language contradicted most miners' firm resistance to being included in the working class. Many continue to prefer to speak of

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<sup>58</sup> In conversations with me throughout this project, many Marxist scholars have both explicitly argued and implicitly implied that the Gillette miners' choice to not unionize is a result of their false consciousness. In "Wage Labor and Capital" Marx (1849) casts doubt on the benefits accruing to workers through capitalist profiting: "To say that the worker has an interest in the rapid growth of capital is only to say that the more rapidly the worker increases the wealth of others, the richer will be the crumbs that fall to him, the greater is the number of workers that can be employed and called into existence, the more can the mass of slaves dependent on capital be increased." Some labor theorists, including Michael Burawoy (1985), also argue that the local "culture" of the miners, and the apparent coordination of interests between the miners and capital, is actually a product of capitalist hegemony that further enslaves the worker.

In a similar vein, scholars like John Alt (1976) suggest that rising standards of living and consumption patterns make work more tolerable for employees, discouraging organizing. Although the real value of national blue-collar wages has actually decreased in the last twenty years, most miners in the basin have never been left without a job, even if it meant that they had to move their families. This insight sheds some light on the situation in Gillette. "In defense of mining," a middle-aged miner said, "it has always paid the bills. I have never missed a paycheck for twenty years." Steady mine wages have afforded local families all types of consumer goods, such as vehicles, boats and four-wheelers, and they have also provided the basis for college educations and retirement accounts. Many miners emphasize the values of hard work and perseverance in relating their life histories in ways that sometime echo the psychology of meritocratic individualism (Newman 1988).

Yet I would suggest that far from being well-paid industrial slaves or victims of false consciousness, most miners actually have a sophisticated understanding of the structural class dynamics at work in the coal industry based on their everyday experiences, but they have chosen to work within it rather than to organize against it. For the most part, they have been successful in using slowdowns or other strategies to effect change on the worksite, especially when it comes to challenging unpopular supervisors or policies. Labor theorists and other concerned scholars should not discount the impacts of the miners' creative efforts to improve their everyday working lives, especially since they might shed light on strategies for workers to achieve the ideals held by union supporters.

themselves simply as *workers*. Even though miners view their work as qualitatively different from the kind undertaken by managers because theirs is productive and physically demanding (cf. Halle 1984), they sometimes speak of themselves as middle class due to their sizeable incomes. It is telling that most anti-union letters to the editor from miners emphasized not just their high wages, but also their stock options in the company. Portraying themselves as stockholders further distances the miners from their understandings of the working class.<sup>59</sup>

After the campaign union organizers promised to stay in the community, organize other mines and make sure that the mine managers kept the promises they made to employees during the election, but the defeat effectively ended large-scale attempts to unionize the Powder River Basin miners. Today, twenty years later, many miners place stickers with a red strike through the initials UMWA on their hardhats and lunch boxes. Talk of unionization sometimes rumbles through the ranks when miners become frustrated with changes in health care, pension plans or working conditions, but the majority of the workforce perceives these threats as strategies to get management's attention instead of as serious calls for radical organization. The 1987 campaign helped to ensure that the Powder River Basin, the new center of the U.S. coal industry, would be operated without unions. This development parallels larger declines in union membership. Although coal mining is almost synonymous with unionization, as of 2005, only eleven percent of America's 108,000 coal miners were unionized, which corresponds with the national average for all workers.<sup>60</sup> These numbers are the direct

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<sup>59</sup> Offering workers stock options has been a corporate strategy to increase employee loyalty, increase production and discourage unionization (Ellin 2002).

<sup>60</sup> This decline is striking for the industry considering that in the decade after World War II, unionization rates in the coal mining industry exceeded eighty percent (Lichtenstein 2002: 56).

result of corporate strategies seeking to rid their workplaces of unions, as well as a few key missteps made by the most bureaucratized labor unions (Lichtenstein 2002; Metzgar 2000).

Conflicting ideas about personhood and workplace relationships animated the campaign, which boiled down to a showdown between the western ideals of independent labor espoused by corporate officials and images of interdependent brotherhood championed by a union representative from Appalachia. The miners' decision not to unionize demonstrates that dominant tropes about cowboys and independent western labor may be the stuff of myth, found more often in novels and films than in everyday workplaces, but they are richly meaningful for Wyoming miners in thinking about why and how they work. The miners' adoption of this trope, however, does not preclude them from critiquing the conditions under which that work takes place, as crews have banded together in slowdowns and other strategies commonly associated with unions to create the type of workplaces they find valuable.

### **Boomtown ills?**

Boomtowns, with their wild cast of characters ranging from saloon women to drunks inclined to start bar fights, are a staple setting in western novels, films and television series. In this section, I trace how common tropes about wild boomtowns have been used, debated and reworked by journalists, public officials and Gillette residents. In

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Most coal is now produced by nonunion workers. In 2006, unionized mines in the U.S. produced 220 million tons, while their nonunionized counterparts produced 941 million tons. Statistics are available online from the federal Energy Information Administration: <http://www.eia.doe.gov/fuelcoal.html>. Normally high unionization in manufacturing has also dropped. For “likely for the first time in history,” in 2006 unionization in manufacturing (11.7 percent) was lower than for the rest of the workforce (12.0) percent, due to buy-outs and plant closings (Schmitt and Zipperer 2007).

particular, I focus on the creation and widespread dispersal of the term “Gillette Syndrome” during the 1970s and 1980s. A visiting psychologist coined the term to characterize the bundle of social ills he witnessed while practicing in Gillette. It circulated through national media during the oil and coal booms, and traces of it can still be found in recent reports on the rapid contemporary expansion of the coalbed methane industry. After sketching the main themes of the national representations, I turn to interviews, published oral histories and letters to the editor to consider local appraisals of population growth and its portrayal in national media. By critically evaluating the supposed “transience” of local workers, their families and the community they have tried to build, residents call for journalists and scholars alike to critically consider local attachments to place along with migrations impelled by socioeconomic pressures.

My criticisms of the Gillette Syndrome texts stem from my own desire as a native ethnographer to deconstruct and critique the dominant representations of my community (Limón 1994). It is not a question of whether drinking, delinquency, divorce and depression was present in Gillette during those years. For some residents, they certainly were. The question is why certain moments and strategies of adjustment have come to dominant popular and academic portrayals of Gillette. My concerns echo Kelly Askew’s (2004) critique of the political economy of images surrounding Africans-as-Maasai-warriors:

Portrayals of Africans as Maasai, of Maasai as warriors, and of Maasai warriors as drinkers of raw blood are not, in and of themselves, false or negative. Certainly, some Africans are Maasai, some Maasai are warriors, and Maasai warriors sometimes drink raw blood. Problems arise when, through repeated media representation of a highly delimited set of images circulating globally, these portrayals constitute most of what Western audiences know about Africa. [2004: 54]

Gillette is much more than a town of people suffering from social ills, but other histories of building a community and raising families have been obscured because they do not fit within popular myths of “Wild West” boomtowns.

Before the first oil boom in the 1960s, Gillette was primarily a ranching town located along the Burlington railroad. Incorporated in 1892, the town’s population increased steadily through the 1950s, growing to 3,850 residents in 1960. The oil boom brought thousands of new workers to Gillette through the 1960s so that by 1970, the population had doubled to 7,194. Even as the oil boom began to wane in the 1970s, the new coal mines attracted more new workers. By 1980, 13,617 people lived within city limits, a figure more than triple the 1960 census. In the 1980s and 1990s, the population seemed to level off as the coal boom dissipated, so that the 1990 and 2000 censuses reported 17,635 and 19,682 residents, respectively. The recent coalbed methane boom, however, has once again brought rapid expansion to Gillette. In 2006, city officials estimated that 27,533 people were living within city limits, and by 2008 those estimates reached around 34,000. These estimates have varied in recent years depending on the methods for compiling them, especially whether the numerous people living in RVs and campers parked in streets and campgrounds are included.

Journalists, academics and locals alike have drawn on western tropes to characterize and try to understand each of these booms. Most recently, a 2007 report on the CBS Evening News drew attention to the large number of under- and unemployed Michigan autoworkers who were moving to Wyoming to work in the energy industry. The aired segments explicitly gestured to western tropes, as the reporter called Gillette a “Wild West boomtown,” made frequent allusions to the “wide open skies” of the area,

and illustrated her arguments with pictures of bison herds and a downtown mural evoking the homesteading period. Earlier, in September 2006, *The New York Times* ran a large article on the same phenomenon, highlighting the struggles faced by a Michigan family in adjusting to their new life in Gillette. The reporter opened the piece with the young son holding up the tail of a rattlesnake he had killed at the “edge of his family’s dirt front yard,” and the mother’s observation that they did not have rattlesnakes in Michigan (Johnson 2006).

During the same week as the *Times* piece, a *Denver Post* article profiled a student at the community college who had moved to Gillette from Colorado and was living in a trailer because he could not find housing. The article portrayed Gillette as a wild boomtown that might inspire the student to wonder, “Will a drunken coal miner in a pickup back up to my bedroom in the middle of the night, clamp onto the hitch and pull it down the road with me still inside and screaming?” (Tosches 2006: B1). Besides the factual inaccuracies – underestimating the population by at least 10,000 people and insinuating that the basin’s surface coal miners wear a “bright light attached to a helmet” on their heads – the piece portrayed local residents as hostile to outsiders. The mother of the student was quoted as saying, “This is a tough town. It doesn’t seem to accept outsiders very well, outsiders being anyone who’s not a coal miner. It’s so hard to see him live like this. But he’s a pretty tough kid, and he knows what he wants in life” (Tosches 2006: B1). While many newcomers do find it difficult to meet people, many eventually build close friendships through community organizations, churches or the school district.

These current representational tropes of Gillette as a wild, western boomtown are strikingly similar to those established decades earlier during the oil and coal booms. Social psychologist El Dean Kohrs infamously crystallized the social ills he witnessed during the oil boom in his term “Gillette Syndrome.” Originally coined in a 1973 article in *The Wyoming Human Resources Confederation Insight*, the term became nationally recognized after he used it in a presentation to a 1974 meeting of the Rocky Mountain Association of the Advancement of Science in Laramie, Wyoming (Thompson 1979: 30). In the paper, he described what would come to be known as the three A’s and three D’s of boomtown social ills: alcoholism, accidents, absenteeism, depression, divorce and delinquency. The emblematic example that would be picked up by journalists and scholars around the country was a generalized case:

A housewife, after fighting mud, wind, inaccurate water and disposal systems, a crowded mobile home and muddy children all day, snaps at her husband as he returns from a 16-hour shift. He responds by heading downtown and spending the night at a bar drinking and trading stories with men from similar circumstances. This typical occurrence came to be called the ‘Gillette Syndrome.’ [Kohrs 1974:3]

Significantly, Kohrs frames his argument by explicitly likening growing Gillette to an “Old West” boomtown:

The Chancervilles have disappeared, those tent towns set up to provide saloon and feminine social entertainment for the early day frontiersman, but the grim statistics of spiritual depression, divorce, drunkenness, dissention and death indicate that the ‘Old West’ – not the idealized movie and TV kind, but the real world of drought, dirt, elemental danger and a dismal battle for existence – are not even 100 years in the past for Wyoming. [Kohrs 1974: 1]

He also chides residents for being caught up in a “frontier society,” refusing to change, ask for help or treat the elderly well (Korhs 1974: 8).

In the following years, flocks of journalists arrived in Gillette to report on the sensationalist details of this syndrome and the possibility that it might be duplicated in

other western energy boomtowns. These media outlets included *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *National Geographic* and *Playboy*. Here I focus on the three most extensive journalistic examples as well as two works of fiction. In 1974 the local newspaper reprinted an article from *The New York Times* that begins by describing Gillette as a “raw jumble of rutted streets and sprawling junkyards, red mud and dust, dirty trucks and crowded bars, faded billboards and sagging utility lines, and block after block of house trailers squatting in the dirt like a nest of giant grubs... Gillette looks and feels as if the whole town is on the wrong side of the tracks” (Sterba 1974). The reporter cites an economist who characterized mobile home parks as “aluminum ghettos” in which “mobile home squatters form sprawling colonies often lacking in water and sanitation.” He then quotes a public health nurse who was concerned that since the new workers tended to marry young, move frequently, and lack close family or friends, their parenting skills were poor and were thus raising a lot of “physically and mentally retarded offspring.”

Energy workers are also portrayed as restless, continuous migrants in Bill Richards’ 1981 *National Geographic* article, in which he labels the Powder River Basin the “new energy frontier.” The article revolves around a division he identifies between the established ranching community and the new energy workers, failing to mention the overlaps between the two groups. In it, he portrays the ranchers as “trying to hold to old ways and values in spite of stunning change” (Richards 1981: 98). He focuses on one local rancher who refused a coal company’s financially extravagant offer to give him a larger ranch in Nevada in exchange for allowing them to mine the coal under his land, quoting him as saying, “This is my home. My grandfather homesteaded here. My father

survived years like the 1936 drought... I wanted to give my kids something with history attached to it, not just some place a corporation bought for us” (Richards 1981: 100).

Richards denies the same sense of history, kinship and attachment to place for the new workers. The article portrays the coal miners as transients, who always chase the best-paying job and suffer the “boomtown syndrome” ills of loneliness, despair, suicide, marital conflict, wife and child abuse, and alcoholism (Richards 1981: 109). The photographs in the piece tell a similar story, highlighting the dirtiness of the miners at work and their proclivity to drink during their leisure time.<sup>61</sup>

Unlike almost all the other authors, however, Richards does mention the positive dimensions of rapid growth. He quotes mayor Mike Enzi speaking about “present-day positive solutions than historically negative problems,” including a thriving intramural sports community and new homes (Richards 1981: 109). The article ends on a skeptical note, documenting the difficulties ranchers and environmentalists face in stopping development. The final photograph of two tombstones sends a clear editorial message: the one engraved with a large oil rig towers over the much smaller one featuring a picture of a man riding a bucking bronco.

Craig Vetter equates transience and moral shortcomings in his 1982 *Playboy* article, entitled “Boom Dreams” with the tagline “They come to these overnight towns for the promise of steady work and a hefty paycheck – why they stay is harder to understand.” The article begins with an account of him picking up a hitchhiker, to whom he explains, “I had been broke for so long that I’d just spent a week in a dirty, ugly, cold, treeless little oil-and-coal boom town called Gillette, and I’d *liked* it. In fact, I said, I

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<sup>61</sup> The last photograph does offer a more positive portrayal, catching a group of miners enjoying a game of football during their lunch break in the shadow of a large haul truck.

thought I was going back, just as soon as I got my bankrupt affairs in order, to see if I couldn't get work among the dirt eaters" (Vetter 1982: 165, emphasis in original). He then describes the town as "ugly – it spills down off the pretty little hill that was the original town in long grim strips of everything you have ever seen that is quick, dirty and squat-empty of imagination or planning" (1982: 165). The theme of the town's physical ugliness underlines the piece, and parallels his condemnation of the so-called social ugliness. He mentions the Gillette Syndrome, which he characterizes as the "murder, robbery, assault, child abuse, wife beating, divorce, alcoholism, depression, madness and suicide, all out of proportion to the number of people in town" (1982: 165).

Most of the article recounts Vetter's adventures in some of Gillette's "many" bars. Labeling Gillette a "hard drinking town" (1982: 166), he labors over descriptions of bar fights concerning the town's "scarce" women, the tension between the "native" cowboys and newly arrived laborers, and the stories that depressed bar patrons shared with him about their misfortunes. These people are never mentioned by name, nor does Vetter try to understand their larger life stories and how these events fit into them. Most significantly, these interactions with bar patrons form the bulk of his "ethnographic" data.<sup>62</sup> In fact, he only spoke to two people, a city administrator and a coal mine manager, outside of bar environments. Vetter's opinions toward the people of Gillette seem contradictory. He appears to laud the young men who "do the hard, filthy work," but mere sentences later he characterizes them as "rough and greedy" (1982: 165). His conclusion exemplifies this ambivalence: "Finally, it seemed like an honest town to me.

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<sup>62</sup> Anthropologist James Ferguson also conducted a significant portion of his research with Zambian copper miners in bars (e.g. 1999: 188). In fact, he bases his arguments about a "global pattern of working-class male sexism" (1999: 188) on one such interaction, but fails to account for how the social conventions of bars influence how and about what people talk.

All the people I met seemed to be getting exactly what they wanted out of the place, and if they weren't, I suppose they could always break a few windows and go home" (1982: 207). Though Gillette might be an honest town for him, he suggests that it is not "home" for anyone.

Two fictional works about the boom were also published in the 1980s. William Hauptman's play *Gillette* portrays the symptoms of the syndrome through its four main characters: two female prostitutes, Jody and Brenda, who have just been released from jail, and two men looking for work: Mickey, who is older and experienced, and Bobby, who hopes to learn how to be a "real working man." None of the characters are from Gillette or intend to stay – all of them are simply looking for "coin," or money. Most of the scenes take place in bars and involve drinking and drug use as a way to cope with the long, hard shifts on the oil rigs. In a clever play on the national oil crisis that prompted energy development in the Powder River Basin in the first place, a worker gets high and remarks, "This is my solution to the energy crisis" (Hauptman 1985: 23). One coal miner makes an appearance as a racist, violent and abusive former convict who threatens to kill Bobby and bury him in a train car after he suspects a romantic tryst between his girlfriend and Bobby. In this fight scene, Hauptman seems to suggest that the energy industries are killing romanticized myths of the West. After beating up Bobby, who was dressed in western garb, the miner nails him to the floor, ranting the whole time about how much he hates "cowboys."

David Breskin's (1989) *The Real Life Diary of a Boomtown Girl* hits all of the symptoms of the Gillette Syndrome through the main character, Randi, who finds work she enjoys at a coal mine, but only after being threatened with rape while she works on an

oil rig. In her diary, she writes about living in a trailer home, using crank to stay awake during long shifts, loving the effects of alcohol, and getting dumped by her first fiancé. She also remembers her father's abuse and her mother's eventual attempted suicide. Breskin does, however, describe minework with more vivid – and, according to local miners, more accurate – detail than any of the articles that claimed to be based on in-depth research. For example, he writes humorously about the coal company's workplace rules and safety slogans while also poignantly describing shiftwork's toll on the body and the ways mines “use people up” (cf. Finn 1998 on consumption). Moreover, he identifies some of the main challenges faced by women miners, including accusations of getting special privileges based on their gender and marital troubles stemming from spouses being forced to work on different crews. His character Randi also writes about enjoying her time on the blasting crew because of being able to see the work she had accomplished, a sentiment expressed by most miners in my own fieldwork.

Even though all these dramatic portrayals of the Gillette Syndrome caught the attention of a national audience – perhaps because, following the new western historians, they reenacted some of the foundational myths of “the West” – their link to actual social practices in the town is debatable. A group of social scientists associated with western universities and consultant agencies were the most vocal in arguing that journalists and scholars (e.g. Gilmore 1976; Massey 1980) picked up on the term without critically appraising the merits of Kohrs' research.<sup>63</sup> They found Kohrs' data incomplete and his “conclusions” to be better considered hypotheses (Thompson 1979; Wilkinson et al. 1982). With a larger data set, they found that two of Kohrs' three major assertions were

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<sup>63</sup> In keeping with the western boomtown theme, Gilmore names his fictional western town “Pistol Shot.”

factually incorrect. Divorce rates were not higher and welfare payment did not increase, but criminal activity increased in terms of property-related crimes (Wilkinson et al. 1982: 35). While not denying the social problems experienced by boomtown residents, they argue that scholars should also highlight positive social changes involved in growth. Other scholars critique followers of the syndrome model for romanticizing pre-boom life (Summers and Branch 1984). Kohrs himself seems to be guilty of this practice, as he was quoted at a 1974 meeting in nearby Buffalo, saying that rather than see more industrial development, he would prefer for the area to remain “unspoiled.”

This is not to say that most prominent critics of the Gillette Syndrome were disinterested. Members of the group of social scientists quoted above were business consultants. Moreover, one of the most widely quoted refutations of the syndrome was produced by Exxon, the owner of two new mines in Gillette, in a company publication. Written by a freelance journalist, the tagline summarizes the article: “The supposed ills of a prosperous community prove to be more in the eye of the beholder than in fact” (Dedera 1981: 12). Like his interlocutors, Dedera begins by portraying pre-boom Gillette as a typical western trailtown:

A tent saloon dispensed whiskey by the tin cup. Dusty drovers discharged their six-shooters into the sky. Wild longhorns milled in their makeshift pens. Stagecoaches bounded in, bearing men and women entrepreneurs, some of whom were not altogether moral. Politicians bellowed of a bigger, better future for Gillette. [Dedera 1981: 12]

He quotes residents as stating that while particular social pains are associated with rapid growth, the supposed “good old days” were not perfect either. He also highlights the positive efforts made by community leaders and residents to improve Gillette, including “attempts at orderly development,” a demonstrated commitment to education, increasing

permanent housing, new places to shop, and a great number of churches. He argues churches have increased from eight to 26 in the last twenty years, whereas in that same period the liquor stores increased from two to ten. He also notes the positive efforts made specifically by energy corporations, including paying local and state taxes and abiding by strict environmental regulations.

### *Local responses*

No one who lived in Gillette during the oil and coal booms would deny that the town went through painful adjustments, especially in the lack of housing and city infrastructure and tensions between people who plastered “Native” bumper stickers on their trucks and those who had just bought their first pair of cowboy boots. Most take care, however, to highlight that these problems were not unique to Gillette. In fact, the director of mental health services who followed Kohrs explicitly criticized the way the term “Gillette Syndrome” had been simplistically circulated. In an oral history collected in the early 1980s, he explained that the term is “an oversimplification and a popularization of a difficult living situation that has been used in a very exploitative, sensational sense. It’s very unfortunate. You don’t need the term. That kind of difficulty can occur in any community” (Gardiner 1985: 138). He attributes the popularity of the term to its links to western stereotypes:

This cliché about the only thing that there is to do is to sit down and smoke dope and hang around the bar is some kind of urban cowboy theme that gets glorified and sensationalized to the point that it has a life of its own, irrespective of any kind of objective description of what goes on in the community. Unfortunately it sells a lot of newspapers. [Kohrs in Gardiner 1985: 142-3]

Local residents had previously made this same argument in a series of scathing letters to the editor following the 1974 *Times* article that described mobile home parks as nests of grubs. They pointed out that New York suffered from its fair share of social ills.

Wrote one resident:

True, Gillette is a boom town and no doubt will be a boom town for years to come. But people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones... We don't deny our town has growing pains, but we are growing for a purpose. To supply you people back East, yes you in New York City also, with gas for your cars, oil for your stoves and oil and coal to keep your lights bright! ... True, we may not win any Blue Ribbon awards for our beauty, but we will challenge Mr. James P. Sterba to find a town with our hospitality, friendliness and generous people that fill these squatting trailer houses in Gillette. [Hisson 1974]

Another criticized the reporter by cleverly naming a syndrome after him: "I'm happy *The New York Times* has seen fit to enlighten us about that peculiar disease Gillette has been the victim of lately. Characterized by wide mouth, narrow minded snap judgment, rabid environmentalist journalism, it's known as 'Sterba Syndrome' and while we 'grubs' in Gillette haven't found a cure we sure as &@%# are working on it... Mr. Sterba should confine his efforts to his own backyard – New York City has been a pest hole for years and could certainly benefit from his attentions" (Dunbar 1974). The editor concisely summed up local appraisals of the article: "If Gillette is going to be branded with a national symbol called the 'Gillette Syndrome' then let that criticism come from the area of this nation which is not suffering from the effects of the sale of alcohol, and the rising rates of job absenteeism, divorce and delinquency." All these responses emphasize that the social ills linked to Gillette are not unique to the city, but a widespread problem across the country.

Moreover, residents also made careful distinctions between viewing the growing pains as the result of inherent character traits – such as greed, laziness or stupidity, as

suggested by many of the articles – or pressures in the immediate local context. For example, in discussing people who had been forced to live in trailer homes due to a lack of housing, one resident wrote:

I do believe mobile home park residents need as much room as families living in houses, yet they are denied the facilities to control their families, etc. in less than one-half the total square footage of the average home... The homeowner can build garages, storage sheds, etc. to help contain the accumulations of human failings. And again due to the cost and the restrictions mobile home owners must out of necessity live with the whim of the park owners as to whether storage areas are provided, who's responsible for maintenance of them, repairing broken down fences (if any) and so on. I am sure that mobile home owners want beauty, space and area in which they too can enjoy a more acceptable living standard. [Plato 1974]

He concluded by calling for more rules and regulations to improve living conditions. In effect, he argues that features of the local environment, such as overcrowding and unplanned expansion, shape human behavior that some might label as pathological (cf. Morgan 1881 on the “stunting” of Native Americans and Engels 1844 on the condition of the English working class). While Kohrs would most likely be sympathetic to this argument – in fact, he situates his thoughts about Gillette within the larger research area of the effect of crowding on human development and behavior (1974: 1) – very few of the subsequent citations of his work include this perspective. Rather, they seem to place blame for the social adjustments on the inherent, pathological character traits of the people experiencing them.

People who experienced the two booms often draw on the same Wild West imagery in talking about those years, often describing them as “wild.” Yet they do so carefully, with less generalization, and remain attentive to the need to distinguish their characterizations of the period with the prominent negative stereotypes. For example,

Patty, who moved to Gillette and got a job at a mine, remembered Gillette during the coal boom as being wild:

I hate using the word wild, but it was wild. People worked hard and people played hard. You knew everybody either from, I hate to say, either from work or the bar.... Anywhere you went, you knew basically everybody that was there. And it's interesting now where we have a boom going on again, first thing when you go to the Kwik Shop in the morning and get gas, you see everybody jumping out of their rigs and pickups and buying the absolute crap junk food. Their clothes are dirty from yesterday, you can tell they didn't get much sleep, it's almost déjà vu. Really kind of odd. I think the best way to sum it up is that people worked hard, because you were either basically in mining or the oilfield. You played hard, you all went out, you all went to the bar, you all went out to eat. You partied together. It was crazy.

She describes many of the same things covered by the journalists – intense work punctuated by partying – but notes the stereotypes and moves beyond them in emphasizing the close social connections crafted by workers. She emphasizes camaraderie among friends in marked contrast to the loneliness and alienation highlighted by the reporters. Whereas it can be difficult to become accepted in social circles, most newcomers eventually crafted close friendships.

Most popular accounts of the Gillette Syndrome leave out these and other efforts made by newcomers to make friends, raise families and build a community. The story of Dave and Sue, a couple who moved to Gillette in the 1970s for work, is exemplary. Their experiences of moving to Gillette, making friends, building a church and raising a family are common throughout the community but scarce in the dominant portrayals of it. Unable to find any place to live, they bought a mobile home from a farmer in their native North Dakota and moved it to a trailer court. Unlike the popular horror stories of these areas, they had to send pictures of it to the owners so that it could be approved. The first time Sue's parents came to visit them in Wyoming, they were worried that the couple was

living in the “ransacked and deplorable” trailer courts featured by the recently published *National Geographic* article, but were pleasantly surprised by their daughter’s new home. They were eventually able to buy a house in a new neighborhood and raise their children along with a close-knit group of friends on their street.

Dave and Sue also fondly remembered Friday night get-togethers at the local pizza parlor. The husband described the bar scene there as “rowdy and loud, a lot of young people in their twenties drinking, dancing and smoking cigarettes.” They could only remember a few bars, despite all of the sensational accounts of the town’s drinking scene, and “not going out much.” In an interesting twist on the partying stereotype, Sue remembered holding worship services in the American Legion before the church was built. “Going in there on Sunday morning after a night of drinking, it stunk like beer and cigarettes! And the beer cans were still there, and the beer bottles were still on some of the tables. Yeah, you just moved it aside and had church. I remember that.”

What stands out the most for this couple and other residents during this period is establishing friendships. Dave and Sue remembered camping in the Big Horns with the husband’s sister and brother-in-law, as well as with Robert and Renee, a couple down the street who came to be like family to them. This group of friends shared pizza and beer on Friday nights and went bowling with on Saturdays. They also fondly remembered having fun at get-togethers with work friends where there was alcohol involved, but thought that they spent more time camping, going to high school sports games, movies and out to eat at the Chinese restaurant. “We weren’t the real crazy people,” Sue said. Along with a few other families in their neighborhood, Dave and Sue and Robert and Renee ended up raising their children together. Throughout their conversations with me, they made

reference to the people and families they knew during the boom who were still living in Gillette, as well as some of their children.

The themes of family and place continue to appear in contemporary criticisms of national portrayals of energy booms. During the spring of 2007 I had the opportunity to work with two classes of local high school students, reading with them Hauptman's play as well as *The New York Times*, *National Geographic* and *Denver Post* articles. In each of the classes, students wrote a short response to the texts and then discussed them as a group. The students, especially those with parents who worked in the mines, criticized the stereotypes that emerged from the readings, and one even pointed out the environmental pressures that might cause social problems. Not only did they critique the authors for making it seem as if the town was a "giant dirtball" where only two groups of people – ranchers and miners – lived, they pointed out the lack of attention to family life. One senior wrote that her dad is a coal miner and works long hours to support her family. She also drew attention to the permanence of both his cohort's employment, pointing out that many of them had been employed there since they were in their twenties, and her own family life, noting that they have been in Gillette for thirty years but have never lived in a trailer.

At the same time, students did not romanticize the mining lifestyle. The same student just discussed wrote that "workers do not get to see families frequently." One of her classmates wrote an even more scathing evaluation of the toll of shiftwork on family life:

I think they should have talked about family a bit more. My dad used to take care of my sister and I while my mom worked, and then he moved to Wright because he got a job in the mine. My mom, I, my sister lived in Casper at the time and then we didn't like not being together so we all moved to Gillette. He has worked

in most of the mines around Gillette because he wanted to check out all of them. He is currently at South Antelope and has been there for a few years. He recently discovered overtime and broke and is holding the record for overtime. 800 hours. Obviously we don't see him very much at all.

In their writing and class discussions, most of the students drew attention to how long their families had lived in Gillette. Because the biggest cohort of miners is now in their early and mid-fifties, many of their children are just finishing high school so that many of the students in the class I worked with had been born and raised in Gillette.

In fact, one of the most powerful criticisms of the syndrome-inspired articles about Gillette is that the journalists, not the locals, were the transient ones. Vetter's *Playboy* article inspired two Gillette women to write a letter that was published in the next month's comments section of the magazine:

We've had all we can stand and can't take it anymore! We have just finished Craig Vetter's "Boom Dreams," which is set in Gillette, Wyoming. His article consists of bias and misinformation. He "*streaked*" through Gillette like a horse with blinders on, seeing only what he chose to see. This is not a barren and desolate place; beauty is in the eye of the beholder. The residents of Gillette are the true pioneers of this age. We are not smothered by the bureaucracy and the businesses that so petrify urban areas. We are not ensnared in a complicated stairway to success. Our dreams are not those of any board of directors. True, we don't have prestigious cathedrals and landmarks. But we have energy, tangible and intangible. The energy of our youth and of our region will make a better tomorrow. [Millette and Bentley 1982; emphasis mine]

Another response appeared in the state's most widely read newspaper. A city official said that he was bothered that Vetter "simply looked for the negative and then completely ignored the existence of anything else" without talking to people who were happy in Gillette. "He deliberately set out to associate with certain groups, and he knew what he'd encounter before he wrote the article" (Davis 1982: A1). The city official stated that the article left out the many stories of people who were content living in Gillette. In fact,

Vetter failed to interview any residents who were building families and a community during the boom.

A lifelong residents of Gillette who worked in the oil industry was upset that Vetter, the author of the *Playboy* article, came to town for a week and

really didn't get an in-depth view of it... Those people that he talked to at the party and he tried to portray them as the typical Gillette person, which I think is a long ways from the truth. It's true that you do get the fly-by-nights, you know you get those in any boom town. Somebody that comes in and stays for four weeks, six months, a year, or two years and then is gone. I think that's oversimplified, over exaggerated, because there's still the core people that were here back when I was born. I think that's blown out of proportion, because I see some people that are here and have been here all their lives that are active in the community and they organize things and they get things going [Gardiner 1985: 75-76]

These responses all note the bias evident in the article, and point to Vetter's research missteps – staying in Gillette for just a few days and seeking out people whom he expected to find and sought to sensationalize – as one cause of it.<sup>64</sup>

These stereotypical portrayals of the Gillette Syndrome still weigh on many residents, who worry that they influence negative views of the town. One environmental consultant will “never forget” the *National Geographic* article. She said,

I remember one picture of a miner from Wyodak with coal all over his face and white shirt. It wasn't the most complementary picture as this person had a big belly and a not so bright expression on their face. His shirt read “Where the hell is Gillette, Wyoming?” That caricature still holds in many people's minds today. But Gillette is full of educated blue-collar workers. We came to this place from

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<sup>64</sup> A newspaper reporter made a similar critique of the *National Geographic* article: “When I read the article I realized that all he'd written was something that most competent journalists could have done in an afternoon. He could have flown in on Air U.S. at twelve and been out of here at seven o'clock on Pioneer... The article did not reflect any great deal of thought... People get a very surface look at Gillette, and in most cases, that look is very narrow. It's just a quick look, and it doesn't have to be that way, when you look at the time the media has invested in us. I am disappointed that they aren't getting the real story. I'm not saying the real story is flattering, but I'm just saying that they're not digging enough to get the real story... I'm not asking for a Chamber of Commerce story. I just want a really thoughtful, in-depth look at Gillette” (Gardiner 1985: 16).

many states and towns and brought our own likes and dislikes with us. For a small town, we have a wide variety of recreational and cultural activities. Since, for the most part, we all came from somewhere else, you couldn't afford to be too stuffy.

She then pondered the future of town, remembering how she and her friends used to wonder if they would retire somewhere else. "We'll see who stays and who doesn't. I have certainly changed my mind over the years. Gillette has been good to me. I don't know if I'd want to live anywhere else." She moved to Gillette feeling as if everyone was moving all of the time: "The old joke was that if you stayed over two years in Wyoming, you were considered a native." Over her lifetime, however, she came to feel at home in the community and decided to stay permanently.

Placing popular portrayals of the Gillette Syndrome in dialogue with local appraisals of the booms and their representation raises critical questions about attachment to place and the socioeconomic pressures that make it difficult. No resident would argue that booming Gillette lacked certain social pressures accompanying rapid expansion. The question, rather, is how and why these types of portrayals and social adjustments came to dominate popular representations of social relationships during the period rather than other activities, such as raising families, that were also taking place during the boom. As many letter writers pointed out, the reporters came to town with a set of expectations linked to common myths about western boomtowns and the supposedly transient people living there. They did not stay long enough to see the creative ways in which local residents would ameliorate the stresses of boomtown life, form community organizations and build infrastructure. Nor were they able to observe the miners' gradual shift away from the "work hard, party hard" attitude that accompanied their increasing

responsibilities for taking care of their children and the introduction of 12-hour shifts that left them precious little free time during work days.<sup>65</sup>

The media frenzy and its critical local reception should cause us to think carefully about how scholars speak about attachments to place in the face of socioeconomic and other historical pressures to relocate (Fricke 2003; Lemon 2000). The people who have made Gillette their home, from the first cohort of coal miners to the most recent group of Michigan autoworkers, are not the first or last to move in search of stable jobs. In fact, the history of coal mining in Wyoming was a history of migration from its very beginning, as British, German and Scandanavian and then Slavic, Austrian, French, Italian and Greek miners and their families moved West seeking work (Garceau 1997: 28; Gardner and Flores 1989: 83). Moreover, many current Gillette residents also anticipate leaving the town upon retirement, oftentimes to move closer to the cities their own children have relocated. Sara, who moved to Gillette when her husband got a job at one of the mines, was active in school and community events along with her husband, but she never considered retiring in Gillette:

Never... I know my daughters are not going to be living here. I mean, they would fall into the category that we have nothing to offer them. And so I want to be closer to wherever they are. I don't feel like even after 16 years there are strong ties here. I would think that there would be, but we're all transplants! This isn't where we grew up. It isn't where we have family. And so it's a very temporary place. And you make the best of it while you're here until you're gone.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> See pages 201-202.

<sup>66</sup> Sara's comment, coupled with the desire of the majority of her peers to move away from Gillette, suggests that even though locals and company officials have made great efforts to distinguish the town and neighboring Wright from the heavily criticized, more traditional mining "company towns," the communities do remain focused primarily on one industry (energy) and are often considered to be temporary residences for many of the people living there. For critiques of company towns, see Crawford (1995); Finn (1998); Gibson-Graham (2006); Robinson (1996). For an extended argument that Wright – a town arguably founded and nurtured by one of the local coal mines – is not a company town, see Righter (1985).

What a careful history of Wyoming miners reveals is that far from being inherent transients, they create places and become attached to them for as long as it makes sense given their families' trajectories. This other side of the Gillette Syndrome story shows that even though particular groups of people may be stereotypically portrayed as inherent wanderers – and be forced to address this stereotype when confronted with it – they nonetheless make efforts to root themselves in meaningful places.

### **Women, western expansion and mining**

Women in western history have often been relegated to “cameo roles as matrons of the boarding houses or madams of the bordellos” (Finn and Crain 2005: 1). To counter this trend, this section traces how Wyoming women challenged and sometimes transformed the masculinized notions of the frontier that animate dominant tropes for thinking about the American West. The first half sketches out women's everyday activities in early coal mining communities during periods when it was still illegal for women to work in the mines themselves. I focus primarily on women who were related to miners, but also gesture to those who were involved in community business and agricultural activities.<sup>67</sup> I show that women's opportunities for paid labor were heavily though not completely limited by Victorian gender ideologies of femininity and domesticity. The second half follows the integration of Wyoming women into the industry from World War II through

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<sup>67</sup> I do not analyze prostitution in-depth for two reasons: much has already been written about the subject and it was not as extensive in coal communities as in other boomtowns, perhaps because with the exception of the low paid Asian immigrants, most of the coal companies specifically sought to hire married men with families because they were believed to be less likely to unionize. I also seek to avoid the common virgin/whore trope underlying much western history (Limerick 1987: 50; Myres 1982: 167-8; Peavy and Smith 1996: 8; Riley 1988: 131; Sagstetter and Sagstetter 1996: 150).

the 1970s Powder River Basin coal boom with a brief comparison with parallel developments in the eastern U.S. In particular, I show that these women have engaged and reworked local gender ideologies associated with ranching to give meaning to and create continuity with their mine employment that other people might label as nontraditional.

*Women in early coal mining communities*

Before the intervention of the new western historians, the history of westward expansion was written as one focused on white men (Limerick 1987; Scharff 2003b). Literature scholar Annette Kolodny was one of the first scholars to critically consider how “generations of women came to know and act upon the westward-moving frontier” (1984: xii). She argues that the prevalent frontier mythology of possessing a “virginal” female landscape disenfranchised frontier women and that women’s understanding of the frontier derived from a distinct set of analogies such as the garden. While her vision evokes the reductive binaries common to cultural feminism – adversarial men and nurturing women – her work is still useful for thinking about the prejudices against women entering contemporary masculinized spaces informed by frontier mythologies. In fact, her argument that fantasies inform and organize experience anticipates Richard White’s influential argument that the mythological and actual West exist in constant tension with and inform one another.

Following larger trends in the academy during the 1980s, historians began piecing together women’s experiences in the West (e.g. Myres 1982; Moynihan et. al 1990; Peavy and Smith 1996; Riley 1988; Zanjani 1997; on Wyoming in particular see Garceau

1997; Wheeler 1987 and the earlier Beach 1927).<sup>68</sup> A popular strand of this movement replicates the same flaws in Turner's original framework by portraying the West as an escape from the gender confines of eastern society: "Any woman who wanted to escape Victorian restrictions or who yearned for a new life could get a fresh start in the West" (Sagstetter and Sagstetter 1998: 134). It is in this vein that many popular accounts of the freedom and independence of prostitutes are written (e.g. Brown 1995; Lawrence 2002). While it is true that western women could own property, vote and stretch the limits of what was considered appropriate women's work before their eastern counterparts, it is crucial not to romanticize their experiences (Peavy and Smith 1996: 94; Scharff 2003b), especially since a close examination of women's activities in early western coal communities reveals the great difficulty with which women challenged Victorian notions of gendered space and work.<sup>69</sup>

If western history has been centered on men, so also have histories of mining (for an excellent recent exception see Finn and Crain 2005). Yet even though women's numbers have been small – in 1910 men outnumbered women in Wyoming 68,593 to 6,013 – they have played crucial roles in western history and the development of mining industries. Except for a few prospectors (Zanjani 2000) and investors, most women were

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<sup>68</sup> I would like to thank my research assistant Sarah Wolff for finding and procuring most of the sources used in this section.

<sup>69</sup> Scharff draws attention to the ways in which myths about women's freedom in the West was powerful even if it was not necessarily true: "The success of woman suffrage in Wyoming, coinciding with the passage of a similar law in Utah, helped to stimulate the development of a new regional identity, of the West as a place where women could be free. By the time of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, the West had become, beyond dispute, recognizable as the region that enfranchised American women first. If, by numerous measures, women in the American West enjoyed no more liberty or power than women in other places, the legend of liberated western womanhood did not need to be true to be powerful; it merely needed to be believed" (2003b: 92).

linked to the industry through kinship ties to miners.<sup>70</sup> State laws barring women from mine work played a large role in solidifying a heavily gendered division of labor in early mining communities. Along with seventeen other states, Wyoming's constitution of 1889 included an article banning all girls and women and boys under the age of fourteen from employment in the state's coal mines, all of which were underground.<sup>71</sup>

These laws were part of larger Victorian-era reforms that created strict gender divisions of labor and space (McClintock 1995). For example, a cross-cultural perspective reveals long histories of women working in underground British and Belgian coal mines since at least the fourteenth century and with evidence of regular employment being found for women miners in 1587 (John 1984). Exact numbers are not available because the companies paid only the lead or practical miner who organized the labor of his kin, and all of these women were working for relatives. By the late 19th century, fully ten percent of underground workers in these countries were women (John 1984; Hilden 1991). Beginning in the 1840s and reaching a critical point in the 1880s, members of British Parliament began attempting to pass legislation barring women from work underground due to concerns that such labor would "unsex" them (John 1984: 188).

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<sup>70</sup> A few women were able to participate in mining activities as prospectors and investors. Mrs. E. C. Atwood of Colorado is famous for her success in the industry. After being cheated out of a \$10,000 mining investment, she studied geology and mineralogy to gain an edge over her competitors. She eventually became vice president and general manager of the Bonacord Gold Mining and Milling Company of Colorado and also owned interests in other Colorado mines. Delia McCarthy was president and general manager of the Cooperative Mining and Milling Company of Cripple Creek and secretary in Atwood's Bonacord Company. In her 1900 address to the International Mining Conference, Atwood argued that mining could "be made to pay by any energetic woman who will pursue it in an intelligent way" (Peavy and Smith 1996: 105; Myres 1982: 264).

<sup>71</sup> The text of Article 9, Section 3 reads: No boy under the age of fourteen years and no woman or girl of any age shall be employed or permitted to be in or about any coal, iron or other dangerous mines for the purpose of employment therein; provided, however, this provision shall not affect the employment of a boy or female of suitable age in an office or in the performance of clerical work at such mine or colliery.

Historical records reveal concerns ranging from women's dress (for safety purposes they wore clothing such as boots and trousers instead of dresses and aprons), to their exposure to dirt, their moral behavior while working underground surrounded by men, and fear that such work took them away from their primary responsibility of taking care of their families. Despite the laws, women in these countries for the most part continued working until mechanization and a declining coal market pushed them out in the 1950s. In Belgium, these women miners were turned into icons of industrial labor for the young country's developing national identity as young, physically strong and hard working (Hilden 1991). The timing of the industry's western expansion may help to explain the lack of an early history of women miners in Wyoming. By the time the railroad reached the state and the first mines were opened in the late 19th century, these reform movements were well underway in Europe and the eastern U.S.

Yet even if most women were not directly employed as miners, their experiences were nonetheless tied up with the industry, specific companies and individual miners. For the majority of women, their daily activities were circumscribed to the domestic sphere. Women spent the majority of their time engaging in what anthropologist Janet Finn (1998) terms "crafting the everyday": the daily activities of family and community maintenance. These women held heavy household responsibilities that were complicated by the oftentimes remote locations of their camps and communities. Women remember making their families' clothing, coaxing gardens to grow in arid conditions, mowing hay fields, canning vegetables, making sausage and sauerkraut, bottling beer, making wine, branding cattle and milking cows (Gardner and Flores 1989; Wheeler 1987: 84). Even

doing laundry was a monumental task.<sup>72</sup> They also cared for disabled men and large families (Wheeler 1987: 84). Miners' wives also spent time negotiating with coal companies over the details of their everyday family lives. For example, Quealy's archived letters reveals petitions from women for improvements on the company houses they rented with their families. Others show that women made demands on the company and provided for their families in more stealthy ways, by bringing coal from the dump for use in their houses instead of buying it from the company (Quealy 1905).

Most women also turned to the domestic sphere for avenues for paid labor, as revealed by previous historical research and a series of mothers pension files for Lincoln County (location of the Kemmerer mines) between 1915 and 1917.<sup>73</sup> Taking in laundry was a common strategy for women since that onerous task was usually the first that women with any disposable income hired out (Sagstetter and Sagstetter 1998: 140-2; Wheeler 1987: 84). The pension files show that women in Lincoln County earned about three dollars a week taking in laundry. Many women also ran boarding houses to help make ends meet. By providing single miners or miners whose families remained in the old country with a room or roll-away in their house, homemade meals and laundry

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<sup>72</sup> A woman whose husband worked in the Monarch mine remembered: "The clothes he'd bring home would just be saturated with black coal dust. You'd soak them out in an old tub outside. We had no bathroom. In the summertime, especially, you'd put a big tub out in the sun and tell the kids to stay out of it. Then you'd have to go out there and dig them out, scrub them one by one, and put them out before you would go to bed. A person had to wash the clothes by hand on the board, put them in the boiler, especially the whites, and let them boil on the stove. In the summer with coal, you can imagine how hot your house would get" (Gardner and Flores 1989: #).

<sup>73</sup> During these years, the state of Wyoming administered a program through which widows and otherwise single women with children could receive a pension from the state if they were deemed worthy by social welfare inspectors. The mandatory forms included sections in which the women described their daily activities, previous wage work and their aspirations for wage work. I was skeptical of these forms considering all of the cultural biases animating them that also animated the law barring women's coal mine employment—for example, the investigators had to ascertain if the women were morally upright and instructing their children in the same, if their houses were kept neat, and if they were thrifty and industrious—but the information in these documents corresponds with the diary and oral history interviews.

service, women could bring in about \$30 a month for each boarder (cf. Peavy and Smith 1996; Wheeler 1987: 98). Some coal companies, such as the one run by Quealy, also owned large boarding houses that were similar to hotels, and they hired women managers to run them to give them a homey feeling. Women with formal education often taught in small schools (Myres 1982).

A few women opened businesses in coal mining towns, often as seamstresses (Riley 1988: 121) or bakers (Wheeler 1987: 101), though there are also records of a South Pass City woman who ran the general store with her husband, managed a hotel, and served as postmaster (Beach 1927: 160; cf. Garceau 1997: 26). The pension files also hint that some women ran more covert businesses from their home. One Finnish widow was threatened with losing her pension if she did not stop bottling beer in her home for profit. Payroll records also reveal that a few who were related to miners or were widows worked as janitors in schools or at the mine offices, or as clerks in company stores. Others worked as cooks, waitresses and maids, especially during World War I (Garceau 1997: 31). All of this culturally acceptable wage work can be viewed as an extension of their domestic caretaking responsibilities. As Kolodny (1984) suggests, the irony of the frontier experience is that women's strengths derive from their limitation to the home. This analysis also shows that the Victorian divisions between the gritty world of work women had to be protected from and the imagined sanctuary of the home were much messier in real life: maintaining a home was hard work.

Yet in Wyoming, perhaps more than other western states due to the large swaths of land available for homesteading, women involved in agriculture managed to expand the "domestic" sphere (Riley 1988: 4; for an opposing viewpoint see Myres 1982: 123).

In southwestern Wyoming in particular, many women not only contributed to the family ranching effort but also independently established their own homesteads (Peavy and Smith 1996: 98; Riley 1988: 132; Sagstetter and Sagstetter 1998: 134). In fact, single women “proved up” or successfully acquired titles to their land more often than single men (Sagstetter and Sagstetter 1998: 131). Though many coal company officials had the means to own and operate ranches in addition to their mining jobs, even rank and file miners engaged in ranching activities. Entire families would move to the ranch in the summer and then return to town once it was time for the children to go to school and for the father to return to the mine (Wheeler 1987: 91).

Even though the West has been popularly portrayed as an escape from the gender confines of the eastern U.S., women’s everyday lives in early Wyoming coal mining communities were heavily influenced by Victorian ideals of separate spheres of work for women and men. When women turned to wage work to supplement their husbands’ income or to provide solely for their families, they turned to activities such as doing laundry, baking and taking in boarders that were extensions of the domestic work they were already doing for their own families. Yet to say that women’s everyday activities were heavily influenced by these Victorian gender ideologies is not to say that they were completely determined by them. Women managed to stretch domestic spaces by engaging in everything from operating covert alcohol businesses to running successful ranches (cf. Seizer 2005 on women stretching domestic spaces). It was not until World War II and the 1970s energy boom, however, that women were able to join mining workforces as non-office workers.

### *Women miners*

Even though it was technically illegal for women to work in Wyoming coal mines up until 1978, the archives hint that at least a few women found their way underground anyway, though there is no “official” record of their activities. The original caption for the picture below from an early 20th century mining camp in Monarch, near Sheridan, explains that this woman hauled tools for her husband.

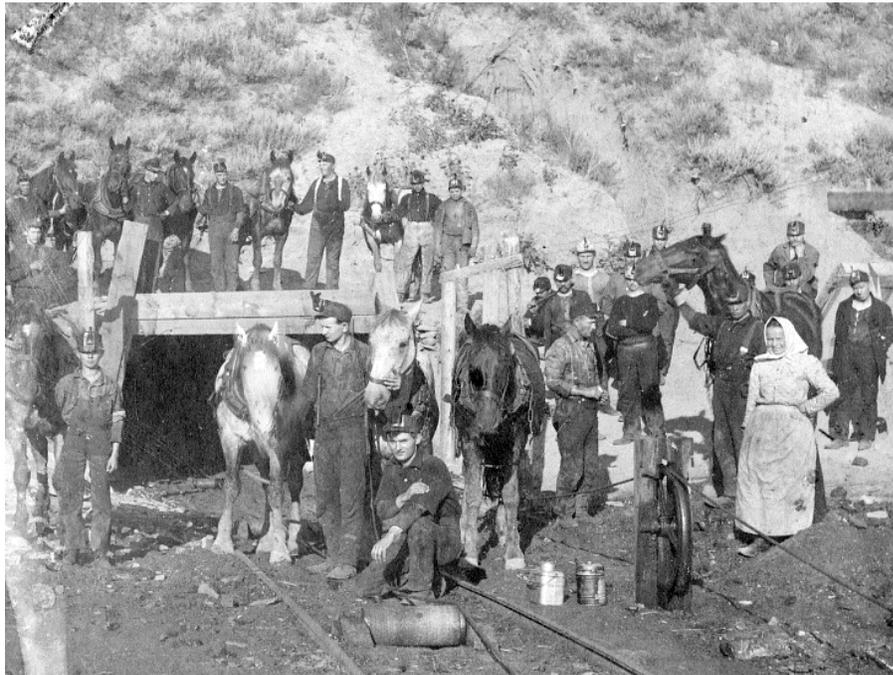


Figure 6: Monarch around 1900. Photo courtesy Sheridan County Museum.

Although women could not work in production, the law was clear in not banning their employment in mine offices. Like other mining companies around Wyoming, the Kemmerer Coal Company directly employed women in the office as stenographers, secretaries and janitors, as well as in the company stores as clerks. In the early years of the Wyoming coal industry, the majority of stenographers were men, but company records show that by the 1950s, they were exclusively women (cf. Davidson 2001). Most of these women had graduated from high school and then attended secretarial training

programs. A June 1945 letter in the Sheridan Coal Company archives hints that some women used these positions to receive business training and advance up the corporate ladder, though women generally did not achieve management positions in the industry until the 1980s. These records also show that these women were responsible for many of the staff caretaking activities – sending flowers to the family of deceased employees, arranging for Christmas presents for office staff, etc. – all of which required a “good personality” according to one Sheridan Coal Company executive. Company records show the variety of skills they had to develop, such as weighing coal, handling the switchboard, and filling out government bills of lading, contracts and sale bids. Moreover, by at the last the 1970s, women were working for mining companies as laboratory technicians.

World War II presented Wyoming women with their first legal opportunity to enter the production side of the mining workforce. Faced with a labor shortage and increased demands for coal, in 1943 the general manager of Union Pacific and the president of the UMWA District 22 signed a Memorandum of Agreement temporarily allowing the employment of women as miners: “The necessity for employing women on the tipples [structures used for loading coal into railroad cars] and in the shops was caused by a shortage of men and due to the War Emergency. We agree that as soon as the War Emergency has passed and competent men are available that the women will be replaced by men” (Larson 1954: 277). By June 1944, one hundred women were working for Union Pacific in the shops and on the tipples, averaging a wage of \$213.29 per month as union members (Larson 1954: 278). Women made the same wages as men in their positions, but were not allowed to take higher paying jobs in the actual mine. The front-

page headline of the August 6, 1943, Kemmerer paper seemed astonished: “Help to relieve manpower shortage by donning overalls, mine safety shoes and helmets – first time women have ever been used for such labor here – they say they like it.”



Figure 7: A 2007 picture of the Reliance tipples, no longer in use.

Sorting coal in the tipples was dusty work, cold in the winter and unbearably hot in the summer. No laws existed to require ventilation or sprinkling the coal, and miners remembered working in “six foot of cloud... You couldn’t even see the person standing right by you” (Gardner and Flores 1989: 171-2; cf. Moore 1996: 50). Yet many women, including Madge Kelly, enjoyed her work, saying that it was “one of the happiest times of my life. If there was a job open today at a mine and I was younger, I’d be the first in line” (Moore 1996: 52). After applying for work at Union Pacific in 1945 to support her

four children as a single mother, she worked on the tippie and then was promoted to running the panel that operated the tippie. Whereas the other available jobs working in a cafeteria or cleaning motel rooms did not pay as well, she made excellent money: \$9.57 a night, \$12.46 on Saturdays and double time on Sundays. She remembered the camaraderie of her crew as they worked seven days a week during the war. “We had a lot of fun out there.... We never thought we were making history. We just knew it was a job the country needed us to do” (Moore 1996: 51). The war’s end, however, brought the men home and reduced the demand for coal, prompting women miners like Madge to be laid off even though most of them enjoyed their work and would have preferred to stay (Moore 1996: 51).

It was not until the 1970s that the Wyoming coal market would once again boom, especially in the newly developed surface mines in the Powder River Basin. Faced with a labor shortage, companies actively hired women along with men from Wyoming and surrounding states. Women were hired not only to work in the office, but also to work in the shops, plants and pits even though the law barring women’s employment in production was still technically in place. Their successful integration into the workplace played a major role in the 1978 election that resulted in the repeal of the original law barring women’s mine employment. The bill passed by a wide margin, and press surrounding it suggests that popular opinion held that the law was irrelevant because women were already successfully employed as workers in surface mines around Gillette and Rock Springs. The only dissent came from a few citizens who still doubted that women had the physical strength necessary to work in such an environment.

During their first years on the job, many women drew on western, specifically ranching metaphors to organize their life histories and give meaning to their work. Patty attributed her success in the industry to growing up on a farm: “I grew up on a farm, so I was very used to physical labor. Getting dirty didn’t matter to me. You did what needed to be done. You didn’t wuss out, wimp out, or worry about your fingernails.” When she first hired on, there were four women in production. Three of them had rural backgrounds, and she thought the fourth’s lack of that experience was noticeable and made her integration onto the crew more difficult. Peg, who worked her way up to being a shovel operator, argued that a career in mining seemed natural because she had been doing “non-traditional” things all her life on the ranch. Not only did growing up around equipment and driving horse trailers make it easier for her to learn how to operate the mine equipment, it also prepared her to work with men without asking for special treatment: “It was easier for people come out of an agriculture culture, at least in this part of the world. It’s egalitarian, you just grow up doing everything. You’re just another one of the hands!” The term “hand” is often used by miners in the basin to refer to workers, particularly in the sense of a “good hand” as someone who is especially skilled and willing to help out when needed. This term is gender-neutral, easily used to indicate both men and women, compared to other, more gender specific terms such as manpower.

Ranching metaphors also inform the ways in which non-production personnel think about their work. Marie, who now works as a land permitting and management consultant for many mines in the basin, grew up on ranch adjacent to a coal mine. She remembers being raised to do “whatever needed to be done” irrespective of gender, “just like that Nike commercial: Just do it. I grew up in family where whatever needed done,

whoever was available did it. Whoever was there pulled the calf. With the equipment, whoever was at hand was expected to do it. That benefited me later on.” In explaining the success the many of the ranch kids had working in the industry, she suggested, “They understood twelve-hour shifts, running the heavy equipment and working until a job is done. The product doesn’t magically appear.”<sup>74</sup> She also drew similarities between mining and ranching, in that both involve “preparing the land for the harvest, harvesting the product and then getting the land ready for its next step.” Moreover, she likened her family consulting business to ranching since they eat together at least once a week, celebrate holidays together and work in a “homey” office that includes a shower, a kitchen and an air mattress.

The market conditions and gender ideologies surrounding the Wyoming women miners’ integration into the industry stand in stark contrast to those Appalachian women encountered.<sup>75</sup> Women in the eastern U.S. had long worked with their families in preindustrial mines, and historical evidence suggests that at least a few women slaves worked in mines owned by their masters (Moore 1996: xxviii). During World War I some Pennsylvania anthracite companies hired “bloomer girls” – named after their uniforms – to counter drastic drops in production, but protest from the UMWA prompted the state mine inspector to demand that companies immediately halt their employment (Moore 1996: xxxii). Some women also worked in the mines during World War II, even though their presence was not universally welcomed (Moore 1996: xxxv).

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<sup>74</sup> Mining companies have drawn on similar imagery to liken mining with harvesting and thus portray their efforts as sustainable (see pages 391 and 402).

<sup>75</sup> Readers seeking a more detailed historical analysis of Appalachian women’s experiences with the coal industry should see Giesen (1995), Hall (1990), Reichart (2006), Seitz (1998) and Tallichet (1998, 2000, 2006).

The 1970s energy boom also opened up some opportunities for Appalachian women to seek work in the mines, even though they often faced criticism from their spouses, families and neighbors (Moore 1996: xxxvii). Companies frequently refused to hire women who were equally or more qualified than men, a practice that was finally addressed in a 1978 sex discrimination lawsuit brought against a group of mining companies by the Coal Employment Project, a nonprofit organization founded by lawyer Betty Jean Hall to support women miners (Hall 1990; Moore 1996: xli). Whereas the Wyoming women entered brand-new mines in an area that was experiencing a labor shortage, the Appalachian women who were eventually hired found that many men resented them for taking a man's job, except for if they were single mothers who had to provide for their families (Tallichet 2006: 33, 132). Moreover, sociologist Suzanne Tallichet (2006: 30) argues that traditional gender ideologies conditioned Appalachian women's slow and difficult integration into the region's underground mines. Characterizing the colonized Appalachian family as a "patriarchal social unit in which gender relations and women's subordinate status have been slow to change," she suggests that this institution is the "social context in which women learn about domination, accommodation and resistance" and also conditions women's integration into the underground mines (2006: 138; cf. Seitz 1995).<sup>76</sup> These more binary gender ideologies contrast sharply with the more egalitarian attitudes toward gender and work espoused by Wyoming men and women miners alike. When coupled with attention to the differing market conditions, this comparison offers an intriguing, if partial explanation for the very

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<sup>76</sup> Though I am not an expert on gender relations in the Appalachian region of the U.S., it seems likely that exceptions to Tallichet's generalization exist.

distinct experiences of eastern and western women who began seeking mine employment in large numbers in the 1970s.<sup>77</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Although the mythologized West and its independent cowboys, wild boomtowns and masculine heroes were largely products of eastern fantasies about escaping from industrialization, these tropes continue to inform the ways in which many Wyoming miners imagine themselves. Sometimes they have used these tropes to positively value their work practices, such as when miners adopted cowboy symbolism to voice their disapproval of unionizing or when women miners drew on ideas about egalitarian ranch work to make sense of their own participation in a male-dominated industry. At other times, they have challenged and significantly reworked dominant stereotypes, such as the wild western boomtown that underpinned national portrayals of the Gillette syndrome. While maintaining the sense of excitement and opportunity implied by the boomtown, residents have criticized the inherent transience and alienation ascribed to energy workers. In their own life histories, they have emphasized the creation and nurturance of close relationships among friends and family in the face of socioeconomic pressures to migrate. These efforts to cultivate relationships form the basis of the next two chapters, which trace the processual creation of kinship at home and work.

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<sup>77</sup> This is not to say that there were no similarities in these two groups of women's experiences. For example, in the late 1970s some Wyoming women miners tried to organize a support organization much like the heavily Appalachian Coal Employment Project. Women in both parts of the country also faced tremendous challenges in attempting to take care of their children while working rotating shift schedules (Giesen 1995; Tallichet 2006).

## Chapter IV

### Families at Home

“Hey, so what are you doing out here anyway?” Steve, Ray and Mike were working as a team on the dragline, a colossal earth-moving machine that takes just three people to move more overburden during a shift than a large team of truck drivers and shovel operators. After asking me the important questions – who my parents were, where they worked, and what year I graduated from the high school – our conversation turned to my project. They were curious why anyone, but especially someone in graduate school, would want to sit on the dragline all day without either monitoring their progress or being trained to operate it. I responded that I was an anthropologist interested gender and kinship at the mine, prompting Steve to guffaw, “She’s here to study the primitives!” I laughed along with Ray and Mike, all the while thinking about how to condense a decades-long disciplinary debate about otherness into a response appropriate to our conversation.

Anthropology’s association with the exotic was not lost Steve or many of the people I came to know during my research. Upon meeting me, most people thought that I was at the mine to engage in some sort of archaeological project reconstructing the region’s Native American and pioneer past.<sup>78</sup> Others associated my discipline with the feathers and body paint of the non-western people often portrayed by *National*

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<sup>78</sup> This was not a bad guess given the legal requirements that mines conduct cultural heritage surveys before expanding into new pits.

*Geographic* and, like Steve, accordingly assumed that I was placing miners into a “savage slot” (Trouillot 1991). These understandings of my discipline influenced their expectations of my research, as many began our conversations with vivid descriptions of the enormity of the machines, thrilling tales of harrowing rescues and other comments that emphasized the intrigue and “otherness” of their work.

Anthropology’s disciplinary reputation has also conditioned ethnographic studies of U.S. culture (di Leonardo 1998; for reviews of anthropological approaches to American life see Moffat 1995 and Spindler and Spindler 1983).<sup>79</sup> Focused on activities and people distanced from the perceived mainstream, these studies sharpen our understanding of sociocultural life in the U.S., but they also elide the “attention to the everyday... that is a legitimate target of study in any other setting” (Fricke 1998: 4). Coal miners have been exoticized by many academics and popular culture creators as people who are a “breed apart” by virtue of their labor. This chapter, along with my larger research project, seeks to counter those representational trends by drawing out the larger implications of the deceptively mundane details of the everyday lives of mining families. In the following pages, I trace the ways in which miners, their spouses and children imagine what family relationships should be and then attempt to enact these visions in their daily lives. I argue that in order to do so, they creatively adapt to the pressures presented by shiftwork and boom and bust cycles in order to carve out places

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<sup>79</sup> Few anthropologists made the U.S. a primary fieldsite, and those that did often focused on ethnic minorities, especially Native and African-Americans. Margaret Mead’s (1943) wartime *Keep Your Powder Dry! An Anthropologist Looks at America* did offer her thoughts on the influence of parenting on what she identified as the mainstream “American character,” though the book seems to be based less on research than on commonsense (and middle class) notions about how the world should be.

and times in which they can engage in the daily practices of creating relatedness (Carsten 1995b, 2004).

I begin by tracing how scholars have theorized the relationship between myths of family life – what cultural historian John Gillis (1998) terms the “families we live by” – and everyday practice. I focus on a trajectory of research suggesting that socioeconomic restructuring has both called into question dominant idealized visions of family life and made it difficult for working people to create the kinds of family lives they value. These insights frame the main focus of the chapter, an ethnographic account of the everyday family practices of miners, their spouses and children. I investigate two dimensions of the mismatch between myth and practice. First, I show that whereas the idealized visions of family held by miners and their spouses include members who spend time together, the rotating shift schedule requires the miner to be absent from countless everyday and many other special events in the lives of their spouses and children. Mining families have creatively developed strategies for ameliorating this temporal disconnection, but I suggest that these have often resulted in the miners’ spouses taking on the stress of more domestic responsibilities. I also argue that this stress is particularly challenging for women miners, especially those who are single mothers. Second, the idealized visions of family life also entail the parents’ hope that their children pursue careers that are personally meaningful and allow for more balance between family and work time. I contextualize the parents’ efforts to educate their children in terms of the criticisms they make of their own employment experiences, particularly the excruciating shiftwork, the boom-and-bust cycles characteristic of the mining industry and the declining opportunities for people without college degrees to engage in meaningful, well paid

work. I conclude by suggesting that the popular summer student program may provide a way for parents and children to mend the ties of relatedness that years of shiftwork put into peril, a perspective that adds a more hopeful twist to concerns that work is becoming like home and home is becoming like work.

### **When home becomes like work**

David Schneider revolutionized anthropological approaches to the study of kinship with his argument that the kinship western anthropologists studied was an analytic category embedded in its own cultural universe that did not correspond to any cultural categories understood by the people to whom it had been applied: “It exists in the minds of anthropologists but not in the cultures they study” (Schneider 1972: 51). In so doing, Schneider called into question the intellectual merit of cross-cultural kinship analysis, prompting many anthropologists to put away their genealogical diagrams in order to pursue emerging questions of power, gender and decolonization. Yet kinship studies have since flourished in forms sensitive to Schneider’s critique.

Taking Schneider’s critique of the western bias of kinship models as a point of departure, Janet Carsten (1995b, 1997, 2004) has reinvigorated comparative kinship studies in her calls for anthropologists to study cross-cultural processes of *relatedness*.

I would suggest that since both the definition and the meaning of kinship are culturally variable, we cannot apply a universal definition of kinship to which procreation is central. But – and here I part company with Schneider – this does not mean that we cannot compare both how people conceive of relatedness and the meaning they attribute to it... I would suggest, by contrast, that the central question should be: how do the people we study define and construct their notions of relatedness and what values and meaning do they give them? [Carsten 1995b: 236]

The category of relatedness addresses Schneider's critique while rescuing the chance for cross-cultural study because it does not rest on the same assumptions characteristic of EuroAmerican kinship.

Carsten further departs from Schneider in analyzing not just how people conceive of relatedness, but also how they bring it into being through everyday practice. In Schneider's analysis of mainstream kinship symbolism in the U.S., he argues that American kinship categories are "built out of two elements, relationship as natural substance and relationship as code for conduct" which derive, respectively, from "the order of nature" and the "order of law" (1980 [1968]: 29). He also distinguishes "cultural symbols" – the object of his analysis – from "any systematic, regular, verifiable pattern of actual observed behavior" (1980 [1968]: 5). He justifies his exclusive focus on cultural symbols by arguing that the two should be understood as "independent of each other and not as being in tautologous relationship... the definition of the units and rules is not based on, defined by, drawn from, constructed in accord with, or developed in terms of the observations of behavior in any direct, simple sense" (1980 [1968]: 6). In the expanded 1980 edition of the book, he defends his focus on symbols against Clifford Geertz' theory of culture as the "informal logic of actual life" by invoking Ferdinand de Saussure's (1916) distinction between *langue* – language as a system of signs and the proposed correct target of linguistic analysis – and *parole*, or actual speech.

Schneider is right to argue that cultural symbols and actual behavior are not simple reflections of one another, but in discounting the study of everyday life he also fails to account for the complex ways in which symbols and behavior do relate to one another. Cultural historians Stephanie Coontz (1992) and John Gillis (1996) influentially

argue that dominant myths about family life arise along with changing historical circumstances in the everyday lives of the myth makers. In particular, they argue that popular ideals of stable, nuclear families characterized by strict gendered divisions of labor developed to mediate the tensions characteristic of emerging capitalism and its concomitant “competition, immediate gratification and amoral calculations concerning persons and things” (Gillis 1996: xvi; but see Fehevary 2002 for a consideration of the ways in which the socialist state engendered idealized private spheres). The insights of these scholars and their colleagues call for researchers to critically examine the creative, contested and sometimes contradictory links between idealized conceptions of family life and actual everyday practice. For example, anthropologist Nicholas Townsend has studied fatherhood as a “cultural image” and interpretive framework through which men “make sense of their actions, circumstances and relationships” (2002: 3). These idealized images are embedded and contested in everyday practice as they reflect values, inform social policy and guide the lives of men and the ways in which they tell their life stories, even as they can exhibit internal contradictions (2002: 3, 6).

Sociologist Judith Stacey (1990) also engages in such a project in her account of the “postmodern” family that has emerged from economic restructuring. Noting that “popular images of working-class family life... [once rested] on the iconography of unionized, blue-collar, male, industrial breadwinners,” she argues that

in an era when most married mothers are employed, when women perform most ‘working class’ jobs, when most productive labor is unorganized and fails to pay a family wage, when marriage links are tenuous and transitory, and when more single women than married homemakers are rearing children, conventional norms of a normative working-class family fracture into incoherence. [Stacey 1990: 255; see Newman 1988 for a middle-class account of this process]

Similarly, Katherine Dudley's foundational account of the 1988 closing of the Chrysler assembly plant in Kenosha, Wisconsin, demonstrates that deindustrialization is not simply an economic process, but a cultural one in which many of the "symbols, beliefs and values that once fortified a sense of moral order in our capitalist economy have been cast into doubt" (1994: xxiii). Confronted with losing their jobs and being unable to find other work in the declining auto industry, workers and their spouses had to rethink how they would parent their children, connect with friends and demonstrate their moral worth through a different form of work. This research highlights the ways in which the reorganization of work has prompted revisions in dominant myths about family life.

Farming communities in the Upper Midwest have been faced with comparable questions. Dudley (2000), Tom Fricke (2003, 2008) and Caroline Tauxe (1993, 1998) explore the ways in which families and communities have grappled with the effects of the 1980s farm crisis, during which many families lost their land, homes and distinct style of living and working as kin. These scholars trace the implications of these economic processes for family life, especially in the pressures for many children to leave the rural communities where they grew up type and pursue a non-farming career (e.g. Fricke 2008: 27). Studies of farming families and communities provide a unique take on debates about changing work and family forms because they have historically integrated family, work and place.<sup>80</sup> Common portrayals of the mining industry similarly link kin through shared work and attachment to place. Yet I will show that centrifugal forces are embedded within the mining industry, as boom-and-bust markets for mined materials have

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<sup>80</sup> The linking of family, work and place is also noted in studies of ranching families and their ties to the land (Grossman 2003; Jorgensen 1984; Sheridan 2007; Starrs 1998)

consistently scattered generations of workers throughout western states and criticisms of workplace conditions and opportunities increasingly prompt miners to advise their children to seek work outside of the industry. Mining families in Gillette navigate these pressures in their quest to make the families they live with appear a little more like the families they live by.

### **Out of sync: Families and shiftwork**

Many influential accounts of the processual creation of relatedness focus on the everyday practices of living together and sharing food (e.g. Carsten 1995a, 1997, 2004; Lambert 2000; Parkes 2005; Yan 2003). In this section, I highlight the temporal dimension of these processes, drawing attention to how sharing time and basic rhythms of everyday life forms the basis for these shared practices. In the Powder River Basin a demanding rotating shift schedule requires miners to spend much of their waking and sleeping lives out of sync with other family members. Many miners and their spouses have developed strategies to mitigate this temporal disconnection, but these often rely on the spouse – who is most often a wife given that most miners are men – assuming the majority of everyday domestic responsibilities. In other words, a prevalent gendered division of labor in the workforce has created a gendered division of labor in the home. Most women miners, on the other hand, are single mothers who cannot rely on a spouse to take care of their home and children while they work rotating shifts. In these cases, the women embody the stresses that stem from the expectation that they be both a primary breadwinner and daily caretaker. In so doing, however, they also stretch the bounds of dominant gender ideologies that associate women strictly with the home.

*“We lived in-between days off”: Balancing work and family*

The challenge for miners to balance their work and family responsibilities is not unique to Wyoming, but the rotating shift schedule seems to have intensified it. Based on his research with middle-class, primarily white men in their thirties in the San Francisco Bay area, Townsend (2002) suggests that the “package deal” of fatherhood entails emotional closeness, provision, protection and endowment. Significantly, he also argues that while these four elements of American fatherhood can be mutually reinforcing, “they are also in tension with one another, so that the package deal incorporates internal contradictions” (2002: 2). In particular, he shows that though employment can be a way of providing for their families, “the time it claims reduces fathers’ direct daily involvement with their children and the potential for emotional closeness” (2002: 130). This problem is pertinent for miners in Gillette. To maximize production, almost all the mines in the basin run a four-week, four-crew schedule that includes the following series of shifts: four nights, three days off, three days, one day off, three nights, three days off, four days and seven days off. While almost all of those with families originally sought jobs at the mine in order to provide for their children and spouses, the demanding rotating shift schedule distances them from the everyday routines of the people they seek to support.

Jerry, who has worked a rotating shift schedule for the past twenty years, eloquently describes this dilemma. In discussing why he wanted to work at a mine close to town rather than supervise a crew at one of the southern mines, he said:

It was just too much time. With a twelve-hour shift, you had to be there an hour early, then you stayed a half hour after shift, and had two hours of driving time. It was just eating you up. We lived in-between days off. I didn’t think it was a good life. If I could get six hours of sleep a night, that was doing good.

Otherwise you just worked and slept and waited for days off to come back around.

He also remembered the difficulties of trying to spend time with his kids when he worked a two-week, eight-hour shift schedule. “When you were on swings, you didn’t see your kids at all. If you go to work in the afternoon and don’t get off until after midnight, you don’t see them unless you get up early in the morning. And even if you do, you hardly see the kids at all.” He also laughed and admitted, “I was a little grumpy. It took me a while to learn how to deal with it, that sleeping during the day and having those little bitty kids around. It was bad.” Yet being able to provide for his family was a big draw of mining jobs. He said, “It was good work. It was fun back when you kids were small.”<sup>81</sup> Everybody has to work, of course, and mining was the work to have when you were in Campbell County.<sup>82</sup> We raised our families and paid for everything with that job.”

Jerry’s wife Cindy decided to stay home to be able to raise their kids without regularly hiring a babysitter. It was important to her that she was able to “be home with them and do things, go to school activities or sports that they were involved in, and be able to shuttle them around for all that instead of depending on somebody else.” She said that “it hasn’t been bad” adjusting to Jerry’s schedule, emphasizing that they were thankful he had a job after having been laid off from his previous job. “It’s just provided a good living for us.” Like her husband, she pointed to his years as a supervisor as the most difficult. “With a twelve-hour shift plus additional hours for supervising and an hour drive each way, there were times when it seemed like I didn’t see him for several

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<sup>81</sup> Jerry uses the term “you kids” for two reasons. First, his kids were my age. Second, I had previously worked with him for two summers on small crews in which the people his age came to think about me and my peers as their adopted children.

<sup>82</sup> See Fricke (2008: 30) on life being “unimaginable without working at something” in a North Dakota farming community.

days in a row because he was only home to sleep and eat and then leave for work.” But she also pointed out some of the benefits of shiftwork. “I had evenings free a lot of times, and if I didn’t want to cook a big dinner I didn’t have to, and I could do something with friends. But for the most part I spent that time at home doing things around the house.”

Linda, whose husband Roger is approaching retirement after more than twenty years of shiftwork, remembers him “always being gone” while she was at home raising their sons. When Roger was first starting at the mine, he would work at night and then go to school during the day to train to become a mechanic. “I was always so busy with the kids, being pregnant and busy, that there was sometimes where it was just wearing me down. During those two years he was driving truck and going to school, I was pregnant and raised two kids. We never saw Roger for two years.” When he was home, they made sure that time was focused on him playing with the kids. They also tried to have a sit-down family dinner during the weekend, either pizza on Friday night or a chicken dinner Sunday afternoon, since he was gone during the week. When thinking about those years, Linda most remembers the repetition of cooking for her family. They used to buy cases of powdered skim milk because their boys drank it so quickly, and she always enjoyed baking their own bread. “Make milk, make bread. Make milk, make bread. When you have that many children, it’s make milk, make bread, make milk, make bread.” Although she remembers the stresses of that time, Linda also appreciates all of the extra-curricular activities Roger’s job allowed them and their kids to do, from joining sports teams to taking vacations at the lake.

Dave, a plant mechanic, and his wife Sue developed a similar strategy to make sure that he had enough time with their daughters. Sue explained, “They’d be ready for bed when Dad came home at 7:30 or 8. He would sit down, and the three of them would sit down and read every night. That was their time, and I would go for a walk. And then I’d come home and they’d still be reading, so I’d go downstairs, and that was their time together.” They think that their daughters, now grown, look back and appreciate that time. Dave and Sue also fondly remember vacations on his “seven off,” including when he would take the girls skiing in the winter or when they would all go camping in the summer. Even though Dave regrets not being able to participate in community events because of his schedule, he concluded, “It’s not all bad. It makes you realize the importance of a two-parent family. Sue worked a regular eight hour, five day, pretty much forty hour week, and that helps. If we’d both been working my schedule, it’d be a lot harder.”

Although they do not work a rotating shift schedule, the long hours put in by managers have raised comparable challenges for their families. Sara’s husband has worked in management since they first moved to the basin twenty years ago. She appreciates that the job has made it

very comfortable for us to clothe and feed our kids, and have a nice home and vehicles that run. The negative thing is how much time it takes. He gets up at four o’clock. As he’s aged, that’s become more difficult for him. It meant that he had less social time with the rest of us... There have been times when he has just not really been a part of the family other than the income, and he just comes through to sleep.

Sara works full time, and her strategy has been to keep her and her children’s schedule independent of her husband’s. “A long time ago I figured out if I had to put everything

that I needed to do or wanted to do in his schedule it wasn't going to happen. And so I've never had a problem."

Other women take a dramatically different approach to negotiating schedules with their husbands. Sandy calls her strategy "King of the Castle." She tries to tailor everything she does around her husband's schedule. On day shifts, that means being home by 8:15 at night in order to have dinner ready for her husband when he returns. On night shifts, that means keeping the house quiet during the days when he was trying to sleep – no small task when she has chores such as vacuuming to do or when their two children were small. It also means that she tries very hard not to disturb him by entering their bedroom. "I have to figure out what clothes to wear before I even know what I'm doing for the day. I used to get dressed totally in the dark so I wouldn't bother him." Sandy also found that her husband's schedule influenced her friendships. "It's almost impossible to have couple friends unless they're on the exact same rotation. With one couple, we know that we can only meet them one or two Mondays out of the month. That's literally the only time we can get together unless somebody has taken a day off." It was also challenging to maintain her own friendships when she dedicated all of the days her husband was off to spending time with him. At the same time, she and her friends who were also married to shiftworkers found that they came to relish their time alone without their husbands. "When they're working days on the weekend, I have from five in the morning until eight at night that is totally mine to decide what I want to do, where I go and how much I do." As we were chatting, she looked at the clock to see if it was time to wake him up for the night shift and commented, "I literally tailor my whole day around his shifts."

### *Women miners and support networks*

Whereas the majority of men at the mines can rely on their wives and girlfriends to take care of their homes and children while they are at work, comparatively few women miners can rely on the support of a husband with a more regular schedule. Those that do consider such support essential to their ability to pursue a career in mining. Patty started in the industry 25 years ago as a general laborer and is currently in management. She is thankful that while she was on shiftwork, her husband had a straight days job that allowed him to do the primary caretaking for their daughters. “He was and still is a very hands-on dad. We had daycare. If I was on nights, he’d pick them up when he got off work, feed them, change diapers and pack them and haul them and away they went. Never would have made it without him.”

Women who are happily married to other shiftworkers have also worked out what they perceive to be an equitable division of household responsibilities with their partners. Mary and Doug have both worked in production at the same mine since the early 1980s. She said, “I’m lucky because he does ninety percent of the cooking and I do all the cleaning. And he occasionally does laundry, and he does all the oil changes. I’ve got good support.” Yet even with these arrangements the long hours are still exhausting, as Patty explained: “The twelve hours totally consume you. When you get home you can barely eat and see your family before you have to go to bed.”

It is telling that the married women who are the most satisfied with the division of household labor are those who do not have children and the responsibilities associated with them. In fact, Mary said, “If we had kids, I don’t know if I’d be out here. I don’t

know how we'd do it, since we're so busy without them." In fact, a significant number of women in their twenties and early thirties who have reached positions of leadership in the pit doubt that they could raise children while working the rotating schedule, so they have decided to delay or completely abstain from having children. "My husband and I both have strange schedules so I don't think we could raise our kids the way we want to," said Joanne, who runs the dispatch system at one mine. "We could take more menial jobs, but we think the work we do is important."

Even though raising children while on shiftwork is difficult, many single mothers specifically choose to work at the mine for the high wages and good benefits.<sup>83</sup> Among their crews they find tremendous respect for their efforts to single-handedly provide for their families. Yet being both the breadwinner and caregiver presents challenges for them, especially while working a rotating schedule. The single most important strategy to address this challenge is cultivating a support network of family, friends and babysitters who can care for children at odd hours while the miner is at work or sleeping in preparation for work.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Single women seeking mine work to support their families appears to be common throughout the industry (Giesen 1995: 128; John 1980: 97; Tallichet 2006: 33, 132).

<sup>84</sup> Generational differences are significant in understanding the support networks developed by single mothers. The single moms who are now in their twenties often have family in town because their own parents moved here during the original boom. The middle-aged women miners who first started working in the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, rarely had this luxury because they either moved by themselves or with a spouse. Instead, they had to establish networks of friends whom they would come to think about as family. Al's wife Sandy grew up in a small farming town in the Midwest and remembers being surrounded by extended family as a child. "There was family around all the time. My grandparents lived next door and my cousins and I were always getting into trouble together. We used to take trips every year with all the aunts and uncles. That was what was hard about moving to Gillette. We kind of had to make our own families." Marie eventually met and created close friendships with people she knew from her job, church and children's activities. Other new residents relied on neighborhood connections, such as Dave and Sue. At least five other couples on their block were raising children at the same time, and through years of sharing meals, going camping, attending community events and watching each other's children, they came to think of themselves as family.

Melissa, a single mom in her mid-twenties, works at one of the closest mines to Gillette. The rotating schedule sets the rhythm of everyday life for her and her three-year-old son. Even though she hates getting up at five a.m., she does so on day shifts in order to prepare and take her son to daycare before work. She considers herself lucky to be working so close to town; whereas some of her friends have an hour commute, hers is only fifteen minutes. She arrives to work a few minutes before the start of shift to share coffee and some jokes with her crew. Like most of her coworkers, she spends the day operating heavy equipment such as large haul trucks and blades. In order to make the day go by faster, she brings along an mp3 player full of stand-up comedy and her favorite music. After work ends at seven, she picks her son up from the sitter. Once home, she reheats leftovers for their dinner and tries to put her son to bed by nine. On nights, their schedule is reversed. She takes him to her mother's house before work so he can spend the night sleeping there, and then in the morning she takes him to the sitter so that she can sleep at home. She does not have as much trouble sleeping during the day as do some of her coworkers: "I pop two Tylenol PM's, drink a Bud Light and I'm out." After picking him up in the afternoon, she fixes a light lunch, prepares for work, and drops him off again at her mother's house before returning to work for the next nightshift.

Although the schedule is challenging, Melissa enjoys working at the mine because it pays well, offers excellent insurance and allows her 14 days off a month to spend with her son. She went to college and earned a teaching degree, but quickly realized that she could make more money working at the mine where she had had a temporary job during summer vacations from college. Even though she finds single motherhood challenging, she loves being a parent and is happy that she turned down a marriage proposal from the

father of her son. Candidly, she recalls telling him, “I made one mistake and don’t need to make another.” She has a boyfriend who works a rotating schedule that is completely opposite of her own, but she does not mind only having one day off a month in common. She laughed and said, “It’s not that bad because then we can’t get sick of each other.” On her days off, she likes to see her friends, shoot pool, take trips and go camping.

Nicole has been working as an equipment operator for six years, ever since her ex-husband told her that she would never have a job that paid as well as his. After her divorce, she relied on a friend’s wife to baby-sit her young children while she was at work. She would get up at 4:30 in the morning to get the kids ready and take them to the babysitter’s house by 5:30 so that she could get on the bus to go to work at 6:00. After work, she would pick them up at 9:15 at night. Once home, she had to get them ready for bed, shower and pack her lunch for the next day. On a good night, she got six hours of sleep. When working nights, she got even less. She dropped her kids off at the babysitter’s in the afternoon before work and then picked them up at 9:30 in the morning. Preferring to stay up with them during the day while most of her coworkers were sleeping in preparation for the next shift, she slept for only an hour while her kids were napping. She also slept on the bus for an hour on the way out to work and on the way home, which brought her total to three hours of sleep. She also tried to use her thirty-minute lunch break to sleep as well, which helped her make it through the night. “But you do what you got to do sometimes,” she said. “And I was surprised I was able to do it.”

Since Nicole’s children have grown up and are old enough to attend school, she has found it easier to balance her multiple responsibilities. In the past few years she has also benefited from marrying a man with a more regular schedule and being able to rely

on family members who have moved back to Gillette and can help take care of her kids. She intends to keep working at the mine as long as she has a job there because overall she enjoys her work, her coworkers and the paycheck. She encourages other women to do the same, saying, “It’s a good job. It’s a lot of fun, but it’s what you make of it. I love the physical and mental challenges of it.”

Single mothers, along with other miners, must creatively manage their schedules in order to keep their households running smoothly and have time to spend with their kids. Both Melissa and Nicole try to take care of all major household chores on their days off. They use the days “off” in-between “blocks” of shifts (such as the four days) to do laundry, clean and cook large meals that could be reheated later in the week – a strategy they call “pre-planning.” Other women use a meal preparation company in town that streamlines the process of planning and cooking meals. Like other similar business becoming popular across the country, this company provides all the food, tools and recipes for a few family-sized meals that customers can prepare onsite and then bring home to freeze. Staff members do all of the clean-up following the meal assembly. The women enjoy the feeling of feeding their families a home-cooked meal and appreciate the time they save in simply defrosting and heating the meal at home.

Even though the schedule can be excruciating, the benefit is time off during the week, especially during the seven days off that come once a month. Melissa loves the rotating schedule for that week off because she can spend quality time with her son. Miners can also strategically plan their personal vacation days. Like many of her coworkers, Nicole saves her personal days for her children’s important school and extracurricular events. Choosing which events to attend can be difficult considering that

she only has two weekends off a month, and during some of those she likes to work overtime. To keep in touch with their children and caretakers during shifts, Nicole and many other parents take advantage of cell phones and increased coverage. Before cell phones became widely available, miners had to rely on the security guards and their supervisors to take and deliver messages for them while they were on shift. Cell phones have facilitated direct contact between parents and their children as well as between spouses. Carrie, a longtime equipment operator, and her husband raised their children while both of them were on shiftwork. She remembers sometimes not seeing her husband for an entire week. “We used to leave each other messages on the butcher block, and then we lived life through the cell phone.”

*Household labor, gender ideologies and relatedness at risk*

Three key theoretical implications emerge from the preceding discussion of shiftwork and family time in the Powder River Basin. First, it is clear that women around Gillette remain responsible for the majority of household responsibilities, corresponding with larger patterns in the gendered division of domestic labor in the United States (e.g. Coltrane 2000; Dempsey 1997; Mannino and Deutsch 2007). Balancing a second shift of these responsibilities along with a rotating shift schedule is particularly difficult for women miners. While most husbands take responsibility for tasks in the garage and yard, these chores take less daily efforts than those in the house. Even couples that have negotiated a more egalitarian division of labor find that men’s domestic contributions are usually labeled as “help” for which the women are “thankful.” Carrie initially said that everyone in her house helped out raising livestock and taking care of the house, but later

laughed and qualified her statement: “Mom does extra chores. One night I came home from work just exhausted, and they were all sitting there watching TV. They asked, ‘What’s for dinner?’ I was so tired that I just took out a jar of peanut butter and a jar of jelly, slammed them on the counter and said, ‘Dinner is served!’” This distribution of household responsibilities suggests that even though men espouse more non-traditional gender ideologies in their talk about women being accepted in mining, they also often (and perhaps unintentionally) reinforce more traditional ideas and practices in their own homes. It also suggests that gendered divisions of labor in the overall workforce has produced a gendered division of labor in the home.<sup>85</sup>

Second, single mothers face the greatest challenges in balancing their work and home responsibilities, but those who have successfully crafted themselves as breadwinners stretch the bounds of conventional gender ideologies. Single mothers are generally treated with profound respect from members of their crews, which reveals tensions in the gender ideologies giving shape to everyday life in the Powder River Basin. The figures of the male breadwinner and female caretaker have figured prominently in western gender ideologies since the development and expansion of industrial capitalism. Yet women miners across the U.S. who are the primary financial

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<sup>85</sup> This marked gendered division of labor belies the ways in which miners and their spouses de-emphasize gender differences when speaking about raising their children. For example, Carla, an equipment operator, gave her daughter her own set of tools when she began work at a neighboring mine. Others made sure that their daughters learned how to take care of their cars at home. “My girls know how to mechanic,” said Maureen, a longtime equipment operator whose husband also works in the pit. “One daughter, I told her to go help her dad in the garage and she complained that she had just done her nails. ‘I don’t care!’ I said. “Go change the oil!’ It’s a survival thing.” When Donna was working shifts as an equipment operator, she left her teenage son a list of chores to do. “Now his wife is amazed by the stuff he knows how to do in the house! I told him, it never hurts a boy to learn how to do dishes, wash clothes, vacuum, all of that. And I don’t think it hurts a girl to get out there and learn to change oil and change tires either.” Thus at the same time as most parents de-emphasize gender difference in speaking about what parents should be, my research demonstrates that the daily responsibilities of raising children tend to be dramatically gender segregated.

providers for their families have creatively drawn on the idiom of breadwinning to integrate themselves into the industry. For example, sociologist Suzanne Tallichet (2006: 2) retells the story of an Appalachian woman who convinced her skeptical male crew members she had a right to a “man’s job” because the man who should have been providing for her and her children had deserted them. Other scholars have noted that miners’ wives who otherwise disapprove of women’s work underground support the single mothers who work there in order to provide for their families (e.g. Gibson-Graham 2006; Giesen 1995; Tallichet 2006).

Women miners in Wyoming face considerably less resistance from male coworkers and their wives, but they still draw on the ideological force of the breadwinner role to position themselves at work and home. “It’s hard being both the mom and the dad,” said Nicole. “But we have a nice house, my kids are all fed, they have the clothes they want, and they don’t get into trouble. One day I hope they’ll go to college, and I’ll be paying for that too.” This accomplishment is also celebrated by their crew members, who recognize the difficulty of balancing their multiple responsibilities without the support of a spouse. The women miners’ successful embodiment of the otherwise masculinized figure of the breadwinner illustrates that women can open up spaces in hegemonic gender ideologies to engage in work that is meaningful to them and allows them to provide for their families.

Third, this research shows that just as kinship can be created over time through the quotidian activities of living together and sharing food, it can also be strained and put into peril precisely by *not* engaging in these activities.<sup>86</sup> Carsten has influentially called

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<sup>86</sup> Edwards and Strathern (2000) argue that EuroAmerican anthropologists studying kinship do not often focus on disconnections due to their own cultural values of belonging.

for anthropologists to study kinship and relatedness as processes, not predetermined states: “Relatedness is always in the process of being created” (1997: 281; cf. Ingold 2000). This perspective helps to understand the disconnection felt between many shiftworkers and other members of their family. While many mining families in Gillette primarily understand kinship as a biological fact – they are parents by virtue of conceiving and giving birth to children – they also understand the importance of nurturing these ties over time. The different mealtimes of miners and their families has become emblematic for people thinking about this disconnection, perhaps because sharing food is as crucial for making relatedness for these families as it for those in Malaysia (Carsten 1995b: 223) or North India (Lambert 2000: 84-5) even though specific practices vary cross-culturally. But in this case being out of sync expands beyond mealtimes to embrace the most basic rhythms of sleeping, working and enjoying leisure. When miners come home from nightshifts, they sleepily get ready for bed as their spouses and children wake up and get ready for the day, and they sleep while their spouses and children work, go to school and play and entertain in the house. As their family members are getting ready for bed, shiftworkers are gearing up for twelve hours of work. When they finally reach their days off during the week, they find that they are often alone in their free time, and use it to watch movies, go to the gym and do home improvement projects while their family members work and attend school. Due to the schedule, miners even find it difficult to engage in many of the community and school activities that form the basis for much public social life in town.

Yet Carsten also reminds scholars that “kinship is an important arena in which to find creativity... an area of life in which people invest their emotions, their creative

energy, and their new imaginings” (2004: 9). Men and women in Gillette have addressed the challenges of shiftwork with creativity. When sitting down for a shared daily meal – an icon of familial closeness (Ochs and Taylor 1995) – is not possible, miners and their families have created other rituals in which they share time, space and food together, whether those be special weekend meals or standing reading dates between a father and his daughters. Shiftwork makes it difficult but not impossible for miners to embody and enact the types of family arrangements they value, making the families they live with appear a little more like the families they live by.

### **Raising children and imagining the future**

Many miners point to their successful parenting of children as their primary achievements in life. But what exactly does it mean to be a good parent in Gillette? In this section I expand Townsend’s “package deal” of fatherhood to illuminate how both men and women imagine their responsibilities as parents. Chief among these responsibilities is providing their children with an education through college or trade school. I argue that in pushing their children to attain higher education, parents seek to help them approximate the type of family and work lives they ideally imagine for themselves.

#### *Endowing education*

For many Gillette residents, their jobs at the mines coincided with starting a family (cf. Halle 1984 and Townsend 2002: 129 on the “mutual reinforcement between the responsibilities of work and family”). For example, Ray, a longtime equipment operator,

remembered that his fiancée was sick of moving around with his first job, so she “went around and got applications at the coal mines for me. I hired on and we moved up here right after we got married.” Like Ray, the majority of people working at the mines during my fieldwork were men and women who hired on in the late 1970s and early 1980s when they were in their twenties. This cohort is now reaching their fifties and early sixties, and the mines have begun trying to hire large numbers of younger workers in order to replace their core employees as they begin retiring en masse. Most of these new workers are people in their twenties who are beginning to start their own families.

In discussing the hopes they had for being parents and the ways in which they remember raising their children, both men and women speak to the four facets of fatherhood identified by Townsend (2002: 2): emotional closeness, provision, protection and endowment. As noted by other researchers, home ownership played a large role in their life histories, perhaps because it connects all of these elements (cf. Halle 1984; Townsend 1991: 2). Here I would like to add education, both formal and informal, as another key mode through which parents engage in emotional closeness, provision, protection and endowment.

While explaining his major accomplishments, a mechanic named Al initially emphasized home ownership: “I’ve been able to pay for my home. You know, I can remember that when I was first working, I never even dreamed that you would ever even own a home, let alone own one free and clear.” He also thinks about provisioning in terms of the 401k retirement account he has built up, the pension he plans on receiving from the company, and the good health insurance he has been able to provide his family. His eyes lit up, however, when he talked about his ability to facilitate his children’s

educational accomplishments. “I’ve watched my kids go through school, from kindergarten all the way to high school. I’ve been able to put both of my daughters through college, good colleges. If I hadn’t moved here, I don’t know that I could have afforded the education that I’ve been able to provide.” For both Al and his wife Sandy, higher education was an essential part of raising their daughters to be independent women. Sandy worked full-time while raising their children, and took pride in both her financial contribution to their education and her everyday support as they were growing up. She remembers driving them to and from their extra-curricular activities, meeting with teachers during parent conferences and attending school events. Along with her husband, Sandy wanted their girls to be able to take care of themselves and “not depend on anybody. We felt that a college education would be essential in that.” Both she and her husband frowned on some of their friends who believed that their children should be wholly responsible for funding their college education. “You have to help them out when they’re just starting out,” said Al.

Educational support is not limited to paying the bills. Loren, a longtime equipment operator, took an early interest in his son Brad’s distinguished running career. He ran with him, attended every race he could and helped him start selecting colleges to visit and consider attending. Along with his wife, he wanted to be sure that the school had an excellent academic reputation as well as a strong racing team because even though running was a good way to get college scholarships, it probably was not going to be a stable, sustainable career. As such, they helped him think through possible majors and careers based on his interests and abilities. Brad was also an excellent student, especially in his math and science classes, and Loren and his wife also took an active interest in his

education. They enjoyed recounting stories about funny essays or insightful papers he had written, and how his classmates would give him a hard time if he ever got something wrong on a math test. When I asked Loren what goals he had for Brad, he chuckled and said, “A lot more than I had for myself.” He then told a story about his son helping him put up a fence at their new house. “I was cussing because something wasn’t going right, and I said to him, ‘See, this is why you get an education, so you don’t have to do this yourself.’”

Ray also plans on getting his youngest daughter through college. A gifted student, she also succeeds in many extra-curricular activities and sports. In talking about her work ethic, he seemed to make an analogy to his own: “That little girl puts in ten, twelve hours a day and still carries an A+ average.” He and his wife have encouraged all of their kids to do well in school:

I just tell them that they need to get good grades because opportunities will open there... My wife, she pushes them, especially this young one. She makes sure she has all her grades in, and she pretty much so handles that all at home. And I think we have more opportunity in Gillette here too because we have better teachers and opportunity there to do all these recreational things for the kids are just abundant.

Even though most parents hope for their children to attend college of some sort, many understand that such a path might not be appealing to them, especially given their own experiences with higher education. Jerry’s wife Cindy encouraged her sons to attend college, but she also supported their decisions not to attend. “I think it’s really hard when you’re asking 18 year olds what you want to do with your life when a lot of us are making major changes even in our forties and fifties.” In talking about her life, she was the proudest of raising happy, healthy kids. She was happy that one of her sons had tried living in Denver, as she had dreamed of doing when she was growing up Gillette. But

she was even happier when he decided to move back. “I’m glad that he’s realized that the city life isn’t necessarily all that it’s cracked up to be and that you can have a little bit more of family – I don’t know if normalcy or whatever is the right word – but an ability to meet somebody in a smaller community like this.”

Linda approached raising her four boys in a similar manner:

I just want them to be happy and have good jobs and have whatever education they can have. I mean, I’m not going to scream and yell at them because they’re not going to the University of Wyoming. I mean, I didn’t. I just want them to be able to make a good living. If they don’t like school, then don’t go to school. Try to find a trade of some sort.

She is proud that each of her sons is able to manage money and support himself, and she points to the allowance she and her husband gave them while they were growing up.

“My husband would make them put it in a bank account. That was money they had to put away.” She thinks that the role of a parent is to “be there for them and help them with their decisions.”

Linda’s husband Roger thought about further education in the same way. If his sons chose not to attend college, he encouraged them to learn a skilled trade. One way he did this was to include them in major home improvement projects so that they could learn a little about mechanics, electrical work, plumbing and building. Intriguingly, he said that he approached raising a family and supervising a crew at the mine in similar ways. For example, the crew he supervised had a large number of inexperienced workers whom he described as starting off like “babies... they’re young and they don’t know.” Compared to other supervisors who assigned tasks and partners randomly, he took great care to rotate each of the mechanics around the shop so that they developed a variety of skills. He smiled, “It’s just kind of fun to watch their growth.” Even though he made

analogies between fathering his boys and supervising his crew, he preferred to describe himself as a “coach” or a “big brother” at work even though he also said, “If you have a crew, you’re like a father or a mother and it’s a day in and day out.”<sup>87</sup>

In fact, many of the men drew on their work experiences of being mentored to explain how they approached both training new hires and raising children. The most respected mentors tended to be those who had worked their way up from the bottom to positions of leadership, and did not micro-manage but gave their employees the tools to learn and succeed on their own.<sup>88</sup> Al remembered:

That old man that I worked for, old Art, he was probably the best supervisor I ever worked for. That’s because he was from the old school. The older guys, that’s all they knew was work. And Art was so smart. He always had good ideas... And a lot of times, he had been out of mechanics for a long time, but he’d been around the machinery for so many years that a lot of times, if you went up to talk to him, he would ask you the right questions that you were able to figure out where you needed to go... He was probably one of the best supervisors I ever worked for.

Tellingly, in discussing their own families, Al and other miners espoused philosophies of parenting that correlated with their evaluations of supervisors and mentoring. Each of the men and their wives emphasized that children should pursue their own unique passions

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<sup>87</sup> Richardson (2006: 175) argues that the language of big brothers and sisters allows for distinctions between juniors and seniors and seniority without negating more egalitarian work practices.

<sup>88</sup> These ideas surrounding parenting and appropriate work relationships underlie the miners’ strategies to mentor and train new hires, an increasingly important and contested arena of social relationships. Many of those who were originally hired in the late 1970s and early 1980s are now anticipating retirement. In order to deal with the impending workforce shortage (and take advantage of profitable coal markets following the rise in petroleum prices), companies are actively recruiting as many young workers as possible, even if they lack mining experience. In socializing and training the next generation of miners, the many miners draw on their own first experiences when discussing new hires on their crews. The few new employees who are the most respected are those perceived as hard working and enthusiastic. Most of the experienced miners, such as Jack, are frustrated and upset that the majority are “five minutes through the gate and they think they know everything.” This frustration stems from the new hires deterring the experienced miners’ attempts to position themselves as mentors: by refusing to ask questions, the newer workers deny their would-be mentors the opportunity to impart knowledge and advice.

and interests, and that it is the parent's responsibility to make that possible through acting as a sounding board and providing them with both formal and informal educational opportunities. Many parents also valued the summer student program for complementing their efforts at parenting. John, who worked in management, was happy that his daughter participated in the program. He said, "I think that proved that she's very adaptable. There was a host of very foreign experiences that she had success at. And I think as a parent, that's what we try to do. You know, you try to do what preparations you can, see what you can provide so that your kids can run off and be successful." Making a play on literal and figurative tools, he laughed and said, "Give them the tools. That's what we're trying to do."

In this section I have argued that the miners' efforts to ensure that their children receive college or trade school educations comprises a key means through which they and their spouses provide for their children. These hopes for their children's future careers are directly linked to their contemporary critiques of the booms and busts of the mining industry, contemporary local workplace practices and their hopes for a kinder future for their children.

#### *Links between educational hopes and workplace criticisms*

In this section, I tease out the miners' criticisms and imagined futures by looking at the popular summer student program in which the college-age children of employees work at the mines during vacations from college. The number of students involved in the

program varies according to the size of the mine: their numbers approach 40 at the largest but can be less than ten at the smallest. When the graduating senior classes at the basin's largest high school normally comprise about five hundred students, the participation of more than a fifth of these in the summer student program is significant. Moreover, the program has become an arena for miners to explicitly evaluate their employment histories and current conditions, and then communicate these ideas to their children and their children's peers. In this section, I explore three of these criticisms: excruciating shiftwork, boom and bust employment cycles and a declining blue collar job market.



Figure 8: Smith and her father during the summer student program

The summer student program has become a rite of passage for many young people in Gillette and a greatly anticipated annual event for many mine employees. When discussing what stood out from their summers at the mines, the college students I interviewed all pointed to the same thing: their crews' insistence that they stay in college

and not end up as coal miners like them.<sup>89</sup> During the three summers she worked at the same mine as her father, Chloe found that new coworkers tended to start off conversations with her in the same way. “They’d see your name on your hardhat and ask if you were so-and-so’s daughter, and you’d say yes or no. And then they’d ask if you were his kid who was going to school here or there.” She was amazed not only by how much people already knew about her before stepping on the minesite, but also by how interested they were in hearing about her college plans:

It was so strange because the [pit] bus would stop and people would get off and get to their equipment. I told people about my college plans that first summer hundreds of times. I was asked hundreds of times by different people. And almost all of the time, they would end that conversation by saying, “Well, stick with it.” That’s always how it was. “You’ll do well, I wish I had done it.” A lot of the younger ones who had asked, they’d say, “Well, I had two semesters left at Laramie [at the University of Wyoming] and I decided to come to work out here. I wish I hadn’t done it.” They’d always bring up some element of their own education experiences or encourage you to stick with it. I mean, I had more encouragement from my crew at the coal mine than my academic advisor at college! It was constant. And when you get to know them more, they would always bring up the students who had come back, who had quit school and come back, and they would always get teased. “Don’t do that, we don’t want you come back here, we really want you to do well.”

Callie, Al and Sandy’s daughter, had a similar experience during her summer at the mine. “People out there all told me to stay in school. ‘You don’t want to end up like me.’ That’s how they felt.” Callie was careful to explain that this advice did not mean that the miners thought they had a bad life. “But it’s not that they failed,” she said and continued:

I think they like working out there but they think the other world is a lot easier than their world, with the sacrifices they’ve made and the physical work that they put in. And I think they see the other world as much easier and much kinder and they want their children to be in that world.

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<sup>89</sup> Compare Willis (1977: 107): “Ironically, as the shopfloor becomes a prison, education is seen, retrospectively, and hopelessly, as the only escape.”

Callie aptly picked up on the criticisms underlying the miners' advice to stay in school. The first major concern of most miners is that their children and their coworkers' children avoid what they see to be the most detrimental development in local labor conditions: the twelve-hour shiftwork that has made it difficult for them to participate in everyday family and community life. Barb, a mechanic who raised her son while working shifts, succinctly critiqued the schedule: "I don't think humans were made for these hours." Donna, a longtime equipment operator, explained that twelve-hour shifts "brought out the worst in everybody. I was just like a grizzly. 'Don't you come near me! Don't even look at me, I'll rip your head off.' Oh, it was terrible. I've heard so many people say that. It not only affects your body, it affects your thinking, your mind."

Most miners hope that their children will not have to work rotating shifts throughout their life. Callie's dad was very happy that she did not have to work shifts even while she was at the mine. Some parents like Jerry consciously discouraged their kids from seeking work in the mining industry precisely due to the shiftwork requirements:

I've steered them away from these coal mines. I mean, they can do whatever they want, but I've steered them away from shift work if they'll listen. So far they've taken that to heart. There's a lot of stuff out there that you can do where you don't have to work this shiftwork. Maybe somebody would like it, and some people probably do. I've heard people tell me they'd rather work nights than days, but I think they're lying.

Jerry is happy that his son who is a truck driver has not yet applied at a mine, even though "he would probably be the greatest equipment operator in the whole world because he likes to do it. There's just a lot of other opportunities, even in Gillette." Like Jerry, many miners have found that the shiftwork has become tiring and trying for them both physically and emotionally. Those who can often move into "straight days" jobs,

finding that they had no idea just how fatigued and disoriented they had been in previous years. Those middle aged miners who do not wish to switch positions or have not been able to move into straight days struggle through the night shifts in order in order to protect their future retirement and to help their children avoid finding themselves in a similar situation.

The miners' second major criticism of the industry is the long-term instability they associate with mining. As much as they remember the excitement of booms, they also remember the stresses of busts. Al and Sandy were thankful they left the uranium mine before the bust in the early 1980s. Al said, "I wasn't there when the mine shut down, but friends of mine that were said guys were literally crying because they were financed. Everything they owned – all those fast cars and toys – was financed, and they knew that they were never going get a job that paid the money they were making."

Looking back, he remembered, "They told me that I could always come back, but by the time I graduated from diesel school, it was all over. There was never any chance to go back. It never has come back. I think everybody's given up hope now." Sandy was also happy they had avoided the uranium bust:

All of our friends, they had a shock. They just went to work, and they told them to pick up their tools and go home because they didn't want to give them any foreknowledge of it because they were afraid that they'd trash the mines. And then that whole area just became abandoned. There was a school out there and everything, and the whole community then was displaced. So yeah, it's kind of sad in a way. And all those people had to go someplace else.

Sandy believes that the ever-present threat that her husband could lose his job has played a large role in their marriage. "Starting out very early, we realized that at any moment, Al could be out of work. Some people chuckhole every penny they can or else they live

life like there's no tomorrow because with mining, you never know. We hadn't even been married a year, and we saw all our friends get totally wiped out.”

Al's parents, Frank and Martha, had also weathered a number of booms and busts during the course of their marriage. Work was an orienting narrative in Frank's life. He said, “I could always feel more relaxed working than I felt not working. It was a way of relaxing I guess.”<sup>90</sup> In rural South Dakota, he started picking and bucking potatoes on a farm when he was twelve. Later he fed livestock at the sale barns and loaded delivery trucks at a bakery. At age 17 he quit school and went to work on a ranch, where he worked twelve to sixteen hour days, seven days a week depending on the season. He made 125 dollars a month, plus room and board. When he grew tired of the ranch, he worked in construction and on a drill rig and eventually hired on at a mine because they were paying two dollars an hour and the work underground was a temperate 55 degrees all year. “So after coming out of the elements, like the hard winters and then the hot

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<sup>90</sup> See Fricke (2008) for a discussion of work ethic and moral selves in a North Dakota Farming community. Frank's statement evokes Fricke's observation that farming families rooted their lives so much in work that even in church, “men, especially, sit uncomfortably immobile during the Mass, their big hands open as if in need of a wrench. At such moments, the Catholic practice of frequent rising, sitting and kneeling appears to be a blessing” (2008: 31; cf. Fricke 2003). Frank also emphasized the moral character of work, stating that he did not appreciate men who did not put in an “honest day's labor. Companies should not pay people to do nothing. No way. That's unethical, and I would be ashamed as a human being to go up and take money for nothing, for doing nothing. To sit and read books all the time [as they had bragged]. Something about it is not moral.” Al picked up this attitude in his own work, saying, “My parents were hard-working people. I was raised that if you were paid for eight hours, you worked eight hours. And then there has got to be a certain amount of pride in what you do. To go out there and not give it your best, that's kind of a shameful thing, to not go out there and give them an honest day.”

This linking of kinship, morality and work offers a critique of Harry Braverman's (1998 [1974]: 67) argument that the concept of an honest wage is “inherently meaningless” since a worker's daily wage actually includes the surplus labor value the capitalist appropriates by extending the working day beyond the labor time to produce the value of the wages the capitalist pays workers. The concept of a fair day's wage is locally meaningful for miners. These conceptions of work ethic are couched in kinship relations and moral language about personal character and the good life, and suggest one way that workers have been able to make meaning out of potentially alienating labor conditions. Putting in a hard day's work is one way for miners to honor their parents, many of whom were also miners, and continue a family tradition.

summers, the mine was pretty much a relief,” he said. “I really fell in love with mining.” Throughout his life he mined many different materials – including phosphate, lead, silver, gold and uranium – in many different states, but he still vividly recalls the details of each project, such as the depth and width he had to drill to account for specific local conditions. “All ore bodies, even though they’re the same mineral,” he said, “they’re all different in character.” His favorite part of his career was acquiring technical knowledge in order to “understand the real heart of the operation.”

Frank began as a miner’s helper, using jackhammers to drill holes, and was promoted to mine foreman four years later. The mine was sold and put on standby, so he moved to Wyoming along with his wife and son. He started working as a driller for a new underground mine, but the company decided to focus their efforts on the open pit mine they were planning. The company laid off the drillers, but asked Frank to stay and run a loader in their other open pit mine. He then transitioned into being a relief operator and mechanic. Five years later, the company shut the mine down but asked Frank to stay and load all of the equipment to be transferred to another operation in Utah. Rather than move his young family, he took a job with a local mining company where he would end up spending the rest of his career and eventually become the operations manager. During the more than thirty years he spent with them, their major focus was uranium, which led to another boom and bust. After the initial boom in the 1970s, he said, “The price of uranium kept dropping. It never bounced back or anything. It was unpredictable.” Frank once again prepared and arranged the equipment for sale before retiring. Even after he retired, he often went back to the office to see his old friends, and

he worked temporarily as a consultant when they needed his knowledge of the company's equipment and operations.

Al and Sandy's family is not unique. The Powder River Basin is currently home to miners from Arizona and Nevada to Minnesota and Colorado who moved to Gillette seeking work when other mines closed. Except for those with skills that transfer easily to other industries, such as mechanics or electricians, miners are concerned that they would have a difficult time finding well-paying work requiring their skills. One equipment operator wryly asked, "How many places do you know where the majority of your workforce drives multi-million dollar, giant trucks for a living? Where else, besides a mine, am I going to be able to get a job?"

Donna found herself in this precise situation after an injury forced her to quit her job as an equipment operator, and the experience reinforced her conviction that kids her son's age need to go to college:

Stay in college. Get your degree. Have something to fall back on just in case coal mining doesn't work out for you, or it's not what you want. I don't have any computer training. I started in school a long time ago, and I wish I would have finished it. Because I was doing well in it, I enjoyed it, I would have had a career to fall back on now. So no matter what, get a career to fall back on.

By sending their kids to college or trade school, miners and their spouses hope that their children will be trained with skills that transfer easily among multiple, more stable industries (cf. Reno 2008: 137-189 on autonomy, class and kinship in the U.S.)

Finally, miners also encourage their kids to continue their education because they recognize the decreasing opportunities for people with only high school educations to "get ahead." Sitting around the lunchroom one day, a group of middle-aged men were discussing their efforts to convince their kids to go to the University of Wyoming or the

local community college. When one of them reasoned, “We were the last ones who could make a decent living without having to go to school,” his coworkers nodded in agreement. Al felt similarly. Even though he sent both of his daughters to college, he realized that it is not right for every kid.

But you still need to send them to a trade school or something. The days of people making my kind of wages right now are limited. I don’t think in the future that people with a high school education are going to be able to make that kind of wages. I think as time goes on, you’re going to find that even a bachelor’s degree is run of the mill. I think it’s going to be pretty hard for them to succeed with a high school education.

In his own experience, he found that when the uranium industry crashed in the town where he grew up, those jobs were not replaced by other well-paying industrial jobs but by minimum-wage service ones: “They’re Wal-Mart kind of jobs, fast food jobs.”

The assessment of the blue collar labor market made by Al and his peers is on target. Real blue-collar wages were stagnant during the 1980s and actually fell during the 1990s, recovering their 1981 levels only in 1997. After a brief period of moderate increase from 1998 to 2002, they have since remained flat (Lawrence 2008: 17). In fact, since 1986, the real wages of blue-collar and service workers have risen just 1.1 and 1.4 percent in the U.S. On the other hand, the real wages of white-collar workers have increased by 11.1 percent over the same period, with executives experiencing a 14.4 percent rise (Norris 2006). Powder River Basin miners have experienced these economic trends first-hand, seeing their originally very high wages and benefits fail to keep up with rising costs of living and wages in other sectors. Along with other blue-collar workers, they also realize that if the mines were to close, it would be nearly impossible to find those kinds of wages in other industries. As factories increasingly outsource previously well-paying and often unionized assembly jobs, American workers – even autoworkers,

one of the most strongly unionized and highly compensated groups – have difficulties finding comparably skilled, well-paying work with which to support their families and maintain their middle-class consumption patterns (Dudley 1994). In fact, during my fieldwork, Gillette officials were actively recruiting under- and unemployed Michigan autoworkers to move to the area and work in the rapidly expanding energy and construction industries. Walking around the break room before the start of shift, I was often taken aback by the number people were wearing hats and tee-shirts from the University of Michigan, where I was attending graduate school.<sup>91</sup>

These three primary criticisms of local working conditions and the larger labor market animate the miners' insistence that their own children – and their coworkers' children whom they come to know through working with them in the summer – attend college or trade school. The paradox of this situation is that the older generation is socializing the younger one to understand, appreciate and temporarily carry out the mine work that the students are in the process of leaving behind by pursuing a college education, the primary requirement for participation in the program. The miners explicitly encourage this leaving behind, repeatedly telling the temporary miners that “we work here so that you don't have to.” This attitude prompts deeply felt, conflicting emotions for members of the younger generation, who are being told to love their parents but not follow in their footsteps.

Chloe, for example, struggled to reconcile her appreciation for her father and her dislike of her job at the mine:

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<sup>91</sup> In fact, the sheer number of people who had moved to Wyoming (primarily Gillette and Rock Springs) from Michigan was evident in a poll taken by ESPN regarding the 2006 University of Michigan vs. Ohio State football game. According to their map, only two states in the entire country predicted a Michigan win: Michigan and Wyoming.

By the time I started college, he'd been working at the mine for 18 years. So for me to just buck up and work there for four months, I figured it was the least I could do. He had been paying for everything. You feel a certain sense of guilt knowing he'd been working nights and doing difficult but mind-numbing work, so for me to just buck up and work there for four months, I figured it was the least I could do to help pay for my expensive private college.

Like Chloe, very few children of miners anticipate that they will follow in their parents' occupational footsteps, in no small part due to years of advice from their parents and parents' coworkers. These explicit instructions to avoid work in the industry is striking given their own family histories of mining and the more general history of the U.S. coal mining industry, which was once characterized by familial apprenticeship systems in which a job was one of the things handed down from father to son (Long 1989; Montgomery 1987). These attempts to break familial occupational ties are not limited to the Powder River Basin. The American news media coverage of the mine disasters at Sago, West Virginia, in 2006 and Crandall Canyon, Utah, in 2007, included interviews in which miners and their family members explained that they no longer wished to see their children get mining jobs. These interviews suggest that discouraging mine employment for their children serves as a way for mining families to criticize industry practices. At the same time, however, limited job opportunities and dissatisfaction with higher education sometimes propel their children into the industry against their own best wishes.

*The replication of unintended career paths*

Most of the miners in the basin originally intended to stay at their jobs for five years, after which they would look for other opportunities in different places. Now approaching their twenty and even thirty-year anniversaries at their jobs, they laugh when thinking about how unintentional their employment paths were. This experience frames their hopes that their children do not end up inadvertently getting stuck in a “temporary” mining job, and it is especially pertinent given that many miners themselves replicated, either consciously or inadvertently, the career paths and family lifestyles of their parents.

At the time of our interview, Ray was just about to reach his thirtieth anniversary with the coal company. I had previously explained to him that I was interested in writing about the family lives of miners, and he began our interview by tracing his family history of mining back to his Irish-English grandfather who was a coal miner in Colorado:

They coal mined for 35 years in southern Colorado. My mom grew up in the mining camps. And then one of his boys actually went into the mines as a little boy, my uncle John. My uncle Bob, too. Well, he worked, you know, you’ve seen them old coal mine movies? He’s one of those little boys that worked down in the mines. And then I’d be the next generation of coal miners. How I did it I don’t know, man, I didn’t have any interest in it. Must be in the blood.

Like Ray, some miners with family histories in the industry use metaphors of blood to understand this continuity of occupation, imagining that both kinship and their proclivity for mine work is passed on through the substance of blood and runs through their veins (cf. Feeley-Harnik 1999; Ferry 2005; Finn 1998; Miller and Sharpless 1985).

Whereas the metaphor of blood naturalizes similar occupational choices, other miners pointed to socialization and lack of other job opportunities as their reasons for working in the industry. Kelly has been one of the most respected equipment operators on her crew for the last twenty years. She grew up in Montana as the daughter of a copper mine employee. When the company shut down the mine while she was in

college, they transferred her father to a molybdenum mine Nevada. She worked there in the same department as her father for a summer. She later tried getting hired on full-time because she was unsatisfied and uninspired in school, but the company did not hire her because they did not want to encourage other students to drop out of school. After working as a waitress in the casino industry for a few years, the mine started hiring again and she went back to work there full-time. When the mine shut down in the mid-1980s, she was transferred up to a mine in Gillette.

The frequency with which many mines open and close has prompted miners to create around the western U.S. that can be mobilized to find work in the industry. Al also grew up with his dad working in the mining industry, first in maintenance and then in operations. After trying college, he moved back to his hometown in central Wyoming in the late 1970s to work in the booming uranium industry. He eventually started working for the same company as his dad, but left that job to return to school. After finishing his degree in diesel mechanics, Al and his wife moved to Gillette in the mid-1980s when they realized that the uranium industry was not going to emerge from the bust that began a few years before. The same slump had hit the coal industry, however, and jobs were difficult to find. Al was hired on at a new mine by virtue of a connection from his previous work in the uranium mine:

A good friend of mine that I knew from the uranium mine was selected to be one of the foremen at this new mine.... They hired 30 employees, and I was one of the 30 that got hired. They'd looked at over five or six hundred people, so I was pretty fortunate that I got hired. The man that recommended me, I'd worked with him out at the Gas Hills. He knew my work history, he knew what kind of mechanic I was, and knew that I took a lot of pride in my work and that I'd been working on machines and that I'd be reliable. And he got me the interview, and I ended up getting the job. I remember it was pretty exciting for my wife and me.

Years later, Al's brother also moved to Gillette to work as a mechanic for the same company. The two men's mother Martha believes it is no accident that her sons followed a similar career path as her husband: "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised because they've got the same mind. I just think it takes a special person to be a mechanic, simply because they have to tear it all down, then they have to be able to put it back together and figure out what was wrong with it." At the same time, she points to limits of this biological explanation in noting the scarce job opportunities around their town. "When you stop and think about it, the only work that was around here was mining." Al agrees with her, citing the lack of other appealing job opportunities as his primary reason for working in the industry.

The lure of excitement and financial rewards of booms also drew many people into the industry. Jerry's father had worked in the oilfields his entire life, moving his family around the country until settling in Gillette during the 1960s oil boom. He attended college in Colorado and Wyoming for a few years, but never found a major that interested him, so he moved back to Gillette to work in construction and then mining. He remembered Gillette in the 1960s as a "brawling bar fight, muddy, ugly town with only two paved streets." But as his father worked his way up, the family eventually moved out of a trailer into a house. "And that's the way the whole community went. Gillette is a good community now, with good, talented people. I moved here in 1968 kicking and screaming, and I've been defending this place ever since. It's a great place." His siblings also settled in the area and all have jobs or spouses connected with the mining industry, and at the time of our interview, he was contemplating his own retirement from the mine.

Like Jerry, many miners remember their first years in the industry as wild. Kelly drew a comparison between the subculture of recreational drug users in the casino and mining industries. “There were people who had never driven a haul truck sober until they’d been out there a few years. Same thing in the oil field. For the most part that’s all changed, besides catching the odd person here and there, but there was just rampant drug use in the mines when I first started.” Other miners I met relished the chance to recount stories about the stupid things they and their coworkers had done while stoned at work.

Al linked the wild atmosphere at work in his first mining job with the boom and the excess of money and job opportunities:

It was an exciting time back in the late 70s. We were making good money, and everybody had lots of toys and lots of fun. It was a crazy time, you know. A lot of young people. Guys that were in their 40s, I remember thinking that they were way old. Our mine was gearing up and had done a lot of hiring, and everybody was young and people were spending a lot of money on booze and drugs and fast cars, and oh, it was crazy! The town was a wild place back then, and the mine was just as wild. People were smoking dope on the job and drinking beer on the job, and running around with guys’ wives that they were working with. You know, everybody was partying hard and they were living fast. Man it was wild. A lot of money. People weren’t used to that kind of money. Everybody had fancy cars. I had a lot of fun back then, but it was nothing like it is now with drug testing and showing up to work.

Kelly also remembered enjoying the prosperity of her new job. “I bought myself a new Trans Am. I’d waited 24 years, hoping, and no one else had bought me a new car, so finally I just gave and bought my own. So there I was, cute chick in a cool car!”

Both Kelly and Al emphasize the fleetingness of this time, however. Kelly said,

I finally settled down, paid attention and learned how to drive a truck. I became good. And then it was a real source of pride for me. You know, a lot of guys, are like, ‘Who cares about truck driving?’ Truck driving is what makes you the money. That’s what puts the bread and butter on the table. Sure, it’s nice to be a big boy, a big dozer hand, but come down to it, first and foremost, the trucks are what make the money.

For Al, the transition happened when he started working long hours for a contractor who was opening the new mine:

Once we moved to Gillette, and I started working all these hours, I lost my interest in spending a lot of my free time drinking. My days off were too valuable and my time off it meant so much. I had things that I wanted to do, and being hungover was not something I wanted to do on my days off. We were working six days a week, and I worked a lot of overtime.

While some miners – and even some entire crews – still enjoy going out to the bar after a series of shifts, the majority have slowly moved away from that lifestyle in order to focus on their families or hobbies.

A few prominent patterns emerge in comparing the life histories of Gillette miners. Many of them speak of family histories of mining, although it seems that work in the industry was just as likely to scatter family members across the western U.S. through boom and bust cycles as much as it provided a means for staying in the same place (cf. Malone 1986; Rohrbough 2004; Smith 1967). It also seems that even though most people were not consciously trying to follow in their parents' footsteps, they ended up in the same line of work due to limitations of local job opportunities and dissatisfaction with college. Although many enjoyed the initial excitement associated with the "wild" boom times, the majority eventually began having children and settling down into more stable career paths and lifestyles.<sup>92</sup>

Most miners hope that their children do not have to endure the cycles of booms and busts as they did. Yet even though miners strongly encourage their own and their coworker's children to avoid working at the mine permanently, a significant number of summer students do drop out of college in order to work full-time at a mine. In so doing,

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<sup>92</sup> This finding suggests that the Gillette Syndrome can be partially attributed to a cohort effect, as all the major articles about it were published while the majority of the town's workers were young and had yet to start families.

they inadvertently or consciously replicate their parents' career paths and family arrangements, just as their parents did so a generation before. Not only are the socioeconomic climates similar, as the energy boom of the mid-2000s holds similar promises of wealth and excitement as did the one in the 1970s, but many of the miners' children have found the same dissatisfaction with higher education as did many of their parents. Like many other former summer students who eventually returned to Gillette and worked in the mines, Christie explained that she got a full-time mine job because she did not graduate with a degree that inspired her. "So I kind of moped around the house for a month. And then I realized this is stupid. I can go to work at the coal mine and make tons of money. So I went to the coal mine... and I just called em one day and asked if they had any openings and they said come in the next day, and I had a job." She said that she hopes to go back to school one day, but she's "burned out" of formal education.

After she started seriously dating the man who would become her husband, Christie sought a transfer into the office so that she would have a more regular schedule. She found it difficult to spend time with him because he was working at a different mine and was on a different schedule than her own. In thinking about her childhood, she remembers how her own mother adjusted her schedule to revolve around her father's shiftwork. "If he was working nights, we'd go over to her friend's house and play cards. We'd go shopping, buy what we wanted to buy and go have lunch. That was her way of getting her time because when he came home, it was more focused on him." She now does the same thing in scheduling her own social activities. She thinks that because she and her husband both grew up with shiftworkers, they have had an easier time handling the schedule. "I know people that are having a hard time with it. If you're not used to it

and marry into it and you don't know, to me there's more of a chance of people not making it." Christie and her husband eventually hope to save up enough money to quit their jobs at the mines and move onto his family's ranch outside of town.

The experiences of people such as Christie and Melissa show that despite the hopes of their parents, a college education does not necessarily guarantee that they will avoid work in the mining industry. If young people wish to stay in Gillette, the best opportunities for high paying work are often tied to the industry their parents have encouraged them to leave behind.<sup>93</sup> This work may be appealing because at the same time as miners jokingly and seriously tell their own children and the summer hires that they never want to see them at the mine again, they do instill a sense of pride and appreciation for mine work in the summer hires. To conclude, I consider how learning to understand and appreciate their parents' labor may be a way for parents and children to mend their relationships after years of being out-of-sync due to shiftwork.

### **When home becomes like work**

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild has become one of the influential theorists of the mismatch between the ideals and realities of everyday work and family life in America. After theorizing the "second shift" (1989) as the stressful domestic duties that women in dual-career couples must complete after working outside the home, she has since turned to critique what she perceives as home becoming like work and work becoming like home (1997, 2003). Her interest in this topic was sparked by her observation that although men and women expressed a desire to spend more time at home and with their children, they

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<sup>93</sup> The other primary career opportunities for young people are teaching in the school district, working for the hospital or becoming involved in a small business.

were putting in more and more hours despite more “family-friendly” workplace policies. She finds that many employees spent more time at work because it was there, and not the home, where they found rewarding and comparatively less stressful family-like relationships. She argues that women’s increasingly long work hours have increased time pressures on everyday family activities so much so that parents have imported Taylorian time efficiency from the factory into the home (1997: 45-49).<sup>94</sup> In this scenario, home becomes the locus of stress about organizing and completing onerous tasks, compelling many workers to seek rewarding kin-like relationships at work (1997: 44). At the same time, companies embrace and encourage the positive family-like work relationships as strategies to recruit and retain workers, increase production and gain an edge over their competitors (1997: 42-3).<sup>95</sup> Hochschild is concerned that private life will become evermore “devalued” as Americans increasingly find at work the emotional satisfaction usually associated with the family (1997: 198, 44).

This paradox would seem to be especially pertinent for thinking about social relationships in Gillette, as I have shown in this chapter that miners experience stresses in maintaining their family relationships at home, and in the next chapter I will show how they create much loved “crew families” at work. Here, however, I will suggest that even though the official purpose of the summer student program is to provide the mines with

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<sup>94</sup> Henry Braverman (1998 [1974]) most famously criticized Frederick Winslow Taylor’s scientific management for separating manual and mental labor.

<sup>95</sup> Hochschild emphasizes that this development is a direct strategy of capital to reproduce itself: “If a family gives its members anything, we assume it is surely a sense of belonging to an ongoing community. In its engineered corporate cultures, capitalism has rediscovered communal ties and is using them to build its new version of capitalism... In this new model of family and work life, a tired parent flees a world of unresolved quarrels and unwashed laundry for the reliable orderliness, harmony and managed cheer of work. The emotional magnets beneath home and workplace are in the process of being reversed” (1997: 44). While it would prudent not to romanticize family life, Hochschild does identify significant shifts in the ways in which people manage their time and create social relationships.

temporary workers during seasons in which their full-time employees take vacation and to provide their employees' children with money to attend college, the participants have also turned the program into an opportunity to mend the family relationships stressed by years of shiftwork. This development offers more hopeful spin on the work and family dilemmas so compellingly documented by Hochschild.

In talking about growing up, almost all of the summer students remembered either their father or mother being absent due to their job at the mine. Chloe said that all she knew about her father's work when she was growing up was that he worked far away and got home late at night. "The only thing I really knew was that it took my father away from home, but I didn't know anything at all about what he did. All I knew was that the mine was a place where you were married to the job and always worked constantly."

Similarly, Callie remembered that all she knew about her father's work was that

he was a mechanic and that he worked out at the mine. It was a different shift. He worked shiftwork, and that was one thing that you had to adjust to. It adjusted our home life. He ate dinner at a different time than we did. He got up at a different time than we did. He just had a different schedule. That was one of the main things you knew because you can't see where he works, you can't go bring him lunch. It's a very removed world from the family.

The summer she worked at the mine, however, she came to understand and appreciate how hard her father worked and how important his work was to the entire operation.

Before working there, "I didn't understand his reputation out there. I didn't understand at all how much people respected his work. I guess being girls we never worked with him, like on a car, where we would have learned to appreciate that." During her summer at the same mine as him, she gained "a new appreciation for what he did and how big the mine was. Like, he was working on a truck and I got to ride in it. I actually knew what he was talking about and what he was doing." She also learned how stressful that kind of work

could be. “You were always in fear that you were going to do something wrong and get fired. I didn’t understand that until I worked there, that it was constant, not pressure, but knowledge that if you did something very wrong you’d get fired because you weren’t safe.” She also thoroughly enjoyed meeting his coworkers. “I looked forward to the days we were there together. He could show me off to all his little buddies and they’d make fun of me.” For example, after she told them that she worked in buildings and grounds, a lot of people would tell her that the lawn looked bad, knowing that mowing it was her job. Then they would usually let her in on a funny story about her dad. She understood and appreciated that this joking was a way of showing affection.

Christie also grew up with a father who worked shifts. Like Callie, she never understood his work until she worked at the mine herself as a summer student. “I didn’t know what the heck was going on. I mean, we’d have company picnics and stuff but it’s never the same as actually doing it.” She remembers that her father would come home from work and while they were eating dinner, complain to her and her mother about the stupid things different coworkers had done during the shift. “But you don’t have any concept about what he’s talking about because you don’t know nothing, and you don’t know those people.” That changed after she started working there. They become closer through sharing knowledge about the mining process and the people who worked for the company. “He was proud of me. He knew I was doing a good job. Like, ‘Yeah, this is my daughter.’ And every time we’d go talk to someone, it was like they know us both now. Plus I could go home and complain about something and he would know what I meant. That all brought us closer.” She also came to appreciate his reputation as one of

the nicest shovel operators onsite, especially since he would load trucks even if they had parked under his shovel crookedly.

Miners share the same positive appraisal of the summer student program. Al thought the program was important in giving young people an opportunity to “get out and see where their mothers and fathers work, save a few dollars for college, and get out in the workforce and see what’s going on.” He enjoyed being able to take Callie out to see the loader that he always worked on and introducing her to a few of his crewmembers. “She got a chance to see what a coal mine was like and save some money. I was glad to see her out there. It was fun to see her in a hard hat and coveralls and sunglasses.<sup>96</sup> And I did take her out for a ride in the loader one afternoon.” He is proud that her old crewmembers enjoyed working with her so much that they still asked him about what she was doing.

Thus it seems that aside from the money for college and trade school, one of the main benefits of the summer student program is its potential to reconnect miners and their children through shared work experiences. I would suggest that this appreciation rests primarily not in the technical knowledge learned over the course of the summer, but in the iconicity of feeling it generates. Working with Apache on the San Carlos Indian reservation, David Samuels (2004) coined the term iconicity of feeling to refer to an iconic, or perfectly duplicated, experience of emotion in a separate but recoverable time and place. In terms of his fieldsite, the Apache experience “Apacheness” when they conjure up a feeling of what it meant to be Apache in the past. In terms of my fieldsite, the iconicity of feeling links the emotional experiences of the new miners – their initial

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<sup>96</sup> His daughter dressing in the same clothes and equipment as his might have been significant for Al because it created an iconic link between them.

fear and nervousness, their tiredness prompted by the rotating shift schedule, their weariness in going to work to do heavily routinized work and yet their pride in doing a job well done – with those of their parents. The summer student program might be so popular because this shared empathy is hard to access without working at the mines themselves.

I would like to take this analysis one step further. The parents and children both speak about “really knowing” or “really understanding” their parents for the first time through the work experience. These comments seem to suggest that even though the community generally relies on a biological model of “real kinship,” they also have a conception of the achieved and processual nature of kinship described by Carsten and others. Instead of considering their relationships as complete at birth, as suggested by biological conceptions and rigid genealogical diagrams of kinship (Ingold 2000), the miners seem to value the creation of ties of relatedness over time and acknowledge their potential fragility. Summer employment appears offers the potential for miners and their children to reconnect in a way that does not challenge the parents’ strong wishes to see their children seek work elsewhere, as the work is ideally temporary. Importantly, these strengthened relationships carry forward beyond the summer.

This finding suggests a more hopeful spin on Hochschild’s accounts of home becoming like work and work becoming like home. My research confirms that the home has become subject to the stresses of time efficiency usually found in the workplace in the form of assembly line meals, rigid activity schedules and feelings that chores are never fully done. However, it also suggests a more optimistic corollary: the re-translation of meaningful kin-ties from work to the home. One of the biggest appeals of summer

work in the industry is the possibility to reconnect with the parents who were largely absent or grumpily sleep deprived due to shift schedules while their children were growing up. In other words, work becomes not just an escape from the pressures of home, but an opportunity to mend otherwise disrupted and stressed family relationships.

## **Conclusion**

The space between the families envisioned and enacted by the Powder River Basin miners and their spouses is one of creative tension. While these families acknowledge and oftentimes celebrate the hard work that enables them to raise children, the family life they imagine does not include twelve-hour rotating shifts that require some members to miss out on the daily rituals of creating relatedness. Nor do such visions include the uncertainties associated with boom and bust work cycles or declining opportunities to make a good wage with a high school education. These criticisms of their current situation directly inform the ways in which they encourage their children to attain a college degree or advanced technical training. They hope that by endowing their children with the ability to embark on a career of their choosing, they will be able to navigate the economic pressures of work to make their future family lives look more like the ones they value.

This chapter has demonstrated the interdependency of home and work in the Powder River Basin. A gendered division of labor in the mining workforce, when paired with a rotating shift schedule, has created a gendered division of labor in many homes, and the challenges women miners face in balancing home and work responsibilities are so great that many women in their twenties and thirties have decided not to raise children

of their own. Additionally, the parenting practices that miners and their spouses have developed are linked both to their ideas about workplace mentorship and their critiques of current labor conditions. Finally, work in the mines can help miners and their children to reconnect after years of being out of sync. Yet kinship at the mines is not limited to parents and their children, as kin-like ties also animate relationships among coworkers who share rhythms of time and leisure, substances such as food, and joking practices. I turn now to a more in-depth examination of the miners' crew families and their relationship to the company families envisioned by management in order to theorize the work that idioms and practices of relatedness perform at the mines.

## Chapter V

### Kinship at Work

The members of G crew were uncharacteristically silent the first morning I spent with them in March 2007. They milled around the large room making coffee, filling up water bottles, reading newspapers and chatting, but there was none of the good-natured ribbing or boisterous laughter that I had become accustomed to at the other mines. A small group sat down around me, and their conversation soon explained their rather disheartened behavior: a well-liked member of their crew had recently died. They remembered him for always smiling and asking everyone how they were doing, and told me that they were such a close-knit crew that everyone attended his funeral. They found the eulogy his daughter gave particularly meaningful. “She said that we knew him as well as their family did because our crew is like a family,” commented one of the youngest miners. “She’s right. We spend more time with each other with than our families at home. We become our own family.”<sup>97</sup>

This conversation points to the miners’ conception of their workplace relationships as kin-like. Throughout my initial employment as a temporary summer worker and later ethnographic research as a graduate student, I witnessed and participated in countless ordinary activities that created, reinforced and transformed workplace

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<sup>97</sup>As historian Alf Ludtke (1985: 309) writes: “On the job, factory workers did not simply operate their tools and machines, or cooperate with each other in various ways – they also, literally, lived together for long hours at a time. This physical contact, this ‘being-together-in-the-same-place,’ must be related to the rest of life on the shop floor, to those endless uncertainties that constantly molded workers’ experiences.”

relatedness. I saw how the miners' crew families provided them with the tools to make their work meaningful and enjoyable in a working environment popularly (but not locally) portrayed as the bastion of alienation and exploitation. I also observed that the corporate officials drew on but differently deployed the same idioms of kinship to integrate the miners into more hierarchical corporate families that the miners creatively maneuvered within and outrightly challenged. These practices and many more conversations prompted me to think critically about the role that kinship, usually relegated to the private sphere of the home in EuroAmerican thought, was playing at the mine, and what it might mean for more general anthropological theories of work and relatedness.

Recent innovations in anthropological approaches to kinship and relatedness shed light on the processes through which the miners craft crew families through the everyday sharing of time, food, drink and jokes. At the same, these practices draw attention to significant gaps in this research, primarily its overlooking of the workplace as a key site for the processual creation of relatedness. Studying workplace relatedness helps to disrupt easy binary associations between men, work and rational self-interest on the one hand and women, home and altruistic love on the other.

I begin this chapter by arguing that studying workplace relatedness both sharpens Marxian accounts of alienation and helps to disrupt the heavily gendered analytical distinctions between public and private spheres and the distinct motivations for social action assumed to animate them. I then turn to an ethnographic account of the Wyoming miners' crew families, tracing both the substance and non-substance based processes through which they craft relatedness with one another. In particular, I present joking

practices as an avenue through which miners create these relationship and argue that this perspective offers a corrective to current trends in theorizing sexual harassment and the integration of women into the mining industry. Finally, I examine the sometimes contradictory attempts corporate officials have made to integrate miners into their version of a company family. They have tried to focus these practices around the question of safety – arguing that the miners’ family obligations oblige them to watch out for one another – while limiting the other arenas in which relatedness matters. Many go so far as to argue that employees should “leave their emotions at home.” At the same time, however, I show that miners have been able to challenge this attempted regimentation of relatedness and bring questions of kinship directly to bear on perceived corporate emphasis on production rather than workers’ wellbeing.

### **When work becomes like home**

Questions about social relationships and the meaning of work that have inspired scholars ranging from Karl Marx to Donald Roy and Paul Willis. A strand of critical Marxian theory moves away from a focus on surplus production (e.g. Burawoy 1979, 1985) to focus on alienation, understood not simply as the separation of workers from the products of their labor, but more broadly from what Marx calls the species being (Marx 1977 [1844]; Ollman 1971; Postone 1993).<sup>98</sup> Marx argues that alienated labor deprives

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<sup>98</sup> The difference in these two approaches is clear in Burawoy’s (1988) dramatically different reinterpretation of Roy’s ethnography compared to Handelman. His analysis revolves around Roy’s game of “making out,” or trying to complete as much piece work as possible to get the bonus wage differential, or in other words, to achieve levels of production that earn incentive pay. Burawoy argues that the shopfloor culture revolves around this game: “It was in terms of the culture of making out that individuals evaluated one another and themselves” (1988: 203). Burawoy notes that Roy was skeptical at first because the game “appeared to advance Allied’s profit margins more than the operators’ interests... Once I knew I had a chance to make out, the

workers of the imaginative human potential to engage in creative work and form meaningful relationships with other workers and nature (1971 [1844]: 82). He famously described alienated labor as that in which the worker “only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home” (Marx 1977 [1844]: 74). Marx references the dichotomy between home and work to critique the contrast between the social relationships typically associated with these two social spheres.

But what happens when workers and company managers consciously endeavor to make workplaces feel more like home? Close ethnographic attention to workplace social relations shows that affective ties among employees can push against the alienating tendencies of contemporary work, as people laugh, tell jokes, create nicknames and invent covert shopfloor games to entertain themselves and craft friendships with coworkers (e.g. Canning 1996; Dudley 1994; Hamper 1986; Halle 1984; Roy 1959). As Paul Willis writes,

Though one must always take account of regional and occupational variations, the central thing about the working class culture of the shopfloor is that, despite harsh conditions and external direction, people do look for meaning and impose frameworks. They exercise their abilities and seek enjoyment in activity, even where most controlled by others... This is the same fundamental taking hold of an alienating situation that one finds in counter-school culture and its attempt to weave a tapestry of interest and diversion through the dry institutional text. [1977: 52]

Even in the most potentially alienating of working conditions, people find creative ways to infuse their working activities and relationships with meaning. In the Powder River

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rewards of participating in a game in which the outcomes were uncertain absorbed my attention, and I found myself spontaneously cooperating with management in production of greater surplus value” (Burawoy 1988: 203). In focusing on the implications of Roy’s ethnography for the creation of surplus value, he misses out on the other social dimensions of Roy’s work that form the basis of Handelman’s analysis.

Basin, these strategies hinge on the creation of what the miners call their crew families. Even a brief glance at popular media reports on workplaces reveals that many people in the U.S. consider their coworkers to be a type of family, but few academics have examined in detail this phenomenon and its implications for everyday life.

Theorizing the ways in which the affective ties of kinship animate contemporary workplaces contributes to recent scholarship attentive to the ways in which relationships of love and family, often discursively relegated to the private sphere, are tied up in state and capitalist projects (Berlant 2000; Butler 2002; Lemon 2004; Povinelli 2006; Stoler 2002). Concerning the workplace in particular, scholars have documented the ways in which corporate paternalism – in which executives and managers utilize idioms of kinship, specifically parent/child relationships, to frame their interactions with workers – has been a corporate strategy to create stable, loyal and productive workforces and to avoid intervention by governments and unions (Jacoby 1997; Lichtenstein 2002). Henry Ford’s “five dollar day,” which integrated workers into the “Ford family” on management’s terms, exemplifies heavy-handed corporate paternalism in the United States (Gramsci 1997 [1891-1937]). Workers received the full five dollars only if they were deemed to have performed efficiently and to have developed an appropriate family lifestyle that was evaluated by the company’s “sociology department.”<sup>99</sup> Critics of such management styles point to the dependent and subservient roles company patriarchs assign to workers who are likened to children, the condescension inherent in management defining the best interests of their employees, and the crosscutting of solidarity by

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<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, Ford used the high wages to justify major transformations in the labor process (more accelerated, more repetitive and less varied work) and to encourage company identification through the workers’ ability to purchase cars (Meyer 1981; Richardson 2006: 173).

vertical identification with managers instead of coworkers (e.g. Brodtkin and Strathmann 2004; Finn 1998; Jacoby 1997; Lichtenstein 2002; Montgomery 1987).

Perhaps as a strategy both to defuse these criticisms and seek out a competitive edge through Total Quality Management techniques, many companies have shifted their efforts to creating new workplace families that are ostensibly based on flattened hierarchies and empowered workers. Attempted implementations of such initiatives have been critiqued for being so superficial and profit-minded that significant gaps emerge between stated goals and actual practices (Argyris 1998; Ciulla 2004; Johnson 2006). At the same time, Arlie Hochschild (1997) documents a more successful case in which this type of program actually resulted in workers choosing to spend more time with their family-like coworkers than their spouses and children at home (cf. Baron 2006: 150-1 on labor histories of workplace social bonds sometimes outweighing those of family). Faced with increasing stress at home, employees invested their emotional energy and time into their workplace families, which were cultivated by management in order to retain workers and increase profitability (Hochschild 1997: 42-4, 204). Male managers sought to position themselves – and were recognized by employees – as father figures in order to make their workplaces seem like home. Located squarely within the ideals of Total Quality, these father figures were supposed to provide emotional support for their employees without treating them paternalistically, though Hochschild also documents the limits placed by productivity on such behavior (1997: 63-5). Hochschild's research underscores the point that scholars cannot simply dismiss corporate efforts to create workplace families as inauthentic or superficial, as employees actively engage and sometimes transform these programs.

Because they tend to be focused on men's activities in the workplace, studies of corporate idioms and practices of kinship could possibly disrupt the analytic binaries of public and private, work and home, masculine and feminine persons, and rational and altruistic action. Yet so far they have not done so because these programs are construed as rational, profit-oriented endeavors, thus corresponding with dominant conceptions of social action in the public sphere. Upsetting these dichotomies requires attention to men and women's caretaking and kin-making practices.

Sustained theoretical attention to men's caretaking activities both in the home and at work is seriously lacking (Gutmann 1996, 2007; Townsend 2002; Yanagisako 2002) and usually limited to their activities as breadwinners (e.g. Coontz 1992; Halle 1984).<sup>100</sup> This scholarly trend is especially true for ethnographies of mining communities.<sup>101</sup> For example, in her research in a Mexican cooperative mining community, Elizabeth Ferry (2005) deftly unpacks the gendered symbolism associated with men's responsibilities for building houses and working in ways that preserve jobs for their sons and grandsons. However, for Ferry and other scholars, analysis of the gender ideologies underpinning these practices does not usually involve men's caretaking practices *within* the homes they provide (Gutmann 2007: 147).<sup>102</sup> In Chapter Four, I documented the many ways in which male miners care for their families at home: they watch children on their days off,

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<sup>100</sup> Psychologist Stephanie Shields (2002: 11) suggests that the lack of attention to men's emotional lives can be traced back to dominant conceptions of "emotions" themselves being gendered feminine.

<sup>101</sup> Janet Finn (1998: 143) offers the most detailed account of the emotional ties built among miners in her empathetic account of a man who lost his partner and, after a period of mourning, still could not go back to work in the area where he was killed (cf. Ferry 2005: 115; Goodell 2002).

<sup>102</sup> Bonnie McElhinny (1994) suggests that whereas women are expected to project warmth and cheerfulness in their emotional labor (Hochschild 1983; Kanter 1977), men are often expected to project negative emotions such as threats or none at all in the case of rationality and impersonality (1994: 163)

assist and sometimes take total responsibility for cooking or cleaning, and play an active role in extracurricular activities through coaching sports, leading youth groups and attending events. I argued that shiftwork makes these activities difficult but not impossible. In this chapter, I trace the multiple kin-making and caretaking activities that men engage in at work, both horizontally with their peers and vertically with company representatives.

### **Making crew families**

This section examines the creation of the miners' crew families. While noting the ways in which this process is accomplished through exchanges of substance – primarily food and drink both on and off the worksite – here I also theorize a non-substance based practice: engaging in joking relationships. I conclude by drawing out the implications of this research for thinking about alienation and workplace sexual harassment.

### *Substance*

Ethnographic research suggests that food sharing is a powerful way to recognize the personhood of others and create relatedness with them. Janet Carsten argues that “feeding (in the sense of receiving as well as giving nourishment) is a vital component in the long process of becoming a person and participating fully in social relations... kinship itself is a process of becoming” (1995: 223). Helen Lambert (2000) takes a similar approach in her ethnographic interpretation of kinship practices in North India, theorizing the inequalities produced through such practices. “It would seem that who eats and drinks with whom, a form of sharing substance... operates as an idiom for expressing

degrees of relatedness between persons... In other words, those whom one feeds are those one cares for and who thus are – or can be – relatives” (Lambert 2000: 84-5).

Although the majority of these studies have been centered in homes, a few ethnographic studies suggest that such practices might accomplish comparable things in workplaces.<sup>103</sup> In his study of a small group of naturalized American factory workers, sociologist Donald Roy (1959) identified a variety of “times,” characterized by the sharing of food and drink, which helped the men manage the tedium of their jobs. These included the “coffee time” that marked the beginning of the working day for the earliest arriving workers; “peach time,” which accompanied the last worker’s arrival; the entertaining “banana time,” in which one worker consistently “stole” the fruit out of another’s lunch pail; “lunch time” initiated by a practical joke of tampering with the clock; “fish time,” in which the two workers who originally shared coffee then took a break and shared pickled fish; and finally “Coke time,” in which the workers took turns buying canned soda for one another. In this research, Roy’s primary concern was theorizing the link between group interaction and job satisfaction.

Anthropologist Don Handelman (1990) subsequently reinterpreted Roy’s original ethnography to account for the ways in the different times served as dynamic frames for

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<sup>103</sup> In his study of the New Jersey plant workers, David Halle (1984: 141-2) noted the importance of shared meals in bringing workers closer together: “In every section except the packaging plant, men have installed cooking facilities – a refrigerator and a stove or hot plate – on which they prepare meals each day. Usually these are not very elaborate, for most groups are too near chemical fumes for leisurely eating to be pleasant. But the workers in the warehouse, which is far from centers of production, cook on a grand scale. Each day they prepare a large meal, the menu for which is enthusiastically debated the day before. About 11:00 AM they all sit down for lunch prepared by two workers who particularly enjoy cooking. Men invite friends from throughout the plant.” He then quoted workers who described in great detail the coordination these events took, especially who brought which items. They also pointed out that workers in other areas were jealous of their meals: “But you make too many enemies. Guys in the plant say, Why didn't you invite me?” (Halle 1984: 142).

social action. Following Roy, Handelman argues that through these times, “the protagonists reinvented the working day as an integrative framework of sociability” (Handelman 1990: 104; cf. Bateson 1972 and Goffman 1974 on frames). Whereas Roy’s account gives the impression that these “times” were implemented somewhat mechanistically, Handelman argues that the sequence of activities “contained its own power of reproduction” and should thus be treated as a “synthetic framework for action that reproduced itself through time” (1990: 104). Most significantly, he argues that the frame of the integrative times established a “master context of reciprocity, mutuality and solidarity for interaction in the workplace” that framed the ways in which conflict and opposition were to be interpreted and handled (1990: 109). For example, the daily sharing of coffee set the frame for the rest of the day’s interactions that included mock conflict, such as the stealing of the banana and the tampering with the machines and clocks.

A similar process is at work in the mines. Many miners arrive to work early, due to either their own preference or the company’s bus schedule. After a trip to locker room to pull on coveralls and gather their tools safety gear, most proceed to a common area, either a hallway or room. Without fail, someone has started a pot of coffee that is shared among the group, except perhaps for those prefer to sip tea, soda or an energy drink. This time provides the crew with a chance not just to strategize the working day, but also to socialize face-to-face, a rare opportunity given that for the rest of the shift most of them will be confined to their own pieces of equipment. Using Handelman’s vocabulary, this “integrative” time frames the rest of the day’s activities, which include similar times of solidarity (lunch and coffee breaks) as well as those characterized by conflict, both mock

(such as practical jokes) and real (such as serious arguments). Before the mines switched to twelve-hour shifts, many miners also marked the end of the working day by drinking a beer during the car ride home or at a local bar. These events made them feel like family. “We were just like family back then,” remembered Jack, who was now contemplating retirement. “We’d just pull our trucks over wherever we were and get out and have lunch together. Sometimes we’d even cook things on the engines since they were so hot! And then we’d drink together on the way home.” Laughing, he explained, “People would bring six packs in the morning and hide them outside the gate or along the road, and we’d pick them up on our way home.”

This integrative framing process also animates the common ritual of “bringing doughnuts.” At all but the largest mines, operators who get their equipment stuck in the dirt and require assistance from their coworkers to free themselves are expected to bring in doughnuts for the entire crew the next day.<sup>104</sup> A few supervisors and operators interpret the custom negatively as punishment. As one supervisor explained to me, “I don’t support that whole doughnuts deal. It’s hounding people. A lot of the guys don’t like it. It hurts their feelings. You think they’re cast iron but everybody’s still human.”<sup>105</sup> Many others, however, make a dramatically different interpretation. “It’s just a fun little thing we do,” said a middle-aged equipment operator. “It’s not meant to embarrass anyone. If we give you a hard time, that means we care about you.” He then pointed out that everyone, even the most experienced people on their crew, had brought doughnuts in at least once or twice in their career. “Everybody’s done it. You just do it,

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<sup>104</sup> At the smaller and medium-sized mines in the basin, this would require bringing in no more than two or three dozen doughnuts. At the largest, however, it would mean bringing in seven or eight dozen.

<sup>105</sup> This comment is also interesting because he seems to be arguing that miners have feelings that can be hurt even if they not perceived as such.

smile when people give you a hard time, and then everybody moves on.”

Handelman’s interpretation of Roy’s ethnography helps to understand the dynamics animating this custom. When equipment becomes stuck, it introduces potential conflict into the minesite. Not only do the stuck operators fall behind in their own tasks, but the people who come to their rescue have to temporarily abandon theirs as well. These situations also raise the possibility of assigning blame for the mistake. Did the shovel operator ask the stuck truck to back into a soft spot, or did the truck driver miss the shovel’s mark? Did the dozer operator fail to take care of a soft spot on the dump, or did the truck driver fail to take proper evasive maneuvers? Bringing in doughnuts to share with the entire crew provides an overarching frame of integration to interpret the potentially disintegrative situation.<sup>106</sup>

As significant as these daily events are, I would also like to expand the scope of this discussion beyond the single working day to theorize larger scale integrative rituals. Each time someone retired from a crew I worked on or studied with, their supervisor brought in cake or ice cream for the entire crew to share on that person’s last day. Their coworkers usually brought in additional treats, such as breakfast foods on day shifts or desserts on night shifts. The size of the mine condition how elaborate these celebrations are. For example, during my first summer as a temporary employee, the mine where I worked had only two crews made up of less than ten people each. On my last day, the

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<sup>106</sup> This perspective might also help to understand the practice of miners bringing in food for the entire group to celebrate a person’s individual achievement. For example, during my research one of the newest loader operators reached a personal best that the experienced workers considered a benchmark of excellence. One of them brought in doughnuts for the entire crew to celebrate, perhaps not just to recognize that individual’s achievement, but also to emphasize that his accomplishment did not disrupt the overall harmony of the crew. This fits into a larger tension between the competition among coworkers to do well and the value they all place on remaining a cohesive, generally egalitarian group.

entire mine shut down to come together in the main office to eat cake and ice cream, socialize and tell funny stories about my time there. Such an event would be unimaginable at larger mines. In fact, by the time I returned two summers later, the mine's workforce had almost tripled. Many of my coworkers brought in muffins, doughnuts and coffee cake the morning of my last shift, but the bigger celebration took place offsite when they all took me out to a local bar after we had clocked out. One of my coworkers had taken me under his wing that summer, making sure that I stayed safe and had a good time. As he bought me a Bud Light he said, "We're going to miss you, kid. You're just like a daughter to all of us."

Crews also use food to mark major transitions. At one of the mines, the crews went under a major reorganization during my time with them. Such events are relatively rare since people prefer to stay with the same crew and because management does not like to reorganize without good reason. On the last night before the major reorganization in which the majority of my crew was being transferred to new crews, the supervisor asked his wife to bring in pizza for the entire group during our lunch break. Sitting down together in the office for a hot meal instead of eating sandwiches alone in equipment or in a makeshift shack in the pit provided a welcome break from the night shift and an opportunity to talk about the impending changes. After people had told their favorite stories of funny things their coworkers had done and began preparing to go back for the rest of the shift, the crew's unofficial leader summed up the mood of the room: "It's been a pleasure working with all of you. I know we've all had our moments, but you guys really are family to me."

*“Blue-collar comedy”*<sup>107</sup>

As much as these exchanges of food and drink are crucial for creating a sense of relatedness in the mines, they do not exhaust the full range of ways in which this process happens. In the previous chapter, for example, I argued that the miners’ iconic temporal alignment with their crews – sharing basic rhythms of sleeping, waking, eating, working and playing – contributed to miners feeling like family with their coworkers. I now turn to another significant modes of creating workplace relatedness that is not predicated on the exchange of substance: joking relationships. Not only are these practices ethnographically significant, they contribute to a growing critique of the proliferation of substance-based approaches to kinship. After her very influential early essays, Carsten (2001; 2004: 133) later documented the “use and abuse of substance,” cautioning anthropologists to be more specific in the ways in which they use the category. Recently, Sandra Bamford (2007) argues that the turn to substance maintains many assumptions about EuroAmerican biological relatedness.<sup>108</sup> In contrast, she argues that Kamea relatedness does not rest on physiological reproduction, but on ties people form with the nonhuman world, such as land and trees (Bamford 2007: 6, 13). Scholars have also decentered biological-based notions of family by turning to “caretaking” as a form of creating relatedness (e.g. Borneman 1997; Carrington 2002; Weston 1991). In this section I offer joking as another key mode of crafting relatedness.

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<sup>107</sup> This subheading is a play on the stand-up comedy tour that revolved around rednecks and working folks and featured Jeff Foxworthy, Bill Engvall, Ron White and Larry the Cable Guy. The tour, begun in 2000, was so popular that it generated a live album, a DVD, a movie and a cable TV program.

<sup>108</sup> Kath Weston argued this point earlier, stating that “a cumulative focus on interrogations of biology and science, in the absence of an equivalent interest in connecting some different and less familiar dots, suggests that the new kinship studies is still indentured to kinship in the time-honored sense of the term (2001: 152).

Jokes and joking relationships have been theorized by anthropologists as both producing consensus (e.g. Radcliffe-Brown 1952) and disruption (e.g. Douglas 1975; Oring 1992).<sup>109</sup> Studies of jokes, gender and working places have tended focus on masculinized joking and its role in maintaining the social order. Willis (1977: 53) influentially argues that the “intimidatory humor” of the masculine shopfloor contributes to the reproduction of England’s capitalist class society. He suggests that where the alienated labor has “emptied work of significance from the inside, a transformed patriarchy has filled it with significance from the outside. Discontent with work is hinged away from a political discontent and confused in its proper logic by a huge detour into the symbolic sexual realm” (1977: 150). Specifically, he argues that for the “lads” – the working class young men who get factory jobs after disengaging from the bourgeois school system – sexism in the form of jokes, beliefs and practices helps them give meaning to and maintain their work: “A division in which they take themselves to be favored (the sexual) overlies, becomes part of, and finally partially changes the valency of a division in which they are disadvantaged (mental/manual labor power)” (1977: 148).

Labor historians have extended this line of research by documenting and theorizing the ways in which masculine joking practices have contributed to the formation of masculine identities and workplace solidarity. In summarizing trends in labor historians’ approaches to masculinity, Ava Baron concludes that for such scholars, “Sexualized humor was another vehicle for ‘doing gender’ and solidifying fraternal

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<sup>109</sup> See Seizer for an excellent critique of “romantic theories of the innate subversiveness of the joke” (2005: 199, 401 n. 16). Radcliffe-Brown emphasizes stability and “social equilibrium” (1952: 108) in his theory of joking relationships. “The theory is here put forward, therefore, is that both the joking relationship which constitutes an alliance between clans or tribes, and that between relatives by marriage, are modes of organizing a definite and stable system of social behavior in which conjunctive and disjunctive components... are maintained and combined” (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 95).

bonds at work” (2006: 152; cf. Collinson 1988; Halle 1984: 180-5; Vaught and Smith 2003 [1980]). Beyond contributing to the formation of male workers’ subjectivities and relations, Baron argues that these joking practices also involve a degree of coercion: “Men perform their masculinity through jokes and pranks, even while they also use humor, tricks and horseplay as means to pressure others to conform to heterosexual norms and gender practices and to punish them for deviance” (Baron 2006: 153). Management theorist David Collinson (1988) also draws out the “darker side” of shopfloor humor by arguing that as much as humor can be a display of individual and collective “resistance,” it can also be a means of demanding authority and asserting control (cf. Halle 1984: 185; Iacuone 2005).

Both Baron and Collinson highlight the conservative aspects of joking relationships, particularly in documenting their contribution to the preservation of particular forms of male privilege in blue-collar workplaces. The majority of the studies cited by these two scholars, however, were based in exclusively masculine workplaces, raising the question of how women’s shopfloor presence might reinforce or challenge these theories.

Scholars of mining industries in particular have suggested that these joking behaviors have systematically marginalized women in the industry. These studies tend to equate sexualized joking with sexual harassment or discrimination. For example, Suzanne Tallichet (1998, 2000, 2006) suggests that the men at the mine where she studied engaged both verbal and practical jokes as a form of “male bonding.” She argues that these practices simultaneously “‘otherize’ and ‘sexualize’ women so as to reaffirm men’s dominance” (2006: 47; cf. Vaught and Smith 1980; Yount 1991). While

acknowledging that harassment lies in the “eye of the beholder,” she also suggests that the women who profess to enjoying the “sexist” jokes or at least accepting them as a part of their initiation into the workplace suffer from a double consciousness (2006: 46). Drawing on Patricia Hill Collins’ (1990) foundational articulation of black feminist thought, Tallichet argues that such women have adopted the thinking and manners of the dominant group in order to survive conditions of relative oppression (2006: 47).

It seems hasty at best and offensive at worst to assume that women who participate in sexualized workplace joking behavior either are the victims of either harassment or dual consciousness. The experiences of many Wyoming miners prompt a reconsideration of conventional theories of sexual harassment in blue-collar workplaces. In the following pages, I discuss the myriad ways in which men and women engage in joking relationships with one another at the mines, taking care to neither romanticize the jokes as either inherently subversive nor indict them as the bastions of social stability and male privilege. Rather, I show that joking practices comprise a key means for both creating workplace family relationships and critically evaluating the behavior and intentions of other coworkers.

### **Microwave outlaws and other workplace pranksters**

As the existing scholarship would predict, joking practices can create solidarity among workers as opposed to management. The best example from my fieldwork involves a story so funny to the miners that every single member of one crew recounted it to me. One of the managers decided that the pit operators should not have a microwave in their break room because it could encourage them to be late returning from lunch. The crew

was upset because they felt professionally and personally insulted: they were not often late and every other area of the mine had a microwave to make hot lunches. After the manager took the microwave up to the office, the crew's unofficial leader promptly drove to the onsite warehouse, got another one, and took it back to the room. During one of his rounds a week later, the same manager found the new microwave and threatened the entire crew with locking up the break room (which also had their coffee machine and water cooler) and making them eat lunch by themselves on their equipment if he found one there again. The next day, an as yet unnamed person showed up to work early and posted signs around the office that said, "When microwaves are outlawed, only outlaws will have microwaves" – a clever play on the National Rifle Association slogan well known by the miners, many of whom were avid hunters.

Needless to say, the signs were quickly taken down, and the joke was interpreted by the managers as one of insubordination and bad attitudes rather than a legitimate critique of workplace policies. The manager threatened to put the person who posted the signs on "step," a disciplinary technique. But after the pit crews expressed their frustration by intentionally following every safety rule to the letter and thus slowing down production for two weeks, the manager quietly let it be known that he would no longer be stopping by the break room during his rounds in the pit.<sup>110</sup> The microwave was just as quietly replaced, and the crews returned to their normal levels of production and microwaved lunches.

Although scholars have tended to focus on these kind of "us versus them" joking relationships (e.g. Collinson 185-6), the majority of joking practices in the basin did not

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<sup>110</sup> This work to rule strategy is a common theme in labor history, in which workers bring about the changes they seek by slowing down production while still preserving their jobs (since they are not technically doing anything against corporate policy).

rely upon nor invoke labor and management divisions.<sup>111</sup> Instead, they revolved around relationships among miners who considered themselves to be part of the same crew family. Like many other summer students who put on their hardhats only to discover that their coworkers had surreptitiously filled them with ice, water or butter, I enjoyed my fair share of jokes first as an employee and later as a researcher.<sup>112</sup> On my first day as a truck driver, my trainer and I had a discussion about politics in which he learned that I tended to lean more to the left than the right – a position that was rare not only in Gillette, but especially in the mines. With a straight face, he told me that the only other Democrat onsite was the shovel operator I had just met. Excited, I approached him the next day before the start of shift. As our coworkers were chatting and settling into their chairs for the pre-shift meeting, I said to him, “So I hear you’re the only other Democrat out here.” Eyes wide and face red, he composed himself enough to correct me as the entire room burst out laughing, cueing me to realize that I had been tricked. I quickly learned that he was the staunchest Republican and biggest fan of radio pundit Rush Limbaugh on the already conservative minesite. The shovel operator turned our interaction into a joke that would be repeated throughout the summer when he started calling me “Leftie” on the radio and requesting that I reposition to the right. Other jokes continued during my two summers as a truck driver, as I returned to my truck after a break to find that the much-needed air conditioning had been turned off in favor of full-blast heat; when other drivers honked their horn in an attempt to get me to leave the shovel early; or when the water

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<sup>111</sup> For thoughts on why this division is less salient in the Powder River Basin mines, see Chapter Three. Both offer an extended discussion of the role that cowboy imagery, particularly notions of independence and non-exploitative work plays in shaping relationships between corporate officials and miners.

<sup>112</sup> Butter was the crowing glory of this type of hardhat joke. Water and ice are usually discovered the second the unsuspecting person puts their hardhat on their head, but it takes a miner hours to figure out that they’ve been buttered since it takes the substance hours to melt.

truck operator sprayed my newly washed windshield just in time for it to be covered with coal dust from the hoppers.<sup>113</sup> Like many of my coworkers, I interpreted these acts as gestures of belonging and trust, especially since the people who first played jokes on me were the ones who had originally “adopted” me onto the crew by engaging me in conversation and introducing me to others. To return to Handelman, these caretaking activities provided the integrative frame that helped us interpret these actions as jokes rather than attacks.

Nicole, who has been operating equipment in the mines since the 1990s, similarly considers her closest friends at the mine to be those who she can “joke around with.” Her memory of her last day of work before transferring to a new mine highlights the importance of jokes in constituting relationships. One of her favorite things about her old crew was something they called “Sing and String.” Whereas truck drivers are expected to back up completely to the berm so that their loads of overburden fall over the side, “stringing” refers to the practice of leaving the dirt in long strips on the top of the dump. Because this causes extra work for the dump’s dozer operator, the act can be either malicious or funny depending on the strength of the relationship between the dozer and truck operators. Nicole’s crew had turned stringing almost completely into a joke. The twist their crew developed was that they also composed songs that could be silly or tell a story about the dozer operator, and then they sang it over the radio while stringing dirt everywhere. “It was fun,” she said. “I would just laugh so hard when someone did that to me.” On her last day with the crew, she knew that she had to Sing and String. “So I

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<sup>113</sup> The loading procedure at most mines involves a system of shovel horns that direct the truck driver so that neither has to spend unnecessary time on the radio. Each mine has a little bit different system in which specific numbers of honks signal the driver to do something: reposition closer, reposition further away, stop backing up, and leave.

made a nice little song and everybody was in tears and then all I could do was say ‘Okay’ and then string out a little smiley face on the dump. And it was just fun. It was just a good time.” Just like the crew who shared a hot meal on their last night together before being scattered onto new crews, Nicole intended for her joke to leave her coworkers with a sense of close ties.

Nicole suggested that distinguishing well-intended jokes from those that were more malicious depended both on the intention of the person and on the closeness of the friendship they shared. Christie, who was originally hired as a summer student, learned this distinction quickly. She became an aficionado of practical jokes as she stayed on at the mine as a full-time employee and loves recounting stories of good jokes that she played on others or had played on her. Laughing, she explained how she turned a somewhat distant coworker into a friend:

Wherever I work I try and make people have fun. I’m always laughing, I’m never down or anything. So there’s this one time this guy on my crew is wearing these coveralls, and they have big pockets in the back. He always wears coveralls. So I got a cup of water – and see with coveralls, you can’t really tell anything until it soaks through or you sit down – so I took a cup of water and poured it in its back pocket. And he was walking around and you could kind of see the water jiggling. And then he sat down for our pre-shift meeting and he’s like, “Christie!”

In this case, the joke provided an opportunity for the two of them to become closer.<sup>114</sup>

She also laughed remembering how she and her coworkers used to take duct tape – a product in abundance to keep the cabs of the older trucks functional and comfortable – and roll it into balls that they would throw at each other’s trucks in an attempt to make them stick.

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<sup>114</sup> Telling this story reminded Christie of another one in which she tried putting soda in someone else’s coverall pockets. That joke failed because it was not actually harmless: unlike the water, the soda was sticky and did not melt quickly.

Christie's favorite capers by far, however, all involved the water truck. Water trucks are haul trucks that have been modified to carry and spray large quantities of water on the haul roads in order to keep dust levels down. Unlike haul trucks, their operators do not have to follow set "runs" but can choose where they drive and when. During the summertime, Christie would make sure to visit the old water pump and fill up the tank with the "old mucky ucky gross water" before taking a drive around the pit to find an unsuspecting target to "accidentally" spray. Her favorite was to catch supervisors with their windows rolled down and then laugh with them at the end of the shift. She also liked to fill up with water near one of the "green houses" or portapotties. Once she saw someone enter the green house, she would pretend to check her sprayers and would spray down the green house while they were stuck inside. This joke was also played on me during my first summer, though my friend and coworker made sure to spray from such a distance that I did not get too wet.

Christie was clear in explaining that she only played jokes on her friends. "I like to make people have a smile on their face for the rest of the shift, you know? I guess I'm just always trying to make people happy." She found that it was harder, though not impossible, to play those types of jokes on people once she took a job in the office because they did not spend as much time socializing and becoming friends. "In the office you can't really play practical jokes because they're not practical joke people type of people. When you work with people for 12 hours, you kind of get to know the people, where with only eight hours in the day, you don't really get to socialize." She was equally clear in distinguishing those types of jokes from what she would consider harassment, or when "you know they're not doing it for the joke." She said that she had

never been harassed because her coworkers were like family to her. “That’s the thing about it because when you work with people for 12 hours they become your friends. And they’re there to protect you. That’s the whole thing. We’re a team... Once you get to know people, you’re just a family.”

Practical jokes are rarely used to punish or alienate coworkers since jokes evoke closeness and the preferred method for dealing with people one does not like is to ignore or disengage them.<sup>115</sup> Lenny, a longtime equipment operator who was hurriedly counting down the days to his retirement, told his crewmembers and me one of the only of these such stories. After being spilled on when someone put a bowl of water disguised as coveralls and paper towels in his locker, he watched the person he suspected of authoring the prank every morning on the bus until he noticed him take a nap with his work boots off. Stealthily, he emptied two packets of Kool-Aid into the boots without the person noticing. After sweating in them all day, the man returned home and failed to notice that his socks were red. “His wife got pissed at him for staining the carpet!” celebrated Lenny, who then explained that the guy’s feet stayed red for two weeks and he ruined eight pairs of socks. Lenny laughed and asked the guys sitting with us, “You think he ever tried getting me back?” The rest of his coworkers were laughing along with him,

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<sup>115</sup> Al, for example, loved telling a story of a practical joke that also taught a lesson. One guy at the mine was constantly late to the bus, nearly every day, because he always wanted to take an extended shower, dry off and comb his hair. The people waiting for him were mad because they did not want to extend what was already a 15 hour day. One day, one of his coworkers decided to play a joke on him using Never Seize, a lubricant which miners use to keep nuts and bolts from getting rusty and help get equipment pieces apart. One little drop of the stuff, Al noted, ends up everywhere like an inkspot. For the prank, someone put a few drops of Never Seize on the perpetually late coworker’s towel. They were imperceptible, but when the man dried off, the silver paste spread all over his body and through his hair. “He came on the bus and he was spitting nails because he was so mad!” remembered Al. “If he would have known who’d done it, he would have whipped them!” Al chuckled and concluded, “Every time I see Never Seize, I think about that guy and laugh.”

and the story prompted one of the younger workers to tell one of his own. Explaining that he used to work at a saw mill, he said that one time he and his friends put green paint in everyone else's gloves because no one checks them before they put them on. "They had green hands for three weeks! Man, that was funny. I miss those guys." The younger coworker made no mention of his acts being inspired by ill feelings or revenge, so I would suggest that in telling his story, he subtly reframed the original one told by Lenny to emphasize the positive, relationship-building aspect of practical jokes.

### *Rethinking harassment*

For Christie and nearly all of miners in the basin, jokes help both to break up the monotony of their working days and to create close, family-like bonds with coworkers. These types of relationships rarely appear in the existing literature on women miners, however, which tends to focus on issues of sexual harassment. Even though women in the western U.S. have participated in the mining industry in large numbers since at least the late 1970s, the challenges faced by Appalachian women seeking and retaining work in the coal industry have largely come to define the academic agenda for researching women in mining. The few scholars who focus on American women miners have highlighted their struggles with sexual discrimination and harassment, a move that dovetails with the efforts of the Coal Employment Project, an advocacy group for women coal miners founded in 1977. While these efforts are certainly laudable, they do not exhaust the full range of women's experiences in the industry.

Tallichet (1998, 2000, 2006), for example, draws on research at a central Appalachian coal mine to argue that both the organizational and cultural practices of the

workplace discriminate against women. Specifically, she suggests that the creation of a sexualized workplace and gender-identified tasks prevents women from advancing into better-paying and safer jobs. Within this framework she interprets sexual harassment as a strategy for men to reinforce the masculinity of minework and to maintain their dominance over women (2006: 40, 60, 146, 155).

In her research in western underground mines, sociologist Kristen Yount concludes that harassment is a means of expressing male domination and managing the stresses engendered by working conditions (2005: 66; 1991: 405). Her work is notable for theorizing both the overlaps and distinctions between harassment and what the miners term “razzing.” Some women like being razzed and consider it one of the highlights of their days, not a form of harassment (Yount 1991: 415, 2005, 68). Yet razzing can hold multiple and contradictory meanings for different people, and even the most enjoyable razzing can escalate into harassment (Yount 2005: 66-8; 1991: 400). To account for this ambiguity, Yount eventually collapses the two into a term she calls “harazzment”: a hybrid category of harassment and razzing that includes everything from playful and humorous jokes to hostile behavior (2005: 66). This term is helpful in identifying a continuum of practices whose interpretation varies according to specific individuals and contexts. Yet collapsing the two terms seems problematic since they refer to different sets of intentions, contexts and interpretations.

The concern held by both Tallichet and Yount that harassment disadvantages women in the workplace corresponds with Catherine MacKinnon’s (1979) foundational argument that sexual harassment is illegal because it constitutes sex discrimination under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Yet MacKinnon established a model of sexual

harassment in which “the harassers are always male, their victims always female, and their mode of harassment always sexual” (Anderson 2006: 307).<sup>116</sup> This formulation raises complications for thinking about practices that fall outside of this paradigm, such as the treatment of gays, lesbians and transsexuals as well as aggressive horseplay among men and non-sexual harassment of women (Anderson 2006: 288-9). Especially pertinent to the present discussion of the Wyoming mines is the question of sexual banter in the workplace. Philosopher Elizabeth Anderson identifies the difficulty in labeling such behavior harassment because it is not clear that it constitutes discrimination, and she cautions that regulating expressions of sexuality could threaten sexual autonomy and impose heterosexist norms on people with queer sex/gender identities (2006: 289, 291).

In this vein, scholars have called for more nuanced theories of the “unwelcomeness” standard and consensual sexual activities at work (Anderson 2006: 300). Sociologist Christine Williams and her colleagues argue that “sexual harassment and sexual consent are not polar opposites, in contrast to the assumption of much legal theory. Instead, they are interrelated and overlapping moments in a complex and context specific process” (Williams et al. 1999: 77). The insight that personal definitions of harassment vary according to context is further complicated by studies showing that workers were more likely to label sexualized behaviors harassment when they took place within a situation of asymmetrical power relations, such as those between employees and bosses or customers, or within a situation in which the “perpetrators” were members of a racial minority (Guiffre and Williams 1994, but compare Welsh et al 2006).

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<sup>116</sup> Yount does complicate simplistic understandings of harassment by offering examples of tomboy women harassing men, which she interprets as a way for them to win acceptance (1991: 416).

Anderson neatly summarizes the challenges of theorizing sexual harassment by arguing that the goals of normalizing the wrongs of sexual harassment; investigating its causes, effects and meanings; and matching experiences of harassment to legal frameworks are in tension with one another (2006: 285). This insight calls for fine-grained ethnographic investigations into local processes of defining and addressing “harassment.” Such work also provides a necessary critique of some generalizing tendencies in the literature. For example, Tallichet (1998: 131) draws on three small case studies to posit the pervasiveness of sexual harassment for women working in non-traditional blue-collar occupations. James Ferguson makes a similar argument by presenting some *Zambian* male mineworkers’ sexualized banter as “only a specific instance of an only-too-familiar global pattern of working-class male sexism” (1999: 188). What I find in my research is not another example of some purported globalized working-class misogyny, but a complex field of relations in which women and men carve out spaces to engage in meaningful work and social relationships. Participation in workplace relationships requires intricate social knowledge to judge and manage the social frames that help distinguish joking and harassment.

### *Crafting camaraderie*

The women miners who most enjoy their work speak fondly about their close relationships with crewmembers. Carrie’s explanation echoes those of many miners: “We’ve worked together so long that we’re one big family. We support each other and take care of each other. Sure, we might have our disagreements, but what family doesn’t? We still couldn’t imagine working with anyone else.” As I have shown, miners

integrate themselves into these workplace families not spending time together, but by actively crafting camaraderie with their crewmembers. Participating in both practical and verbal jokes comprises a key part of this process and also raises pertinent questions about the distinction between enjoyable sexualized banter and harassment. The ways in which the miners distinguish these two types of behavior constitutes an organic critique of much of the academic literature surrounding sexual harassment in male-dominated blue-collar occupations.

To further elucidate these differences, I focus on the experiences of two women, Mary, a longtime mine employee, and Daisy, a relatively new miner. During interviews, comments about sexual harassment were most often sparked not by personal experience, but by their criticisms of the 2005 film *North Country*, which was based on Lois Jenson's pathbreaking sexual harassment lawsuit against a Minnesota mining company (Bingham and Gansler 2002). Both Mary and Daisy argued their experiences had nothing in common with the harassment portrayed in the film. "Things aren't like that out there," said Daisy. "People don't do dirty and disgusting things to each other." When asked what behaviors they personally would consider harassment, they first mentioned unwanted physical touching by a member of the opposite sex, especially someone in a position of authority. They also included the exchange of sexual favors for better job assignments or promotion, including when they were initiated by a woman pursuing her supervisor. In fact, during my research the most forceful criticisms of harassment were aimed at women who, as one miner put it, "use their sexuality to get ahead." Men and

women miners alike reserved their harshest criticisms for women who were believed to have slept with their superiors in exchange for the best jobs and training opportunities.<sup>117</sup>

Miners in general did not take offense to the explicit drawings and derogatory comments sometimes found in the pit's portable bathrooms unless they targeted a specific person. But most significantly, neither Mary nor Daisy considered cursing, bathroom humor or sexualized jokes harassment, even though these are all practices that many scholars and advocates would assume constitute sexual harassment. Like many women miners, these women value these interactions as essential sites for crafting positive social relationships and often regard them as the most fun part of their day. "They make fun of me," said Daisy. "I like it. It cheers me up, gets my day going. They watch out for me." Mary enjoyed recalling tales of good practical jokes, including one in which someone bumped into the back of her blade back when she was first learning how to operate it and was still "thinking through every action." She was so taken aback that she immediately got on the radio and started "yammering" about how something was wrong until she realized what had happened and began laughing along with the coworker who had instigated the joke. A few years later, she had an opportunity to play the joke on someone else, which gave her great satisfaction. Mary aptly explained the differences between sexual harassment and joking:

Camaraderie. I love that word because of what it builds. It's more friendly, building a trust, because they know that I'm not going to go to HR [Human Relations]... You have to know the person first, then you build and you can say whatever you want – body humor, sexual jokes, whatever – because you know each other. You're not going to run off to HR.

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<sup>117</sup> While it seems as if this practice does actually happen – women who engage in romantic relationships with superiors often end up with more training opportunities and better equipment assignments – the prevalence of it seems exaggerated, perhaps because it serves as a way to police women's social behavior and encourage them to act like "one of the guys."

These positive experiences support the efforts made by Williams and her colleagues to distinguish pleasurable sexualized workplace interactions from harassment.<sup>118</sup>

The few instances in which women and men labeled behavior harassment involved the verbal degradation of another worker's skills on the basis of their gender. In fact, the only incident during my fieldwork in which crewmembers labeled an action as sexual harassment was when a male equipment operator, before the start of shift, said, "Women should mind their men." Daisy, the only woman present for the comment, interpreted it as a statement that she did not belong in the mine and thus as an insult to her skills as an equipment operator. The comment was particularly hurtful to her because she took pride in her good work reputation. The men on the crew eventually reported the incident to their supervisor not only to support her, but also to encourage him to stop "running off his mouth" and "trash talking" his coworkers. At his supervisor's prompting, the man apologized to the entire crew, an action appreciated by his male and female coworkers alike.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> These jokes could comprise what business sociologist Rosabeth Kanter (1977) calls a "loyalty test." As it was for Mary, one of the major distinctions men and women at the mine make when discussing their coworkers is whether they will turn you into Employee or Human Relations, the office at the mine which handles sexual harassment claims. Men and women miners alike acknowledge that sexual harassment does happen, but they speak bitterly about a few women who, they believe maliciously, have turned in coworkers for sexual harassment to advance their own career or punish someone they didn't like. They spoke about these women as if they had "sided with management" over their peers. In this way, seemingly sexist jokes are not always used to heighten differences between men and women, but they can also serve to incorporate men and women into a single group opposed to management.

<sup>119</sup> The only time sexual harassment came up during my own ten months of employment as a temporary miner was when one of my friends on the crew wanted to get one of our coworkers fired. Before the shift, the unpopular coworker had been reading personal ads and making many sexual innuendos, and my friend thought that me turning him in for harassment would be a perfect opportunity to get him disciplined, if not fired. He later changed his mind and asked me not to turn the man in because it would be hypocritical, saying that he also was guilty of saying inappropriate things. This event is significant because it points to the ways in which miners strategically define behaviors as harassment based on the broader picture of social relations.

These experiences draw attention to the benefit of combining studies of sexual harassment with fine-grained ethnographic research into local conceptions of workplace relationships, particularly the frames that help participants interpret the significance of practices and distinguish between joking and harassment (cf. Geertz 1973 on distinguishing winks from blinks). In their everyday interactions, both women were less likely to label jokes harassment if they had already established a family-like friendship with the person telling them. In my research, the miners explicitly argued that the family-like relationships precluded the sexual banter from being interpreted as harassment and the instigators of these interactions as being labeled harassers. Daisy said that she did not consider herself harassed when engaging in joking relations because her coworkers “look at you as part of a family, not someone you’d date. They thought of me like a daughter.” When I asked her how she’d distinguish between joking and harassment, she said, “It depends on how you take it. The same joke can be offensive or not when told by different people. You have to think: Are they a part of your family or not?” She also pointed to the men’s expectations for how their own daughters would be treated: “These are nice guys, friendly guys. They have daughters, and they don’t want to them to be treated like that.” This insight is significant because even though many scholars have identified the sense of family felt by mining crews, none have used this framework to critically retheorize sexual harassment.<sup>120</sup>

Yet to say that feelings of workplace relatedness help miners to interpret behavior that might be conventionally labeled harassment as positive indications of close emotional ties does not mean that sexual harassment and discrimination do not take place

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<sup>120</sup> Tallichet (2006, 136-8) unites her observation that crews come to think of themselves as family with experiences of sexual harassment to argue that the family is the place where gender dominance is learned.

in the Powder River Basin mines. A few women miners experienced sex discrimination in training opportunities during the early years of the boom (cf. Tallichet 2006 and Yount 1991). For example, one miner remembered that women like her on her crew did not receive the same promotions that men did, and they were not encouraged by management to train to be shovel operators. “Do I think it’s a man’s world out there? It most definitely is,” she said. She said that this discrimination did not bother her as much as it would women today because she was from an era where “it didn’t matter how good the woman did at her job, they were not considered the bread providers... A woman had to prove herself and work really hard or be somebody’s girlfriend.”<sup>121</sup> Peg sought to become an oiler, the position that is a stepping stone to becoming a shovel operator, but found that some men at the mine invented seemingly impossible tasks, such as carrying heavy material straight up the shovel ladder, she had to accomplish before being considered for the job. With the help of the shovel operator who had encouraged her to bid on the position, she successfully met their requirements and became one of the first women shovel operators in the basin. Another woman who worked in billing during the early years found that when she would venture into the plant, a few men would push her up against a wall or purposefully bump into her. “I literally used my hardhat as a weapon,” she said. When she decided to leave her job for a better paying position in the pit, her boss hired two men to replace her. “And they got double my wage, plus benefits!” She complained to her boss about the discrimination in pay and he justified his decision by saying that the men had to provide for their families, whereas she did not.

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<sup>121</sup> This statement is another example of the idea that women can sleep their way to the top, discussed above in note 4 on page 5.

It is significant that in recounting these experiences, all these women were careful to limit their criticisms to specific individuals rather than miners in general. Even today, women can easily pick out the few “macho” guys on some crews that sometimes give them a hard time, but they are careful not to argue that all men are sexist or discriminatory. While some women did encounter discrimination and harassment in their attempts to seek better jobs at the mines, equally many found opportunities to advance quickly through the hierarchy of equipment assignments. Betty, for example, said that she was “hazed” when she first started, but she eventually proved herself to be a competent equipment operator and worked her way up into leadership positions in the pit. Similarly, when Patty first started at the mine she found that “women were received well.” She was the first woman to operate a shovel at her mine and found that even though she knew she would be “watched close,” she was confident that she would do the job well. “People were also very supportive and very open minded, willing to give you the chance.” In fact, she later became a well-liked and well-respected pit supervisor.

My analysis thus points to the importance of local categories and framing devices for better understanding workplace relationships, as practices that might be labeled harassment by scholars may not be perceived as such by workers. In fact, many women in Wyoming actively seek out and participate in sexualized banter in order to craft camaraderie and ties of relatedness with their coworkers. This perspective is vital for studies of gender dynamics in masculinized workplaces, as continued scholarly and popular emphasis on harassment obscure the many positive aspects of workplace relationships that inspire both men and women to enjoy and maintain their employment long-term.

## **Unmaking relatedness**

As much as miners love their workplace families, they critique corporate practices that increasingly make it difficult to enact them. At two o'clock in the morning on a winter night shift at Pronghorn mine in 2007, I was sitting in the cab of a seemingly ancient electric haul truck beside Jack, who had worked at the mine for thirty years. He seemed to enjoy our conversations, perhaps because his impending retirement had prompted extra reflection and perhaps because talking simply helped to keep him awake. "It was like family when I started," he told me. "Not kin like your family, but family because you live with them, spend half your life with them." He was upset that the current company had gotten away from being family-oriented. He said that back when management was more family-oriented

there wouldn't be any backstabbing like you have to watch out for today, someone trying to put a feather in their hat. Before we were like brothers and sisters, we would always cover each other's butt.<sup>122</sup> We were taking care of each other. If somebody did something they shouldn't be doing, you didn't tell the foreman. You'd tell them. You spend half your damn life with them. That's another reason why I want out. They have this attitude that 'I'll get you fired if it means that I can get upgraded.' They don't take care of the equipment. They're here for the paycheck, not the job, and it's dangerous.

Our conversation turned to all of the funny practical jokes they used to pull on each other before the company disallowed it, and then he compared how they all used to eat dinner together to now having to eat staggered lunches only with the other people loading off of the same shovel. Management prefers this arrangement so that shovel maintenance can

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<sup>122</sup> This language of siblingship is actually quite rare in the basin, perhaps because of its association with unions (Richardson 2003, 2006, 2007). Jack may be more comfortable using it because he is one of the few miners in the basin who grew up in an Appalachian community where the coal miners were all unionized. He never worked in the mines back home because he does not want to work underground "like a mole."

be performed while they are already shut down for lunch, instead of taking them out of the regular rounds and slowing down production.

In his conversation with me, Jack brings together many of the major themes related to workplace families that I have already discussed in this chapter: they are distinct from but analogous to kin, conventionally understood as relatives by blood and marriage and they are created over time through shared experiences of working, joking and eating together. Jack also raises two other themes that are the focus of this section: they have been both embraced and discouraged by coal companies as a part of larger management styles and they have served as an organic critique of some capitalist labor processes, such as production speed-ups. In this section I trace how miners have adapted to and transformed the visions of workplace family originating with corporate officials.

### *Company families*

“Cooperation” was and continues to be the key buzzword used by company officials to describe their philosophy of workplace relations, a discursive strategy that fits within broader anti-union or “new management” corporate activities of the 1970s and 1980s (Durrenberger and Erem 1999; Lichtenstein 2002). To recruit miners and gain their loyalty during this period, companies offered unprecedented wages and benefits that surpassed the standards for comparable unionized workplaces. They also provided unparalleled benefits that included full health, dental and vision coverage for workers and their families, plus attractive pension plans and stock options. When corporate officials visited the mines, they congratulated the miners on their high production numbers, emphasizing their value for the larger corporate family. These notions of corporate

relatedness was further reinforced through safety lunches, elaborate Christmas parties, summer picnics, and “family days” where spouses and children were invited to the mine.<sup>123</sup> Without fail, managers invoked kinship in their speeches at these events, stating that their primary goal was to send every miner home safely to their family at the end of the day. They also usually referenced the miners’ sense of workplace relatedness, encouraging them to monitor their own and each other’s safety because they were obligated to take care of one another. Companies also frequently gave miners and their families gifts such as belt buckles, baseball hats and jackets – all emblazoned with the corporate logo – as rewards for meeting production and safety standards. Many also printed newsletters to develop a shared feeling of community. Although these practices could have been interpreted as paternalistic, employees generally did not interpret them as such, perhaps because officials stressed the “independence” of the miners within these families and oftentimes drew on western imagery of independent ranchers and cowboys to characterize the workforce.

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<sup>123</sup> In their efforts to bring workers together into corporate families, managers also oftentimes engage in food-sharing activities framed with idioms of kinship. Most companies host annual summer picnics and winter holiday parties that include large buffets for the employees and their families. At the actual minesite, many host semi-annual catered “safety lunches” in which the managers sometimes help to serve the meal. These lunches are pertinent contexts for the creation of workplace relatedness given that safety programs are enmeshed with idioms of kinship. At every single safety lunch I attended as both an employee and researcher, managers appealed to kinship in encouraging the miners’ safe behavior. Not only was being safe important in order for everyone to return home to their families at the end of the day, but as a workplace family the miners owed it to each other to be safe. But these safety lunches raise a caveat concerning substance-based approaches to relatedness. Even though the miners happily consume the food bought and served by the company, relishing a hot meal and an opportunity to converse with people they normally do not see during the day, they explicitly critique the perceived paternalism and hypocrisy surrounding the corporate officials’ language and actions. Thus anthropologists studying substance should also theorize uptake: accepting nourishment even when framed by the giver as an activity creating relatedness does not always create a feeling of relatedness on the part of the receiver.

For the most part, employees appreciated these efforts because they made them feel more like people and less like numbers. As Kelly described her first years in the industry back in the 1980s, “I really felt like I was making a contribution. And it was just something that’s so simple in retrospect.” She compared the first “huge” mine she had worked at with the smaller one where she eventually settled down. Fifty people attended their morning meetings at the first mine, whereas only seven did at the second. She remembered that one day at the small mine when they were not hauling coal, her boss asked her to do some painting around the minesite.

When I got done I went into the shop and I rinsed my paintbrushes out and stuff and I put them away and everything. And then the next day when I went back in there, it was my stuff in there, and I would continue to do my job. That was like my little corner and as insignificant as it may sound, it was really kind of a big thing to me, kind of a symbol of my participation, of me being there and actually having some status as an employee. At that time, we weren’t numbers.

Miners during this time also took pride in their ability to produce unprecedented quantities of coal at low costs, and interpreted the gifts and the investment of high tech equipment as evidence that the corporation cared for them. They also found ample opportunity to make their ideas known and contribute to both small and large decisions made at the mine. “When we first started, back when there was only thirty of us or so,” said Al, “you could tell that you really made a difference.” They liked chatting in the hallway with the local company’s president, who knew their names as well as those of their spouses and kids. They took pride in their companies’ community activities and reclamation efforts. Furthermore, the corporations’ family-making activities did not preclude the miners from crafting relationships amongst themselves. In speaking about those early years, many miners rhapsodize about playing practical jokes on each other,

hiding cases of beer outside the main gate to enjoy during the carpool home, and planning potlucks at the lake or someone's home for the entire crew and their families.

Starting in the mid-1990s and continuing throughout my fieldwork, miners began to critique the erosion of the family atmosphere, much like Jack. The oil companies who opened the mines sold them to coal companies that were perceived as less generous. Many of those companies eventually went public, a move that many miners blame for further cutbacks in their treatment. While the miners never underwent a wage cut, their pay did not keep up with inflation or rise as quickly as those in similar local industries so that they found themselves making comparably less money the longer they worked. Along with many other American workers, their health care benefits slowly decreased. Companies still handed out occasional gifts, but most production and safety bonuses were converted into monetary rewards that had a less personal feel (but see Keane 2008). Christmas parties became less and less lavish until most people stopped going altogether, and family days existed only in the faded collages of pictures from years past that still hung on the walls. In fact, the summer picnic I attended in 2007 had no visible official recognition of the company. Everything from the food to the entertainment had been outsourced to a professional party company whose owner handled the microphone and directed events while his staff welcomed people to the party and served the food. None of the corporate officials gave speeches, and the generic gifts awarded as door prizes had nothing to do with the company or even coal mining. Yet none of the miners or their families seemed particularly upset, perhaps because changing labor practices had prompted them to feel less fondly toward managers who had made it increasingly difficult for them to craft family-like relationships at work.

Along with greater numbers of people – some mines have grown in size from less than a hundred to almost a thousand employees – increased production pressures make it difficult for miners to craft and maintain their crew families. Suzanne, an engineer, remembered knowing everyone when she first started:

It just used to be like one big happy family, but now people are just so busy and focused on what they have to do, it's lost its personal touch. I miss that. I don't know anybody anymore. As we got busier, with more production, I couldn't spend as much time walking through the shop, talking to maintenance technicians while I was doing my compliance observations.

She also attributes these changes to the company going public. “When you're privately owned you don't have to answer to stockholders and yeah we always watched our spending, but now it's like every nickel and dime we got to answer to stockholders.” She points out growing contradictions between the company officials' public discourses of happy workplace families and the actual workplace practices that make these families difficult to enact.

Jerry also attributes major changes in the workplace back to the company he worked for going public: “Instead of being a company that worked for the people and whatnot, now we work for the stockholders. We have to make the bottom line look good for the stockholders, so that the way they manage that money and do that's a whole lot different than a privately owned company.” He finds that with tighter bottom lines, it is more difficult to engage in the activities that used to make work fun.

That was a fun job then when you can go out there and do your job and not have a lot of pressure on you to do this or do that. It was actually kind of fun. But you can't have fun out there right now because of the demand to get the coal out – and dirt more than coal cause you've got to move the dirt first so you can get to the coal. Everybody's under pressure to do all kinds of stuff, so there's no fun there much.

He was upset that morale was so low that people who had previously worked for the company for twenty or thirty years were leaving their jobs, and he saw that more and more levels of management were being created to keep a handle on their ever increasing production numbers. He concluded somewhat wistfully, “It happens everywhere, big companies move managers in, but we’ve just now experienced that over the last few months. Now it’s just a job.”

For Jerry and Kelly, the electronic swipe cards that they now use to check in have become emblematic of their status as numbers rather than people in the company. According to Jerry, “I’ve never seen such bad morale out there in twenty years as I’ve seen over the last couple years. And the reason being is people are not getting treated like people.” Referring to the new cards that all technicians had to swipe instead of keeping track of their own hours, he said, “Right now I’ve got my little number, I put my little swiper card in. Nobody even knows who I am anymore. I’ve got my number that I clock in everyday. And I miss little changes like that. One thing or another just adds up until there’s just not a very good morale.”

Kelly also attributes changes in size and technology to an increasing sense of alienation:

Make no mistake about it: we’re not wearing suits and ties and sitting in front of a computer, but it is corporate America. It wasn’t before... Historically in mining it’s been a small community. I know people that I worked with twenty some years ago in Nevada that are up here now, and there’s guys that are like, ‘Oh yeah, I worked with him down at Lucky Mac back in ‘70 when we were just first starting.’ It’s a small little world, but now, I do have a computer screen in my blade or my dozer or my truck, and I have to log in with my employee number. And when I get there in the morning I swipe in my credit card instead of filling out a timecard... And when you see technological things coming in you feel less and less of a connection to the place where you work. I mean, there was a point when, like when your dad and I started, the mine manager knew our names. He probably knew your name, you know. And, they were there. Management was a

visible presence and it's not any more... Now you hear stories about them, but you never actually see them.

These seemingly small changes are significant for miners because they signal larger shifts in the way management treats them as people or numbers, but the miners' biggest critique and most pressing concern regards safety. People in Gillette evaluate companies based on their commitment to facilitating safe workplaces, and often choose to leave or hire on at specific mine due to their reputation for safety. Loren, along with many other miners who have worked through major corporate shifts, believes that increased production pressures have made the mines less safe places to work.<sup>124</sup> Specifically, he and other miners view changes in mining methods from truck-shovel to dozer-push operations as evidence that the company cares more about their bottom line than the wellbeing of their workers.

Most mines in the basin were opened during the midst of an energy boom, and were originally started as truck/shovel operations, in which shovels were used to remove all of the overburden in addition to the coal. As the coal's location beneath the overburden became deeper and more pressure was placed on workers to be efficient in the face of lowering prices for coal, more mines began using draglines and dozer/push methods to remove the overburden. These processes create steeper walls and deeper pits, especially when compared with the truck/shovel method and its series of wide benches. Loren, who had previously enjoyed his job and the company he worked for, became disillusioned and noticed that the morale on the entire minesite had lowered. He was

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<sup>124</sup> Compare Hamper (1986: 11): "It was all so typical of General Motors. Their priorities were often scary. It was perfectly fine for a foreman to stop the line and chew on your ass about some minor detail, but it was practically an act of treason for a worker to stop the line in order to extricate an unconscious old lady out of harm's way. Safety and Production – sometimes the two just didn't mesh."

especially frustrated because he did not believe that the company was actually saving money because they now have to leave more coal behind and rehandle the overburden multiple times.

You know, I don't know and I don't make the numbers, but that's what we think and that's why it's frustrating. Because we're in this valley, and things are a lot tighter and we're out of coal every day... It's just like when we're loading holes [to be blasted], you look up and you're standing there next to his highwall and these chunks are falling of at you and before you didn't have that. See, and our [group of blasters'] big thing is, "Well, if we ever die underneath this highwall, the name of the mine is going to be changed."

I asked him to what, and he laughed dryly: "Well, that depends on who dies!"<sup>125</sup>

Even though these developments seem dim, the miners have been able to carve out spaces to enact the workplace family relationships they desire as opposed to the more paternalistic workplace families corporate officials have tried to mandate. This process is evident in recent changes in official safety programs modeled after the miners' preferred strategies for managing safety.

### *Changing the shape of safety programs*

The negotiation of safety programs is an especially pertinent arena in which to analyze the sometimes contested crafting of workplace families, as both miners and management draw on idioms of kinship to give meaning to official programs and everyday practices. Both groups often argue that staying safe at work is important for everyone to go home to their families at the end of the shift. This rhetoric is present in workplace training, signage and pep talks, and it has even been institutionalized within the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration: the mines honored with the annual prestigious

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<sup>125</sup> The conversation in which Loren made this comment took place in November 2006, almost a year after the Sago mine disaster in West Virginia. This black humor is a form of social critique (Goldstein 2003).

Sentinels of Safety award receive a statue of a woman, presumably a miner's wife, holding a small child, awaiting the return of her husband.<sup>126</sup> Miners and managers also state being a workplace family obliges them to take care of one another. Yet in actual everyday practices, salient differences emerge between the safety caretaking spoken about and enacted by managers and many miners.



Figure 9: Coal companies often profess their commitment to safety in signs inside the mine and at the mine entrance. Photo courtesy Peter Gartrell.

As articulated by Jack above, back when the mines first opened during the peak of family-oriented companies, miners established strategies for crafting safe workplaces that also preserved the dignity of each individual. They “took care of each other” by ensuring

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<sup>126</sup> This imagery of a miner's wife is powerful but outdated and inappropriate given that large numbers of women have participated in the industry as miners since at least the 1970s.

the safety of the crew without involving corporate officials. Most miners continue to handle issues one-on-one because “it’s more respectful that way,” said Jack. “You handle it like adults instead of little kids who need someone to take care of them.” The more paternalistic “official” style of addressing safety issues indexed by this miner involves bureaucratic corporate structures. Miners are encouraged to report the incident, make a statement in front of the entire crew, or fill out a form detailing the incident. These methods privilege vertical connections between managers and individual miners instead of horizontal relationships among crews. Miners criticize these programs for straining family-like workplace relationships and treating them like children. One miner sharply nicknamed a program in which people who turned in one of their coworkers for a safety violation would be put in a raffle for a gift certificate to a local restaurant “Squeals for Meals.” Given these criticisms, many miners chose to disregard the “official” safety programs and engaged their own one-on-one strategies to address safety concerns.

Yet at various times during the course of my fieldwork, most of the mines in the basin began instituting official safety programs that reflected many of the miners’ strategies. As described in Chapter Two, one mine that had been widely critiqued for valuing production over safety facilitated an employee-designed program based on anonymous observations. A volunteer group of technicians first examined patterns in the mine’s reported safety incidents and developed a system categorizing them. They now regularly train “observers” who spend a few days of each rotation watching their coworkers perform their job tasks. During their training, they learn not only how to identify potentially unsafe practices, but also how to best approach a coworker to correct those behaviors. One of the points emphasized by observers is that the interaction should

be a give-and-take conversation framed by compliments of the miners' safe practices. Furthermore, the observed worker has a chance to respond to their evaluation, and this response should be included on the form along with the observer's remarks. The form does not include the name of the person being observed, and observers try to make sure that their interactions remain as anonymous as possible so that their identification of unsafe practices cannot be traced back to specific individuals. Miners are encouraged to engage in this process informally every time they see someone performing a task unsafely. When the peer leader of this program introduced this program to his crew, he explicitly drew on idioms of kinship: "We're all one big family out here, so we have to watch out for each other. You might want to turn a blind eye because you don't want to upset them, but we have to take care of each other."

Most miners think highly of the program because it includes two primary characteristics of their own strategies: anonymity and one-on-one, adult-to-adult interactions. They believe that there is potential for this program to significantly improve safety conditions, but most remain skeptical that management will follow through on their end. The voluntary safety team is supposed to use the forms to identify patterns of hazards and possible solutions that would, in theory, be implemented by management. Despite the corporate officials' avowed commitment to the program, many miners are waiting to evaluate the program until management actually follows through their talk about being a family by instituting needed safety reforms that could also potentially hamper production.

The trajectories of safety programs highlight the miners' active role in strategically negotiating corporate structures that could be interpreted as paternalistic.

Identifying contradictions between the corporate officials' discourses and practices of workplace kinship, they drew on management's obligation to facilitate safe workplaces characterized by kin-like relationships to craft a safety program that preserved the values they associated with crew families. This accomplishment illustrates an aspect of corporate paternalism sometimes erased in scholarly and popular critiques. Critics of corporate social welfare programs point to the dependent and subservient roles company patriarchs hand to workers likened to children, the condescension inherent in management defining the best interests of their employees, and the crosscutting of solidarity by vertical identification with managers instead of coworkers (e.g. Brodtkin 2004; Finn 1998; Jacoby 1997; Lichtenstein 2002; Montgomery 1987). Yet focusing on the critiques of corporate paternalism obscures the ways in which workers are able to maneuver within these structures to negotiate social contracts with companies:

Paternalism, owners and managers as parents over laborers, carries with it an imagining of a mutual obligation between senior and junior, between those with power to control and shape the workforce and those within the organization. This is why a simple dismissal or critique of paternalism goes too far... we cannot forget that laborers often find in paternalism a moral tone to economic relationships worthy of defense when the other option in the cold hand of the market. [Richardson 2006: 173; cf. Kalb 1997; Scott 1985; Tone 1997]

Finn's (1998) work drawing out the negotiations between Anaconda and the residents of Butte and Chuquicamata is pertinent here for studies of mining industries that are often perceived to be among the most patriarchal and heavy-handed. Corporate officials attempted to draw miners and their families on both continents into the "one great family of Anaconda," through benevolent paternalism, including lavish holiday parties, community social events, and (in Chile) company housing and stores. She argues that the idiom of relatedness did not preclude Anaconda from playing its workers in

Montana and Chile against each other in elaborate attempts to control the workforce, recognized by community members in their assessment that “the company never had a strike it didn’t want” (1998: 3). But through a close analysis of the mining families’ everyday activities and memories, she illuminates the “long history of action on the part of working-class women and men to build and maintain both autonomy and solidarity within the structures of corporate and military paternalism” (1998: 197). Careful attention to the everyday lives of miners and their families in Wyoming reveals a similar process in which community members were able to negotiate a social contract with mining companies.

#### *Regulating emotions in the workplace*

A significant contradiction in the official company families exists in the basin. At the same time as company officials in the Powder River Basin invoke notions of kinship to encourage their workers to watch out for each other’s safety, they simultaneously instruct their employees to “leave their emotions at home.” The role that “emotions” should play in the workplace figure largely in most of the new miner and annual refresher safety courses required by the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) and carried out by local companies. In these cases the term most often glosses irrational and nonproductive workplace feelings and heavily gendered family stresses that are portrayed as originating outside of the workplace. In one class I attended, we were asked to take a short personality quiz to learn if we were risk-takers, had short tempers, or were passive-aggressive. The lesson behind these quizzes is that each of these approaches is dangerous

in a workplace and should be mitigated. The ideal worker imagined by companies and MSHA is someone who is calm, cool and composed and leaves their emotions at home.

Many of these sessions also include videos about industrial safety. In each of the ones I watched, the camera sits in on a rushed family breakfast, focusing in on a man while his (sometimes pregnant) wife yells at him to pay the bills that are past due and his children stare mournfully at him as he rushes out of the house to avoid being late for work. The viewer then follows the man to work as he clocks in, takes a verbal beating from his boss and begins his shift by driving his truck or standing on an assembly line. The next series of shots usually comprises a montage of close-ups on the man's worried face with flashbacks to the scenes in the home. Often the videos end with the man getting into an accident, presumably because he was not focused on his work task.<sup>127</sup> When drawing out the themes of these videos in the class discussion, the trainers usually emphasize two things. First, emotions – understood as family stresses – should be kept at home or else workers will be hurt or killed. Second, emotions are not “productive” because they distract workers from doing the best job that they possibly can. This second theme also appears in the general safety crew meetings during the summer, fall and before each built-in monthly stretch of seven days off. Supervisors and safety personnel often warn the crew that having their mind in a different place by eagerly anticipating a week off, a summer vacation or a hunting trip can distract them from being both productive and safe while at work.

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<sup>127</sup> The emphasis on death and injury in these videos and the courses overall have led many summer students to refer to the week-long training as “death week.”

At the same time as company officials and trainers explicitly ask their employees to check their emotions at the door, however, their rhetoric of corporate kinship reintroduces the value of affective relationships, particularly when it comes to safety programs. In these cases, feelings such as caring so much about one's work family that workers do not want anyone to get hurt is actually encouraged by the company, perhaps because it is legible (able to be tracked and managed) within their categories of acceptable work practices that also contribute to their business goals of being productive and safe.<sup>128</sup>

Yet crews have their own visions and practices of workplace relatedness. Contradictory corporate policies and practices surrounding the role of emotions and affect in the workplace add to the complexity of everyday work practices as well as the negotiation of significant events such as grieving for a deceased coworker. At one mine, the crew had come in for work and found out through word of mouth that Bart had passed away early that morning. When everyone started filing in to the meeting room, two safety managers, a man and a woman, stood at the front of the room along with the crew supervisor who was normally there. The supervisor began by announcing that in case someone had not heard, Bart had passed away during the night. As she spoke her voice broke and she started visibly and audibly crying, as did the handful of women on the crew. Most of the guys sat at their tables staring at their feet or hands, not looking at

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<sup>128</sup> In this way, Lauren Berlant's (2000) work on intimacy shows that even though many scholars might consider prevalent U.S. discourses of a public and private division of social life to be a legacy of Victorian fantasies of gendered divisions of labor, this division continues to animate other social processes of differentiation: "A simple boundary can reverberate and make the world intelligible; the taken-for-grantedness of spatial taxonomies like public and private makes this cluster of taxonomic associations into facts within ordinary subjectivity as well. This chain of disassociations provides one way of conceiving why so many institutions not usually associated with feeling can be read as institutions of intimacy" (2000: 3).

anyone. Bart's best friend on the crew was not there because he was with the family, but his other closest friend, a man in his mid-60s who was ready to retire as well, sat with his arms crossed, silently crying.

The male manager broke in and said that what they should take away from the situation that you have to live life to the fullest and always watch out for each other, and that they could take a couple minutes if anyone wanted to say anything. After a pause, two women tentatively talked about how Bart was a safe worker and had always made them feel safe. The manager nodded enthusiastically and, after another pause, said that "emotions were going to run high today," and they had to "make sure that they didn't let them distract them from doing their job safely." Then one of the relatively new male hires raised his voice and said that it was a "bad deal when you didn't even have a chance to say goodbye to someone" and that he had just been talking to him on the bus last night. Henry, one of the most experienced crewmembers, eloquently said that they were all going to be going through a lot of emotions and that they were going to hit them at different times, now, minutes from now, or hours from now, and that if they needed to, they should find a safe place to pull off and take a moment to grieve because "the need to grieve surely trumps production for today." As he said this, he looked at the manager, and then made a comment that it was a concern of safety. The manager nodded slightly but added, "We've all still got a job to do."

After another long silence, one of the experienced guys made a comment that Bart always had his quirks. Everyone laughed a little, which touched off some tentative joking about some of the tricks he had pulled out there. These rolled into long stories that caused everyone to laugh out loud, and the crew started talking about his family and

sharing what information they had about his wife and kids. After a long silence, during which some people started looking at the clock because the meeting had stretched beyond the time normally allowed before they had to go out into the pit, the supervisor gestured to Henry and said that she was going to go over the plan, but like he had said, that they could take some time during the day if they needed it. Everyone readjusted in their seats and seemed a little relieved when she went into her normal routine of explaining where the shovels were and what they needed to accomplish. After she was done, Henry said that they should also keep in mind that with this intensity of emotion they might have short tempers, so be sure to be patient with one another. Then they all shuffled out, and the radio that day was quieter it had been since I started researching at the mine.

During this meeting and throughout the following weeks, the delicacy of the negotiation between the managers and the crew's unofficial leaders revealed tensions in the categories different people used to interpret and act on the death. The safety managers who normally did not attend the crew meetings did so to show that the company supported their family-like grieving process, but they also had to ensure that production did not suffer too much. It is not surprising that the first tentative attempts to remember Bart and his contribution to the crew were framed explicitly in terms of safety, since it is recognized by the company as an acceptable way to channel or show emotion at work. Nor is it surprising that the first people to publicly display grief were women, since most of the men I knew felt pressured by their understandings of masculinity and so displayed affection indirectly through joking (cf. Swain 2000). The stories they told were not about what an amazing truck driver Bart was, but how he always ran over everything from portapotties to shovel cable but managed to hide it from

their supervisor and the mine managers. These stories were also a subtle way for the crew to challenge managers' attempts to channel the emotions associated with the death through the rhetoric of safety, as they explicitly brought to light his and their successful creative interpretations or blatant disregard for the safety rules they found the most asinine. The manager was left in an awkward position to smile weakly during these stories since it would have been extremely inappropriate to either stop them or try to make an official lesson out of them.<sup>129</sup>

In the next few weeks, the crew took up a collection for Bart's widow. Everyone had just received a one hundred dollar bill from the company for making it thirty days without a lost time accident, and many of them put it directly into the envelope. In talking about the project, they framed it as a way for them to take care of his family by momentarily and collectively taking over the role of the breadwinner that had just been vacated.

These types of practices are common throughout the basin. For example, when Darla's parents died, she was still only a temporary worker at the mine where she would end up spending twenty years. Since temporaries do not receive any type of leave, she had to go without pay while grieving and taking care of their estate. "But my crew collected enough money to pay me so I could eat and keep my house. We help each other." At another mine, when the son of a couple who both worked in production was seriously injured in a car accident, the entire crew came together both to collect their

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<sup>129</sup> He was also in an awkward position telling everyone to live life to their fullest when most of the crew were extremely upset and disturbed thinking that he had spent his last day on Earth driving a truck around in circles and had not used up the vacation days he had been saving.

personal money and to convince management to match and then donate their production bonuses to the family. Instead of receiving sub sandwiches or pizza for meeting their production goals, the crew requested that the mine donate the money they would have spent on food, plus matching funds, directly to the couple in need. Every single person in the pit worked through lunch in order to keep a steady stream of money flowing to their coworkers while they took care of their son out-of-state.

Mine company officials ostensibly tell their employees to leave their emotions at home. This message is contradicted by their simultaneous encouragement that workers watch out for each other's safety because they care for one another like a family. Bart's crew made use of this contradiction to carve out time and space to grieve his passing as well as to reassert their vision of a crew family and the proper place of production in it. Yet these practices are not reserved to major events. Throughout this dissertation I point to the myriad smaller times and spaces that miners have created to treat each other like human beings. While Marx famously described alienation as the worker not being at home while at work, Ingold reminds us that "the worker does not cease to dwell in the workplace. He is 'at' home there. But home is often a profoundly uncomfortable place to be" (Ingold 2000:332). Making the mines seem like home and their coworkers like family is a key strategy for making work a more comfortable place to be.

## **Conclusion**

Membership in the Powder River Basin crew families might be so highly valued because it provides miners with the tools to make their work meaningful in the ways in which

they see fit. Miners find satisfaction in their work not from driving giant haul trucks around in endless circles for half of their lives, but in the social relationships they craft along the way.<sup>130</sup> While these interactions are often humorous – pats of butter found in hardhats, desserts suspiciously missing from lunchboxes, and nicknames that evoke long histories of inside jokes – they also provide much-needed support during times of crisis.<sup>131</sup> While not replacing the families miners support at home, these workplace families provide a key means through which miners recognize the uniquely human qualities of others, care for coworkers and engage in work they value.

This chapter has demonstrated that ideas about family, caretaking and emotions – usually relegated to the private sphere and feminine persons – in fact animate mining workplaces in the Powder River Basin. Crafting relatedness at work through sharing rhythms of work and leisure, food, and jokes comprises a key means through which

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<sup>130</sup> Miners create relationships among each other, but they also imagine larger relationships with people around the country who consume the electricity generated by the coal they produce, as discussed in the conclusion to Chapter One (cf. Dunn 2004 on women workers in Poland imagining themselves as mothers to the nation).

<sup>131</sup> Nicknames form a special subset of jokes through which the miners create family-like relationships with one another. Although some nicknames are explicitly criticisms leveled at coworkers perceived to be lazy or antisocial, most are intended to highlight an endearing or unique personality trait or recount a particularly entertaining event (cf. Dudley 1994; Hamper 1986). For example, one shovel operator earned the nickname Speedo after one summer day when the air conditioning broke in his shovel and he had to strip down in order to stay cool. Another man who liked to take leadership and had the same last name as a famous American general was called General, and a guy who always wore bandanas earned the name Rambo. A different crew called one of their members Walking Eagle because he was “so full of shit he can’t fly,” according to a coworker. The same man was also called Muffy because he thought he was a stud muffin and was so particular about his hair that he carried a comb with him at all times. Another miner was called Schwanzie after said he was going to get a job as a Schwanz delivery guy after the women on his crew talked about how they know this Schwanz guy who always gets hit on by women when he did his rounds. It is interesting that nicknames also extend to equipment, such as an old white drill is called Betty in honor of Betty White and when a LeTourneau loader that frequently breaks down is called the Latrine-O. This practice points to the close, human-like relationships many miners form with the equipment (cf. Faulkner 2000; Kleif and Faulkner 2003; Mellström 2004). Women also carry and make up nicknames, but these tend to be derivations of their first or last names rather than a one that signals a larger story or event.

workers find meaning in their working lives and guard against the alienating potential of their jobs. These efforts have prompted company officials to adopt idioms of kinship in many of their interactions with workers, and I offered two pertinent examples of miners successfully identifying a gap between rhetoric and practice to make their workplaces more inhabitable. Throughout my analysis, I have gestured to the gender dynamics of these practices, with special attention to the ways in which these ties of relatedness mitigate gender difference. For example, single women miners have successfully crafted themselves as breadwinners, and many women enjoy participating in jokes that create a sense of familial camaraderie with their coworkers. At the same time, I have suggested that women are expected to perform more of the public “emotion work” while men engage in more indirect caretaking. The next chapter considers more closely the construction of gendered persons, particularly as this processes is implicated in the construction of place. I will suggest that even the most masculine of industries, places and persons, men and women have created places and senses of personhood that defy strictly binary notions of gender.

## Chapter VI

### Gendered Places and Persons

In 2003, the production crew of a popular Canadian television show visited a coal mine in Wyoming's Powder River Basin to film a segment on women miners. In the process of filming and editing, the producer highlighted the women's successful integration into a male-dominated field, documenting both their close relationships with male coworkers and their ability to operating some of the world's largest heavy equipment such as the "Cadillac of dozers" and the industry's largest blade. He also staged an after-hour gathering of the women at a local bar, where he encouraged them to dress up and recall funny stories about mishaps and narrowly avoided accidents. But even as the episode explicitly celebrated their achievements, the women sensed a contradictory message about gender and mining work. In recalling the event with me, one of the women remembered, "The producer wanted to film some short commercials, so he asked me to climb up on the blade and put all of my long hair up under my hardhat. Then I was supposed to climb down, take it off, and shake out my hair. I felt so stupid!" The producer was trying to capitalize on the viewers' expectation that the operator descending from the blade would be a man to surprise them with a markedly sexy and feminine woman.

In the course of their everyday working lives, women miners navigate the contradictions stemming from their participation in a historically, though not exclusively

masculine industry. In the case of the television special, even though the producer explicitly sought to highlight their successes, he reinforced stereotypically feminine tropes about beauty, attraction and ability. Similarly, even though the women's crew members explicitly attest to their own gender blindness by arguing that the most important factor in being a good coworker is ability, many also pepper their everyday talk with statements about women's inherent differences from men, especially considering their moral superiority.

If the public sphere and the world of work have been associated with men and masculinity in dominant discourses about social life in the U.S., mines and mining communities might represent the epitome of this gendering. Yet even though mining workforces have been historically dominated by men who depend on women's caretaking activities in the home, women have also played a significant role in the industry. In this chapter I focus on the everyday practices of women miners to draw attention to the contested construction of gendered persons, particularly as this process is implicated in the construction of place. Miners and academics alike often describe mines and miners as exceedingly masculine, but it is crucial to analyze distinct places *within* the mines and the variety of ways in which people embody gender identities. Ethnographic research not only shows that the masculinity of particular places such as mechanical shops is contested by the people who work there, it also reveals that such highly masculinized places exist alongside feminized places such as offices. Moreover, in order to navigate the sometimes contradictory expectations for gendered behavior, women miners have elaborated identities as tomboys that upset dichotomous notions of gender difference.

This chapter thus returns to some familiar themes of feminist anthropology – gendered divisions of place and labor – in order to advance contemporary understandings of how gender becomes “anchored in the structures and relations of production that underlay workplace cultures” (Canning 1996: 286). But in addition the process of anchoring, I am also interested in how gender difference can become unmoored. I begin by outlining a few pertinent intellectual trajectories for thinking about gender and place, tracing a shift from early feminist accounts of universal public and private spheres to a more phenomenological approach that includes indexical practices. I draw on this material to argue that the Wyoming miners create, reflect upon and rework gendered mine places that cannot be reduced to being either purely masculine or feminine. Because women miners must deftly navigate these complexly gendered places in their everyday working lives, I then suggest that many have positioned themselves as tomboys in order to strategically manage the competing pressures for them to sometimes downplay and at other times emphasize gender differences. This alternative gender category points to a spectrum rather than a binary of gender practice in the mines, unsettling widespread and entrenched notions of gender difference in the industry.

### **Theorizing gender and place**

This section lays the theoretical foundation for thinking about how close attention to place can help elucidate the processes through which gender comes to matter in social life. The first strands of a self-identified feminist anthropology turned on a speculated universal ascription of women to a devalued private sphere of social life that was enclosed within a dominant masculine public sphere. More concerned about abstract

spaces than local places, these theories were quickly critiqued for their EuroAmerican biases, prompting many anthropologists to examine culturally specific and emplaced practices. Heavily indebted to Bourdieu's theory of practice, such investigations often focused on the gendered social spaces of houses and communities to explain cultural understandings of gender and relationships among women and men. While these approaches may offer a powerful theory of the reproduction of gender, they suffer from the same limitations of Bourdieu's "glacial" conception of habitus (Appadurai 1996: 55). I conclude by suggesting that a more productive approach would include attention to the creative practical and linguistic negotiations involved in crafting places and persons.

Although the feminist anthropologists who became influential in the 1970s were not the first to study women or gender (e.g. Deloria 1944; Kaberry 1939; Mead 1935; Richards 1956), their involvement with growing Anglophone women's movements encouraged their focus on identifying the sources of women's subordination in order to challenge it.<sup>132</sup> Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo's introduction to the groundbreaking *Woman, Culture and Society* linked "universal asymmetries in the actual activities and cultural evaluations of men and women to a universal, structural opposition between domestic and public spheres" (1974: 41; cf. Ortner and Whitehead 1981). While the contributors to this volume dismissed theories of biological determinism, their explanations for the divide rested on what they viewed as women's universal primary responsibilities for childcare (e.g. Ortner 1974: 77). The intellectual project thus laid out by Rosaldo and her colleagues was to identify correlations between the status of women

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<sup>132</sup> In her critical appraisal of Margaret Mead's writings, Micaela di Leonardo (1998) argues that Mead only allowed herself to be adopted as a feminist anthropologist once it became marketable in the 1970s. In fact, di Leonardo characterizes Mead's stance that innate sexual temperaments universally distinguish men and women even if the composition of these temperaments differs across cultures as "anti-feminist" (1998: 191).

and the differentiation of domestic and public spheres of activity (Rosaldo 1974: 36; but compare Reiter 1975, Rosaldo 1980 and Ortner 1996 for reconsiderations of this project).<sup>133</sup> The key problem with this formulation is that it relied on a tautological relationship between women and the domestic sphere (Strathern 1988: 73; cf. Yanagisako and Collier 1987). In other words, these feminists took women as indexes of domesticity instead of searching for the culturally specific ways people use different kinds of places to index gender. Throughout the 1980s many Third World and U.S. women of color exposed the white, middle-class biases of this strand of feminist thought (e.g. Combahee River Collective 1977; Davis 1982; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Lorde 1984) and its creation of a “monolithic Third World woman” (Mohanty 1991). Discussions of gendered spaces and places turned to less universalistic models of practice inspired by Bourdieu.

For Bourdieu, houses are a primary location for the engendering of culturally specific and arbitrary divisions of social life. He argues that the division of Kabyle houses into two areas associated with a series of gendered oppositions – high/low, light/shade, day/night, fertilizing/able to be fertilized – implicitly taught its inhabitants the distinctions between masculine and feminine activities and spaces (1977: 90). His theory of the dialectic relationship between agency and structure should lead to these structured spaces appropriating bodies that could in turn appropriate those structures (1977: 89). Yet Bourdieu conceives of the house as a finished product, *opus operatum*,

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<sup>133</sup> The other major project of this period was inspired by Engels’ (1884) hypothesis that wage labor would liberate women from patriarchy. Karen Sacks (1974) and Eleanor Leacock (1978) attempted to link the subordination of women to their degree of control over the means of production. Strathern (1988: 138) critiques these projects for equating a lack of private property with egalitarianism without theorizing different property regimes in which claims on persons are effected through services instead of goods.

implying a fixed set of relationships relatively unaffected by the practices they generate (1977: 90). He thus leaves little opportunity to theorize the creative and reflective embodiment of these structures through practice. He argues that women and men experience houselife differently, as the house orients men to leaving and women to movement inward (1977: 91), but does not consider the possibilities for persons to even briefly occupy or reflect on other emplaced positionings (see Mueggler 2001: 55 on the potential for persons to occupy, if only partially, another's place). Moreover, he also assumes a predominating "harmony" among the structuring structures and between these structures and the generated habitus (1977: 72, 80-2, 110), leaving untheorized social actors' negotiations of overlapping and sometimes contradictory social spaces and their multiple social locations within them.

A more phenomenological rendering of practice and place potentially serves as a corrective for Bourdieu's unconscious agents doomed to reproduce the structures that marginalize them (Throop and Murphy 2002). Here philosopher Edward Casey's (1996, 2001) argument that humans create and know places through their embodied interactions with them is instructive. Unlike Bourdieu, Casey is careful to maintain a true dialectical understanding of place, suggesting that "our immersion in them is not subjection to them, since we may modify their influence even as we submit to it" (1996: 19). Moreover, a more phenomenological approach to human experience and behavior opens up space to theorize how people themselves infuse events, experiences and places with meaning (Throop and Murphy 2002: 199). Bourdieu discounts such an approach, arguing instead that subjects inhabit a world of practical mastery and knowledge that remain below the level of consciousness (e.g. 1977: 79). Michel de Certeau (1984: 56-8) critiques this

theory, suggesting that Bourdieu had to sacrifice consciousness in order to create a model of stability and coherence.<sup>134</sup> Instead, de Certeau crafts a more phenomenological theory of practice in which persons are located within structures of power but retain the creative potential to engage in “tactics,” or the “innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other’s game” (1984: 18). This formulation takes account of the tendencies toward structural reproduction without foreclosing the possibility for incremental change, as opportunistic tactics often cannot keep what they win (de Certeau 1984: xix). This perspective allows that while everyday practices of making meaning are structurally embedded, they are not structurally determined. It should encourage scholarly attention to the creative and conscious inhabiting of gendered places rather than simply their overdetermined reproduction.

One possible avenue for such a project views language as social action instead of mere reflection of structure. For Bourdieu (1991), regularized language practices emerge from the dispositions of the habitus formed by structures of power in a “field.” He argues that actors in this field end up reproducing dominant language patterns because power can be accessed through acquiescing to internalized standards; by participating in the “linguistic marketplace,” competitors uphold it (1991: 230).<sup>135</sup> While it would be imprudent to discount the constraining effects of discursive and other structures of power, insights

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<sup>134</sup> De Certeau writes, “In order for coherence to be the postulate of ethnological knowledge, to be, that is, the place it allocated for itself and the epistemological model to which it referred, it was necessary to put this knowledge at a distance from the objectified society, and thus to presuppose that it was foreign and superior to the knowledge the society had of itself. The unconsciousness of the group studied was the price that had to be paid (the price it had to pay) for its coherence. A society could be a system only without knowing it. Whence the corollary: an ethnologist was required to know what the society was without knowing it” (1984: 56).

<sup>135</sup> This example is just one instance of Bourdieu’s impoverished theory of human motivation. Whether Bourdieu’s “agents” are arranging marriages or manipulating linguistic markets, they appear to be driven by individualistic self-interest (cf. Throop and Murphy 2002, Woolard 1985).

from linguistic anthropology show that language use can create and potentially transform social worlds in addition to reproducing them. This perspective is pertinent for discussions of gender and place. Gal and Kligman (2000: 41) argue that public and private should be understood as indexical signs linked to their specific context of production. Furthermore, they argue that like other cultural oppositions, this one is fractal and can be recursively applied to various levels of context so that “within any public one can always create a private; within any private one can create a public” (2000: 41). This perspective highlights the power for speakers to indexically create, reflect upon, and rework places. It also facilitates analysis of the polysemic interpretations of place (Bray 1997: 56).

Susan Seizer (2005) engaged in such a project in her ethnography of special drama actresses. She offers a pertinent example of using footing to index types of spaces in her description of a Tamil actor’s manipulation of public/private divides through shifts in footing within a single monologue. A man playing the buffoon directs his comments toward the musicians by addressing them and orienting his body toward them, while speaking loud enough for the audience to overhear. He thus shifts the alignments between the audience, the all-male onstage musicians and himself in order to make “public” statements about gendered behavior that would typically be acceptable only in private, single sex conversations (Seizer 2005: 189).

Seizer’s research also exemplifies Gal and Kligman’s call for researchers to trace the everyday negotiations of contested public/private spaces as well as their enduring discursive power (Gal and Kligman 2000: 40). Seizer situates the everyday practices of the actresses within the larger context of the stigma they encounter while pursuing public

careers that upset dominant cultural values associating femininity with enclosed domesticity. She argues that in their attempts to mold their lives to the standards for respectable Tamil women, the actresses have crafted familiarized, private domestic places within their very public traveling practices. For example, women arrange to travel by private car to their engagements, develop relationships with store owners who control access to private rooms at bus stations, and literally construct enclosed spaces near the stage that separate them from both male actors and the audience (2005: 319-23). Seizer's characterization of these practices as appropriations of dominant strategies of exclusion echoes de Certeau's (1984) conception of the "poaching" power of tactics that turn dominant "strategies" to their own advantage.

This theoretical orientation would also help to nuance theories of the creation of gendered places in mining communities. Elizabeth Ferry (2005) in particular offers a theory of the creation of the gendered spaces of the mine and home in a Mexican silver mining community. Pairing Nash's (1979) analysis of the gendered symbolism of a Bolivian tin mining community with Bourdieu's theory of practice, Ferry argues that the domains of mine and home are constructed as "parallel though distinct" (2005: 100). The work process "continually recreates the mine as a gendered and morally and politically inflected space and orders difference within that space" (Ferry 2005: 101). The mine and the silver vein (the "Veta Madre," literally, mother lode) are construed as feminine and womb-like, enclosing the masculinized work of the male miners (Ferry 2005: 116). In contrast, the everyday actions of the miners' female kin produce the inside of the home as a space of feminine labor that is enclosed by the masculine structure of the house, since men are responsible for using the money that returns to the community in the sale of

silver to build homes (Ferry 2005: 118). Ferry concludes that the house and mine provide metaphors and models of and for gendered social life (2005: 101).

One of the primary contributions of Ferry's analysis is that she theorizes room for men and women to debate and renegotiate symbolic forms and arrangements. For example, she notes that the gendered conceptions of the home, the mine, the Cooperative and the daily labor practices animating them produce androcentric notions of generativity (as men are construed to agentively reproduce the patrimony). But she also shows that women carve out spaces for action by deploying the moral idiom of patrimony and its connotations of male responsibility to hold both individual men and the Cooperative accountable for following through with their responsibilities to women and families (Ferry 2005: 130-3). Yet Ferry's analysis of the gendered places and activities of the mine and home often creates neat, binary distinctions between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and masculinized and feminized labor practices.<sup>136</sup> This tendency is encouraged by an overwhelming dominance of the mining workforce by men. The comparatively high percentage of women miners in the Powder River Basin precludes such a neat binary and draws attention to the creation and negotiation of complexly gendered mine places.

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<sup>136</sup> Ferry's analysis of local power relations in the Cooperative complicates this picture, especially when she draws on Matthew Gutmann's (1996) critique of the category "machismo" and its relation to the everyday practice of men. Through textured ethnographic analysis of his fieldwork in Mexico City, he elucidates men's practices that contradict stereotypical ideologies of masculinity, including their nurturing activities as fathers, as well as women's accepted participation in dominantly masculine spheres. Ferry draws out different ways of being masculine at the Cooperative and links these to distinct modes of exercising power. For example, she shows that the hegemonic masculinity associated with surface workers, based on sexual potency and paternalism, is unevenly embodied by the bosses (2005: 160). She also argues that a moral economy enables some miners to critique engineers and their mining plans based on their lengthy experience and successful confrontation of danger (2005: 145).

## **A man's world? Gender, labor and working places**

In this section, I explore a few key situations and places in which gender difference is produced and comes to matter in the Powder River Basin coal mines. The first subsection outlines the major institutional and ideological frameworks within which men and women must navigate in the courses of their everyday working lives. These frameworks often attempt to create gender blindness that is foiled through their actual embodiment in everyday practices. The second and third focus on two specific places – the mine offices and maintenance shops, considered to be the most masculine and feminine work areas – to investigate the production, interpretation and reworking of gendered places within the mines.

### *Gender blindness*

Official mine policies ostensibly attempt to create gender-blind workplaces, but their actual uptake frequently produces and sometimes emphasizes gender difference. As a part of their initial training and yearly refresher course, employees must attend “diversity” trainings. Even though the stated goal of these sessions is to ensure that all individuals are treated equally, the importance placed on sexual discrimination and harassment has resulted in the entire training being identified with “women’s issues.”<sup>137</sup> In most training sessions, a representative from human relations presents diversity as a value and goes over federal laws and the company’s official policies, which are printed in employee handbooks and usually posted on bulletin boards. An example:

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<sup>137</sup> Racial and ethnic issues are usually noted but not elaborated, perhaps given the demographics of Gillette and the mines. According to the 2004 census, 97% percent of Campbell County residents identified themselves as white, compared to 95% in Wyoming and 80% in the United States overall.

It is the policy of [mining company] to afford equal opportunity to qualified individuals, regardless of their age, color, handicap, national origin, race, religion or sex and to conform to all applicable laws. This policy of nondiscrimination does and will apply equally to recruitment, selection, placement, transfers, promotions, terminations, salary administration, and other conditions of employment. It is the responsibility of each employee to support this program. If you have any questions regarding the Company's Equal Employment Opportunity Policy or its implementation, contact your supervisor or the Employee Relations Department.

This section is immediately followed by a "Policy on Harassment":

Harassment of an employee because of his or her age, color, handicap, national origin, race, religion or sex is counterproductive and will not be condoned or tolerated. Employees who feel they are being visually, physically, or verbally harassed are urged to contact their supervisor or an Employee Relations Representative. Reported incidents will be fully investigated. If the facts support such complaints, appropriate action will be taken promptly.<sup>138</sup>

Three features of these policies are striking. First, the overarching imperative of productivity (and profitability) is evident in their consideration of harassment as "wrong" because it is "counterproductive." In one training session I attended, the leader further explained that hostile work environments impede the "entrepreneurial environments" the company sought to cultivate. Such an environment was characterized as one fostering creativity, initiative, job satisfaction, advancement, high performance, dedication, and financial rewards commensurate with experience. Second, responsibility for identifying and addressing perceived wrongs rests with the individual experiencing harassment. They are encouraged to relate with their coworkers on an "adult to adult" basis by raising concerns and brainstorming solutions with the individual first and supervisors and other company officials second. Many employees appreciate this policy as a respectful way to handle differences among peers. Yet at the same time, it makes seeking support difficult for people experiencing problems with supervisors and upper-level managers. Raising

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<sup>138</sup> For a discussion of how the miners themselves define, understand and deal with sexual harassment, see pages 238-244.

issues and potentially accusing someone with direct control over the details of their working lives is perceived to invite retribution. This individualization of responsibility mirrors parallel developments in the individualization of risk reduction and occupational safety (e.g. Barab 2003; Harthorn and Oaks 2003; Iacuone 2005; Rockhill 2001).

Third – and most pertinent for the current discussion – many miners believe that the explicit goal of “valuing diversity” could actually translate into erasing difference: women are to be treated no differently from men, whites from Latinos, and so forth, even though these differences are often (but not always) playfully elaborated and celebrated in the work setting. Moreover, this policy is perceived by many to contradict the company’s affirmative action plans that explicitly seek to increase numbers of women and ethnic minorities in both hourly and management positions.

Notions of gender blindness also animate the expectations held by company officials and miners that women perform their jobs indistinguishably from men, such as without special assistance in operating, fueling or troubleshooting their equipment. Upon being introduced to my project, the immediate response given by most men usually echoed the one articulated by an equipment operator named Randy: “I don’t care if it’s a man or a woman out here, as long as they do their job. It has nothing to do with gender. Some women are really good at this, and there are a couple of guys who aren’t.”<sup>139</sup> Some women find this openness empowering. Katie, a former equipment operator, explained, “Being an equipment operator is an excellent opportunity for a female since it doesn’t matter if you’re female or male. It’s very open. Men don’t care as long as you can get back to the berm square.” Here she is referring to the ability of talented truck drivers to

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<sup>139</sup> While appealing to notions of gender blindness, this formulation actually reinforces gender difference by assuming that most men *can* do that type of work whereas most women cannot.

align themselves with the berm (piles of material placed alongside roads and at the edges of dumps to prevent machinery from getting off track) so perfectly that all the material in their dump beds falls completely over the edge of the dump, making the job of the dozer operator much easier.

These gestures toward gender egalitarianism in labor resonate with common rural western values held by many employees. In discussing a mine's affirmative action plan, one human relations manager compared her experiences in Wyoming favorably with those in eastern underground operations: "It was harder to get those [non-Wyoming] women to apply. Here mining is more traditional work for women... it's just like putting a daughter to work on the farm out here." The conceptions of gender and labor indexed by this woman appeared in many of the conversations I had with men and women alike.<sup>140</sup> Many of those who moved to northeastern Wyoming to work in the coal industry take pride in their rural backgrounds and attribute their strong work ethics and gender egalitarianism to their experiences growing up in the surrounding region's farming and ranchlands. Women who successfully embody this work ethic in the mines can earn the title "good hand." The term "hand" is often used by miners in the basin to refer to workers, particularly in the sense of a good hand as someone who is especially skilled and willing to help out when needed. This term is gender-neutral, easily used to indicate both men and women, compared to other, more gender specific terms such as manpower.

Running alongside many of these gestures toward gender blindness, however, are myriad daily practices that actually reinforce difference. For example, to say that many

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<sup>140</sup> Extended ethnographic data concerning ideas about gender and labor in the American West can be found in Chapter Three.

rural westerners expect men and women to work alongside one another in providing for their families is not to say that they erase all differences between them. Many of the same miners who argue that gender does not matter at work also commented both formally and informally that most women are not as technically skilled as most men. This formulation allows for exceptions while maintaining a stereotype that women miners confront daily in their working lives, most often in “proving” themselves as competent workers before they were accepted onto their crews. Betty cautioned, “You can’t have it both ways, equality and preferential treatment. I didn’t ask for any special treatment: I earned their respect. I worked as hard as the men. With the guys I had to work harder, make sure my skills were better. I worked my way up, so no one will bad mouth me now.” Barb agreed, “You have to be tough to keep your status, especially on the mechanical end because people think it’s a man’s job.” Daisy attributed more stereotypical ideas about women and technical abilities to generational differences: “With some of the older guys, you have to prove yourself and show that you can hold your own.”

Furthermore, many of the most vociferous proponents of equal expectations and treatments of men and women’s work also firmly believed that women should act as a moralizing influence on men. Janet Finn (1998) found that conceptions of motherhood in the copper mining community of Butte, Montana, often entailed women acting as moral guardians for individual men and entire communities. In the Powder River Basin mines, this sentiment was most often expressed in terms of women being expected to use “polite” language. Many of the women miners found that it was empowering to play the “moral superiority” card and avoid using curse words or telling vulgar jokes (cf. Tallichet

2006: 140-2). Others ignored such expectations and attempted to fit in with the guys. Laura, a temporary worker, observed, “Some women have mouths like guys. They’re mean because they’re trying to fit in. Back when I was working in the oilfield I tried to compete with the guys by talking like them, but I decided it wasn’t worth it.” Like many other women who sought to become like one of the guys by consciously integrating more swearing and sexualized comments into their everyday talk, Laura eventually gave up because the constant escalation and one-upmanship grew tiring (compare Yount 1991 on pleasurable “razzing” escalating into perceived harassment).

Moreover, even though official company policies espouse gender-blindness – so much so that maternity leave is formally classified within the more general category of sickness/temporary disability leave – everyday practices subtly and not so subtly contradict them. For example, management at most mines give out gifts as incentives for miners to meet production and safety goals. Some of these, such as jackets or t-shirts, are construed by miners as gender-neutral. But many others are not. “Do I really need another huge belt buckle? Baseball cap?” asked Ally, who was frustrated by the many masculine gifts the company had been given out. At the same time, she was equally skeptical of previous attempts to offer “feminine” presents, such as headbands, which she viewed as ridiculous. “But at least we don’t get gift certificates to Cabela’s!” she quipped, referring to the popular hunting and fishing superstore.

Many women also find masculinized assumptions behind official discourses of gender blindness in everything from safety videos and equipment design to the shift schedule (cf. Acker 1990; Britton 2000). Company officials make great efforts to portray their workplaces as gender neutral in both their everyday talk with miners (by using

gender-neutral or both masculine and feminine pronouns) and representational practices in the media (by including pictures and stories about women employees). At the same time, it is exceptionally rare to find women represented in the non-local safety videos shown during trainings and refreshers. Films produced by equipment manufacturers often highlight the ergonomic benefits of seat designs, using male actors to demonstrate. The women who actually operate them, however, point out that they are actually designed with an eye to common male body types. A longtime equipment operator argued, “They didn’t design them for women. Women are longer in the legs, and men in the waist. That means you have to lean forward the whole time when you’re operating a blade.” This observation suggests that many aspects of industrial work may be designed around men’s rather than women’s bodies (Williams 2000: 76-77) Finally, many women argue that the demanding rotating shift schedule is better suited to men who do not take primary responsibility for childcare and housework.<sup>141</sup>

If people create places in the course of going about their daily lives, the miners in Gillette create places with multifaceted gender dynamics. While it may be tempting to cast the mines as overwhelmingly masculine places – especially given the seemingly ubiquitous statements that they are a “man’s world” – the actual embodied engagements with these places introduce considerable complexity into the dialectical relationship between place and gender. Taking a closer look at specific work areas within the minesite, an analytical step not often undertaken by researchers, reveals even more moments of contradiction and their creative appropriation by miners. In the following sections, I trace the gendering of these places not only through divisions of labor (given

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<sup>141</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of women miners’ “second shift” of housework, see Smith (2008) and Chapter Four of this dissertation.

the critique of the 1970s feminist anthropology that bodies understood as female do not simplistically create feminine places), but through local interpretations of the talk, dirt and physical labor associated with everyday work practices.

*Gendered mine places: The shop*

Maintenance shops exemplify many of the characteristics that lead both people in Gillette and academics to consider mining one of the most masculine industries. Male mechanics tend to describe the shop as a “man’s world” and specifically enjoy working with other men in “manly” ways. Miners draw on gendered conceptions of language, dirt and physical labor to give meaning to their work, and explicitly distinguish their work responsibilities and working styles to those associated with the office, the area of the mine most associated with women and a bureaucratic masculinity (cf. Baron 2006; Halle 1984; Willis 1977: 104).

In explaining why he would be uncomfortable with women working in the shop, one mechanic explained:

I don’t know that a woman is strong enough to do some of the things that we have to do as far as swinging hammers and pulling wrenches and lifting heavy objects, that sort of thing. And then when I’m working with a group of guys, we talk like men. I’m uncomfortable having to watch what I’m saying all the time if a woman’s around because we laugh and joke and have fun and there are times that it’s not appropriate for a woman to be there. So I would have a problem with that.

He went on to stress that he was not inherently prejudiced against women, quickly mentioning that he had heard of talented women welders and that some of the best equipment operators were women, but he remained firm in his discomfort with women working in the shop. Gendered language ideologies play a major role in his and many of his coworkers’ thinking about appropriate jobs and places for women in mining.

Everyday talk in the shop, especially in its celebration of swearing and telling off-color jokes, epitomizes the dominant masculine speech style many men and women associate with the mine.

Many of the men and a few of the women, especially the most experienced ones, strongly criticize women who “speak like men.” “It’s inappropriate for a woman to be constantly swearing, f this and f that,” said Will. “It’s not fitting for a lady.” Maureen, who retired from her job as an equipment operator after thirty years, lamented that many of the younger girls are “as bad or as worse than the guys. They cuss and carry on. If it was my daughter or my granddaughter, I’d be so ashamed... What are they trying to do, be a man?” In fact, the pressure to speak politely around some women is so strong that some men take advantage of it for themselves. A high-level engineer enjoyed retelling a story from her first job. A production manager would routinely scream and swear at everyone around him unless there were women in the room, so her colleagues used to bring her along to meetings even if her attendance was not required. “My sole purpose was to do nothing but stand there so he wouldn’t scream and cuss!” This style of language is discouraged though not entirely absent from the office because that area is construed as requiring more “professional” speech, but it flourishes in the shop.

The mechanic also poetically described the heavy physical labor required by shop work: swinging hammers, pulling wrenches and lifting heavy objects. This work is also locally construed as being particularly dirty.<sup>142</sup> For example, changing oil, checking and replacing hydraulic fluids, and maneuvering around equipment often leave the mechanics’ coveralls covered with grease, mud and coal residue. Whereas many

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<sup>142</sup> The ways in which miners talk about dirt and labor is dramatically different from the ways in which the Gillette Syndrome writers discussed in chapter one did so. For the miners, dirt was not dehumanizing, but an index of hard labor.

equipment operators can wear street clothes to work or use the same pair of coveralls for an entire week, most mechanics have to change theirs daily. It is telling that at the mines where production employees are not required to wear company-issued coveralls, the mechanics are usually the only ones who do so anyway. Their understanding of their work as physically demanding and dirty provides a key mode through which to differentiate their work from the kind done by men in the office: office men do have to use their muscles to do their jobs, and they can wear jeans or even business casual clothing without having to worry about them becoming grimy (cf. Halle 1984). In fact, sightings of managers or company-identified supervisors in coveralls usually inspires chuckles from the miners, amused by their brief incursions into the “real” mining world of dirt and grease.

These local discourses and practices are embedded within and extend those engaged by popular and academic writers who portray coal mining as a domain of danger and dirt appropriate only for brawny men (Campbell 1984; Duke 2002; Lahiri-Dutt and Macintyre 2006). For example, the screenplay for *How Green Was My Valley*, a film that swept the 1942 Academy Awards and set the precedent for depicting miners onscreen, calls for an opening scene in which the father and his son are “punching at the coal face with his pick. He wears a miner’s outfit and is blackened and grimy with coal dust... It is day, and the stalwart miners, grimy with coal dust, are coming from the cages and lining up to get their pay...” (Dunne 1990: 54). In the final cut, the directors focused on close-ups of each of the sons as they receive their pay. Whereas a close shot typically invites identification with the filmed subject, the extreme dirtiness of the men precludes such an identification: their clothes and hands are noticeably dirty, but the most striking feature of

their appearance is the thick layer of black coal dust covering their faces, making the whites of their eyes and teeth stand out. These images appear throughout the film and have been recycled in many subsequent films about coal mining communities and families, especially the relatively recent *October Sky* (1999).

These representational patterns are part of a larger trajectory of labor history in which “the ‘working class’ was invisible unless it was marked white, male, and/or blue collar industrial” (Bettie 2003: 33). In the basin, this interpretive process involves fractal recursivity, or the “projection of an opposition, salient at some level of relationship, onto some other level” (Irvine and Gal 2000: 38). The key semantic oppositions in this case – male/female, strong/weak, dirty/clean, vulgar/polite – take on force as they are linked to institutions, ideologies and practices (Lemon 2000: 195). They contribute to the overall gendering of mine as a masculine place, as well as the gendering of particular areas within the mine and specific jobs within these areas, such as environmental versus mining engineers. These oppositions remain salient even as exceptions to these patterns potentially challenge them. The systematic obscuring of the successful women described below points to the tenacity of local beliefs about gender, physical strength, politeness as well as their power to reproduce gendered places.

Even though most miners perceive the shop as an extremely masculine place, women have always participated in its daily activities. Many current women miners in the basin originally began their careers in the late 1970s working as general laborers in the shop, until positions became available in the pit. The few women who now work as general laborers mostly spend their days washing down equipment in preparation for the mechanics. The very few women who have successfully established themselves as

mechanics highlight the significance of what de Certeau would call “poaching” techniques for creatively inhabiting and crafting multiply gendered places. For example, Barb finds it challenging to maneuver within that “different language” without trying to “be like one of the guys.” Like many other women who identify as tomboys, she tries to strategically swear in order to gain the respect of her crew. For example, she will swear when people have gone a “step too far” because otherwise “the guys will walk all over you.” At the same time, she still finds it “unfeminine” to swear excessively and catches herself looking around to see if anyone hears her when she unintentionally curses after injuring herself.

Like the mechanic quoted above, Barb considers shop work to be physically demanding and wishes that tools were made lighter for women like her to handle. At the same time, she argues that there are tradeoffs that made it easier for her to do particular jobs. For example, she can get into tight spots such as the area around the belt on a haul truck. “It only takes me twenty minutes because there’s so much room in there it’s like a football field, but it takes guys who can’t reach it a lot longer.” She can also fit between a tire rim and a frame on a rubber tire dozer, whereas many of them cannot, and her comparatively thinner and longer fingers can get into places that theirs cannot reach. She has also developed a system with her crew in which they trade assignments so that people have the jobs best suited for them. “I know my limitations and I have different ways of moving things. I also know people I can ask for help.” Yet even as she argues that men normally have better upper body strength, she also points out that most heavy jobs require two people anyway so that even a guy could not handle them alone. She also notes that even though work in the shop can be dirty, it is temporary and non-prohibitive:

during our sit-down interview she tapped her impeccably painted fingernails on the bench where we were sitting. Like many other women who think of themselves as tomboys, she enjoys the opportunity to work hard and get dirty. Melissa, for example, took pride in not being bothered by the dust and dirt found around the mine and even in the shop. She enjoyed recalling a story of a woman who came in to interview and was disturbed by the somewhat dusty chair offered to her in the conference room. “I wanted to say to her, ‘Where do you think you’re applying for a job, lady?’” Melissa remembers.

Work in the plant is considered to be as physically demanding and even dirtier than the shop. Plant technicians load trains, perform maintenance and clear the buildings and machinery of accumulated coal dust. These “washdowns” result in even the most careful technicians emerging from the plant buildings wet and covered with coal dust. “It’s definitely a man’s world,” said Wendy, who is a relatively new hire in the plant. “You have to accept stuff and get over it because it doesn’t do any good to dwell on it. You can’t expect to be treated any differently because you’re female. You do the best of your abilities, but there are some things that women can’t do, like the physical stuff.” Wendy identifies the contradiction discussed above of women being expected to work indistinguishably from men even if they do not have the same abilities. And like Barb, she has addressed that challenge by finding different and actually safer ways to accomplish jobs, such as using lifts. “You can’t do it the same way as the guys, which might be good because they end up hurting their backs. We’re more cautious. That brute strength ends up hurting themselves. You look at them and they all have bad backs. It’s like their hearing, they don’t protect themselves. Stupidity.”

By creatively inhabiting the most masculine of all masculine places, Barb and Wendy push against dominant equations of masculinity, “rough” language, heavy physical work and tolerance of dirty conditions. They carve out specific jobs and working styles as “feminine,” precluding all-encompassing statements of the shop and plant as exclusively masculine places. For the most part, however, these efforts truly remain “poaches” because they do not completely disrupt the dominant practices that create the shop and plant as masculine places. But it would be hasty to discount these

innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other’s game... the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have. In these combatants’ stratagems, there is a certain art of placing one’s blows, a pleasure in getting around the rules of a constraining space. [de Certeau 1984: 18]

Moreover, in strategically downplaying and emphasizing gender difference, these women also carve out a non-dichotomous gender identity as tomboys.

#### *Gendered mine places: The office*

If the shop provides an arena for men to enact dominant masculinities, the office provides a similar opportunity for many women, the great majority of whom value their work for allowing them to care for people and nature.

The 1889 law banning women’s employment in Wyoming mines did not forbid them from working in the office. Since the first years of the state’s industry, the greatest concentration of women in the industry have been found within mine offices. Today, women work there primarily as administrative assistants, clerks, human relations officials, and environmental engineers. Many, though not all of these women conceive of

their work as enabling them to enact their own versions of femininity (and feminism).<sup>143</sup> For example, administrative assistants often value the caretaking aspects of their jobs. Susan's career has advanced along with the top-level manager with whom she originally began working. While the specific details of her job change along with the day, she is proud of how organized she is in "taking care" of the manager and his staff. "You don't realize how much you're a caretaker for thirteen guys." She recalled making coffee every morning, finding cell phones, going to the airport to pick up luggage, getting the tour van cleaned, calling their home when they were going to be late and picking kids up from school when they were not available. On the day of our interview, she was answering phones, editing a Powerpoint presentation for a national meeting, making all of the travel arrangements for the staff to attend a state convention, and making sure that the computer systems training in the office next to hers went smoothly by ordering lunch and keeping them supplied with office materials. She views all these responsibilities as evidence that the men respect her, and she is happy to have such a good working rapport with the primary manager. "We've worked together for twenty years. It's like being married because we both know what we're thinking before we ask and we finish each other's sentences. He's really been there for me." Susan's use of the marriage metaphor to describe her relationship with her boss points not only to the close and respectful emotional connection she appreciates in the workplace, but to the gendered dynamics of

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<sup>143</sup> Very few of the women involved with this project identified themselves as feminists even though they did identify as "strong women" by virtue of their experiences. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to draw out and situate historically the women miners' varying opinions of and relationships with feminist movements, I would note that they tend to disassociate themselves from mainstream movements for a variety of reasons: 1) they enjoy working with men and think that "feminists" do not; 2) they identify closely with their modest rural backgrounds and associate feminism with rich urban women; 3) they espouse more conservative political viewpoints and think feminists are too liberal.

their relationship. He is not just a boss but a kind of husband, and she is not just an assistant but a kind of wife.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter's (1977) pathbreaking analysis of gender in a large organization places the Wyoming women's experiences in a larger trajectory of organizational social relations. Critiquing individualist presumptions of women's labor force participation, she argues that an actor's place in social networks better explains their work experiences than internalized femininity or masculinity. Noting that administrative assistants and clerks have almost exclusively been women since at least the 1960s, she identifies a bifurcation in the gendering of office work (1977: 17). She argues that stereotypes of emotional women and rational men contribute to the masculinization of management and the feminization of assistant work (1977: 25). In her analysis of secretarial work, she documents a "constant flow of orders" both predictable and unpredictable that echoes Susan's daily experiences (1977: 79). Moreover, she suggests that the close personal relationships between bosses and their secretaries are encouraged by institutional structures linking the fate and status of a secretary with those of her boss (1977: 74-5). She then unpacks the "marriage metaphor" by noting the requirements of loyalty and the asymmetrical privileges and gains from the relationship (1977: 89). Her primary argument is that as women become excellent secretaries, with few exceptions they simultaneously become less able to handle management positions, thus reproducing a cycle of immobility (1977: 98-9).

When women do achieve management positions in the basin, they tend to be concentrated in human relations, a pattern Kanter's theory also elucidates. She argues that since its inception, the human relations aspect of management has been concerned

with the emotional dimensions of workplace relationships rather than the technical and rational aspects typically associated with masculine management schemes (1977: 23).

#### Feminized human relations offices

provided a rationale for where women belonged in management. If they belonged at all, it was in people-handling staff functions such as personnel, where their emotional fine-tuning, according to the stereotype in operation, was more appropriate than in decision-making functions... If women have been directed into the 'emotional' end of management, they have also been excluded from the centers of power in management for the same reason. [Kanter 1977: 25]

It is striking that women in the basin are over-represented in human relations and safety, two fields that are often collapsed into one office. As Kanter predicts, the women who excel in these areas value their work for providing them an opportunity to take care of their coworkers. The human relations manager quoted above loves her job because people come to her with their problems and she can help them while also keeping confidences and refraining from judging. "The employees really trust me." Katie is a safety representative at the same company and cares very deeply about making sure that the workplace is as safe as possible. Patty pursued a career as a safety manager after working in the pit because it was a way for her to

make a difference for somebody everyday, as hokey as that sounds. Whether it's with looking at the dust they're inhaling or having them cope with family problems... Just knowing that people can come to you for assistance. Helping people through work injuries or work-related injuries or helping the family or just... I suppose helping people in whatever way you can and hoping that at the end of the day you've made a difference for somebody.

My point is not to say that there is something wrong with finding meaning in one's work through these cultural categories, but simply is to shed light on how they draw on and express particular notions of femininity that in turn create the offices as feminine places.

If human relations activities have been conventionally associated with feminized

emotion work, engineering – the other primary clustering of jobs in mine offices – has been linked with masculinized rationality and technical competence. Wendy Faulkner has been influential in identifying and critiquing popular understandings of engineering as primarily a technical, rather than social activity. She argues that technicist engineering ideologies persist because they overlap with and perform hegemonic masculinities, even though engineers engage in a variety of everyday activities that blur dichotomies of masculine technical expertise and feminine people skills (Faulkner 2000, 2007; Kleif and Faulkner 2003).

Women are well represented as engineers in the basin, though gender ideologies of feminine caretaking channel women into environmental rather than mining engineering. Most environmental engineers value their work for enabling them to enact a conservationist ethic through their reclamation efforts. Across the board, their favorite part of their jobs is the time they spend outside in the fresh air working with local birds and animals or tracking the vegetation – all activities associated with tomboys rather than girly girls. Both Mandy and Cindy, two women beginning their careers in the industry, prefer being outside with the flora and fauna to working in the office with other people – an interesting critique of Faulkner’s argument that highlighting the social aspects of engineering might attract more women.

At the same time, the way these engineers frame their love for the outdoors evokes feminine notions of care. Suzanne, a senior environmental engineer, said that she gets her “warm fuzzies by going home with the knowledge that the critters, the natural grasses and everything else are going back like it should be.” Susie, another senior environmental engineer, is proud of her company’s efforts to be good environmental

stewards. “That’s not the company line. I don’t want to sound like a corporate billboard, but we do want to do the right thing because all these people who live in Wyoming live here because they want to. They enjoy the outdoors in some regards more than others. We don’t want to trash our environment because this is where we play and work.” In fact, many of the environmental engineers were not born and raised in Wyoming, but chose to move there in order to be closer to mountains and wilderness areas.

A few women have made inroads as mining engineers, though they tend to speak about their work differently when compared to the environmental engineers just discussed. Louise is a senior mining engineer at one of the largest mines in the basin. In speaking about her work, she emphasized how she enjoys the technical aspects of solving problems such as designing pits and optimizing production. “It’s all a game to me to see if you can solve it.” Out of a graduating class of sixteen, she was the only woman specializing in mining engineering, as the rest pursued the civil and environmental subfields. The extent to which mining engineering is popularly perceived as masculine is evident in the surprise Louise finds in many people upon telling them about her job. She takes great offense to these assumptions and emphasizes the gender blindness of the mines so much so that when I asked her what gender issues she would like people reading my dissertation to learn more about, she replied: “There are no gender issues. Gender doesn’t matter out here.”

In general, environmental engineers tend to value their work for providing them an opportunity to care for the environment they found so inspiring, whereas mining engineers value the technical aspects of their work. These orientations tend to overlap with popular perceptions of their work, in which environmental engineering is associated

with caring for nature and mining engineering is perceived as overly technical and physically demanding. Overlaps between the two subfields certainly exist. Louise, the mining engineer, also takes pride in her company's environmental record and makes sure to emphasize their reclamation efforts in the tours she gave for visitors. On the other hand, many of the environmental engineers enjoy the science behind experiments such as growing sagebrush on reclaimed land. Yet these overlaps are often erased in popular talk and perception that emphasize instead the differences in their gendered associations. The extent to which these subfields have become heavily gendered is striking, especially given that they require virtually indistinguishable skills: the mines frequently hire engineers with various backgrounds to work in the same divisions. Following Faulkner (2007), the significance of these patterns is that they provide different occasions for the enactment of gendered identities.

Thus even though many employees characterize the office as the most feminine place in the mine, the process through which it becomes gendered is nonetheless contested. To begin, salient differences remain among the styles of femininity enacted by workers there. Administrative assistants, human relations personnel and environmental engineers all draw on but differently interpret conceptions of feminine caretaking to give meaning to their work. Moreover, their daily jobs also require them to engage in less stereotypically feminine practices and characteristics. To give only a brief example, even though human relations personnel may enjoy providing miners with a shoulder to cry on, they also have to present a "tough" persona to discipline workers whose absenteeism or drug use impacts the entire minesite. Additionally, many women (especially engineers) create alternative ways of being feminine through their noticeable enjoyment of all things

scientific and technical. Lastly, even though I do not focus on the large numbers of male managers who also inhabit the office, their daily practices introduce further complexities into the gendering of the office place. A room full of women takes on a distinctly different feeling when male supervisors pass through.

### **Tomboys and “girl power”**

The majority of women I interviewed identified themselves as tomboys in the course of talking about their work and life histories, prompting me to think more critically about what work the category might be doing for them in thinking about their workplace relationships and practices. This chapter has thus far traced the creation of complexly gendered places within the mine, showing that even those places the most strongly ideologically associated with masculinity or femininity also incorporate contradictory tendencies and practices. In this section, I argue that tomboy identification is so prevalent in the mines because the category provides women with a way to navigate the competing and contradictory pressures of enacting gender sameness and difference within these places.

The existing scholarship on the category is less than helpful in contextualizing the ethnographic materials, primarily because many scholars approach tomboys as ontological fact rather than analyzing how, when and why people draw on the category to make sense of social positions and relationships. Eleanor Maccoby (1999) perhaps takes the most fundamentalist stance in suggesting that tomboys are the result of hormonal imbalances. Arguing that sex differences arise from biological differences and childhood socialization into separate boys and girls “cultures,” she controversially suggests further

that “girls who receive excess androgens [hormones such as testosterone] prenatally tend to display tomboy tendencies” (1999: 291).

Even those social scientists that eschew biological difference nevertheless often end up with equally binary theories of sex and gender. Lynn Carr (1998: 535), for example, celebrates tomboy “resistance” as an agentive rejection of femininity and “choice” of masculinity. Yet at least in the Wyoming ethnographic materials it is unclear if masculinity is the most appropriate term for these behaviors. Within a binary model of gender, anything viewed as “not feminine” must be labeled as masculine.<sup>144</sup> This approach precludes thinking about multiple ways of enacting non-binary gender identities.

Barrie Thorne (1993) critiques such binary models, arguing that more variation exists within genders than between them. She calls for scholars instead to examine “the social relations in which multiple differences are constructed and given meaning” (Thorne 1993: 109; qtd. in Hall 2003: 368). In this formulation, tomboys represent not the social expressions of underlying biological differences (like Maccoby) or exceptions that prove the rule of strict gender socialization (such as for the linguist Robin Lakoff), but simply one instance of a “complicated continuum of crossing” (Thorne 1993: 112).

Following Thorne, I suggest that this category helps women miners to navigate the competing and contradictory pressures of enacting gender sameness and difference. Whereas official company policies and rural western gender ideologies stress the value of downplaying differences between men and women, dominant language ideologies and divisions of labor reinforce and at times celebrate their perceived differences. Identifying

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<sup>144</sup> Halberstam (2002) engages in a similar theoretical practice in her consideration of “female masculinity.”

as and acting like a tomboy provides a way for women miners to strategically emphasize and downplay gender difference according to context.<sup>145</sup> This approach serves as a corrective to static taxonomies of “types” of women miners and reified, binary conceptions of gender in feminist technology studies (e.g. Yount 1991). Throughout the close ethnographic analysis in this chapter, I have drawn out the ways in which women miners invoke and enact differently gendered orientations in their engagements with technology, especially the large mining equipment. One final example is particularly instructive.

The shift I spent with Laura at Pronghorn Mine provided numerous opportunities to witness this negotiation in action. As a relatively new temporary worker, she was anxious to move up from the bottom rung of the crew hierarchy. We spent the morning talking about how she and her boyfriend ended up in Gillette. “I’m not a girly girl,” she said, “but I never imagined I’d be doing this for money.” Like many of her coworkers, she described the mine as a “guy’s world,” but also emphasized that as a woman “you have to work around it.” For her, that meant not asking for special privileges and just doing the best with what is available. For example, she was frustrated that it was often hard to find one of the portable bathrooms and that “by the time you find one, put in the delay, get down, chock the truck, do your business and then get all the way back up, you’ve lost your load count.” She was upset because in the time it takes most women to take a bathroom break, their male coworkers have already fit in an entire run since they only have to stop the truck and urinate off the side. Because she did not want to get

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<sup>145</sup> This is also true for women miners once they leave work. As Molly explained, “I am still a girly girl, I dress up and put on make-up, but this is a man’s job. There are lots of butch women. But we’re the most feminine crew. Caitlin wears a lot of make-up and Hollie dresses up a lot on her days off. You’d never know we’re coal miners! We can cuss out people like the guys but still act like ladies.”

behind in the load count and look like a less productive and therefore less desirable worker, like many other women she chooses to both reduce the amount of liquids she consumes and to go behind the large dual tires instead of using the portable bathrooms.<sup>146</sup> These practices begin to point not simply to how women and men differently embody work, but also to how the expectations of this embodiment differently privilege men and women in blue-collar workplaces. As Williams (2000: 65) argues, jobs designed around masculine norms and male bodies discriminate against women.

After we did the walk around (safety inspection) and climbed up the haul truck, Laura attempted to retract the ladder but found that it was not functioning correctly. When she was finally able to insert herself into the busy radio communication and report the problem, she took care to use the correct procedure and specific terminology.<sup>147</sup> When the mechanics finally arrived to investigate the problem, she braved the cold and windy winter morning to join the mechanics in their inspection. She told me that doing so was key in order to avoid being labeled girly. Unable to find a quick fix, the mechanics muscled the ladder back into position so that we could drive off and told her to just use the completely vertical embedded ladder instead – a non-solution in her opinion because the slipperiness of the embedded ladder made it dangerous. Instead of cursing

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<sup>146</sup> This prevalent practice is dangerous because it dehydrates women. Women who feel secure in their positions usually refuse to modify their water or coffee intake, but those like Laura who are working on a trial basis do so in order to “prove themselves” to be efficient, dedicated workers. These practices point to one instance in which men and women differently embody work expectations. Women also talk about equipment fitting and affecting them differently. Nicole, for example, vividly remembers one of her mentors explaining to her that through his experience of training women on scrapers, he learned that their jostling affected women differently because their kidneys were not attached in the same way. He told her to be careful that she did not spend too much time running scraper because she could injure herself more easily than a man could. Nicole loved operating the scrapers, but she said that she did not want to be on them that much anymore. “I do hurt,” she said. “It’s just not a good piece of equipment, but I love it and I’m good at it and I would love to get on it every once and a while.”

<sup>147</sup> The next chapter considers the ways in which these practices index mechanical expertise.

and becoming aggressive like I had seen some of her coworkers do in similar situations, she tried a different tactic that she later described to me as involving “girl power.” She began joking with the mechanic she knew the best, making allusions to her own “wussiness” and begging him to fix the ladder as a personal favor to her because she was too afraid of climbing down off of the steeper ladder. He did, and when we returned triumphantly to the cab, she explained the importance of what she called girl power: “Sometimes it’s easier to get stuff done. But you have to be careful, because sometimes it can hurt more than it can help.”

In the course of a few minutes, Laura modified her usual tomboy approach to interacting with her coworkers and the machinery in order to strategically invoke a more markedly feminine persona. Strategies and experiences such as these are far more typical than static categorizations of women would suggest, supporting my contention that the cultural category of “tomboy” refers less to a specific group of women or stable identity than a tactic for managing the extent to which gender differences become salient in specific social and technological engagements. Thus it is crucial to situate women’s strategies for interacting with technology within the larger perspective of their negotiation of when and how gender differences become salient in workplace social relationships.

In the mines, these relationships are negotiated within the multiple and sometimes contradictory institutional and ideological pressures miners must engage in their everyday lives. Even though official company policies, crew preferences and dominant local gender values encourage women to work indistinguishably from and comfortably alongside men, they are simultaneously expected to embrace more stereotypical notions

of femininity by acting as a moralizing influence on their male coworkers. Like Nicole said, “I don’t want to be a lady out there. I want to be one of the guys. But you know, at the same time, I do make a very strong point to be careful.” She elaborated that being careful meant not crossing the line of acting and speaking “like a man” while still being accepted “like one of the guys.”

Scholars interested in the gender dynamics of engineering workplaces and universities note similar tensions (e.g. Bergvall 1996; Faulkner 2007; Kvande 1999). Bergvall (1996) is especially helpful in pointing to the strategies women have developed for navigating these competing demands on a context-to-context, step-by-step basis. This kind of research has the potential to elucidate the production and negotiation of multiple gender identities in relation to technology as long as scholars think outside of a binary model of gender (though see Landström 2007 for a critique of Faulkner’s work on engineers).

This chapter suggests that women who think of themselves as tomboys consciously minimize gender differences in their interactions with coworkers surrounding their work responsibilities. But I would caution that enjoying working with men and downplaying associations with feminine gender practices does not automatically mean that these women are enacting masculinity, as Carr (1998) and others suggest. In fact, *none* of the women or men used the word “masculine” or any version of it in describing themselves or other women who identified as tomboys. In fact, I showed above how some miners actually criticized women who acted as if they were indistinguishable from men. I would suggest instead that it is equally plausible that such women are crafting alternative ways of being feminine within an already existing range of recognized

practices.<sup>148</sup> In discussing what it means to act like a tomboy, miners primarily invoke three other categories for contrast: flirts, ladies and lesbians.

These local categories seem to hinge on the extent to which women downplay or draw out gender differences, specifically the most common strategies for (de)sexualizing workplace relationships.<sup>149</sup> Miners perceive flirts to be those women who emphasize gender difference (through provocative dress and speech) in order to convince their coworkers and bosses to do nice “extra” things for them, such as assign them to the most comfortable truck or fix a broken am/fm radio. Even when sexual favors are not actually traded in such arrangements, the possibility that they could be remains an incentive for some miners to engage in such relationships. Most miners resent such women for “using their gender to their advantage” in order to unfairly get ahead of their coworkers, but rarely speak poorly of the men who enable such behavior. Like flirts, women identifying as ladies also emphasize their femininity but in ways that are perceived to be non-sexual. For example, they are much more likely to invoke moral superiority rather than their sexuality in drawing out gender differences. Identifying oneself or a coworker as a

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<sup>148</sup> This argument is similar to the one made by Bonnie McElhinny (1995) concerning women police officers in Pittsburgh. She argues that as these women take on an image of police officers as “rational, efficient and professional... they challenge the hegemonic definition of a police officer (and of working-class masculinity) as centered on displays of physical force and emotional aggression and replace this image with a more middle-class masculine norm” (1995: 220). It is odd that McElhinny seems to suggest that the women are taking on and modifying masculine identities given that in an earlier article (McElhinny 1994), she explicitly argues that the women “do not interpret their behavior as masculine” (1994: 167). She concludes that because masculinity is indexically rather than referentially linked to behaviors and attitudes, women can take on otherwise masculine practices to integrate themselves into a male-dominated workplace (1994: 167). Rather than arguing that the women miners are taking on masculine identities, I would suggest that they are redefining feminine ones.

<sup>149</sup> This approach differs considerably from the one undertaken by Tallichet (2006). She tends to assume that workplace relationships in the underground coal mine where she conducted research are always already sexualized and therefore discriminatory towards women. Instead, I ask in which situations, characterized by which social configurations, are workplace relationships sexualized. Whereas she offers jokes as evidence of sexualization, I find it more interesting to also theorize their interpretation by interlocutors.

lesbian also serves to reduce the sexualization of workplace relationships, but in a way that downplays gender difference since lesbians are perceived, like tomboys, to be like one of the guys.<sup>150</sup>

Yet even given a wide range of possible ways of enacting feminine identities at the mines, the vast majority position themselves as tomboys, perhaps because practices grouped under this category remain the least socially stigmatized. Most miners perceive flirts as getting ahead unfairly, ladies as too uptight, and lesbians as too deviant.

Tomboys, however, are valued for integrating themselves into workplace as hard workers and fun co-conspirators who maintain feminine respectability without becoming morally superior or a sexual being. And for the women, positioning oneself in this way allows them considerably more room to maneuver within expectations for gendered practice.

## **Conclusion**

The locally salient category of tomboys potentially destabilizes exceedingly binary conceptions of gender. This chapter draws out the multiplicity of ways through which the mines become gendered places as well as the everyday practices through which the miners creatively embody and in turn shape this gendering. I suggested that the local

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<sup>150</sup> It is beyond the scope of this chapter to fully explore homosexuality in the mines. I note briefly that women tend to experience much less friction in coming out than do men, which is perhaps why so very few men ever publicly identify as gay. Local interpretations of the treatment of lesbians vary widely according to those who identify with the category and those who claim a straight identity. A few women remembered graffiti and verbal harassment being directed at women who were out of the closet in the late 1970s when most of the mines first opened, while others adamantly insisted they had never experienced such harassment. These differing experiences may be partially due to what is popularly perceived as the professionalization of the industry: activities that did not used to require rules and regulations (such as training novices on new equipment) are now mired in bureaucratic paperwork.

cultural category of the tomboy highlights the women miners' strategic negotiation of gender difference at work.<sup>151</sup>

It is striking that none of the women suggested that they were innately tomboys by virtue of their birth or genes given prominent popular trends in explaining gender differences by means of biology (see Lancaster 2003 for a cogent critique of these developments). Rather, they pointed to concrete activities through which they developed (and hope their daughters develop) characteristics associated with tomboys. All of the women miners situated their current identifications as tomboys within the longer trajectories of their life histories, pointing back to fond memories of hunting, camping and fishing with their brothers as children. Those with daughters of their own seemed to take pleasure in telling me about they were also raising them to be tomboys. Carrie, for example, still enjoys going hunting, horseback riding and camping on her days off:

I enjoy family time with my kids. Since my daughter has been going hunting with us since she was five years old, she's a better shot than her Dad and her brother! We call her One Shot. Four bullets, four years, four animals. She also likes fishing and showing her friends non-city life, how to be a kid and get dirty. I was always a tomboy too. I loved doing things with my brothers.

The daughters of some of these women are beginning to seek out work in the mines themselves, and their mothers usually give them their own sets of tools as an extension of the efforts they made to develop mechanical skills at home.

Embodying this alternative gender category – tomboys may be like guys but are

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151 Pertinent questions remain surrounding men's abilities to embody alternative gender categories. It is my sense that it is far more difficult for men to deviate from locally dominant practices of masculinity. To give only one example, an equipment operator who often listened to books on tape while at work particularly enjoyed Danielle Steele novels because he felt like he "really got to know the characters." He kept this practice a secret from everyone on his crew, except for his good friend, because he knew that it would be a constant source of jokes. His dilemma points to Gayle Rubin's argument that a sex/gender system which oppresses women as objects of exchange also "oppresses everyone in its insistence upon a rigid division of personality" (1975: 180).

not identical to them – suggests that the production of gender at these mines is a contested process resulting in less polarized conceptions and practices of gender than one might imagine based on the existing academic and popular literature about mining and technology. Even in one of the allegedly most heavily masculinized industries, women have cultivated alternate ways of being feminine in the workplace that would otherwise be obscured by an analytical lens focusing solely on differences between women and men. Even though gender difference is partially produced through everyday talk that construes different areas, jobs and skills within the mine as either masculine or feminine, it is simultaneously undone, if only partially, through everyday practice. Women are able to draw on ideas about tomboys to alternately minimize and emphasize gender difference, allowing them to craft close friendships with men and earn the respect of their crews and bosses. The next chapter considers one limitation on this more fluid gender practice. A close examination of everyday talk about technology, specifically mine equipment and processes, reveals one arena in which even the most well established tomboys struggle to confront the reification of gender difference.

## **Chapter VII**

### **Language and the Gendering of Technical Expertise**

Definitions of technology rely on gendered characterizations of activities, artifacts and places, and conceptions of masculinity and femininity are caught up in ideas about technological skill. The machinery, tools and processes that men engage in workplaces are easily recognized as technological, but women's domestic activities requiring knowledge and skill in the utilization of tools are rarely recognized as such (Berg and Lie 1995; Bray 2007; Faulkner 2001; Lerman et al. 2003; McGaw 1996). Cynthia Cockburn (1985) was among the first scholars to demonstrate that women use "technologies" as skillfully and as often as men do, even though gender ideologies precluded those activities and artifacts from being recognized as such (cf. Hacker 1989, 1990). Judith McGaw's (1996) exploration of certain technologies associated with women, including artifacts and strategies for organizing and cleaning household goods, draws attention the unmarked masculinization of definitions of technology and widens the field of the tools, skills and places that could be analyzed as such.

Notions of technical skill and masculinity remain powerfully linked in the Powder River Basin. Whereas the last chapter considered some women's successful embodiment of an alternative gender identity, this chapter turns to an investigation of how stricter, more binary ideas about gender are produced through everyday talk about mine equipment despite myriad daily examples of women upsetting them. Even women who

are recognized as tomboys, and therefore as one of the guys, find it difficult to be recognized as technically skilled because of naturalized notions about femininity and technical incompetence. As Betty and many other women from truck drivers to engineers said, “You have to work twice as hard to earn half the respect.” Drawing attention to the naturalization of women’s technical incompetence is important because it produces social inequalities (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995).

Understanding this phenomenon requires an analysis of the step-by-step contested construction of gender in specific contexts. For example, Nicole has been a coal miner since the late 1990s. She describes the mines as a “man’s world,” as do most of her coworkers, men and women alike. For her, this means that “you get muddy, you get filthy, and you endure things I never thought I would.” Despite these challenges, she enjoys her work. “It’s a lot of fun, but it’s what you make of it, too.” To explain what it is like to be a woman in this atmosphere, she offered a story:

A guy and I were putting a pump in. That’s heavy stinking work. And I mean, I’m first to admit I don’t have the muscles like half the people do. We are out there and we were *working*. I go, “Crap!” I go, “It’s not working, we’re not getting it.” And he goes, “Quit being a girl!” That’s funny. To me that was funny, because I’m like, “God I am being a girl! I can’t do this!” We went and got a backhoe, but to me that was funny. I mean, yeah, I was very much being a girl. And it’s something I’ve used before is, “God I’m being a girl today!” Because there are days when you just don’t have the strength to smash that crap in there... And it didn’t bug me because this guy’s also the type to call himself very much girly.

In her short story of the pump, Nicole richly weaves together ideas about gender, labor and technology. What does it mean to approach a task or machine in a “girly” way? In what situations can this category be used and by whom? Once referred to, can it be negated or rescinded, and how might its use shape subsequent interpretations of events? Can only women invoke this category, or can sometimes cantankerous yet well-meaning

men use it to describe themselves as well? How might this complexly gendered incident and others like it change the ways in which anthropologists and feminist technology scholars have conceptualized the co-production of gender and technology?

Practitioners of feminist technology studies have convincingly documented the ways in which gender identities shape the design and use of technologies, but theorizing the production of gender through technological engagements calls for anthropological theories and methods. In this chapter, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork at four mines to argue that the locally salient subject position of the mechanical expert becomes masculinized through the semiotic processes of iconization and erasure (Irvine and Gal 2000).<sup>152</sup> By pairing participant-observation with a close linguistic analysis of everyday talk on the mine radios, I trace the social configurations within which men and women miners successfully embody this subject position. This research not only disrupts the

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<sup>152</sup> The psychological concept of gender schemas, which has been productive in theorizing the slower advancement of women in the professions compared to their male peers, offers a comparable perspective on these processes. For Virginia Valian (1998), gender schemas are implicit hypotheses about gender difference that actually create differences between men and women (1998: 103). Schemas are broader and more neutral than stereotypes (Valian 1998: 104). They are mental constructs that people use to interpret social events, and they contain in “schematic or abbreviated form someone’s concept about an individual or event, or a group of people or events” (Valian 1998: 103). This use of the concept is slightly different from the one proposed by Bem (1993) and followed in recent studies of women’s participation in technology (e.g. Lemons and Parzinger 2007). Bem’s focus is distinguishing between people who typify the expectations held of their gender and apply those expectations to others (gender schematics, conformists) and those that do not (gender aschematics, nonconformists).

Valian’s scholarship is helpful in suggesting that women in non-traditional fields – those in which the gender schema for the successful person is masculine – are viewed as “at least slightly unsuited to that profession... resulting in lower expectations of a woman’s potential achievement” (1998: 15). Even slight disadvantages in evaluations and opportunities accumulate over time. This analytical tool has been helpful in theorizing and ameliorating gender discrimination and representation in the science and engineering professions (Stewart et al. 2007). This chapter provisionally suggests that it could also be useful when applied to blue-collar occupations. Dominant gender schemas of miners are overwhelmingly masculine, making it difficult for women to make inroads into this profession despite official corporate discourses of gender blindness. Though I will follow my discipline and speak primarily in terms of gender ideologies and icons, in the footnotes I will link my arguments to the gender schema perspective. I would like to thank Abby Stewart for bringing this literature and Valian’s scholarship to my attention.

ideological masculinization of the mining industry, but it also helps to de-naturalize binary gender difference.

I begin by tracing the theoretical foundations of the turn toward studying the co-production of gender and technology, with an eye to Catharina Landström's (2007) cogent critique of the tendencies for such studies to reify gender as an internal characteristic of individuals. I argue that combining the insights from feminist technology studies with anthropological theories of gender provides a productive approach for examining the co-production of gender and technology.

Next, to investigate the masculinization of the local social position of the mechanical expert, I focus on 48 hours (four twelve-hour shifts) of transcribed radio conversations at two mines – the largest and smallest – where I conducted onsite research, paying special attention to the practices of reporting mechanical problems and giving directions. If gender truly played a minimal role in the workplace as many miners claimed, a lack of gendered patterns in linguistic practices would be evident in the transcripts and the miners' evaluations of everyday talk. If, however, gender ideologies played a more salient role in conditioning the production and interpretation of talk, prominent patterns would emerge and point to contexts in which gender did come to matter. In this chapter, I analyze three such contexts: language and safety socialization, mechanical problem reporting and direction giving.

The chapter then turns to an examination of the ways in which women's technical achievements are systematically reframed in the course of casual workplace conversations. I focus on two routine practices in which miners and managers consider the best women equipment operators to be those who "care" by being safe and keeping

their equipment clean, and in which they construe women pit supervisors to be bossy rather than knowledgeable. I offer this type of analysis as a model for the ongoing project of queering feminist technology studies.

I conclude by drawing out the broader social implications of this research by bringing it to bear on contemporary public debates concerning the gender wage gap. Better understanding the socioeconomic and cultural factors that shape the women miners' employment decisions sheds light on larger debates about women's participation in well paying but male dominated blue collar professions, an area of increasing concern for feminist theorists and policymakers attempting to bring about gender pay equity (e.g. National Women's Law Center 2002; Mastracci 2004).

### **The co-production of gender and technology**

The links between technology and masculinity have been made to appear natural and inevitable in the EuroAmerican world so much so that "technology is firmly coded male. Men are viewed as having a natural affinity with technology, whereas women supposedly fear or dislike it" (Bray 2007: 38; cf. Cockburn 1985; Hacker 1989, 1990; Oldenziel 1999; Wajcman 1991, 2000). Like technology, mining has been portrayed as an exceptionally masculine endeavor due to its historical dominance by men and association with hegemonic ideologies of masculinity. Popular attention to the feats of engineering and gigantic machinery necessary for extracting and processing the mined materials links mining, masculinity and technology (cf. Lahiri-Dutt 2004 and Ferguson 1999: 169 on the industry's depiction as "hard, technological, scientific, efficient" contributing to its masculinization).

Yet the many simplistic and all-encompassing statements found in both popular media and academic treatises that link mining, masculinity and technology obscure the processes through which these associations are both consolidated and contested. Scholars associated with feminist technology studies have denaturalized these links by exploring the historical and cultural processes through which technology becomes gendered. Analyzing the “co-production of gender and technology” sheds light on how each are “performed and processual in character, rather than given and unchanging, and where the mutual shaping of gender and technology is seen as happening simultaneously, in a context of multiple, decentered agencies with no singular line of causation” (Faulkner 2000: 90; cf. Faulkner 2001).

The mutual imbrication of gender and technology calls for analyzing them together: “Since technology and gender are both socially constructed and socially pervasive, we can never fully understand one without also understanding the other” (Lohan and Faulkner 2004: 319). Analyzing the co-production of gender and technology requires dialectical, non-essentialist approaches to each.<sup>153</sup> The social constructivist turn in science and technology studies rejects technological determinism, focusing instead on the dialectical development of technology through social action. One key contribution to this movement is Thomas Hughes’s (1986) concept of “sociotechnical systems,” which highlights the “seamless web” and inseparability of the social and the technical dimensions of technology. The other key contribution to this movement is actor-network theory, which treats the “missing masses” of “mundane artifacts” as nonhuman actors or

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<sup>153</sup> This theoretical trajectory is different from the “women in technology” literature, which tends to view “technology as gender neutral and as unequivocally ‘a good thing,’ which women would enter into if only early socialization... and workplace structures were changed” (Faulkner 2001: 79-80).

actants that also build social fabrics (e.g. Latour 1992; Callon 1986).<sup>154</sup>

Rather than arguing that technologies develop in fixed directions or that artifacts determine use, this approach holds that “technology is shaped as a result of complex social processes in which, typically, diverse groups do battle over what the artifact should do, look like, and so forth. The possibility always exists that a technology and its outcomes could be otherwise” (Lohan and Faulkner 2004: 322; Oudshoorn and Pinch 2003). To posit that technology is nondeterministic and mutually constitutive with social life is to also hold that it is differently interpreted, used and developed by various groups with differing political interests (Kleif and Faulkner 2003: 298). While recognizing the potential for social and political relationships to become congealed in technological artifacts, it is crucial for these “post-essentialist” approaches to not simply replace technological determinism with social and political determinism: “Technology is neither neutral nor political in and of itself... whatever it appears to be lies in our interpretive engagement with it” (Grint and Woolgar 1995: 292).

Research loosely grouped as feminist technology studies has been crucial in identifying the gendered dynamics and implications of such engagements. Notable work has been done exploring the historical gendering of particular industries and occupations, such as engineering (Oldenziel 1999), automobile design and manufacturing (Meyer 2001; Milkman 1987; Oldenziel 2003 [1997]) and electronics manufacturing (Kalb 1997; Milkman 1987; Ong 1987; Salzinger 1997). Ethnographic perspectives contribute key insights to the everyday co-production of gender and technology, especially in science

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<sup>154</sup> Practitioners of feminist technology studies have been slower to embrace Latour, perhaps because his work (esp. Latour 1987, 1996) has been criticized for failing to attend to gendered structures of power (Wajcman 2004; but also see Bray 2007: 44) and for portraying scientists as de-historicized and monolithically competitive, aggressive and accumulative entrepreneurs (Martin 1998: 27-8).

and engineering (Faulkner 2000, 2007; Hacker 1989; Kleif and Faulkner 2004; Kvande 1999; Mellström 2004; Miller 2004; Traweek 1988). Considering mining specifically, historians Angela John (1980) and Patricia Hilden (1991) both document the processes through which Victorian bourgeois reformers cast western European underground coal mining as a masculine endeavor through public outcry and legislation banning women's long-established work in the industry. Sociologists Suzanne Tallichet (1998, 2000, 2006) and Kristen Yount (1991, 2005) offer contemporary perspectives on the everyday social interactions and labor processes that contribute to the masculinization of underground mining workplaces.<sup>155</sup>

#### *Gender, practice and performance*

Landström cautions that some scholars associated with feminist technology studies have missed the mark on theorizing the “co-production” of gender and technology. She suggests that some scholars have espoused a commitment to theoretically deconstructing dichotomous conceptions of masculinity and femininity only to end up reproducing them in their empirical research by treating gender as a stable trait that precedes the creation of more malleable technology (2007: 7; Van Lenning 2004: 26). Critiquing this “black-boxing” of gender, she argues that it should be approached “not as an identity trait that comes from within the individual and determines their relationships with others, but as something emerging in the processes in which people and technology are enmeshed” (Landström 2007: 10).

By critiquing understandings of gender as a stable interior characteristic of individuals, Landström joins a rich intellectual heritage of feminist thought. The roots of

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<sup>155</sup> These authors and their arguments are discussed in more depth on pages 235-236.

such an approach are popularly traced back to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, in which gender is conceptualized as the "repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, a natural sort of being" (1990: 44). For Butler, gender and even interiority are discursive effects, not causes of action. Though Butler does not offer in-depth ethnographic treatments of her theories, other researchers have done so. In Wendy Chapkis's (1997) study of sex workers, for example, she finds that feelings and personalities that seem to be expressions of an inner world are constructed through everyday embodied performances.<sup>156</sup>

Yet Butler was hardly alone or first in calling for a theory of gender as emergent through practice rather than an essentialized inner identity prompting action. In the 1980s such theories proliferated throughout the academy following elaborations of practice theory articulated by Bourdieu (1977), de Certeau (1984) and Giddens (1979), despite the overall inattention to gender in these canonical works (Gal 1995b; Morris 1995).<sup>157</sup> Though feminist scholars in this period approached the issue through different theoretical foundations with varied implications for thinking about subjects and agency,

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<sup>156</sup> Rethinking relationships between state apparatuses and everyday practices has also provided productive critiques of naturalized interiority. For example, Lauren Berlant (2000) and Laura Kipnis (2000) disrupt conventional understandings of intimacy as natural, internal and private. Berlant calls for scholars to trace the multifarious ways in which the "inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness" (2000: 1). Kipnis argues that marriage, often considered the most intimate of relationships, actually produces model citizen subjects for the state. As an institution it does not just rely on but cultivates particular dispositions while discouraging others, such as adultery, that disrupt a productive "economy of intimacy" (Kipnis 2000: 11; cf. Povinelli 2006).

<sup>157</sup> Rosalind Morris critiques other practice theorists for generally failing to critically theorize gender: "It is sobering to note how little the issue of gender entered into the major works on practice during the late 1970s and early 1980s, especially given the ascendancy of feminist thought in the academy at that time. In Bourdieu's writings, gender remains an unquestioned principle of dichotomy. In Sahlins's work, it is a positionality like any other. In de Certeau's essays, it is a palpable absence" (1995: 572). Sherry Ortner's (1984, 1996, 2003) elaboration of practice theory offers the most sustained attention to gender.

the collective contribution was to offer anti-essentialist theories of the construction of gender and sex.<sup>158</sup> For example, Candace West and Don Zimmerman offer an early theory of gender as an emergent “routine, methodical and recurring accomplishment” (1987: 126). Like Butler, they argue that “doing gender” through everyday actions gives the appearance of “particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (1987: 126). Similarly, for Teresa de Lauretis, gender is a “set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors and social relations” rather than “a property of bodies or something originally existent in human beings” (1987: 3). She crafts a Foucauldian understanding of gender as “the product of various social technologies... and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life” (1987: 2).

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<sup>158</sup> Parody and resignification form the basis for Butler’s understanding of resistance and possible transformation, and she uses drag performances to offer one example of such practices. She argues that when persons commonly identified as anatomical “males” act like “women,” they disrupt the easy identification of anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance to reveal the “imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (1990: 175). Butler argues that we are compelled to repeat, but that the manner of this repeating opens possibilities for displacing the gender norms giving shape to the repetition itself (1990: 189). In other words, she locates agency in producing variance into gendered acts (1990: 185); an instance of agency in the previous example might be men wearing skirts or women wearing black lipstick instead the accepted “feminine” pink or red. These attempts at resignification stem from a mismatch between everyday gender performances and hegemonic cultural ideals: “The injunction to be a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated... The coexistence or convergence of such discursive injunctions produces the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment... There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very ‘taking up’ is enabled by the tool lying there” (Butler 1999: 185; cf. 1993: 2).

While this model appears promising, crucial questions remain. If we take seriously the idea that all gendered action is imitative, one should question how parody and change arise from such a system: how should one distinguish subversive repetitions from those that reinscribe norms? Butler herself raises concern about this issue, pointing out that “subversive practices always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés through their repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition within commodity culture where ‘subversion’ carries market value” (1990: xxi). Based on my reading of her texts, she argues that “there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony” (Butler 1990: 177) without identifying precisely how to understand or identify or bring about this key difference. The question of uptake and recognition of parodic performances is undertheorized.

Anthropologists interested in gender have also been influential in critiquing its naturalization. Jane Collier and Sylvia Yanagisako in particular challenge essentialist notions gender by drawing on and extending David Schneider's (1972) critique of the biological basis of western folk models of kinship:

Rather than taking for granted that "male" and "female" are two natural categories of human beings whose relations are everywhere structured by their difference, we ask whether this is indeed the case in each society we study and, if so, what specific social and cultural processes cause men and women to *appear* different from each other... We argue that gender and kinship have been defined as fields of study by our folk conception of the same thing, namely, the biological facts of sexual reproduction. [Yanagisako and Collier 1987: 15; emphasis in original]

The cultural specificity of western assumptions of biology and culture as well as interiority and exteriority is revealed through cross-cultural comparison. Marilyn Strathern (1988) critiques the essentialist assumptions underlining some western feminist intellectual projects. She argues that for Melanesians, gender does not inhere in persons or things, but is produced through actions with others such as exchange. "It is because women 'do' things differently from men, because they evince different capacities in the way they act, that their bodies are gendered... men and women do not so much possess sexual qualities as attributes as deploy their gender capabilities in transacting with them" (Strathern 1988: 130).<sup>159</sup> Other comparable ethnographic examples can be found in abundance. Saba Mahmood (2005) has recently reappraised these issues in her critique of the secular-liberalism underpinning the disapproval articulated for a grassroots women's Islamist piety movement by some "prescriptive" western feminist movements. In suggesting that external performative acts such as prayer are understood by these

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<sup>159</sup> Strathern further deconstructs western notions of stable bodily sex by arguing, for example, that "much ritual attention is paid to sexual organs not because the organs sex the person, as it were, but because in her or his relations with others, the person sexes the organs" (1987: 208; cf. 1987: 128).

Egyptian women to cultivate corresponding inward dispositions, she argues that “action does not issue forth from natural feelings but creates them” (2005: 157).<sup>160</sup>

Alaina Lemon (2004) also questions naturalized notions of the relationship between practice and cultural conceptions of the self in her work with Russian theater students. Comparing American and Russian interpretations of the performance scholar Stanislavsky’s Method Acting, she argues that whereas American performance instructors have stressed the “emotion memories” held by individual actors, Russian approaches tend to emphasize the social dimensions. This orientation extends to dominant trends in social psychology, as one of the most influential Soviet psychologists drew on Stanislavsky to argue that “external” language and interaction constitute “internal” selves (Lemon 2004: 322). Moreover, she traces how emotions – often considered to spring forth from internalized selves – are actually cultivated and continually reworked through acting exercises.

All these scholars, drawing on various theoretical trajectories and ethnographic materials, critique the naturalization of interiority present in much western thought. Theorizing gender as emergent through social practice can shed light on the step-by-step co-production of gender and technology. These everyday practices, while constrained by dominant ideologies, are not completely subsumed by them. Close attention to the details of everyday life – particularly how people create complexly gendered places – complicates the naturalized and binary conceptions of gender that have come to

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<sup>160</sup> Thus instead of following some feminists in treating social norms as external impositions that constrain individuals, Mahmood echoes Butler in arguing that “the distinction between the subject’s real desires and obligatory social conventions – a distinction at the center of liberal, and at times progressive, thought – cannot be assumed, precisely because socially prescribed forms of behavior constitute the conditions for the emergence of the self as such and are integral to its realization” (2005: 149).

characterize not only ideologies at the Wyoming mines, but also popular and academic accounts of gender, mining and technology. It is to this ethnographic perspective that I now turn.

### **Language and safety socialization**

From the miners' first day on the job, language plays key roles as both a tool for socialization and as something that is socialized (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986: 167).

Language acquisition requires more than simply "learning to produce well-formed referential utterances; it also entails learning how to use language in socially appropriate ways to co-construct meaningful social contexts and to engage with others in culturally relevant meaning-making activities" (Garrett and Baquedano-Lopez 2002: 342; cf.

Rosaldo 1982: 209; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986: 184). Sustained attention to mid-life socialization has recently become a major area of investigation, as occupational shifts often require adults to master new speech styles (Garrett and Baquedano-Lopez 2002: 349). This insight resonates with many of the challenges faced by the new miners

described below. Their experiences show that even though socialization is an interactive, not unidirectional process, structural and ideological constraints preclude completely unrestrained appropriations of speech (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986: 165).

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges faced by new miners is navigating the multiple and sometimes contradictory expectations that stem from official company policies and the routines developed by each crew. Company safety and health representatives encourage new employees to "speak up" and often if they notice a potentially unsafe act or have a question about proper procedures. A common theme

used to frame these injunctions is that even though the miners are inexperienced, they are valuable because they are a “fresh set of eyes” to analyze safety conditions in the workplace. As such, they are encouraged to ask questions and raise safety issues with their crews and supervisors.

In their very first days with their crews, however, new miners learn a very different lesson about the appropriate way to speak up about safety hazards. Experienced miners take ensuring the safety of themselves and their coworkers very seriously, and their efforts have resulted in the mines recognition as being some of the safest in the entire country. However, the crews’ most common strategies for creating and maintaining safe working places differ greatly from those most often encouraged by management. Because pointing out a potential safety concern could imply the incompetence or oversight of the critiqued party, most crews have developed delicate strategies for addressing safety hazards without insulting the expertise of their coworkers.

Experienced miners very rarely critique their coworkers in front of others, preferring instead to have one-on-one conversations to discuss potentially unsafe behaviors. New hires are often explicitly instructed to follow this procedure rather than the one they were taught in the course. This method privileges horizontal relationships among crewmembers rather than vertical relationships with supervisors and managers. Most miners react negatively when people violate these preferred practices by announcing the problem in front of others on the radio or in a crew meeting, speaking directly to a supervisor about the issue, or participating in a program that results in a coworker being disciplined. Miners who do not follow the crews’ preferred strategies for

managing safety and should know better are often socially ostracized and spoken to curtly – if at all – on the radio.

Radio talk plays a vital role in managing safety, and most miners rely on a conventionalized style to identify a problem without insulting their coworker. Although new hires are not explicitly instructed in this style, those who pay attention to the microdetails of radio talk often pick it up. For those who are slower to adopt it, their coworkers model the style for them. For example, properly functioning headlights help create safe working conditions, especially on night shifts. Publicly pointing out a darkened headlight is a comparatively minor correction, but some miners take offense because it draws attention to an elementary mistake. During a night shift, a new hire (Jill) informed the blade operator (Clint) that his lights were off. According to her crew, Jill had a history of pointing out “every single little thing” over the radio, which offended her coworkers by calling into question their expertise.

**Example 1**

- 1 J: You don't have all of the lights for that blade on.  
[no response from C]

A few minutes later, Kathy, a miner with more experience who also spent a lot of time with the crew outside of work, used a markedly different approach to address the same problem:

**Example 2**

- 1 K: It looks like some of the lights are out on that blade.  
2 C: Thanks.

Both Jill and Kathy tell the blade operator that some of his headlights are dark, but with different implications for his skill. By using the second person “you,” Jill insinuates that Clint himself has forgotten to turn them on. Conversely, Kathy uses a more indirect,

depersonalized statement and thus avoids implying that the issue is his fault – she leaves open the possibility that the lights could be broken. Clint responds by thanking her, in striking contrast to his ignoring of Jill, perhaps as a way to show Jill the appropriate way to handle such a situation.

Jill unsuccessfully attempted to adapt to the crew's speech style. Since experienced miners tend to indirectly critique a coworker's practices or make a request, these formulations are usually much longer than the more direct statements made by management. For example, when noting that the shovel was about to run out of cable, an experienced miner is more likely to tell the operator that "you probably already know this, but the cable is getting a little tight." Managers and supervisors are more likely to be direct: "You need to get more cable." Throughout my time with the crew, Jill continually lengthened her utterances – perhaps as a way to sound more like her coworkers – but did not adjust her speech so as to not offend their expertise. For example, she once told a blade operator, "You probably already know this, but this road by the crushers is really bumpy and you need to take care of it." Despite both implicit and explicit attempts made by her coworkers to socialize her into their way of speaking, Jill continued with her own style until the rest of the crew became so noticeably upset with her that she threatened to transfer to another crew. Her experiences highlight the ways discussed above in which learning how to speak is also learning how to and interact with others and navigate social contexts.

The crew's focus on Jill – and my own concentration on her here – stems from the distinctiveness of her integration onto the crew. Jill's case is also significant because she (perhaps unwittingly) played an additional role in the socialization of miners who were

hired after her. Her ways of speaking and struggles with the crew became entextualized (Briggs and Bauman 1992) as crewmembers told stories about her that gradually coalesced into a few that became easily recognizable and repeatable lessons about the proper ways of speaking and socializing at work. They told these stories among themselves and to new hires, warning them not to emulate her. This text served as a way for them to jointly create, challenge and recreate theories of social relationships at the mine and impart them to new miners.

Those miners who are able to creatively navigate competing pressures from their crews are more likely to successfully integrate themselves onto crews as both experts and well-liked coworkers. These two social positions are not unrelated. Becoming recognized as an expert requires not only technical knowledge, but also social savvy. By spending time with coworkers both on and off the worksite, miners find it increasingly easier to ask technical questions about mechanical problems with specific machines, various stages of mining processes and strategies for working “smarter not harder.” They also become privy to information about social relationships – such as histories of conflicts, current close friendships and romantic partnerships – as well as insights into individual personalities, such as how to tell when and why people are having a bad day and the best way to avoid them. This information is valuable for everything from determining whom to call during a mechanical failure to knowing when it is appropriate to raise a safety concern and how to do so. Those miners who have more difficulty in mastering the nuances of these relationships and appropriate contexts for talk about safety also face much more difficulty in positioning themselves as experts.

### **Jumbled talk, confused women? Iconization and expertise**

Discussions between operators, mechanics and supervisors about mechanical problems comprise a significant portion of radio communication and a key arena in which technical expertise is evaluated. In this section, I follow Matoesian (2001) to argue that expertise is interactionally achieved or undermined, in this case through talk about machines.

Matoesian argues that an expert identity does not reflect pre-given qualifications, but is a “dynamic interactional achievement, capable of shifting on a moment by moment basis in the very linguistic details of its realization” (2001: 191). This expertise becomes persuasive only in the step-by-step details of interactions, and he highlights the importance of speakers’ management of terminology, shifts in footing and frame, and intertextual voices and documents. Significantly, he also shows that expertise can be discursively undercut through inferences made in the flow of talk. Viewing expertise as a construction moves it beyond the common sense understanding, held by miners, that it simply refers to the knowledge and practical familiarity gleaned through direct engagement with machines in the context of mining over long periods of time (cf. Mellström 2002). Showing how expertise is constructed and challenged through radio talk about mechanical problems suggests that women’s efforts to position themselves as technical experts are undermined by persistent patterns in the production and interpretation of everyday talk.<sup>161</sup>

#### *Conventions of radio talk*

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<sup>161</sup> Valian’s summary of the psychological research on perceptions of competence also suggests that managers systematically under-estimate women’s competence. (Valian 1998: 129).

To contextualize this type of talk, I first offer a brief overview of more general conventions for using the mine radio. Except for lunch breaks, the main form of communication among equipment operators during the twelve-hour shifts is the mine radio. Various radio channels have different access and conventions for speech. At most mines, all miners working in the pit share a primary channel that is set up with repeaters so that it can be picked up from all areas of the pits, whereas the plant and shop often have their own separate channels. However, most mines also have “line of sight” channels that can only transmit signals directly from radio to radio, resulting in much less coverage. These more unofficial channels can be used by groups of people working closely together on a specific task so that they do not monopolize the main radio, but most often they are used to socialize, tell jokes and express frustrations with less political correctness. It is comparably more difficult but not impossible for shift supervisors and upper management to regularly listen to these channels, though many usually monitor the main production channel.

On all the channels, only one person can speak at a time, so that when someone keys their microphone in the middle of someone else’s conversation, they silence or “walk over” that person. It is much easier to identify individual voices at smaller mines since there are fewer employees and crews have often worked together for many years. At these mines, crew members and even supervisory personnel use many more personal names to establish radio contact even though official company policies encourage the use of numbers. Equipment operators take the number of their machine for each shift, so that the person operating haul truck 444 should identify herself as and respond to calls for 444. Pit utility people (who provide support for the shovels and rove among various

tasks during a shift), mechanics and supervisors are all assigned stable numbers. At mines where crews do not know each other as well, these numbers are essential for communicating. At the smaller ones, however, they are interpreted as alienating and thus avoided whenever possible.

Radio talk at both mines tends to focus around task planning and mechanical problem reporting. Most supervisors give out major directions, such as the locations of loading machines and dump sites, during the pre-shift start-up meeting. They prefer to discuss special projects with individuals and small groups out in the pit, face-to-face, to reduce confusion and provide an opportunity for immediate feedback and questioning. During the course of a shift, however, countless unexpected situations or changes of plans require the use of the mine radio to negotiate assignments and plans. Since these discussions most often include the pit utility persons, shift supervisors and management – positions all dominated by men – comparatively fewer women participate in these types of “planning” discussions.

On the other hand, many men and women miners thought that women disproportionately reported mechanical problems – a belief affirmed in a close analysis of the transcripts. Even when comparing miners with similar experience, women still use the radio to report problems more often than do men operating the same equipment on the same crew. Instead of simplistically attributing this disparity to men’s greater mechanical competence, one recurring question on the radio most often voiced by men points to a more plausible explanation. The transcripts are cluttered with men asking their peers and supervisors “Where can I catch up with you?” or “Where can you catch up with me?” Even though I was not able to sit in on most of the ensuing face-to-face

discussions, participant-observation in the pit suggests that many miners use these interactions to privately discuss and seek out help for mechanical problems. These miners' efforts to avoid publicly speaking about mechanical problems point to the force of local ideological linkages between masculinity and displayed technical competence.

### *Iconization and uncertainty*

I identified one key gendered linguistic ideology above: most experienced male miners believe that women “talk too much” on the radio, especially when reporting mechanical problems.<sup>162</sup> Moreover, experienced men and women alike became frustrated when new miners explain problems with what they perceive as a lack of clarity, which can include repeating themselves, not finishing thoughts and using vague or incorrect terminology. Intriguingly, they often linked the uncertainty associated with particular linguistic features to women's perceived lack of mechanical knowledge and ability. As one experienced male miner complained about Jill, who was perceived as both “speaking in circles” and lacking expertise: “Her talk on the radio is just as jumbled and confused as she is.”

The semiotic process of iconization best captures the interpretive work being undertaken in these situations. Iconization is the process through which “linguistic differences appear to be iconic representations of the social contrasts they index – as if a

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<sup>162</sup> Valian cites an intriguing study in which subjects were asked to evaluate the performance of male and female leaders in charge of a group. The students rated the women poorly because they spoke too much, and labeled them “bossy and domineering.” Valian suggests that the women leaders may have spoken more than the men because group members paid less attention to them, offering less verbal and nonverbal feedback (1998: 131). This finding would suggest that women miners may speak more on the radio because their coworkers respond to them less. It is outside the scope of this chapter to test this hypothesis, but a preliminary examination of the radio transcripts do suggest that women are ignored more often than their male peers.

linguistic feature somehow depicted or displayed a social group's inherent nature or essence" (Irvine 2003: 33; cf. Irvine and Gal 2000: 37). This process naturalizes women's perceived technical inabilities, even though perceived connections between linguistic features and social groups may only be "historical, contingent or conventional" (Irvine and Gal 2000: 37).

To explore this process in greater detail in the mines, I first focus on "softening" devices such as hedges, tag questions and vague terminology. Hedges can be understood as linguistic devices that "soften utterances by signaling imprecision and noncommitment" (Dixon and Foster 1997: 90). They have provided a focus for many scholars of gender and language, perhaps because Robin Lakoff (1975) identified them as a key feature of women's "unassertive" speech in her influential though highly critiqued *Language and Woman's Place*.<sup>163</sup> Holmes (1995) in particular has built on and critiqued Lakoff's identification of hedges as a feature of women's unassertive language based on her research in New Zealand. She distinguishes between the affective and epistemic aspects of hedges, arguing that women often use them to create feelings of solidarity among interlocutors while men tend to use them to signal uncertainty.

A close analysis of the transcripts reveals that many women miners, especially those with comparably less experience, do tend to use hedges and other softening devices more often than men when reporting mechanical problems.<sup>164</sup> For example, Daisy is a novice equipment operator. At the beginning of a night shift, her coworker Robert called her on the radio to tell her that the taillights on the haul truck she was driving were not

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<sup>163</sup> To give one example, Cameron (1998) shows that indirectness can also be used by people in positions of power to make demands of others.

<sup>164</sup> It seems unlikely, following Holmes, that the women do so to craft social bonds since the men tend to disparage this practice and because the hedging clusters around statements of technical uncertainty.

illuminating. He has about the same experience as Daisy, but he operates more pieces of equipment. Bruce is a mechanic, and Gus is an experienced equipment operator.

**Example 3**

- 1 Robert: 44 to 177
- 2 Daisy: Go ahead
- 3 R: Hey Daisy you don't got no red lights whatsoever back there
- 4 D: 10-4 thanks **uh** 177 to Bruce
- 5 Bruce: Bring it in
- 6 D: Hey Bruce Ryan was telling me this truck doesn't have any red lights
- 7 B: Yeah bring it in (*clipped*)
- 8 D: 10-4
- 9 Gus: Bruce you want her to bring it in?
- 10 B: **Uh** not today

A few minutes later, Lance, one of the most experienced miners, offers Daisy some assistance.

- 11 Lance: Daisy when you pull forward your red lights came on
- 12 D: Are they on now?
- 13 L: Yeah they're back off now
- 14 D: Still light – I was just on the road traveling in this direction and they
- 15 were on so...
- 16 L: They were on but now they're off
- 17 D: 'sposed to stay on or **what's the deal** with these trucks?
- 18 L: Should have their lights

Half an hour later, after a discussion between Bruce and Will, the pit supervisor, Daisy asks Bruce for further clarification.

- 19 D: 177 to Bruce
- 20 B: Go ahead
- 21 D: Bruce I just caught the last part of the conversation did you want me to
- 22 go ahead and bring it down there to get it looked at or were you gonna
- 23 wait
- 24 B: Take another run
- 25 D: I think maybe when I stomp on my brakes **or something like that** they'll
- 26 come on but I just have the yellow lights that are running when I'm in
- 27 gear or **whatever you call it**
- 28 B: Bring it up we gotta change em out
- 29 D: 10-4

Two hours later, Daisy calls Will to update him on the situation.

- 30 D: Will
- 31 W: Go ahead

- 32 D: Will we're back up and running two hours and 25 minutes  
33 W: You got a lot of catching up to do  
34 D: 10-4 I needed turbo chargers **or something** on here  
35 W: Well your taillights look good  
36 D: 10-4

Daisy hedges or softens her utterances at multiple points in the transcript: in line four when she hesitates in calling Bruce the mechanic, in line 14 when she trails off her explanation of the problem and in line 25 when she qualifies her assessment with “maybe.” She also expresses uncertainty in lines 17, 25-27 and 34 when she uses non-technical words to describe the functioning of the haul truck: “the deal,” “something like that,” “whatever you call it,” and “or something.” These instances are all in a tag position, following and casting doubt on her more technical assessment of the issue. Since the appropriate use of mechanical terminology indexes expert knowledge and builds up expertise, Daisy’s use of non-technical terms points to a lack of knowledge and erodes her previously stated efforts to prove her abilities (cf. Matoesian 2001: 164). The joke between Gus and Bruce in lines nine and ten suggests that her coworkers have picked up on her uncertainty and its linguistic expression: Gary parrots Daisy in asking a question that has already been answered, and Bruce echoes her original uncertain “uh” in his ironic response. In later discussions, Daisy and her crew interpreted the first joke as a criticism. Yet this excerpt also shows that jokes can be used to reincorporate miners into social circles. Will downplays Daisy’s mechanical troubles in line 33 with a joke that she and the crew interpreted as good-natured, perhaps because he then reaffirms her successful handling of the situation in line 35.

Such exchanges were also common at the larger mine. During a chilly day shift, a relatively new hire named Laura began having troubles with her truck and called a pit mechanic. JR, a mechanic who was nearing retirement, answered the call.

#### Example 4

- 1 Laura: Hello pit mechanic  
2 JR: Go ahead  
3 L: I'm in 411 and the bed goes up uh awfully slowly **this is my first day on**  
4 **my own** I don't know if it's because it's an old truck or if there's a  
5 problem with the bed going up too slow. Could you come take a look at  
6 it please?  
7 JR: Which truck?  
8 L: 411  
9 JR: You say the bed's going up too slow?  
10 L: Yes it's going extremely slow even though I have the gas pressed down  
11 all the way. **I don't know** if it's old or if there's a problem with it  
12 JR: Well you might want to check the hydraulic fluid  
13 L: Pardon?  
14 JR: Might be low on hydraulic fluid  
15 L: Kay thanks  
16 Gary: That's an old truck. Might be a short between the steering wheel and  
17 seat there.

Gary is one of Laura's coworkers and has been operating equipment for about five years.

After three minutes of instructions on how to diagnose the problem, JR arranges for another mechanic to look at the truck.

- 16 JR: Laura you copy that just stop on the south line and a pit mechanic will  
17 catch up with you  
18 L: Kay bye

Laura hesitates when offering an assessment of the truck bed problem and then qualifies it by noting that it is her first day on the job. She then elaborates potential explanations, but only after stating her uncertainty in line four and repeating it in line ten. A coworker offers a suggestion based on his knowledge of the truck, and then the mechanic spends a few minutes explaining to her how she should check the hydraulic fluid, a task that truck drivers are supposed to be trained to do before they are released to drive on their own. Finally, the mechanic gives up and sends one of his coworkers to meet her. While I was listening to this exchange with the dispatcher, the pit supervisor and two utility guys, they were astounded at her lack of basic knowledge about both truck mechanics and interactional conventions. Her utterance of the word "please" was the only time anyone

on the radio uttered it in the 48 hours of transcription analyzed here, and when she ended the exchange by saying “bye,” everyone in the office turned to each other with eyebrows raised and simultaneously exclaimed, “Did she just say ‘Bye?’”

Comparably fewer new men use more uncertain styles to report or ask questions about mechanical problems, but even those that did were less stigmatized. During the same shift as Laura’s troubles, another new hire named Tom called the contracting company (Wyoming Machinery) in charge of fixing the haul trucks to report a warning light.

**Example 5**

- 1 Tom: 5 to Wyoming Machinery [pause]  
2 Hello Wyoming Machinery  
3 Bob: Go ahead  
4 T: Yeah this 55 I had a light come on lube low. I checked and it’s in the  
5 sight glass but **I don’t know if it’s downhill or what**  
6 B: You were going downhill or around a corner?  
7 T: 10-4 the first time it did tonight  
8 B: Yeah 10-4 that’s usually what happens. [pause] Good call though

This exchange is highly unusual due to the contractor’s explicit positive appraisal of Tom’s thoughts and actions at the end of line eight. In most other interactions of this kind, the conversation would have ended with the contractor’s statement that the machine’s behavior was not a cause for concern. Perhaps the contractor wanted to hold up Tom’s actions – checking the lube level before reporting the warning light and correctly diagnosing the problem (a steep downhill grade) – as an example for the rest of the crew. What is striking is that unlike Laura’s interaction above, Tom’s uncertain hedging in line five does not override the contractor’s otherwise positive appraisal of him as a knowledgeable operator.

When men do use the radio to report mechanical problems, they are more likely to employ a more declarative style. Brian is a truck driver who is neither a new hire nor one

of the most experienced operators at the larger mine. Rick is a mechanic for the contracting company.

**Example 6**

- 1 Brian: Wyoming Machinery
- 2 Rick: Go ahead
- 3 B: 253 here in 6 south got a steady flow of hydraulic oil behind the tank
- 4 R: 10-4 shut er down
- 5 B: 10-4 yeah as soon as I seen it

In this exchange, Brian succinctly gives the mechanic all of the pieces of information needed to assess the severity of the situation: the truck number, location and detailed description of the problem (rate of flow, type of liquid and location on the truck). He also performs his mechanical knowledge in announcing that he anticipated the correct form of action (shutting down the truck) without having to be told to do so by someone else.

*Erasure and gendered expertise*

The previous section demonstrated that linguistic devices locally understood as uncertain are iconically linked to women's purported technical incompetence. Accompanying this iconization is the interpretive practice of erasure, or the "process in which ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible. Facts that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme either go unnoticed or get explained away" (Irvine and Gal 2000: 38). This process obscures those linguistic features and practices that do not fit the dominant interpretive pattern. In this case, instances in which experienced women miners demonstrate their expertise are ignored, as is the frequent use by men of devices usually coded as uncertain when used by women.

Carrie is respected for being one of the most experienced operators on her crew, skilled in operating many different types of machines and a key member of the safety and rescue team. When reporting mechanical failures, she often utilizes more declarative statements that demonstrate her mechanical expertise, as in the following example.

**Example 7**

- 1 Carrie: 237 to a pit mechanic
- 2 Tim: [makes a radio click, usually interpreted as acknowledgement of a call]
- 3 C: Yeah I'm up here on the south ready line **um** I've got an engine over
- 4 temp, looks like 200 and this truck usually doesn't get that high. The
- 5 fan's running and both belts are there
- 6 T: We'll be there in a little bit
- 7 C: 10-4 it's back down to 175 did you want me to leave it running?
- 8 T: Got any leaks anywhere
- 9 C: **Uh** negative no leaks anywhere, plenty of fuel
- 10 T: Okay

Even though Carrie initially hesitates in explaining the problem, she quickly performs her mechanical knowledge: giving the specific name of the warning light, noting the current engine temperature and comparing it to her knowledge of the truck's normal temperature. She then explains that she has already investigated two potential sources of the problem (a broken fan or missing belts) and found them to be in proper order. The mechanic initially responds unenthusiastically to her call by responding with a click instead of a verbal acknowledgement, but he engages her directly after she confidently explains the problem. Moreover, he does not question her assessment of the issue. Other mechanics on the same crew treat her even more respectfully by prioritizing her truck on their list of jobs and using her name instead of number in conversation. Carrie's strategic use of linguistic features associated with expertise and men confirms Bonnie McElhinny's (1995) argument that "the symbolic manipulation of gender

markers, then, gives skilled women a chance to demonstrate their competence; in effect, women perform gender so gender will be ignored” (1995: 220).

The more declarative speech styles of experienced women such as Carrie are erased in the dominant discourses associating women’s speech in general with uncertainty; women like Carrie are explained away as exceptions to a more general rule.<sup>165</sup> Their linguistic practices do not represent a greater challenge to the ones articulated by their male peers perhaps because there are comparably fewer of them. Highly experienced women like Carrie are relatively rare in the basin because even those who like their jobs often leave the pit for office positions or non-mining jobs with more regular hours that make it easier to take care of children.<sup>166</sup>

Even though women are most often singled out as the most uncertain speakers, men engage in nearly identical linguistic practices, underlining the point that “erasure in ideological representation does not, however, necessarily mean actual eradication of the awkward element, whose very existence may be unobserved or unattended to” (Irvine and Gal 2000: 38). The interpretation of these utterances depended on the speaker’s level of experience. For example, shovel operators – usually the most experienced miners in the pit – tended to use hedges and non-technical terms often without significant criticism. In the next example, the shovel operator Terry reports a mechanical problem to Karl, the pit supervisor, during a day shift.

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<sup>165</sup> From the perspective of gender schemas, this process would be explained by confirmation bias – the tendency to discount information that does not confirm an hypothesis – and belief perseverance – in which people ignore contradictory evidence or label it an exception in order to maintain their hypothesis (Valaian 1998: 106).

<sup>166</sup> As I discuss in another article (Smith 2008) and Chapter Four, the rotating twelve-hour shift schedule makes it difficult for men and women miners to take care of their children and home responsibilities.

### Example 8

1 Terry: Hello Karl  
2 Karl: Go ahead [pause]  
3 Go ahead Terry  
4 T: **Somebody** better come and **uh** take a look at **this thing**. There is  
5 **something** seriously wrong with the swing on **this thing**. I'm not  
6 gonna call em.  
7 K: I'll call em.

Instead of specifying who should investigate the shovel's swing problem, Terry states that "somebody" should look at "this thing" because "something" is wrong. He also hesitates in line four when stating that someone should come down to the shovel to investigate. Karl's respect for Terry's knowledge is evident in his willingness to contact the millwrights on Terry's behalf without further clarification on the equipment failure. Thus experience influences the interpretation of particular "uncertain" features of talk: highly experienced operators are not stigmatized for using this style because their knowledge is not under debate as it is for newer miners, especially women.

It is striking that whereas the most experienced men in the pit utilize hedging devices and ambiguous terms when reporting mechanical problems without reprisal, the most experienced women like Carrie tend to use more declarative statements. These practices may be a response to the dominant ideologies of ideologies of gender and technology that equate masculinity and expertise. Women who perform less assertive speech styles potentially open themselves up to criticism and being labeled as incompetent. Perhaps men can employ similar speech styles without the same risks because their own technical abilities are not under question (cf. Faulkner 2007: 334).

**"You drive your machine, I'll drive mine": Bossiness**

Whereas experienced miners tended to value and produce statements of mechanical problems that were direct, concise and clear, they overwhelmingly preferred indirectness in giving and making requests in the pit. This apparent incongruity poses a challenge for new hires in successfully navigating locally appropriate styles of speaking.

Indirectness is prevalent in miner-to-miner direction giving on the radio. For example, instead of telling a truck driver that they have to move because they are positioned too far to the left or right, most shovel operators prefer to tell them that they might want to adjust their mirrors. This formulation places the blame with the mirror angles instead of the driver. Another common strategy is to make a joke. When I was a truck driver in college, my crew had nicknamed me “Leftie” because I expressed more liberal political views than most of them. One of the shovel operators built on this joke to indirectly make requests of me. Whenever I parked my truck a little too far to the left at his shovel, he took to asking me if I was “listening to NPR” (a “leftie” radio station) instead of directly asking me to reposition.

Other operators prefer to simply describe a situation and let the intended recipient volunteer to take action. For example, the blades are used to keep the roads smooth without major rocks or potholes. Instead of ordering the blade operator to work on a specific section of road, most truck drivers simply comment on the road conditions. When more direct requests are given, they are almost always prefaced with a mitigating device such as “You probably already knew this, but...”

Another popular strategy is to speculate about abstract third persons. For example, a supervisor had requested that the dozer operator build a new road to the new section of the pit. Instead of specifying precisely which material to use, he said, “A guy

could, if he wanted to, take that parting there and make a ramp out of it instead of hauling in a bunch of overburden.” The dozer operator responded that he agreed and had been thinking about doing so. This formulation deflects the order onto a hypothetical person rather than the individual operator (compare Puckett 2000: 53).

The delicacy of situations in which miners must make requests of one another is evident in the verbal art surrounding these situations. For example, Bill, who has one of the most respected positions in the pit as a dragline operator, had previously reported a faulty and noisy alarm to Bob, the pit supervisor. Without having to be directly asked to do so, Bob volunteered to look into the matter and later called Bill to continue planning their course of action.

#### **Example 9**

- |    |       |   |
|----|-------|---|
| 1  | Bob:  | 01 Bill   |
| 2  | Bill: | Go ahead Bob  |
| 3  | Bob:  | I did talk to Mikey I guess they were out I guess they got something they |
| 4  |       | got to do to it but I guess they'll do it on a down day                   |
| 5  | Bill: | 10-4 yeah that's too bad do you know when the next down day is            |
| 6  |       | planned   |
| 7  | Bob:  | No I don't Bill I probably won't be able to til the morning but we can    |
| 8  |       | sure find out. If we don't have a down day sometime soon it'd be nice to  |
| 9  |       | get that fixed huh  |
| 10 | Bill: | Yeah I don't know how important it really is but it'd be nice maybe       |
| 11 |       | Friday they do need to change out those ropes                             |
| 12 | Bob:  | Kay well I'll talk to Jim there in the morning and let em know maybe      |
| 13 |       | they do have something planned or maybe they can plan something           |

In line three, Bob advises that nothing can be done to fix the alarm until the dragline is scheduled to be down (not in operation). He hedges by using the phrase “I guess” three times in his initial proposal for Bill, perhaps as a way to mitigate his responsibility for what he knows to be less than desirable news. In line five, Bill’s statement that “yeah that’s too bad” and question about the next scheduled down day is an indirect request for Bob to reconsider. Bob picks up on this request and acknowledges

the annoyance of the alarm in lines seven and eight. Tellingly, he also switches to the deictic “we” – understood to be him and Bob – as a way to perform the alignment of their interests. Bill then downplays the necessity he previously expressed by questioning the importance of fixing the alarm, but then immediately notes that a rope change was scheduled for Friday. Bob acknowledges this point but makes sure to hedge his promise to investigate the possibility of fixing the alarm on Friday with two “maybes” and an attribution of responsibility to someone else.

If either Bill or Bob had taken a more aggressive or direct stance in the interaction, there is a good chance that the other would have interpreted as an affront to their own knowledge and dignity. Miners react strongly when interactional norms of indirectness are violated. For example, during one shift an experienced male miner responded to a direct request made by an equally experienced woman on his crew by saying, “You drive your machine, I’ll drive mine.” These reactions are especially strong when they involve a miner with less experience bossing around someone with more, such as in another situation when a miner complained to his crew by saying, “I’ve been bossed around by my mother and now by my wife. I don’t need another one out here.”

Moreover, many of the people at Jill’s mine made a point to remember her socialization. When mimicking her speech, they used many direct imperatives (do this, go there, etc.) in marked contrast to the indirect formulations they had developed as a group. The crew eventually became so upset that they staged an intervention with her. “I went over there and told her to mind her own Goddamn business and quit sticking her nose where it don’t belong,” one miner recalled to me. “She just started crying and saying that she didn’t mean to do it and that she’d try to do better. I told her it was okay,

just to quit telling everybody else how to run their own business.” This case illustrates that in the context of giving directions, more declarative statements index inappropriate bossiness rather than expertise, as was the case in reporting mechanical problems.

Linguistic anthropologists (and anthropologically-inclined linguists) offer a few hints as to why indirectness is so salient for thinking about relations of power. Speech act theory narrowly defines indirectness as one illocutionary act accomplishing another, or as the mismatch between the conventional meaning of an utterance and the speakers’ intention. Michelle Rosaldo (1982) critiques such theories for their western-based assumptions about personhood and calls for an integration of culturally specific values, such as ideas about personhood and authority, in the study of language.

Anita Puckett, Scott Rushforth and Andrew Cowell all engage in such contextually embedded research that helps to understand the Wyoming miners’ strong aversion to direct orders. Puckett (2000: 117) characterizes “orders” as “blatant assertions of control over another individual” that are interpreted negatively because they “always reveal or index asymmetrical or disparate relationships among interlocutors.” Indirectness avoids such blatant assertions of control. Similarly, Scott Rushforth (1985) argues that for Bear Lake Athapaskans, the value of *sepdit’e* – roughly translated as polite, humble, careful, reasonable, reserved and controlled – organizes the everyday speech among people in various kinds of relationships. Tellingly, this ideal translates into local value that “We can’t [shouldn’t] order people” (Rushforth 1985: 397), which dovetails with the cultural importance placed on allowing others to be their own boss and avoiding giving orders (1985: 399). Thus indirectness is a way to bring about action without insult to another person’s capacity to think and act (cf. Cowell 2007 on Arapaho).

These analyses of the mutual imbrication of local cultural values and linguistic form correspond with many of the practices I observed in the Wyoming mines. Indirectness may provide a way for miners to negotiate criticism, conflict and control without upsetting the dominant values of cooperation, solidarity and mutual respect for each other's knowledge and skills. Culturally salient criticisms of bossing organize the miners' uses and responses to directives that differentially assign agency to the speaker and intended hearers. Indirectness allows for the most agency, whereas bald directives leave miners in a position to simply acquiesce or risk insubordination (cf. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 188).

*When talk is not cheap*

Attention to both major types of talk – mechanical problem reporting and direction giving – reveals two very different patterns in making meaning out of everyday radio talk. Whereas assertive, declarative statements of mechanical problems are valued by the majority of miners and iconically index expertise, such a stance is strongly criticized when used to make requests of coworkers because it iconically indexes bossiness. It seems that the more experienced women miners become, the more often they employ more declarative speech styles in reporting mechanical problems. What is intriguing is many women's continued use of declarative direction giving styles despite explicit instructions from their crew to engage in the opposite. Novice men tend to adopt the more indirect style relatively quickly after being criticized, but the women adopt such a style much more slowly, if at all, despite the frustration and conflict engendered by these

practices.<sup>167</sup> What is at stake in the reluctance of women miners to adopt the speech styles of their more experienced crews?

Women may try to use a direct style in order to perform their expertise in organizing tasks and to iconically align themselves with management. First, using a more indirect style might call into question their already disputed expertise on the job. Most of the women I came to know, from truck drivers to engineers, pointed to naturalized assumptions about women's technical inabilities and knowledge as their primary challenge at work. "You constantly have to prove yourself," said Daisy. "If you don't, they'll walk all over you." Giving clear directions demonstrates their knowledge in organizing tasks in the pit, even though it also may alienate their coworkers. Second, the women may be attempting to align themselves with management. The experienced miners' more egalitarian speech style directly calls into question the authority of management to dictate the details of their working lives. Since many new women feel do not feel confident in their jobs, aligning themselves with management may provide them with more official job security.

Thus many women find themselves caught in a double bind: attempt to perform their expertise and be viewed as bossy by their crews but liked by management, or take on a style that further erodes their perceived abilities and could ultimately threaten their job security. Noting that most of the women are single mothers who originally sought high paying mine jobs in order to support their families sheds light on their unpopular practices. Linguistic practices do not just index social differentiation and its material manifestations, but produce them (Irvine 1989): talk is not cheap, and neither is raising a

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<sup>167</sup> This case of men valuing and using indirectness presents a counterexample to the more dominant US trend of people, especially white men, devaluing indirectness, especially when expressed by women (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 188).

family. This research shows that the production of gender difference at the mines at the level of discourse and ideology is directly implicated in men and women's differential access to well-paying jobs. The struggles stemming from conflicts about language are also struggles about responsibility and entitlement: who can assess problems and act on them, who can speak for machines, and who can boss whom around. Expertise is not simply question of women knowing or not knowing mechanical specifics, but one of conflicting ideas about power, persons, relationships and groups (Hill and Irvine 1992).

### **Safe or skilled? Reframing technical achievements**

The previous section traced the microlinguistic processes through which women's reports of mechanical problems become iconically linked to their perceived technical inexperience as well as the interpretive practices through which women's technical competence is systematically erased. I turn now to an examination of everyday talk about work practices to illustrate the processes through which women's technical achievements are systematically reframed as either examples of feminine caretaking or instances of bossiness rather than expertise.<sup>168</sup>

*"Some of our best operators are women": Safety and caring*

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<sup>168</sup> Though I do not have space to consider the following case in-depth, I will note that this process is also at work when dispatchers are labeled lazy instead of technically competent. Half of the dispatchers are women, even though they only make up 10-20% of the workforce. Dispatching is one of the highest paying hourly jobs at the mine because they assist in "directing the workforce," a classificatory term at the mines. It could be argued that this position is also one of the most technical: dispatchers must monitor five computer screens which include activities in the pit as well as the plant, make decisions about organizing production activities, evaluate mechanical failures, and run the software. They have developed ways for "out-thinking the machine" to achieve the highest production numbers and help things run smoothly. Yet both management and technicians commonly view dispatching as an easy, no-brainer job. As one miner complained, "They just sit in there and take a nap, watch the computer."

During my first day with his crew, Scott, the pit supervisor, pulled his pick-up truck alongside the one I was riding in so that we could chat through our rolled-down windows. Although a representative from human relations had introduced my project to him and the crew at that morning's meeting, he wanted to hear more details about what I was interested in studying and why. I started explaining that not many people had written about women miners, and he jumped in, saying, "Women do a great job out here. You know, they actually make better operators because they're more safety conscious. They don't try to muscle it." I nodded and took notes as he went through all of the women on his crew and their accomplishments. He then pointed out that women manage the dump (where truck drivers haul the overburden) better because "they don't scream like the other ones. That means that people are more willing to work with them." Satisfied by our chat, he made a joke about the shovel operator I was about to interview before pulling away to check on the crew's progress.

In our conversation, the supervisor demonstrated his own support for women on his crew and in the industry by appealing to a form of gender blindness: women can be equally good operators as men. Yet the way in which he did so drew on and reinforced a common mode of creating gender difference in the mines. When men like Scott talked about the best equipment operators on their crews, they emphasized the technical competence of the men they mentioned, such as in their abilities to consistently load high numbers of trucks using the shovel or to create perfectly graded roads on the dozer. When discussing the best women equipment operators, however, they almost always mentioned those women who were known for being exceptionally safe. Brian, another a pit supervisor, echoed Scott's assessment, telling me that the women on his crew were

better truck drivers. When I asked him why, he explained, “They’re more conscientious. They don’t get careless. They don’t get macho, trying to go around the corners. And they’ll call a mechanic when something’s wrong.”

References to women being safer miners than men appear throughout both popular and academic accounts of the industry. For example, in her study of Indonesian mines, Lahiri-Dutt (2006) finds that managers perceive women as safer operators who also bring a “politeness” to the worksite (2006: 362-4). She suggests that women might have achieved these reputations because they are perceived as being responsible and resting before work rather than partying; as being inherently careful; and as being more proud of their work and hence more likely to take extra care in their jobs. Moreover, a 2007 article in *The Independent*, a British newspaper, noted that a worldwide tire shortage had prompted some Australian companies to hire more women operators because tires tended to last longer under their care (Fortson 2007). While praising women for their careful and caring attention to safety seems complimentary, I will show that it also raises the risk of marginalizing their technical achievements.

Women’s reputation for safety in the Powder River Basin partially stems from local interpretations of talk on the radio. Transcripts confirm many beliefs that women are more likely to bring up safety issues on the mine radio. For example, the policies of most mines require drivers to first call and ask permission from the vehicles they wish to pass on the mine radio. Doing so gives the driver warning and allows them to inform the passing vehicle of any potential hazards. Typically, these situations involve haul trucks passing the slower moving blades as they grade the roads, or light duty vehicles such as pick-ups passing any kind of the slower heavy equipment. This practice is important

because the blade operators are often focused on the ground below, and many pieces of equipment have large blind spots that can completely obstruct views of the smaller trucks. Very few operators routinely follow these policies, however, either because they are confident they can pass safely or because they assume the other driver has already seen them. Besides high level managers who are put under more pressure to embody official company rules, the only other group of people who consistently calls other vehicles before passing them are women operators. For example, during one winter day shift in which I transcribed the pit radio, women operators called and asked permission to pass over twenty times, whereas their male peers never did.

Women also develop reputations for being safe and caring operators by keeping the equipment exceptionally clean.<sup>169</sup> The mechanic who originally told me that he would be uncomfortable with women working in the shop, told me that he was happy that so many of them worked in the pit because they were some of the best operators. When I asked him what he meant, he talked about how they took better care of the machinery:

Back when I first started, there were a couple of women who ran the rubber tire dozers exclusively. They took good care of those machines. They were always polished up on the inside and swept out and they never had any little dents in them. Those two women just took care of them like they were their own cars. And that reminds me of one of our best truck drivers. She's retired now, but she was just a sweetheart. She polished her truck up everyday just like she was cleaning house. She was a good driver. Actually, women make some of the best operators.

Not only does this explanation reproduce the idea that the best women operators are those who are the safest, it also reinforces the common link in the mines between masculinity and dirtiness. Moreover, he finds an underlying motivation of care behind both aspects

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<sup>169</sup> Of course, many men also fastidiously clean out their equipment before the start of shift, but they are seen as exceptions to a more general rule of men tolerating and even enjoying dirtiness.

of these women's actions. For him, care for coworkers and care for the machines make the women some of the mine's best operators.

This ethic of care also underlies many miners' assessments of women shovel operators. Shovel operators hold positions of leadership in the pit because they maintain a large measure of control over the pace of production since the rate at which they load trucks largely determines the entire crew's rate of production.<sup>170</sup> They are also primarily responsible for monitoring the condition of the highwalls and floor surrounding them. From the perspective of management, the best shovel operators are those who can load trucks the most efficiently. From the perspective of many miners, however, the best shovel operators are those who treat them well as truck drivers. Darla, a relatively recent hire, considered a woman named Candace to be the best shovel operator because "she cares enough about the operators to feather out the first bucket on the beds." By feathering out, Darla is referring to a particular style of dropping the shovel's bucket load into the truck beds. The first load of dirt dropped in a bed can cause the entire truck, including the cab, to shudder violently and jar the driver if the shovel operator drops it directly in one place. If they try to spread or "feather" it throughout the bed, the truck shakes much less and makes the entire shift more bearable for the driver. Whereas many men practice this technique, it is most often associated with women.

Many women miners have embraced this safety ethic, creating themselves as cautious, responsible, caring coworkers and employees. One woman who has been an equipment operator since the early 1990s appreciates the nickname she earned on her crew: Mama Love. "I think of myself as a caregiver. If people are sick or having

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<sup>170</sup> Truck drivers have some measure of control in this process, because if they drive slowly they can cause a shovel operator to lose load counts.

problems, they just get on the radio and call me.” If people need to talk or vent, they pull over to the fuel station and she meets them there. She also always carries a medical kit to take care of whatever situation might arise. In fact, she frames her medical training and expertise in terms of caregiving. She is a member of the mine’s emergency rescue team, a certified CPR instructor and a frequent teacher of safety trainings at the mine. She has also trained over one hundred new hires, a responsibility that she says also requires a lot of care if it is done right. “The main thing is to get them comfortable so they won’t be intimidated and will be able to ask questions,” she explained. In addition to being supportive and patient, she makes sure to tell them about all the stupid stuff she has done while at work.

Molly, in her mid-twenties, has recently become more active in her mine’s safety programs and thinks that more women need to be in charge. “Women see mining as a different story. Guys do things differently. Women are safer because we’re more cautious. Men haul ass and have a different way of thinking.” She then pointed to gender disparities in the accident reports: “I’m not being sexist, but when you look at the accident reports 90 percent of them are men.” She attributes becoming safer to becoming a mother. “I never used to care but now I’m a mom, so you have to think about it. Back when I was 21 I was dumping off the highwall with no berm [safety barrier], thinking I knew what I was doing. I would never do that now.” Like many other women miners in the basin, both Mama Love and Molly frame their commitment and knowledge of safety within an ethic of feminine caretaking. Doing so provides them with a way to contribute their expertise to the everyday running of the mines, but it also reinforces more stereotypical notions of femininity that both of them otherwise try to upset.

Crafting themselves as safe and caring operators provides women with a well-accepted strategy to integrate themselves into the crew families. In so doing, however, they also predicate their integration into a male-dominated industry on markedly feminine terms, which contributes to the reification of gender difference. At stake in these practices is the simultaneous erasure of women's other achievements as miners. For at the same time as many women have found it both professionally empowering and personally meaningful to develop reputations for being safe and caring workers, they also seek to have their technical skills better recognized. Mama Love is not just her crew's go-to person for medical assistance and emotional support; she is also the only person on her crew selected to regularly operate the mine's biggest brand-new haul truck. The company decided to have the same people operate the truck rather than inserting it into the regular rotation because they hoped that the chosen operators would be more invested in keeping it in excellent condition if they had to run it all the time. In explaining why she was selected from her large crew, she initially pointed to her work ethic and reputation for being a safe driver. She never missed work unexpectedly, and she was diligent in running through the end of shift instead of parking early like some of her coworkers. Still, she also attributed her selection to her technical skills in operating equipment. Before taking the position with the new truck, she was one of her crew's best dozer hands. Now as a truck driver, her knowledge of the machine and the angles associated with being loaded by the shovel makes her one of the most efficient truck drivers in the pit. Whereas many of her coworkers often have to reposition themselves in order to be properly loaded by the shovel, she rarely does even though her truck bed is considerably larger and thus more difficult to position perfectly. Similarly, Molly was

impatient to be trained on more pieces of equipment. She attributes the slowness in her training to gender bias, since the men who were hired at the same time as she was, and were equally skilled as she was, had since moved on to operate more prestigious (and better paying) pieces of equipment. If women like Mama Love and Molly had their way, their bosses and peers would appreciate these technical achievements as well as their safety reputations.

*“Mom said you have to...”: Pit supervisors*

Very few women in the basin have become pit supervisors, but during my fieldwork I came to know two of them, Nancy and Betty. One was trained as an engineer, and the other worked her way up as an equipment operator in the pit.<sup>171</sup> Even though they worked for different companies at different sized mines, they faced strikingly similar challenges. Both of them had built up a lifetime of skilled experience that had translated into leadership positions. Though they enjoyed the respect of many of their crewmembers and managers, they were frustrated when their expertise was reframed as unnecessary bossiness by certain members of their crews. Though many supervisors in the basin are critiqued for micro-managing, in the case of these women, the critiques were specifically gendered. When their crews wished to signal discontent with their supervisory style, they brought out a nickname that evoked femininized nagging associated with the domestic sphere: Mom. This usage was largely relegated to private conversations among miners before the start of shift, during lunch breaks or in casual conversations as people encountered one another through the course of their working day.

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<sup>171</sup> Because there are so few women supervisors in the basin, I offer few personal details to make them less readily identifiable by people in Gillette.

During my time at both mines, no one addressed or referred to either supervisor as Mom on the radio, even though they often did in the course of conversation amongst their peers.

The nickname held some positive aspects. A member of Nancy's crew recalled that she used to bring in cookies or cakes what seemed like all of the time, at least four times a month. Any time the crew finished a particularly challenging or onerous task outside of their normal responsibilities, Nancy brought in Sloppy Joes or pizza for the entire crew. Betty also regularly brought in food for her crew. For example, she personally brings in candy bars to everyone in a shovel group (which includes the shovel operator, the dump dozer operator and all the haul trucks in that cycle) if they collectively reach 300 loads in a shift. If they get three 300 shifts in a row, she brings in sub sandwiches. Three hundred loads is the benchmark set by mine management for the priority shovels, and she is proud that her program has resulted in the team meeting it consistently.

Bringing food to work to share with the crew is hardly unusual, as both men and women do so spontaneously as well as to celebrate major events such as retirements or meeting major production milestones. These practices do not result in parenting nicknames as they do with supervisors, perhaps due to its other, considerably more negative, sense. Calling someone "Mom" also implies that the person is bossy and is treating others like children. For example, I accompanied Beth on the water truck during a winter day shift in 2007. As she was touring me around the pit and showing me everything that was her responsibility, she mentioned that they were temporarily filling up at a different water tank instead of the one they called the horsehead. After I asked

where the original was, she offered to take me there even though she knew we were going to get into trouble. True to form, once we began driving down the road to the defunct pump, Nancy got on the radio and asked, “Water truck Beth, can we fill up at that horsehead now?” Beth rolled her eyes and said to me, “I can’t even drive down the road without Mom noticing.” Publicly, she responded on the radio, “Jessi just wanted to see where we normally fill up.” Immediately, a friend of hers dryly commented, “Good recovery.” In so doing, he insinuated that I was ruse for her joyriding, ironically embodying the disciplinary role and effectively turning the joke onto Nancy. Beth turned around and once we returned to the main haul road, one of the roving utility guys shook his finger at us in a parodic manner, prompting her to laugh heartily.

Curious about the exchange, I asked Beth what the crew thought of Nancy as a supervisor. She said that they were originally apprehensive because on Nancy’s previous crew, she had “written up” or disciplined a lot of people. “She was acting like a cop, always trying to catch somebody,” Beth explained. She then contrasted Nancy’s supervisory style with their old boss, Tim, whom they had considered “really cool and laid back.” Years ago, she accidentally caused equipment damage on a haul truck. When Tim showed up to talk with her, she remembered him saying, “Here’s your crying towel. Sorry I have to do this, but it’s my job as a boss.” Beth seemed to appreciate that Tim was clear in distinguishing his own motivations and desires from those required of him as a supervisor – he had to discipline her but made sure she knew that he did not enjoy doing so. In this story, Beth implies that Nancy identifies with her role as supervisor a little too closely and actually seems to enjoy getting people into trouble.

Micromanaging is offensive to the miners because it takes away opportunities for them to exercise their own knowledge and expertise. Roger, who worked his way up to become a supervisor, eloquently elaborated these ideas when he distinguished his management style from those of more “backwards” people.

They don't promote free-thinking or self-motivation... And the most important thing to realize is that your greatest resource is your people, and they're to be taken care of and trained and treated and molded rather than whipped and beaten and pushed around. And that if you lead from the front, if you lead by example, and are always straightforward and fair, whether they like you or not, they'll follow you. Then maybe you can step aside and they lead themselves because the main goal is to create a workforce that does not need you. Whereas with certain styles of management... the less information you give the people under you, the more power you have over them, and that's not the right way to do it. You want your people to be able to see all the information to be able to make decisions without you rather than you making every decision.

Even though the supervisors know when to take a joke, neither of them enjoy being called Mom. Nancy, for example, hates being called Mom on the radio. Exasperated, she said, “One night the dispatcher called me Mom on the radio and I told him to never, ever do that again.” She even attempted to get the crew to call another boss “Dad,” but no one would do it. At first blush it could appear that this may be because none of the miners felt that the particular boss merited the criticism. Yet *none* of the crews that I met or previously worked on had ever called a boss Dad even if he was notorious for micromanaging, the supposed offense being critiqued by calling women supervisors Mom. Rather it seems instead that the cultural image of fatherhood held by the miners does not involve the same kind of inappropriate nagging as does motherhood.

Both supervisors are aware of the criticisms being made of their bossing styles, but neither sees a plausible way out. Betty hates that she sometimes has to “talk to people like kids,” using language such as “disappointment” or “you're not using your

head.” She used this type of language during one pre-shift meeting that I attended. She announced to the crew that for the first time since she had joined it, their production numbers were the lowest out of all the crews at the mine. Although she acknowledged that the numbers were not totally fair because they had not worked as many shifts as the other crews, she still used the language of a disappointed parent. At one point she said, “I don’t want to treat you guys like junior high kids, but you can’t go in [park the equipment for the end of the day] before 6:30 or 6:40. You guys are out here to make money, right? Production. That’s what they base raises on.” In her speech, she introduced many of her instructions for improvement with the clauses “I need you to…” or “There’s no reason for you not to…” One of her most controversial directions was to “pre-spot.” The process of haul trucks approaching a shovel and then backing up to it to be loaded is called spotting. Whereas most miners had been waiting to begin that process until the truck that was currently under the shovel was loaded and out of the area, she was asking the crew to begin that process while the other truck was still being loaded. Doing so introduced a variety of dangerous situations that, depending on the specific conditions of the dig area, could include driving dangerously close to the shovel and other truck, parking by highwalls and leaving other equipment in their blindspot. The crew was visibly upset with the change in policy, and one person asked, “Why is this safe now when last year when people wanted to do it, it wasn’t safe?” Betty simply replied that she was passing onto them what upper management had passed down to her.

Even though skilled equipment operators and pit supervisors could plausibly be recognized for their technical expertise, my analysis suggests that their accomplishments are systematically reframed by their coworkers, especially (but not exclusively) by men.

These practices create gender differences according to technical skill in the face of what would otherwise be a weak or absent gendered division of labor in the pit. In these reframings, both groups of women are construed as embodying what could be called a “safety style.” The best women equipment operators are considered to be those who operate the machinery safely and keep it in good working condition, and the pit supervisors are viewed as being tied to the company’s official rules, safety and otherwise. Even though women in both groups would like to be recognized for their technical skills, they simultaneously embody the safety style along with many of their women coworkers. Why might this be? First, taking on this style might provide women in the pit with a means for taking care of their kin-like coworkers, just as women in the office do so through their work as assistants, human relations officers and engineers. Second, women might be drawn to safety styles because they provide a mode of authority linked to official company policies. Being able to access that authority might be particularly significant given that many women, especially new hires, are often excluded from the alternate forms of authority found in the male-dominated work groups.

### **Conclusion**

Even though many miners in the Powder River Basin portray their workplaces as ones where gender plays a minimal role because “what really counts” is ability, I have used fine-grained linguistic and ethnographic evidence to show that expertise itself is a gendered category. I argued that the social position of a mechanical expert is gendered through two semiotic processes of linguistic differentiation: iconization and erasure. These interpretive practices are embedded within local gender ideologies of women’s

“natural” technical incompetence and bossiness. Whereas linguistic devices such as hedges, tag questions and vague terminology are construed as iconically indexing incompetence when used by novice women, they go unremarked on when used by men. Men’s direct reports of mechanical problems are interpreted as evidence of their expertise, but women’s direct requests of others are interpreted as evidence of their natural bossiness.

Throughout my analysis, I have distinguished between novice and experienced women since they exhibit significantly different linguistic and interactional patterns. Powerful discourses linking masculinity and mechanical ability saturate the mines to such a degree that nearly every single woman involved in this project spoke to having to prove themselves to be technically skilled as their primary challenge at work, and most of the evaluators of language use are men. A few women, however, also managed to carve out spaces to demonstrate their expertise. The women who enjoy their jobs the most (and are the most likely to stay for many years) are those who can eventually establish their technical competence through declarative reports of mechanical problems and clear suggestions for action that nonetheless avoid calling into question the knowledge and skills of their coworkers. While it is crucial to acknowledge the force of dominant ideologies in shaping the possibilities for practice, it is perhaps even more valuable to attend to people’s creative appropriation of them in their everyday lives.

Investigating gender as emergent through specific step-by-step practices thus helps to avoid reifying the study of gender as the study of differences between men and women. This intellectual move builds on current developments in queer linguistics to study the production of non-binary gender practices. Livia and Hall (1997) argue that

queer linguistics destabilizes the essentialist notions of gender identity oftentimes found in feminist work, citing Eve Sedgwick's critique of mainstream feminist theory:

The analytic bite of a purely gender-based account will grow less incisive and direct as the distance of its subject from a social interface between different genders increases. It is unrealistic to expect a close, textured analysis of same-sex relations through an optic calibrated in the first place to the coarser stigmata of gender difference. [Livia and Hall 1997: 6]

Talbot (2003: 475) further suggests that focusing excessively on differences between men and women without attention to context or other social processes creates overgeneralizations in research on gender and language, leading to "conceptual dead-ends."

This development has only recently been applied to the queering of feminist technology studies. Landström (2007) argues that even though researchers working in this field claim to investigate the co-production of gender and technology, their actual heteronormative methods have undermined that goal. In relying on heterosexual models for relationships among humans and between humans and technology, these scholars have conceptualized gender as a stable identity that brings about the creation of more malleable technology (Landström 2007: 10). Focusing excessively on differences between men and women without attention to context or other social processes creates overgeneralizations in research on gender and language, leading to "conceptual dead-ends" (Talbot 2003, 475). Detailed linguistic analysis informed by in-depth participant observation can address these shortcomings by shedding light on the contested production of non-binary gender practices through everyday engagements with technology.

This chapter and the last provide an otherwise missing perspective on women's

integration into male-dominated blue-collar industries by attesting to the vital importance of fine-grained ethnographic analysis for feminist theorists, policymakers and activists seeking to ameliorate the gender wage gap. Many scholars and interest groups have pointed to women's exclusion from well paying and historically masculine blue-collar jobs as a primary factor behind the persistence of the gender wage gap. In fact, a program called CLIMB Wyoming has received national attention (e.g. Johnson 2008) in its efforts to train and place single mothers in high paying blue collar jobs, especially in the state's burgeoning energy industry. While skills training, support groups and declared company support of diversity certainly facilitate women's entry into these fields, my research demonstrates that they are insufficient to ensure that women feel comfortable enough to stay in those jobs. The novice women who left mining did so not because they were unable to do the work or because they felt sexually harassed as suggested by scholars. They left because of friction with their more experienced male *and* female coworkers surrounding the navigation of workplace social relationships. Textured ethnographic analysis can illuminate the sources of these tensions – in this case, mismatches between the pressures to perform expertise and the dominant gendered ideologies of language, technology and bossiness. This research demonstrates the potential for innovations from feminist anthropology, linguistics and technology studies to make concrete improvements in the everyday lives of women workers and their families.

This chapter and the last also demonstrate that workplace families in the Powder River Basin are gendered, but in ways that are perhaps unexpected given dominant portrayals of the industry. Women's participation in crew families is often informed by

conventional understandings of feminine inclinations toward caretaking, and many have taken advantage of these notions to position themselves as safety experts. At the same time, however, they also push against more binary ideas about gender by crafting themselves as tomboys who enjoy working and joking like one of the guys.

These crew families existing alongside and sometimes in opposition to the company families envisioned by management. My analysis of these company practices suggest that even though corporate representatives may espouse official policies of gender blindness in their dealings with the workforce, their efforts to integrate women into the company family are often very gendered, such as when they give out gifts like belt buckles and hunting gear that are designed for men.

So far my examination of corporate attempts to craft workplace families has focused on their representatives' efforts to make the workplace seem more like home: sharing meals, giving gifts and encouraging coworkers to care for one another. These practices, intended to cultivate feelings of loyalty and trust in the companies, evoke the ideals of the private sphere as it is conventionally theorized. In the next chapter, however, I show that corporate efforts to craft themselves as trustworthy and responsible actors also include appeals to the public, specifically in the guise of public property, public accountability and an imagined public's best interest.

## Chapter VIII

### Corporate Social Responsibility's Publics

In November 2006, the regional Bureau of Land Management (BLM) office held a public hearing in Gillette to solicit comments on the lease by application (LBA) recently filed by one of the coal companies operating in the basin. The mines do not own the coal they extract and process, but temporarily lease it from and pay royalties to the federal or state government, depending on the ownership of the specific tract. If approved, the lease would grant the mine additional coal reserves adjacent to their current operating area, thus extending the mine's lifespan. These applications are rarely contested, except when rival companies are bidding on the same reserves, and even more rarely disapproved, except when BLM officials deem the price bid for the coal to be less than market value.<sup>172</sup> The lease under question at the November meeting had sparked more interest than most because its approval would require the mine to relocate a substantial section of a major highway linking many local ranches and the city of Gillette.

Less than twenty people attended the meeting, and men outnumbered women two to one. Most were ranchers, dressed casually in blue jeans and sturdy winter coats. The BLM officials had driven two hours from the large city of Casper and sat up front, away from the quiet conversations taking place among the ranchers, and stood out from the

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<sup>172</sup> The BLM does not publicly announce or set the "fair market price" for coal, which depends on the qualities of each individual tract. The record per-ton rate was set in 2005 when Arch Coal paid 97 cents per ton in 2005 for a lease in the highly desirable southern section of the basin. In April 2008, the BLM accepted an 87 cents per ton bid from Rio Tinto for a mid-range lease that amounted to a \$250 million deal.

crowd in their formal office attire. The first official speaker called by the BLM was an environmental manager for the coal company making the application. He left his seat in the front row, dressed in khakis and a collared shirt, to direct his comments to both the BLM officials and the audience. Speaking from a Powerpoint presentation, he outlined the history of the mine and the larger corporation before offering specific details on the lease and highway relocation. He introduced the mine by noting how many people it directly employed (almost 300) and how much coal they had cumulatively produced in its history (almost 450 million tons). He then focused on the mine's safety and environmental successes, which he identified as "core values" of the company. In portraying the mine and company as both a "good neighbor" and "community partner," he listed their safety and environmental awards and their status in the community as a "major employer, purchaser of goods and services; contributor to taxes, fees and royalties; and sponsor of the National High School Finals Rodeo, Gillette Campus, University of Wyoming, and high school scholarships." He dedicated the rest of his comments to the lease specifics and the highway relocation options.

The second and last speaker called was a rancher who identified herself as a neighbor of the mine who wanted to ensure that the potential expansion would not negatively impact her ranch. She presented a strikingly different public persona than the mine or government officials. She was the only vocal meeting participant not to be dressed in business casual clothing and when called, she demurred and poked fun at her speaking abilities. Whereas they appealed to their professional identities and knowledge in framing their comments, she drew attention to her own everyday experiences living near the mine. She began by noting her affiliation with the Powder River Basin Resource

Council (PRBRC), a local coalition of ranchers working to mitigate the worst impacts of coal and coal bed methane development.<sup>173</sup> She then pointed out mistakes in the number of residences and wells on the maps in the BLM's Environmental Impact Statement. She framed her statements in terms of how the mine would continue to impact her family: "These things jump out to me because they relate to me." To demonstrate possible negative consequences of the proposed expansion, she showed a large collection of photographs mounted on poster board documenting the dust and large orange clouds of nitrous dioxide that the mine's blasting activities produced near her house. In concluding, she made a point to say that she had spoken not to hinder development, but simply to "make sure it was done right." After she was finished, the mine official addressed her comments in a general manner, promising to investigate them further to make sure that they were doing everything they could to be a good neighbor. When I approached her after the meeting to take a closer look at the pictures, she pointed to one large orange cloud and said, "This is what a good neighbor looks like."

I had attended the meeting with a friend of mine who covered the coal industry for the local newspaper. Asking him what he was going to write about for his article, he said there was not much of a story since the lease was "bound to go through anyway." In the article published the next day, he focused on the highway relocation options and briefly mentioned the woman's critique, stating that she commended the mine for working hard to be a good neighbor but thought that planning for the coal lease was thus far lacking.

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<sup>173</sup> Ranchers have been at the forefront of environmental movements in the Powder River Basin. See Grossman (2003) for another case in which South Dakota ranchers worked with local Indian tribes to stop mining in the Black Hills would damage the environment and deplete the underground water table.

One type of public that has assembled around the coal industry is a network of community members impacted by mines, environmental and labor activists, and journalists. These networks have tended to focus on the environmental implications of mining processes, particularly those surrounding mountaintop removal and pollution in the Appalachian regions, and questions of corporate liability in workplace tragedies, such as those in Sago, West Virginia, in 2006 and Crandall Canyon, Utah, in 2007.<sup>174</sup> This type of spatially extent commodity network has become a crucial tool for activists to re-brand consumer goods and draw attention to the negative implications of their production, distribution and consumption (Foster 2007, 2008).

In this chapter, however, I consider the ways in which coal companies have crafted their own publics in order to portray themselves as responsible corporate actors. I argue that the Powder River Basin coal industry has been able to garner the overwhelming support of the community by integrating employees, government officials and ranchers into a network surrounding the industry. At the same time, I draw on fieldwork with local ranchers to show that participating in this assembled public does not preclude local community members from critiquing the companies for failing to live up to their promises, as exemplified by the rancher's presentation at the BLM meeting. In fact, I will suggest that even though critics of corporate social responsibility (CSR) discourses caution that this movement may represent more of a public relations strategy than actual improvements in practices, people in the Powder River Basin have drawn on this language to hold the coal companies accountable to their promises to be a good partner and neighbor.

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<sup>174</sup> The 2006 disaster at the Sago coal mine in West Virginia claimed the lives of twelve miners, and in the 2007 collapse of the Crandall Canyon coal mine in Utah, six miners and three rescue workers lost their lives.

Thus to investigate the negotiation of corporate-community relationships in the Powder River basin, I consider the ways in which company representatives have deployed notions of the public and public property to frame both their mining activities and relationships with communities. While the history of expansion into the American West is often written as one dominated by privatization and the sacred property-owning individual, it is equally one of what Corinne Hayden (2004: 118) calls publicization, or “the construction of various kinds of ‘publics’ – public domains, public spheres, public accountabilities.”<sup>175</sup> Western expansion entailed the creation of private farms and ranchlands as well as the formation of vast tracts of public grazing areas, national parks and interests in minerals like coal (Limerick 1987; White 1991). Contemporary mining industry officials emphasize the public ownership of the minerals they extract to frame their interactions with local governments, advocacy groups and community members. Rather than presenting their organizations as profit-seeking business ventures, these representatives portray their companies as community partners in protecting the environment and providing energy for a country in the midst of geopolitical strife.<sup>176</sup> These representational strategies appealing to public property, services and accountabilities comprise a key feature of their efforts to construct corporations as socially responsible actors.

The chapter begins by outlining a history of property rights in northeastern Wyoming, specifically how changes in federal homesteading policies split surface and

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<sup>175</sup> Private property is perceived by many to be a sacred institution in the American West, fueled by popular films and well as events such as the Sagebrush Rebellion, a widely publicized movement to return federal lands to western states.

<sup>176</sup> Anna Tsing (2005) aptly describes the confusion and violence of industrial frontiers, “where making, saving and destroying resources are utterly mixed up, where zones of conservation, production and resource sacrifice overlap almost fully” (2005: 32).

subsoil rights, creating a legacy of tensions between ranchers and energy companies over contemporary development. The next section draws on critical academic appraisals of CSR to argue that it is crucial for engaged scholars to compare official corporate documents with ethnographic research. I then trace the ways in which the companies have discursively constructed themselves as community partners who serve the public's best interest. After identifying two key dangers of this process – the economic dependence of the community on the industry and the power of local industry officials to shape local government – I then turn to the case of environmental stewardship to investigate the relationship between corporate discourses and practices in CSR. I argue that mine employees, local environmental consultants and ranchers have all drawn on the companies' stated commitments to environmental stewardship to hold them accountable for their actions. This development has resulted in a close match between corporate discourses and practice. I conclude by drawing out the implications of the Powder River Basin case for national debates about energy policy and security.

### **From homesteads to split estates**

Noted western historian Patricia Limerick (1987: 71) writes, "The events of Western history represent not a simple process of territorial expansion, but an array of efforts to wrap the concept of property around unwieldy objects." She further notes that defining property was a particularly fraught process when it concerned things that could be impermanent or changeable, such as animal pelts and hides, cattle and grazing territory,

minerals, oil, timber, transportation routes and water.<sup>177</sup> The tensions present in attempts to cordon off these things and then assign rights and responsibilities to them were heightened by conflicts between western defenders of private property and federal government agencies that sought to create vast tracts of public land in the emerging West. This section traces the legacies of the “Old” West that continue to shape current developments in the basin. This history of publicization highlights the tenuous relationships between local and federal strategies for thinking about and defining property (cf. Limerick 1987; Tauxe 1993, 1998; White 1991).

Locke’s labor theory of property was enshrined in 19th century federal land policies via Jefferson’s figure of the yeoman farmer. By arguing that private investments in land increased its productivity for the benefit of all, he justified the seizure of lands governed by Native American and Spanish customary and communal land ownership.<sup>178</sup> When federal officials crafted the 1862 Homestead Act, they rewarded farmers’ labor with 160-acre holdings with an eye to creating a growing class of Jeffersonian farmers whose prosperity would enhance the economic development of the entire nation (Limerick 1987: 190, White 1991: 142-3). The first strands of Western history replicated this vision of agrarian progress, as Frederick Jackson Turner’s (1920) influential frontier thesis located the sources of American democracy in the settlers’ conquering what he

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<sup>177</sup> Similarly, Suzana Sawyer (2004) argues that theories of property based on relationships among social people in relation to things naturalize the “things.” She instead understands property as “the relations that materialize things into the world” (2004: 105).

<sup>178</sup> Locke (1964: 294) writes, “He who appropriates the land to himself by his labor, does not lessen but increase the common stock of mankind. For the provisions serving to the support of humane life, produced by one acre of inclosed and cultivated land, are (to speak much within compasse) ten times more, than those, which are yielded by an acre of Land, of an equal richnesse, lying wast in common.” It is key to remember that Locke was not a disinterested figure in the practical management of American land. Tully (1993) reminds readers of Locke’s role in the British colonization of North America, as he had invested in an agricultural venture in the Carolinas, where he also was an architect of the land laws (cf. Humphrey and Verdery 2004).

called “nature.” One major difference between Locke and Turner lies in the latter’s apparent unconcern to justify the overthrow of Native American land ownership systems, as Turner portrayed the West as *terra nullius*, “an area of free land” (1920: 28).<sup>179</sup> He also ignored the overthrow of established Spanish communal rights in many of the areas ceded to the U.S. by Mexico in 1848 (Limerick 1987).

The first cracks in the ideologies surrounding the Homestead Act began to appear with the advent of the ranching industry. Valued for converting the capital of the grasslands into forms suitable for human consumption, the first ranchers worked without federal regulations on their movements or pressures on land use from farmers (Worster 1992: 40). As more people moved westward, tensions increased over the distribution of land rights. The acreage permitted by the Homestead Act was inadequate for the ranchers, who relied on large expanses of land to graze their herds. Yet early 20th century legislators were hesitant to increase the size of the grants because doing so would liken the ranchers to large landowners instead of middle-class farmers (Merrill 2002; Starrs 1998; White 1991; Worster 1992). At the same time, they were equally opposed to turning the grasslands into a commons or letting the ranchers design their own land tenure systems, since the dry winters from 1885-1890 had led to extreme overgrazing and ecological devastation that provided fodder for influential theories of the “tragedy of the commons” (Starrs 1998: 55).<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> White (1994: 11) makes an interesting comparison of Turner and his contemporary Buffalo Bill, arguing that they each told a different history of the West that depended on the other. Whereas Turner emphasized peaceful, democratic conquering of nature, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West shows portrayed Native Americans as violent attackers of innocent whites, a theme that would be taken up in many Western films. Limerick (1987: 42) makes a similar argument with her conception of the “empire of innocence.”

<sup>180</sup> These events provided Hardin (1968: 1245) with one of his examples of the so-called tragedy of the commons. Hardin’s rendering of the “tragedy of the commons” was based on Malthusian

Lawmakers found a solution in federally administered grazing permits, which split rights to land use and ownership in an attempt to avoid both a feared tragedy of the commons and the potential unbridled accumulation of wealth from large private estates. This move established the ranchers' bitter dependence on the federal government, which would from then on send out officials to monitor the ecological impacts of the ranchers' operations (Starrs 1998; White 1991). In an interesting twist, many ranchers expressed their disapproval for these policies through Lockean-inspired language: the land was rightfully theirs, they argued, because they had invested their time and energy into it, whereas the government remained a type of absentee landlord (Merrill 2002: 123; Starrs 1998: 74).

Changes in land policies continue to echo in current struggles over energy development in the Powder River Basin. The 1909 Enlarged Homestead Act expanded the number of acres individuals could claim from 160 to 320, and the 1916 Stock-Raising Homestead Act allowed for homesteads of 640 acres of grazing lands. Perhaps most significantly, the 1916 Act also reserved all subsoil minerals to the federal government while granting surface patents to homesteaders. The Mineral Leasing Act of 1920 first established a plan for developing minerals on public lands, including the provisions that the U.S. government grant permission to extract minerals by lease and receive royalties from the lessee. This division between surface and subsoil rights created split estates that continue to vex both ranchers and energy developers in the Powder River Basin. When

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assumptions about population increases, the inability of actors to sanction each other or develop regulations, and a "universal" rational desire for actors to seek to get more out of a resource than they put in. Carol Rose (1994) persuasively argues that that collective rights have made more sense for managing roads and waterways, while Elinor Ostrom and her colleagues (1990, 1999) argue that people have self-organized to manage common-pool resources and devised long-term, sustainable institutions for governing resources.

the first wave of ranchers homesteaded in the region in the late 19th century, their land grants included subsoil rights. Anyone acquiring land after 1916 only received surface rights. Moreover, in the years following the depression, many ranching families sold their subsoil rights back to the government to keep their ranches afloat. For all these reasons, very few ranchers still own the rights to minerals found underneath their land.

Because land and mineral policies favor the extraction of minerals over other interests, ranchers with split estates find themselves unable to stop energy development on their land. Most of these contemporary struggles revolve around disturbances from coal-bed methane (CBM) development.<sup>181</sup> Some families in the basin successfully bid on the mineral leases underneath their land in an attempt to block other companies from doing so, but found that their leases would be voided or they would be assessed large fines if they did not develop the gas. The Powder River Basin Resource Council primarily brings together ranchers and their advocates to monitor CBM activities. The coal industry, on the other hand, rarely finds itself a target of the group's activities, perhaps because the industry has made concerted efforts to craft and portray themselves as socially responsible actors.

### **Corporate social responsibility in theory**

The corporate social responsibility (CSR) movement that coalesced in the 1990s seeks to align the practices of transnational business with the social, economic, and environmental wellbeing of the communities in which they operate (e.g. Livesey 2002; Livesey and

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<sup>181</sup> Though many ranching families who maintained their subsoil rights have become incredibly wealthy from the CBM boom, many others are concerned about losing their natural water wells, putting up with increased traffic on rural roads, seeing their ranchlands crosscut by new roads that turn up dust, and having to deal with multiple companies who successfully bid on parsed up leases.

Kearins 2002; Warhust 1998; Yakovleva 2005). Though many corporations present their CSR efforts as voluntary efforts stemming from their own goodwill (Welker 2006), the larger movement and many specific cases can be traced back to critiques of industry practices made by social movements, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other activists (Pendleton 2004: 6).<sup>182</sup> Gay Seidman (2003), for example, demonstrates that only through organized pressure from the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa did corporations operating there agree to adopt the Sullivan Principles, one of the first codes of corporate conduct. In the case of mining industries in Wyoming, companies began publicizing their reclamation and other environmental efforts in the 1960s, a decade that saw increasing national and local critiques of the industry from representatives of the growing environmental movement. Mining companies projected these efforts backwards in order to establish the voluntarism of their efforts, as exemplified by a 1980 ad from the Kemmerer Coal Company: “We remain committed to the land today as we were in 1897, when we produced 25, 267 tons of coal. Our current annual rate of production is over 4.5 million tons of coal. Our dedication stays the same to the people and to the land.”

Proponents of CSR from both within and outside the academy praise its potential for making companies more accountable, especially concerning communication with stakeholders such as NGOs and impacted community members.<sup>183</sup> Sharon Livesey

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<sup>182</sup> Contrary to other observers of the NGO movement, Conley and Williams seem to suggest that rather than corporations appropriating the language of NGOs, a “convergence” between the two groups has come to exist, based on NGOs becoming more corporate (2003: 11, 18, 37).

<sup>183</sup> According to Fairfax (2006: 680), stakeholder theory views corporate responsibility as “a balance of the interests of all corporate constituents, even when that balance does not maximize profits.” At the same time, this does not require corporations to “abdicate their profit-making role.” She notes a “demonstrable increase” in stakeholder rhetoric accompanying the rise of the CSR movement, but traces debates about stakeholder versus shareholder primacy back to the 1920s and 1930s (2006: 681). She argues that stakeholder rhetoric has increased because “society, including investors, may find the stakeholder norm more palatable, particularly during

(2002; Livesey and Kearins 2002) studies the discourses and social practices surrounding Royal Dutch/Shell's efforts to engage in and present themselves as supporters of sustainable development in the face of environmental and human rights criticisms of their Nigerian operations. She suggests that rather than simply viewing the company's social reports an attempt to reestablish discursive control, scholars should pay attention to its "transforming effects" on the company and the concept of sustainability itself. For example, she argues that the discourse of sustainable development "deconstructed narrowly economic views of social progress and produced changes in Shell's practice, such as its endorsement of Kyoto and its commitment to dialogue" (2002: 338). She also suggests that these reports were accompanied by more radical practices of dialogue and open communication, including "Tell Shell" cards, an interactive website with uncensored discussion threads and stakeholder dialogue meetings (Livesey 2002: 341).<sup>184</sup> Even Livesey, however, acknowledges the need for continued regulation from governments and advocacy and citizen groups in order to "correct fundamental failures in the market systems" (Livesey and Kearins 2002: 253).

Scholars and advocates remain concerned that many CSR efforts, including voluntary social and environmental responsibility reports, may represent a public relations strategy rather than actual steps toward substantial improvements in practice (Benson and Kirsh n.d.; Conley and Williams 2005; Kirsch 2006). One of the most

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times of corporate misbehavior when the question of whether society perceives the profit maximization norm as having generated this behavior" (2006: 678). She leaves open the question of whether increases in rhetoric have translated into shifts in practice (2006: 698-9).<sup>184</sup> This type of transparency plays a key role in the CSR movement and audit cultures more generally (Strathern 2000). Corporate reports and communications from mines in the basin included similar invitations for readers to write with comments or call with questions, but some attempts to do so were rebuffed. The newspaper reporter mentioned in the introduction found it incredibly challenging to talk to company representatives even though their own reports explicitly encouraged public comments and questions.

influential critiques of CSR emerged from Christian Aid, a British anti-poverty agency, and its “Behind the Mask” report (Pendleton 2004). Based on case studies of Shell, British American Tobacco and Coca-Cola, it argued that

corporate enthusiasm for CSR is not driven primarily by a desire to improve the lot of the communities in which companies work. Rather, companies are concerned with their own reputations, with the potential damage of public campaigns directed against them, and overwhelmingly, with the desire – and the imperative – to secure ever greater profits. None of this necessarily means that companies cannot act responsibly. But it does mean that their attempts to do so are likely to be partial, short-term and patchy – leaving vulnerable poor communities at risk. [Pendleton 2004: 5]

This and other studies call for careful comparisons of corporate discourses and actual practices. Livesey, for example, terms the emerging genre of social and environmental reports “sustainability values reporting,” and suggests that while it may have the potential to help reform corporate practice, it remains unregulated and voluntary (Livesey and Kearins 2002; Livesey 2002). These self-reports may include unreliable and partial data that does not necessarily correspond with actual performance (Neu et al. 1998; Yakovleva 2005: 52). Moreover, these reports are not standardized within or between companies, making comparative evaluations difficult (Yakovleva 2005).

Self-reporting and the larger CSR movement has also positioned corporations to define and frame key terms of debates about responsibility. In their study of ExxonMobil, legal scholars John Conley and Cynthia Williams (2005) argue that the company has used this power to “define social responsibility in economic terms, and to frame the appropriate response in terms of management, discipline and control... ExxonMobil can emphasize ‘engagement with communities’ but make no mention of open-ended and all-inclusive conversations” (2005: 30; cf. Livesey 2002). In the mining industry, these concerns have centered around the rhetoric and actual practice of “sustainable

development” (IIED 2002). Anthropologists and activists have already drawn out the limitations of the industry’s definition of sustainability (Moody 2002) and drawn attention to gaps between the rhetoric and actual practices surrounding social and environmental responsibility (Finn 1998; Kirsch 2006, 2007, 2008; Welker 2006).

If voluntary CSR reporting efforts represent changes in communication more than practice, this development is even more concerning given that it may preempt regulation from formal government and informal social agencies. Conley and Williams (2005) summarize the dilemma eloquently:

CSR remains a work in progress. At its best, it promises a corporate decision making process in which managers think and talk openly about social and environmental issues and then tell the world what they did and why. At its worst, it is nothing more than an elaborate public relations charade in which companies perform certain prescribed rituals but continue to do business as usual. But it may be even worse business than usual, as the effect of the rituals may be to co-opt critics, mislead consumers and preempt regulation. [2005: 38]

The potential for CSR efforts to preempt more formal regulations and their enforcement does raise concerns spanning workplace safety and environmental practice in the mining industry. In the case of the Powder River Basin, however, I will argue that community members and company employees have worked diligently to ensure that public promises are translated into concrete action. In the following sections, I trace major trends in the representational techniques coal company representatives have used to present themselves as responsible corporate actors and thus legitimize their continued presence in the basin. In each, I draw attention to the bounds of the public imagined by corporate officials and the critiques that emerge from those excluded.

## **Partnership in the public interest**

Partnership is the key theme that animates the representational techniques of Powder River Basin coal companies both in public relations campaigns and workplace policies. Because Chapter Three traced the ways in which workplace partnership between miners and management was constructed and challenged through the 1987 union campaign, here I focus on public relations campaigns that portrayed the companies as community partners and public servants rather than as capitalist business ventures. I then explore two pertinent questions stemming from this positioning. First, what relations of dependency underlined these “partnerships”? Second, how were companies able to assemble a public through local governance?

The companies that began planning, obtaining permits, and opening mines in the latter half of the 1970s explicitly sought to move away from the paternalistic practices of their predecessors. These types of corporate-community relationships were relatively rare in the Gillette area, found only in the first large-scale mine. Belle Ayr was opened in 1972 by Amax, a coal company based in Indianapolis. Steeped in traditions from the central and eastern coal regions in the U.S., management initially tried replicating many of their previous labor practices in Wyoming. For example, they required all miners to join a union even though many of the workers they hired had never previously belonged to one and did not especially want to join. Their public relations campaigns reflected a more paternalistic attitude, as evidenced by a mid-1970s ad featuring a sketch of the country singer Loretta Lynn and the title of her popular song “Coal Miner’s Daughter”:

I’m Loretta Lynn. You know, my daddy was a coal miner in Eastern Kentucky. Coal has always been a part of my life... a tradition. But what is breaking that tradition is the way coal is mined today. Companies like AMAX Coal have made things different for the miners. It’s still hard work. But there’s better pay, shorter

hours, and more concern about health, safety and protecting our environment. America needs coal more than ever before. I'm proud of the mining business, and still proud that I'm a coal miner's daughter.

Beneath this text, she suggests that people wishing to learn more about how Amax is meeting the needs of "Energy, the People and the Environment" should write to the company for a free brochure. The ad is striking not only for its emphasis on kinship – Lynn is a coal miner's daughter, and the company is portrayed as taking care of its miners – but also for its paternalistic tone, especially when compared to those run just a few years later by other companies. She attributes better working conditions and pay to the benevolence of the company instead of the long history of activism by miners and their families. Run during the only major strike in the basin, it suggests that miners should be grateful for what the companies have given them instead of seeking more.<sup>185</sup>

This paternalistic tone contradicts the company's otherwise stated and simultaneous efforts to present themselves as a part of the "new wave" of minerals extraction and energy production. Upon their first arrival in the basin, community relations officials embraced the term corporate citizen in their ads and statements to the local press. Newspaper reporters picked up this terminology in discussing the company as well, stating in 1972 that "Amax has already proven itself to be a good 'corporate citizen' here with gifts to community projects and special efforts in environmental preservation" (Gillette News Record 1972: 17). In response to receiving a special award from the local Chamber of Commerce in 1973 for being a "responsible corporate citizen in a small community," the vice president of environmental services and community affairs stated, "It is the policy and the philosophy of Amax to take part in a community

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<sup>185</sup> See pages 109-111 for a history of this strike.

and to encourage its employees to participate in the activities of the area” (Gillette NewsRecord 1973: 9).

After the strike was settled, the company’s public relations officers emphasized these discourses of corporate citizenship even more, moving away from the more paternalistic messages of years before. For example, the following ad from the late 1970s echoes the Loretta Lynn ad discussed above, but with a key change in phrasing:

A vital industry is a good neighbor too... We are equally committed to the proposition that we can produce more coal in this country without exploiting labor or spoiling the environment. Advanced technology has turned the coal miner into a highly paid, highly skilled professional. His health and safety and the welfare of his family are of vital concern to us.<sup>186</sup>

Here, the miner is highly paid and skilled due to advances in technology rather than corporate goodwill, and the company is portrayed as a “good neighbor,” implying some sort of partnership.

The companies who opened mines in the basin after Amax engaged in strikingly different representational strategies. In their public relations campaigns, they presented themselves as members of the community and their employees as one big, egalitarian family. For example, Kerr McGee ran the following ad from the late 1970s through the 1990s. Underneath a collage of pictures of people who are presumably employees and large title announcing “We’re mining folks too!” the text reads: “We’re proud of our Wyoming people who are an important part of the Kerr-McGee family... Our Wyoming mining operations, purchases and conservation programs make us partners with all of the people of Wyoming in putting natural resources to work for all of us.” Similarly, Caballo Rojo (a Mobil operation) ran an ads in the 1980s with the motto, “Working with the

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<sup>186</sup> Women miners did work at Belle Ayr, which points to the masculine bias of the ad and the company officials who approved it.

people of Wyoming to effectively manage and market Wyoming's natural resources while protecting its environment." In these ads, the companies portray themselves as a partner with the entire state by providing a needed service, successfully managing the public's natural resources.

Similarly, a 1980 Carter Mining ad featured a large picture of what appears to be a husband and his wife with a set of children's puppets they use in their community volunteering. The text reads: "Our people are people you know. That's because they're your neighbors, and they share the community you live and work in. Some may be better known to other members of your family... to your children, your parents, or your grandparents." It then introduces the couple as employees of the company who are committed to volunteer work because they, "like the rest of us at Carter Mining, know that it's just as important to produce good neighbors as it is to produce coal."

A 1980 ad from FMC Wyoming Corporation, a mining company in the southwestern part of the state, also highlights their status as good neighbors:

Wyoming is our home, and the more than 1500 men and women who work for FMC are proud to be effective and active members of their communities. We participate in civic affairs, serve our towns as school board and city council members and contribute time in helping to assure a better life in a great state... FMC people are continually striving to improve their good neighbor status with the development of new, effective environmental controls and more efficient utilization of our precious energy sources. FMC people. We live in Wyoming, and we're proud of our home.

Throughout the 1990s, public relations materials increasingly emphasized partnership. The 1994 edition of the Riverton Ranger's annual Mining Edition included no less than four company ads that all used this language: "partners in safety," "partners in productivity," "partners in quality" and "your mining partner." This kind of relationships between companies, employees and community members envisioned by

mining companies are strikingly different from the first, more paternalistic strategies. In 1972 Amax “encouraged” its employees to contribute to the community, but later companies celebrated the voluntary efforts made by their organization and individual employees to make their communities a better place through employee initiative and partnership rather than simply top-down benevolence. Through these representational techniques, company officials align themselves with the greater community, presenting themselves less as a private business venture and more as a servant of the general public.

### *Power in partnerships*

Coal officials sought to assemble a public and create a sense of belonging that rested on feelings of mutual partnership rather than asymmetrical paternalism. But beginning in 2000 and continuing throughout my fieldwork, their emphasis on the companies’ financial contributions to the community and the state raised questions about what kind of partnership they envisioned with the community. A 2000 ad from Kennecott extolling its “direct contribution” to economic development in local communities and the state is exemplary:

But Kennecott Energy is more than just a company. It is a team of 1,500 people who live and invest in local communities; people who raise families and make friends; people who volunteer for local charities. In 1999, Kennecott Energy paid \$188.3 million in federal, state and local taxes and royalties to finance government and public services, such as education, law enforcement, fire protection, health and social services and infrastructure like roads, airports and sewage systems. Kennecott Energy and its employees are proud to be a part of the economy and lifestyle of Wyoming.

The ad portrays the company as a “team” that does not simply participate in but enables public services and activities. In the same year, Thunder Basin Coal Company ran a similar campaign:

We invest in Wyoming. In the last ten years, Thunder Basin Coal Company paid nearly a quarter billion dollars in bonus bids. Half this amount, or \$116 million was returned to the State of Wyoming. That's money for community colleges, K-12 capital construction and major maintenance, cities and counties. Money Wyoming citizens did not have to pay in taxes.

These ads prompt readers to consider what life would be like without the financial windfall from coal companies. The coal branch of the Wyoming Mining Association – a trade group comprised of industry officials that concentrates on educating the public about the benefits of mining – took a more explicit approach. In 2000, for example, the group published a pie chart detailing the allocation of royalty money from coal mining and proclaimed in large text that one ton of coal equaled \$1.01 in revenue for the state of Wyoming. Their ads became even more aggressive in 2002, stating: “If you’re not supporting Wyoming Mining, you’re Undermining Wyoming’s economy.” A 2004 ad from the organization was similarly direct: “Coal... it’s what’s behind Wyoming’s quality of life.”

This emphasis on the financial contributions of companies situates them as the providers of financial security and comfortable lifestyles. This positioning raises pertinent questions surrounding what type of partnership the companies espouse and put into action, for even behind the most glowing appraisals of the industry’s support for the community often lie apprehensions about the future of the community after the coal gets mined out or becomes unprofitable. One teacher who spoke highly about the opportunities for his students to participate in sports teams with little or no cost also joked about what would happen if the industry ever left. “All these huge houses on the golf course will become abandoned and the stores will close, but I’ll still be here,” he said. “I’ll take them over, be the king of the empty world!” This comment points to the

importance of considering the entire mining cycle from start to finish, rather than simply periods of expansion and financial prosperity (Kirsch 2006).

Jokes such as these express very real concerns about the future of the town without the industry, its jobs and tax base – issues shared by many communities dominated and then deserted by the industry (e.g. Ferguson 1999; Ferry 2005; Finn 1998; Gill 2000). In a sense then, the companies' explicit statements that their support enables good government programs and infrastructure simultaneously insinuate that the quality of life would significantly decrease without them. With these not-so-subtle threats, one might wonder how equal the partnership between companies and the community can be if the quality of life of local residents depends almost completely on the continued profitable operation of the mines.

#### *Creating publics through government*

Concerns about power differentials are particularly pertinent in thinking about the role that corporations play in governance. Social scientists have raised salient questions concerning the implications of close and often asymmetrical relationships between governments and transnational oil and mining corporations. Jędrzej George Frynas (1998) documents the interconnectedness of Shell with state structures in Nigeria, arguing that political instability allowed the company to shape petroleum policies to their economic advantage. Concerning the heavily criticized Ok Tedi mine in Papua New Guinea, Stuart Kirsch (2006) suggests that the state's decision to allow the mine to continue operating and polluting the local ecosystem reflected its status as a minority

shareholder and tax collector “rather than its responsibility to protect its citizens and the environment by regulating corporate behavior” (2006: 15).

Extractive industry officials have played a major role in both state and local government apparatuses in Wyoming. Many coal company executives and employees serve on local and state boards that create industry policies and evaluate their implementation.<sup>187</sup> During my fieldwork, for example, an environmental engineering manager at one of the largest mines simultaneously served on the state’s Environmental Quality Council, a board that hears and determines cases related to the Department of Environmental Quality and assures the implementation of the Environmental Quality Act.<sup>188</sup> The spokesperson for the same company served on the board of directors at the University of Wyoming and assisted in the search for the director of its School of Energy Resources, was a national delegate for the Republican Party conventions and served on the Campbell County Land Use Planning Committee. Two business and operations managers from this company and another were appointed by the governor to serve on a task force guiding the development of UW’s School of Energy Resources – an institution directed by a former Mobil Oil executive and partially funded by gifts of five million dollars from BP, five million from EnCana Oil & Gas, two million from Shell and 580 thousand from ConocoPhillips (Northam 2007; see Fox 1997 for a discussion of corporations “leasing the ivory tower”). Other members of the board included executives from Basin Electric and GE Energy. These activities are most often framed as “civic responsibilities,” and the county and state benefit from such voluntary efforts. Yet at the

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<sup>187</sup> The rotating shift schedule makes it difficult for most miners and supervisors to participate in such public service, so the majority is undertaken by managers and retired miners.

<sup>188</sup> According to its website, the EQC’s mission is to serve as a “professional, impartial and independent hearing body in resolving disputes and to apply its experience in evaluating environmental issues in a manner that fulfills the purpose of the Act.”

same time, it would be unwise to forget that such engagements also provide an opportunity for industry officials to shape public policies and perceptions to their advantage.

The Campbell County Natural Resource and Land Use Planning Committee provides an especially pertinent example of this possibility in the Powder River Basin. In the late 1990s county commissioners appointed thirteen residents, primarily representing agricultural and ranching interests, to draft a land use plan that was adopted in 2000. In 2005, they appointed a committee to revise and update the original plan. It included representatives from the mining and oil and gas industries in addition to citizens involved with the service industry, retail, conservation, building and planning and agriculture. The plan focuses on growth and development, particularly in managing the impacts of federal policies on “private lands, landowners, and private, public, and corporate citizens in Campbell County” (Campbell County Commission 2007: 2). One of the report’s primary themes is the importance of the mining industry for the economic health and social stability of the county.<sup>189</sup>

The report’s section specifically dedicated to mining opens by describing the county’s location on the edge of “what is probably the largest single deposit of coal in the United States that is economically recoverable by surface mining methods.... the most

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<sup>189</sup> The report portrays the history and development of mining in terms friendly to the industry. In the history section of the plan, the report naturalizes the industry by portraying Native Americans as incipient miners: “They burned free coal that lay near outcroppings. These were forerunners of the... mining... industries” (Campbell County Commission 2007: 9). This comparison obscures crucial differences between the Native Americans’ use of outcropped coal to meet their own subsistence needs and the contemporary industrialized capitalist organization of mining activities. Moreover, the history of the Wright community follows the official company line that it was not intended to be and never became a dependent “company town” (Campbell County Commission 2007: 11). In fact, the main source to write this history comes from a book (Righter 1985) by a history professor from the University of Wyoming who was commissioned by a mining company.

prolific coal-bearing formation in Wyoming” (Campbell County Commission 2007: 54-5). It also offers staggering production statistics, including the fact that Campbell County mines provide over thirty-six percent of the nation’s coal used for electrical generation, and details the industry’s high-paying jobs and contributions to the state and local economy.<sup>190</sup>

Tellingly, the report argues that both economic and social stability are “highly dependent” upon a viable minerals industry (Campbell County Commission 2007: 57-58). The role of the county according to the committee, therefore, is the “continued development and production of valuable mineral resources while maintaining and enhancing the environment” (Campbell County Commission 2007: 59). But what does maintaining and enhancing the environment mean in this context? The section on threatened and endangered wildlife explains that the county has historically attempted to coordinate the management of such species with attention to local custom, culture, economic viability and social stability concerns. It then goes on to clarify that *over*-protection of such species provides a serious financial risk, resulting in business losses for ranching families and big game outfitters as well as economic downturns stemming from slowdowns in energy development (Campbell County Commission 2007: 53). It then recommends that the county and private landowners should therefore be “proactively involved in the listing processes and in efforts to prevent the listing of

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<sup>190</sup> “Campbell County mines employ over 4,000 workers whose average income is over \$70,000 per year. This wage level is twice the state average of \$32,000 per job. From 2004 through 2006, oil, gas, and coal have exceeded the prior year’s assessed value. When comparing all of Wyoming’s twenty-three counties, Campbell County contributes over twenty per cent (20%) of the states taxable valuation. Campbell County is the highest producer of oil and coal production in the state, and is second in natural gas production. The 2006 assessed valuation of Campbell County was \$4,261,303,982. Of this amount, eighty nine percent (89%) was attributable to coal, oil, gas, uranium, miscellaneous minerals, public utilities, telephone, pipelines, Rural Electric Associations (REAs), and railroads” (Campbell County Commission 2007: 58).

threatened and endangered species through habitat improvement, conservation efforts, and management practices” (Campbell County Commission 2007: 53). Thus the ultimate goal of conservation is the expansion of industrial and family businesses, two practices that are often difficult to balance.

The main tension that emerges throughout the report is between the private property rights and lifestyles of ranchers and the purported public economic “need” to develop mineral resources. The report points to a potential conflict between continued development and the maintenance of the agricultural values espoused by some residents (or all of them, according to the report’s authors).<sup>191</sup> It notes that surface and mineral owners have negotiated use and lease agreements in order to allow development, but it also hints at the sometimes less powerful positioning in which many ranchers find themselves: “Since Wyoming law makes the mineral estate the dominant estate, private surface owners find themselves faced with allowing federal actions such as wildlife and cultural studies on their private lands, or face the possible threat of condemnation by companies” (Campbell County Commission 2007: 57).

Corporate influence over the report and its writers is evident in the way in which it draws on the same language associated with the CSR movement and often employed by companies in their annual reports and public relations materials. For example, the objectives and policies sections concerning mining emphasize “stewardship” of the land and the necessity of engaging the multiple “stakeholders” invested in the management of land and mineral resources (Campbell County Commission 2007: 59). These same discourses became prevalent in company annual reports beginning in the early 2000s as a

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<sup>191</sup> Reading the report, one would imagine that all local residents are white Christians who wish they were ranchers. This emphasis is especially concerning given the increasingly large local Latino population.

response to criticism of the larger industry's management of social and environmental issues. Major companies in the basin address their employees as "stakeholders" in correspondence and in their annual report. For example, in addition to using the term stakeholder at least once every two pages, the first page of Peabody's 2006 Corporate Social Responsibility Report lists "a continuous focus on safety, stewardship, sustainability and operations improvement" as the company's primary values (Peabody 2006: 1).

Positive working relationships between local governments and mining industries are not necessarily problematic. In fact, most residents are generally pleased with the companies' financial support of the community. Most parents spoke highly of Gillette precisely because of its opportunities for their children, linking the state-of-the-art schools, recreation and athletic facilities to the financial support provided by the companies through taxes and royalties. They also appreciated the college scholarships and summer jobs the companies offered. On a much larger level, the state's budgetary surplus – almost entirely a result of taxes and royalties from extraction industries – allowed the legislature to create a \$400 million endowment that would fund scholarships for Wyoming high school graduates to attend community colleges and the state's only university in Laramie. This program was inspired by the state's Permanent Mineral Trust Fund, which has accumulated over \$2.25 billion since 1969 through a 1.5 percent tax on the extraction of minerals.

Moreover, in the late spring of 2007, two county commissioners approached local coal industry officials in order to secure their support in a proposal to raise property taxes to help pay for a technical education center at the community college. Every single mine

was represented at the meeting, and they ultimately their endorsement of the proposal. Their support was essential because they accounted for nearly fifty percent of the property taxes collected by the county in the previous year. In return, company representatives asked for certain stipulations – including an end date for the tax and a guarantee that the money would be earmarked for the center – and hinted that it would be a nice gesture if a few of the rooms were named after them to honor their contributions. In general, the commission appreciated the companies’ support, as articulated by one commissioner. “I believe everybody in this room has the best interests of Campbell County and best interest of industry at heart, I really truly believe that.” Only one commissioner, known for being the most financially conservative, suggested that the mines should simply volunteer the money for the center up front since they would be reaping the future benefits of a skilled workforce.

Yet at the same time as the mining industries have created wealth for many families and government bodies, developed community programs and provided educational opportunities, their activities have also displaced other residents and made their ways of living difficult to sustain. The goal of multiple use of land is enshrined in the state constitution: “The land shall be used to foster, promote and encourage the optimum development of the State’s human, industrial, mineral, agricultural, water, wildlife and wildlife habitat, timber and recreational resources” (W.S. § 36-12-106). Balancing these multiple interests is often difficult, especially when mineral development is privileged over other potential uses of the land. Even the BLM, the institution charged with analyzing the social and environmental impacts of mining projects, follows the National Energy Policy in recognizing “the continued extraction of coal is essential to

meet the nation's future energy needs. As a result, private development of federal coal reserves is integral to BLM coal leasing programs" (BLM 2007: 1-10). The woman whose ranch was located in close proximity to the mine articulated this position during the November BLM hearing, even though she knew that her critiques had a very slim chance of actually changing the outcome of the lease application because of the BLM's vested interest in developing the coal nearby her property.

While the philosophy and policies of the county commission, following the state constitution, often privilege industry interests, local government officials have at times reached decisions that are unfavorable to the industry. In the spring of 2007, for example, a mining company had tried blocking a local landowner from developing a subdivision on land located in close proximity to their future coal lease. In a vote that surprised many local residents, the commission approved the subdivision based on their desire to protect private property rights and, in the words of one county commissioner, "send a message to coal mines that you better deal with the landowner." Not surprisingly, the mine manager chose to emphasize the company's "partnership" with the landowners in his public comments and his hope that negotiations would continue and be fruitful.

Many local families and government representatives have drawn on the coal companies' statements of commitment to the community to make successful claims for issues and projects important to them, primarily educational and extracurricular opportunities for the town's youth and entertainment for adults. Moreover, the majority of landowner-company conflicts seem to be relegated to the booming coal bed methane (CBM) industry, especially concerning water rights and use. The most pressing coal

company and landowner issues seem comparatively less grave. At one of the largest mines in the basin, for example, issues revolving around land use and access during the hunting season are worked out during an annual barbeque hosted by the company. Yet even given the long history of collaboration between corporations and local community members, it would be imprudent to obscure those tensions that do arise, for they shed light on larger questions of power differentials in such “partnerships” that may be obscured during periods of profitability, growth and expansion – especially when most of the community’s financial and social security depends upon a single industry’s success. Critically evaluating CSR requires ethnographic research into the match between official discourses and actual practice. I engage in such a project in the next section by investigating the companies’ practice of environmental stewardship.

### **Environmental stewardship**

Since the initial boom, mining representatives in the basin have consistently emphasized their commitments to what is now commonly called environmental stewardship. This stewardship entails particular relations of responsibility that legitimize mining activities in the region. Corporate representatives construe both the coal and the natural environment surrounding it as public patrimony on the national and state level. In portraying their companies and employees as good environmental stewards, representatives construct mining companies as the rightful protectors of the public’s property and thus legitimize their activities in the basin.

These practices are not unique to the basin. In her research in the Ecuadorian Amazon, Suzana Sawyer (2004) analyzes the coffee table book Arco published about its

Villano project, which sends the message that oil development and environmental preservation can be mutually compatible. Sawyer traces the ways in which the corporation created itself as a moral and ethically sound actor by portraying itself as the guardian of the rainforest and its biodiversity and by strategically obfuscating the local social upheaval the project created. She thus argues, “The authority of corporate capital today is related in important ways to historical practices of imagining, representing and purifying ‘natural’ landscapes... the way Arco imagined the terrain of its operations significantly affected its rights, responsibilities and legitimacy to explore for and exploit petroleum in Ecuador” (Sawyer 2004: 103).

Discourses of environmental stewardship are direct responses to criticisms of industry practice (Benson and Kirsch n.d.; Yakovleva 2005). Surveying recent exponential increases in environmental mission statements, geographer Gavin Bridge (1998) argues that mining corporations have developed discourses of environmental stewardship to mediate the tensions between accumulation, production and environmental protection in order to legitimize their continued operation. He traces how officials have co-opted the language of non-governmental organizations in their public policy statements by embedding ecological concerns within their business practice (1998: 222-3, 227). Tellingly, he also notes the increasing tendencies to publicize self-regulation to garner public support for their projects in order to fend off further governmental intervention (1998: 232; cf. Conley and Williams 2005; Kirsch 2004). One case study of this practice emerges from Michael Amundson’s (2001) research about the Orphan Lode Uranium Mine on the Grand Canyon’s South Rim. He argues that in the 1960s Western Gold corporate officials formulated their case for the mine’s continued operation in the

language of conservation and Cold War defense.<sup>192</sup> In this case, mine officials expanded responsible use to include both environmental security (producing uranium to prevent the Soviets from bombing the Canyon) and economic security (maintaining the jobs of many Native American miners).

Powder River Basin coal companies also publicize their good stewardship of the region's grasslands in order to legitimize their activities. I will argue that these efforts are the direct result of demands made by local ranchers and community members to engage in environmentally sound mining practices. As the Powder River Basin was poised to become the center of the domestic coal industry in the 1970s, the majority of the federal reserves were located under or adjacent to land held privately by ranchers. Many of these were concerned about the long-term impacts of energy development not only on their own land but the region as a whole.

Laney Hicks, the Sierra Club representative for Wyoming, North and South Dakota, eastern Montana and western Nebraska, worked with local ranchers to advocate for regional rather than project-specific environmental impact statements. In June 1973, along with six other local environmental organizations, the Sierra Club sought an injunction against coal development in the area until a comprehensive and interdisciplinary assessment could be completed that met the requirements of the National Environmental Protection Act. The coalition was concerned that permits and leases were being approved without accounting for the overall impact for the environment and the ranchers. *Sierra Club v. Morton* named the Department of

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<sup>192</sup> Amundson quotes the chairman as writing, in a letter to the National Parks Service, that if their rights to the ore deposit were denied, it would remain in the ground forever, "to the benefit of no one, which would be contrary to all sound principles of conservation of resources and would result in possible injury to our country's uranium supply" (2001: para. 24).

Agriculture and the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Indian Affairs and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as defendants.

Hicks had to counter widespread national support for the rapid development of the Powder River Basin, as the oil embargoes of the 1970s prompted energy companies to look toward the Rocky Mountains for affordable and reliable domestic energy sources. In fact, the initial operators of the Powder River Basin mines were not the established eastern coal companies, but oil companies such as Arco, Exxon, Kerr-McGee, Mobil, Shell and Sunoco that were interested in coal gasification. The importance of these mines for providing an alternative energy source was highlighted both locally in public relations campaigns and nationally in the August 1974 Project Independence hearings in Denver.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s in the basin, coal companies frequently portrayed themselves as providers of national energy. For example, a 1982 Bridger Coal Company ad features a picture of two antelope in the grass. The text underneath explains that where the antelope were grazing, there used to be a 160-foot deep coal mine that had since been reclaimed so that “today everything is home on the range again.” It explains, “We harvest America’s most important energy resource. Then put the land right back the way we found it. Even better sometimes. And there’s nothing minor about that.” The company distances itself from images of coal mines to portray themselves as farmers who provide a valuable service to the entire country.

These same themes appeared in the Project Independence hearings, which were sponsored by the Federal Energy Administration and intended to search out and evaluate ways to increase national security by making the U.S. energy “self-sufficient.” The

hearings and entire project were heavily criticized by environmental groups. In her testimony at the Denver hearing, Hicks questioned the ways in which patriotism was being used to further industry interests. “In order to be in keeping with the title of Project Independence,” she said, “I feel like I should be oozing stars and stripes and be clad in red, white and blue.” She went on to note,

For several years I have watched the activities of the energy companies to acquire resources in the northern plains and Project Independence as far as I can tell represents the same goals under government auspices. With federal ownership of minerals and the private financial and corporate objectives to keep the country dependent on fossil fuels there appears to be a logical partnership. But whose interests are served? Who decides what course keeps this country independent? [Hicks n.d.]

Here Hicks draws attention to the strategic construction of the “public” to be served by ramping up oil and coal production in the Powder River Basin. She suggests that the project should be renamed “Consumer Dependence” because consumers in general would pay the price for the project through increased costs, limited choices, forced migrations and loss of recreation areas. She also argues that Powder River Basin ranchers would be hurt the most of all:

Contrary to the popular Washington assumptions, there is more in the northern plains than sagebrush and coal. Within the limitations of our environment we have established industries based primarily on renewable resources and multiple use. Does your project have respect for these living, functioning producing systems? Or has it already made the decision that we are expendable? [Hicks n.d.]

Hicks also argued that the whole premise of the meetings was misleading because it seemed that the government had already decided which course of action it would take. Pointing to their existing plans in the basin, she asked, “How can a federal agency hold public hearings to collect ‘fresh ideas for the nation’s energy future’ when government actions show that new and fresh options are not to be part of present studies?” (Hicks

n.d.). True to Hicks's accusation, the final report published the next year confirmed what federal agencies had already been promoting: greatly increased domestic coal and oil production.

The other primary criticism of the project that emerged in this period concerned its limited scope. Representatives from various environmental groups wrote letters to federal government officials encouraging them to address national energy concerns not by expanding production, but by engaging in conservation. Members of the Rocky Mountain Center on Environment wrote to the Department of the Interior:

An analysis of energy demands should include a rigorous examination of conservation possibilities, consumption patterns which could be changed, possible efficiency improvements, etc... it is absolutely necessary that the same work group which investigates the 'national energy situation' and demands projections also investigate consumption and conservation alternatives. [Hansen et al. 1973]

Nina Dougherty, the acting chairperson of the Northern Plains Regional Conservation Committee wrote to an interested party in Washington, D.C., that the sponsors of the energy study "have made a basic prior assumption – namely that the present rate of consumption of energy in the U.S. is an unalterable (and apparently desirable) fact and that the development or non-development of the Northern Plains coal resources must be seen in that light" (Dougherty 1973).

In January 1975 the U.S. Court of Appeals issued an injunction against further development until the lawsuit was settled. The public reaction in Gillette and the rest of the state tended to be negative, concerned that the lawsuit would cause the region and state to miss out on the economic benefits of coal development. In the state's main newspaper, an editorial cartoon ran in July 1975 that suggested that the Sierra Club consisted of wealthy people who used the environment for entertainment and did not

have to be concerned about keeping a job (cf. White 1995). While a line of men with hardhats stand in line at the “Powder River Basin Unemployment Line,” a man with a backpack marked “Sierra Club” sits cross-legged by a pool of water, fishing. A miniature Cowboy Joe, the official mascot of the University of Wyoming, asks him, “Got a dime so I can go fishing?”

In January 1976 the U.S. Supreme Court lifted the temporary injunction, and the Department of the Interior approved the four initial plans for new mines in the region that had been on hold. Many others would follow in rapid succession. Although the lawsuit was unsuccessful in requiring regional rather than project-specific impact statements, some of its concerns were integrated in the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977 (SMCRA), which serves primarily to outline the requirements for mitigating the environmental impacts of mining and reclaiming the land after mining has finished. On a local level, the efforts of the coalition did compel mining companies to address their concerns in their attempts to craft themselves as good neighbors and partners.

Since their inception, the mines in the basin have been widely recognized for their environmental efforts that go above and beyond state and federal regulations. For example, since 2001 Peabody’s North Antelope Rochelle has been conducting a voluntary sage grouse telemetry study. The project takes large numbers of expensive radio collars and many employees to track and catch the birds year-round. The mine initiated the project because sage grouse were a particular area of concern in the coal-bed methane boom. The mine sought to identify areas the birds were using for important life cycle events, such as nesting, raising broods and wintering. Doing so prior to mining activities helped them to focus their efforts in recreating the most vital microclimates

(including density, grass type and sagebrush height) to protect the sage grouse. They have also worked with local landowners to recreate these microclimates, giving the birds a place to use during mining, and they share their data with the Forest Service, the BLM and Game and Fish. One well established local environmental consultant considers the program a “remarkable contribution not just to the mine, but to the regional population... It takes a real team effort to take responsibility for the impacts.” Partnership also figures heavily in the ways in which environmental consultants think about their relationships with coal companies.



Figure 10: Mine employees restore a riparian habitat with the silo in the background. Photo courtesy Peabody Energy.

Publicizing environmental awards and achievements is a key strategy for companies to portray themselves as responsible actors. These prizes feature largely in annual reports, especially in the new wave of specific social and environmental

responsibility reports, and in local newspapers. This practice stretches back to the early 1970s, when environmentalists began criticizing the industry on both a national and local level. In the early 1970s, the Wyodak mine – Campbell County’s oldest – began running a series of ads declaring that “Reclamation is not new at Wyodak” and that they had been engaging in it since the 1930s after the mine opened. Another mine at the southern tip of the basin announced that they had been “reclaiming land since 1965. This was prior to ‘get tough’ laws on the matter.”<sup>193</sup>

It is crucial to note that stewardship implies particular relationships of belonging and accountability. For example, many companies express their commitment to community wellbeing through their respect for the land and the other locals who use it. A 2005 Foundation Coal ad emphasized that the company was a good steward of the public domain: “Providing fuel for your energy needs... Reclaiming what’s yours... Good neighbors return what they borrow.” The ad also featured pictures of grazing cattle in addition to the storage silos and pit. Another example comes from a 1974 ad by Decker Coal, a company operating in the northern portion of the basin:

Over 300 employees of Decker Coal live in this area. We hunt and fish, explore the mountains and enjoy the clean air and natural environment. We are concerned with the effects of impact because we want good schools for our children, health care and pleasant living conditions for our families – just like you.

Another local company ran an ad in 1990 stating they are a “part of Wyoming and proud of it” because they are a part of the “Western tradition of working hard and helping your neighbor... the steady growth of the community... [and] the heritage of taking care of the land you work on, so it will take care of you.” In the 2000s, many coal mining companies began running ads that featured pristine views of wildlife, such as antelope,

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<sup>193</sup> Also during the 1970s, Amax opened its Belle Ayr mine to reporters and residents to let them examine their reclamation efforts, which the newspaper deemed laudable.

elk and eagles, frolicking on the minesite as a testament to the sustainability of their environmental practices and their “investment in Wyoming’s future,” as one ad put it. By showcasing their commitment to the environment, these companies craft a sense of belonging with and accountability to the greater community and state.

In these examples, company officials legitimize their activities by crafting a common respect for and enjoyment of the land with Gillette area residents. These discursive strategies might be particularly successful because many locals, especially those with ranching backgrounds or aspirations, hold the natural environment in high regard. Most ranchers in the basin express their love of their lifestyle through its continuity with past and future generations who engage in similar work on generally the same homestead (cf. Christensen 2002; Jorgensen 1984; Starrs 2003). These attitudes are also enshrined in the Land Use Plan discussed above:

The culture of Campbell County is tied to the land. A love for this land often grows on the visitor to Campbell County, like the passion for the land experienced by the people who own and work it. *With ownership comes the duty of stewardship of the land.* “If we take care of the land, the land will take care of us” has often been quoted by old-timers within the county. Historically, in the agricultural community, many family farm and ranch operations have been retained in the same family for generations. A heritage of values, traditions, and ethics are passed on as well and likewise in the coal mining, oil production, and coalbed natural gas communities. [Campbell County Commission 2007: 16-7; emphasis added]

This section links the practices and values of current industry officials with those held by ranchers, farmers and other Campbell County old-timers who passionately cared for the land. The italicized sentence is significant for linking notions of property with stewardship. Whereas the report argues that stewardship is a condition of ownership, my analysis suggests that for coal companies, stewardship legitimizes ownership.

*Living next door to a mine*

Critically assessing CSR, however, requires a move beyond corporate documents to consider how other people evaluate actual corporate practices. On the one hand, company employees, from equipment operators to environmental engineers, take pride in both particular projects and overall performance. “I wouldn’t work here if I didn’t think we were doing a good job,” said one environmental manager, and many of her colleagues in that company and others echoed this sentiment. Another manager enjoys taking groups of visitors and tourists on tours of the mine because she can disrupt a lot of stereotypes about the industry and its reclamation practices. She concluded, “We do a good job because we live here too.” Another emphasized that the mines

do things we don’t have to do and we do it because we want to be good environmental stewards. That’s not the company line. I don’t want to sound like a corporate billboard, but we do want to do the right thing because all these people who live in Wyoming live here because they want to enjoy the outdoors in some regards more than others. We don’t want to trash our environment. This is where we play, where we work, and we just want to do it right.

Consultants who collaborate with mines on compiling data and instituting programs also make glowing reports of the industry’s activities, including voluntary and expensive sage grouse telemetry studies, careful relocating of birds and their nests and alternative prairie dog habitats. While they are saddened that not all of the habitats can be reclaimed exactly – for example, scoria breaks, sandstone bluffs and gulches are difficult if not impossible to reproduce – they appreciate the overall efforts of the mines to return the land to its original purpose.

It is perhaps not surprising that company employees and consultants express approval of the mines’ reclamation efforts. A more compelling evaluation would emerge from people, such as ranchers, whose lives and land were directly impacted by the

industry. Marie grew up on a ranch outside of Sheridan, one hundred miles northwest of Gillette, and frequently describes her lifelong relationship with the mining industry as “twisted.” Underground coal mines have been active in this northern portion of the Powder River Basin since the late 19th century. In talking about her childhood, she said, “I grew up with the taste and smell of coal.” She remembers being able to smell the coal burning underground when she was outside playing or riding horses. The school she attended burned local coal for heat, and the bus that took her and the other ranch kids to and from school used to drive through the pits on the way to town. It was not until she was a teenager, however, that the mine closest to their ranch started encroaching on her family’s land. The mining company began negotiations with her parents to buy the ranch so that they could continue developing their pit. As she was showing me around their land one summer afternoon in 2007, she pointed to the pasture where they used to calve and said that it was not until 1984 when she really noticed the mine. The pit came so close that she could hear the haul trucks and back-up alarms, and the bright lightplants stayed on during the night shift. The thought of the mine destroying the ranch upset her greatly. She said, “I used to take my horse and find all of the control points for the mine. I was smart enough in geometry that I’d pick up the stakes and move them two or three feet or push them over. I did that routinely! I was an environmentalist, railing against the inevitable.”

Marie’s assessment of the industry changed dramatically over the course of her professional career. The company seeking to buy her family’s land offered her a summer internship, she thinks, “to make a point with local landowners. They probably thought, bring the child in, give her a job, and the child will hopefully go home with better

feelings for the company.” She had also recently realized that her interior decorating major was not going to be financially lucrative, so she took the job and eventually found that she enjoyed surveying and drafting. “I started pulling up stakes and thinking for a three year period that the mines were wrecking the environment, that it would be all be mined and would ruin the ranch and the culture of the area,” she remembered. “But by the time I was 22, I was a confirmed stronger proponent of mining, especially for women. There are a lot of opportunities for people willing to work hard, and our standard of living is high because of the industry.” In addition to appreciating the local economic benefits of mining, one of the things she appreciated the most during her summer internships was learning that there was a plan to restore what had been disturbed; that capable, educated people would be in charge of those efforts; and that with SMCRA there would be consistent regulation throughout the industry. After earning a degree in civil and architectural engineering, Marie went on to work in mine leasing and permitting in Wyoming and Montana and then in cadastral mapping. She eventually used that experience to work for the environmental consulting firm her geologist husband founded. As a landman, she specializes in land quality permitting for coal mines.

Although the coal company eventually convinced her parents to sell the ranch (partially because they bought them another ranch a few miles away), they never actually mined it because the area was declared an alluvial valley. In a twist of fate, Marie’s consulting company was put in charge of the initial permitting and final bond release of the land adjacent to her family’s property that the company did disturb. During my fieldwork, the final bond had just been released, meaning that it had met all reclamation requirements to bring the land back into post-mine use for wildlife and grazing. Marie

spent one afternoon showing me the reclaimed area, driving a pick-up through the fields where she used to ride horses as a teenager. She pointed out different species of grass other vegetation and took me to a reservoir that used to be a pit and is now a prime bass fishing place that she and her family visit every Father's Day.



Figure 11: An old mine pit near Sheridan that is now a reservoir.

She was also happy to see that the bald eagles, bobcats and coyotes were still frequenting the area. We watched a couple bucks bound through a pasture, and she smiled with satisfaction, saying, “My dad would have loved to have had pasture this good. I look at this and I’m a ranch kid and I love it.”

For Marie, the most rewarding part of her career has been seeing the land start as pasture, be mined, and then be returned to better pasture. “It works,” she said.

The hydrology works, and there’s a beautiful reservoir. My concern growing up was, ‘What’s going to happen to bald eagles? Will it ruin the habitat?’ I was a great doubter, moving stakes to stop progress and stop this mine from ruining my life. But I saw that we got used to backup sounds and blasting and so did the animals. I know it sounds cliché, but the area looked much worse with the underground mines. It truly looks better than it did back in the 1960s when I rode my horse here. This company has been a good corporate citizen. They make me proud to work for the industry.

She tries to keep her own family’s experience in mind when she is working with other landowners on permits. The lesson her family learned was that “the healthiest attitude to have when you sell is to consider yourself a partner with the coal company. They’re helping you harvest something that you couldn’t do yourself.” This partnership is far from simple. She has learned that is possible to mine responsibly, but that “laws are necessary. Some companies will be good stewards no matter what, but some of the won’t be.” She always asks herself the tough questions: “Is the company responsible? Do I really believe that they are going to keep their promises?” She views her responsibility as making sure that the areas she grew to love growing up as a ranch kid are properly reclaimed so that they can go back to being enjoyed by local people and animals alike.

Marie’s long and “twisted” relationship with the mining industry is unique; not every rancher has the opportunity to personally supervise and reclaim family land. Her journey from vociferous critic to staunch supporter of the industry, however, does demonstrate the importance of companies following through on their stated promises to be partners with local residents and contribute to the public good. Casting themselves as environmental stewards who work in the public’s best interests is convincing only as long

as they actually engage in reclamation that meets the standards of the people who know the land best.

## **Conclusion**

Rather than searching for new definitions of property, anthropologists have turned to investigating “how this concept works, who uses it, for what purposes and with what effects” (Humphrey and Verdery 2004: 2). While property is often associated with privatization, in the Powder River Basin, coal company officials have used the concept of public property to frame both their business activities and their relationships with employees, community members and local government bodies. By viewing the coal and its surrounding environment as public patrimony, company representatives have portrayed themselves as public servants who contribute to the larger state and national good by marketing the coal, providing energy, financially supporting everyday governance and education, and safeguarding and improving the environment. In this case, public property entails specific conceptions of whom exactly the public includes (often limited to those parties who support the industry) and how public accountability will be evaluated.

These representational techniques legitimize mining activities in the basin and can be understood within the larger frame of the corporations’ efforts to craft themselves as responsible social actors. Through the framework of stewardship, companies legitimize their activities in the basin by portraying themselves not just as responsible guardians of the environment, but also as a similarly committed member of the community and general public. “Stewardship entails responsibilities, and responsibilities entail rights”

(Sawyer 2004: 91). Whereas other authors have pointed to the ways in which these discourses obscure ethically questionable activities and harmful effects of mining, the case of the Powder River Basin suggests that it was local activism through a coalition of ranchers and environmentalists that prompted the companies to take responsibility for their impacts on the environment and live up to their promises to protect it.

While the CSR movement has been aptly criticized for concerning itself more with communications strategies than actual changes in business practice, people in the Powder River Basin such as Marie have successfully held coal companies to their promise of being a good neighbor. The ranching industry has produced both the most vociferous critics and staunchest supporters of the industry. The ideal of multiple use enshrined in the Wyoming state constitution is difficult to put into practice when ranchers, government agencies and energy companies hold competing visions about the appropriate use of surface lands and subsoil minerals. Although those families opposed to energy development have been unable to stop it completely, they have inscribed their criticisms in the public record and made efforts to make sure that it was “done right.”

The majority of local residents, however, support the coal industry, approving of both their reclamation and community development activities. Unlike company representatives, they are far less likely to use the term partnership to describe the relationship between the mines and the community, perhaps because they remain keenly aware of the local dependence on the industry for jobs and tax money for public services. This caveat should not, however, detract from the overall successful negotiation of a social contract between the mines and local residents. Mining companies, local government bodies, advocacy groups and individuals have worked together to establish

and enforce expectations for the mining of coal in their region (cf. Acheson and Knight 2000), even if the ways in which the concept of property has been wrapped around such “unwieldy” objects has also produced sites of contention that will be significant in future debates about national and local energy policies and practices.

What are the implications of this research for contemporary debates about national energy policies? In many ways, the Wyoming case is unique. Most popular perceptions of mining focus on environmental disasters or struggles such as Appalachian mountaintop removal, but very different conditions exist in northeastern Wyoming that make the region a nearly ideal place to mine. The areas where the mines now operate are sparsely populated sagebrush-filled grasslands, home to more pronghorn antelope than people. Before the mines opened, these areas were occupied by ranching families who owned parcels of land and leased larger tracts of adjacent federal land to graze their cattle. Many of these families sold their property to mining and development companies, often times in return for cash and larger ranches in other parts of the state. The region is also very arid, so the mines have not had to focus their efforts on managing water sources as their counterparts have in most other parts of the world. The primary challenges for environmental engineers is encouraging multi-year sagebrush growth, not protecting endangered species or habitats.<sup>194</sup>

The Wyoming case has a larger significance in shedding light on the prevalent contemporary discourses of “All-American coal” as the solution to national energy concerns. In Gillette during the 1970s and 1980s, tropes of providing for the public good were crucial in garnering initial support for their activities. Appeals to the domesticity of

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<sup>194</sup> In fact, the primary environmental concerns of both industry personnel and activists are more often related to their criticisms of the coal-bed methane development.

coal and its longevity increased exponentially following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. A 2004 ad from Kennecott Energy stated that “we honor our responsibility to safely mine Wyoming’s precious natural resource, compliance coal. We are proud to provide affordable domestic energy to meet the needs of families across the U.S.” A 2007 ad from Foundation Coal presents a picture of city lights and moving brake lights above the text “The power behind the energy... An investment in America’s energy future.” The same year, an electric cooperative’s ad argues that Wyoming coal is essential for power reliability: “Plentiful, low-sulfur coal mined in our home state helps your local rural electric cooperative, High Plains Power, operate reliably and affordably.”

Explicit appeals to national security were the loudest in debates surrounding coal-to-liquids technology. The technology is comparably expensive but well tested, having been used by countries in periods of war and isolation. The fuel can be used in everything from cars and trucks to jet engines, boats and ships, and skyrocketing oil prices following the start of the war in Iraq made the technology more economically feasible. Greg Boyce, the CEO and President of Peabody Coal, the world’s largest coal company, was one of its most vociferous supporters. At a 2006 industry conference, he argued, “If America has the will to be one of the great energy centers of the world, we have the resources right under our feet.” He also quoted Pennsylvania governor Edward G. Rendell as saying, “Clean coal is a sound policy that unites public and private interests. Instead of becoming more dependent on the Middle East for our fuels, we can increase our dependency on Middle America, and that makes sense to me. I call for an American Energy Harvest.”<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> By comparing coal mining with harvesting, these actors seek to portray the industry as sustainable.

Leading up to the summer 2007 national legislative referendum on national energy policies, including federal subsidies for coal-to-liquids technology, Boyce made explicit comparisons between unstable Middle Eastern oil and dependable “Middle American” coal. During the spring and summer, his company’s advertising campaign encouraged people to “imagine a world where our country runs on energy from Middle America instead of the Middle East.” In a May 2007 press release, he was more blunt: “Oil prices have increased more than 70 percent in the past five years, and the United States continues to depend on expensive oil imports from unstable regions to meet our needs. Transforming America's abundant coal reserves into clean transportation fuels is an important step for strengthening U.S. energy security.”

The theme of that summer’s debates was once again “energy independence,” though renewable sources played a much larger role than they had thirty years earlier. Widespread support for more sustainable energy sources from many, though not all, Democrats in Congress was tempered by President George W. Bush’s staunch backing of coal and oil.<sup>196</sup> Rather than referring to “renewable” fuels, he consistently used the phrase “alternative” fuels to leave room for coal-to-liquids technology. The main critics of the technology point to its production of greenhouse gases, almost twice that of ordinary diesel. For every barrel of liquid fuel, the production process also creates almost a ton of carbon dioxide. Industry supporters counter that they are developing the means

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<sup>196</sup> President-elect Barack Obama initially supported coal-to-liquids, working with Kentucky Republican Senator Jim Bunning to put together an \$8 billion package to support the technology. When unveiling the package, Obama said, “The people I meet in town-hall meetings back home would rather fill their cars with fuel made from coal reserves in southern Illinois than with fuel made from crude reserves in Saudi Arabia.” Responding to pressures from environmental groups, he later rescinded his broad support, voted against the package and stated that he would support the industry only if fuel could be created with 20 percent lower carbon dioxide emissions than petroleum.

to store the gas underground and even use it to force more oil to the surface. The bill failed to pass, but pertinent questions concerning the role of coal in national energy policies remain. While the Wyoming case demonstrates the power of corporations to integrate employees, community members and independent industry officials into a shared public, it also shows that people have been able to draw on the corporate language of social responsibility to hold the mines accountable to their stated commitments.

## Chapter IX

### Conclusion: Beyond the Binary, Beyond the Wall

The strict division of social worlds into public and private spheres is widely recognized as a historically specific mode of social organization and analysis that corresponds more closely with ideological abstractions than with the practice of everyday life. In this dissertation, I argue that despite calls to move beyond this binary, it continues to reverberate in anthropological theories of kinship and work, ethnographies of mining communities and the emerging field of feminist technology studies. Anthropologists rarely study kinship in workplaces, and labor scholars have yet to link the processual creation of relatedness with questions of alienation. Ethnographers of mining communities also reproduce this distinction in their portrayals of strictly gendered places and people that obscure the myriad, quotidian exceptions to them. Finally, even though scholars associated with feminist technology studies claim to theorize the co-production of gender and technology, they often reproduce conventional notions of binary gender difference in their research by failing to account for the emergent aspect of gender.

The series of oppositions stemming from the division between public and private – home and work places, masculine and feminine persons, rational and affective actors – is an ideological abstraction, but people nonetheless strategically invoke it in their everyday lives, especially to make claims on one another and attempt to create the type of workplaces they value. Here I briefly recapitulate two crucial arenas of this practice in the Powder River Basin. First, miners turn groups of coworkers into crew families that

entail specific expectations for how people should treat one another: as persons deserving of care rather than as replaceable numbers or machines. In so doing, they have sought to bring the ideals of the private sphere into the workplace to make it more inhabitable. Company officials have adopted these moral idioms of kinship in their own interactions with employees, especially concerning safety, and miners have been able to draw on this language to hold companies accountable to their promises and goals. At the same time, company officials have also strategically drawn on notions of the public – specifically in terms of public property and the public’s best interest – to legitimize their activities in the eyes of community members.

Second, a significant number of women miners, engineers and managers have invoked the notions of feminine caretaking typically associated with the private sphere to integrate themselves into a historically masculine workplace. For example, many equipment operators find social power and personal meaning in crafting themselves as their crews’ pillars of emotional support and safest operators, even if doing so also contributes to the obfuscation of their technical abilities. Moreover, some miners have sought to criticize women supervisors by referring to them as Mom and thereby insinuating that their authority is limited to or modeled on the domestic sphere. Thus invoking the distinction between the public and private can reinforce the binaries associated with it, but doing so also sometimes reworks and partially undoes them.

I examine this process throughout the dissertation by tracing the production and mitigation of gender difference. For example, I found that appeals to gender-blindness in corporate policies and everyday talk about personhood and labor in the American West are often contradicted in everyday practice. The apparently gender-neutral notion of a

good employee and coworker is embedded within masculinized notions of technical expertise. Analyzing linguistic patterns on the radio reveals that the men and women's reports of mechanical failures are interpreted in light of and thus often reinforce stereotypical ideas about masculinity and technical competence. I also found that despite claims that the mines are a man's world, men and women create complexly gendered places within the mine through their everyday work practices and talk. Finally, I found that since the crews consider themselves to be a workplace family, the women's integration into them is often predicated on them taking on locally salient feminine kinship roles.

At the same time as these conclusions point to the reinforcement of differences between men and women, many miners intentionally and unintentionally worked to downplay such gender difference. For example, many women position themselves as tomboys to navigate the conflicting expectations that they act like one of the guys without simultaneously losing their feminine respectability. Claiming this social position also helps women counter gender stereotypes and establish themselves as skilled technicians. While the crew families often expect that women embody a caretaking role, single mothers successfully embody the otherwise masculine figure of the breadwinner. Many women downplay the potential gender polarization in the prevalent joking practices because they seek to create a shared sense of humor with their coworkers. This research demonstrates that while notions of gender difference are powerful in shaping dominant ideas about work in the mining industry, men and women also creatively appropriate and sometimes rework these ideas in their everyday practices.

This part of the research prompts a reconsideration of dominant accounts of women's participation in male-dominated blue-collar workplaces, especially in the mining industry. These authors and other public intellectuals suggest that the sexualization of workplace relations, specifically concerning sexual harassment, plays a large role in deterring women from participating and advancing in these occupations (e.g. Tallichet 2006; Williams 2000; Yount 1991, 2005). In the Powder River Basin, however, it seems that most men and women miners have *de*-sexualized their relationships with coworkers.<sup>197</sup> For example, I suggested that one of the appeals of positioning oneself as a tomboy is that it allows women the freedom to craft close friendships with men that do not have sexual overtones. I would also suggest that framing relationships between experienced miners and summer student workers as those between parents and children precludes other types of non-platonic connections from being formed. As Chloe, one of the summer students profiled in Chapter Five, said, "Having a father-daughter relationship with those guys is the only way the program works. Having a bunch of college-age women working with a bunch of middle-aged men could quickly become bad. But when they know your father and treat you like a daughter, it stays at a very platonic level."

This research also reflects back on current approaches to studying kinship and gender. I have argued that studying the processual creation of relatedness in workplaces contributes to the already excellent research being done that embeds kinship within larger structures and transformations of political economy and critically questions the role of

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<sup>197</sup> This practice may shed light on why lesbians have been more readily accepted than openly gay men at the mines: lesbians do not seek a sexual relationship with the men, who are the majority of the workers. It also helps to contextualize why women who date their coworkers can become socially ostracized.

substance in the creation of these relationships. I also highlighted the ways in which relatedness at home and work can be undone by rotating shift schedules and changing management policies, a perspective that contributes to de-naturalizing EuroAmerican conceptions of kinship that emphasize belonging rather than disconnection (e.g. Edwards and Strathern 2000; Franklin and McKinnon 2000, 2001). Analytic attention to questions of personhood and gender has also played a key role in the revitalization of kinship in anthropology.

Yet I would suggest that the conceptualization of gender in these “new” kinship studies calls for reevaluation. Feminist anthropologists have long argued that gender and kinship are mutually constructed (e.g. Rubin 1975; Yanagisako and Collier 1987). This body of scholarship has tended to focus on the interplay between the bodies and bodily relationships that EuroAmericans understand to be biologically given and the ways in which they have been made socially meaningful. Analyzing the “specific social and cultural processes [that] cause men and women to appear different from each other” (Yanagisako and Collier 1987: 15) has provided a productive avenue from which to theorize the creation of gender difference. However, I would argue that scholars must also consider the other, less pursued aspect of this theoretical project: the sociocultural processes through which men and women appear *similar* to one another.

Carsten has recently called for this type of research, arguing that “an anthropology of gender needs to be concerned not just with the construction and valorization of difference but also with similarity” (2004: 69). This type of research stretches back at least to Gayle Rubin’s (1975) foundational theory of the production of sex/gender systems through kinship and marriage, particularly her suggestion that

exclusive gender categories are based on the “suppression of natural similarities” (1975: 180). Yet for the most part, serious considerations of non-binary gender practices and identities have been relegated to non-western cases cited by Carsten herself, such as her work with the Malays; the Austronesian case of men being able to menstruate, become pregnant and give birth (Atkinson 1990); and Strathern’s argument that Melanesian persons are composite and androgynous so that gender refers to “the internal relations between parts of persons, as well as to their externalization as relations between persons” (1988: 185). Attention to work and workplace relations may provide an example of non-binary gender practices in the U.S.

In the U.S., scholarly attention gender practices beyond the binary has been largely focused on people and groups that have been marginalized due to their sexual orientations, even though many others – including men and women in Wyoming – creatively embody, rework and transform these ideas in their everyday practices. This analytic blindspot might spring from the tenacious EuroAmerican link between kinship and heterosexuality, a social system that rests upon the differentiation of men and women (Butler 2002; Rubin 1975; Weston 1991). Dominant ways of thinking about gender encourage us to see binary oppositions, and many institutions and practices do make men and women appear different. Focusing exclusively on these aspects of gender, however, is an analytic dead-end. Even in an industry well known for differences between the exaggerated masculinity of male miners and the femininity of the women who care for them, gender is not always most salient mode of differentiation. As I quoted from the shovel operator Mary in the introduction, “Gender is not always the most important part of my day.” I interpreted her statement as a meta-commentary on my project, which she

hoped would consider the larger challenges faced by miners to comfortably inhabit their workplaces. In this dissertation I show that their strategies for recognizing the personhood of their coworkers in a potentially alienating situation are tied up with the crew families they bring into being on a day-by-day basis. Some of these practices create and reinforce differences between men and women, but equally many do not. The study of the mutual, processual creation of gender and kinship therefore requires attention not only to the forces that congeal gender difference, but also to their creative uptake by people in their everyday lives. In my research, this perspective was made possible by studying relatedness in the workplace rather than just the home.

Thus far I have summarized my two primary theoretical interventions concerning gender, kinship and work. I turn now to a more practical implication of my research for current debates about national energy policies. Coal-burning power plants currently provide about half of the electricity consumed in the U.S., and over a third of that coal originates in the Powder River Basin mines. This source of energy has come under increasing criticism for its substantial contribution to greenhouse gasses and pollution of fragile ecosystems. To counter the movement for more renewable energy sources, coal company executives have launched major campaigns to re-brand coal as a clean and secure source for energy. Peabody's "Coal Can Do That" campaign, for example, highlights the next generation of cleaner coal-burning electric plants, new innovations in carbon capture and storage, and coal-to-liquids and coal-to-gas technologies in order to portray coal as a solution for the national energy and security problems. To attempt to reconcile two competing visions of future energy development, many high profile politicians including president-elect Barack Obama have turned to endorsing clean coal

technologies while simultaneously calling for more research into renewable energy sources.

Yet I would argue that current debates about energy policies are insufficient because they divorce discussions of the industry's environmental track record from those about the social impacts of energy development. Criticisms of the industry's contribution to global warming, for example, rarely link with critical assessments of the industry's labor practices. Such criticisms are largely limited to the intense immediate media coverage of major mine disasters. This coverage tends to subside over time, and it also fails to address the experiences of the rest of the country's miners and their families. National energy policies and everyday energy consumption create chains of social relations among workers and their families, corporate executives, government officials and everyday consumers, but these links are obscured in product networks that focus strictly on the environmental implications of energy development.

This obscuring of social relations frustrates miners in the Powder River Basin who see direct links between larger market trends and the details of their working lives. Each time coal prices rose in the 2000s, companies in the basin worked to dramatically ramp up production. In an effort to keep as many pieces of equipment in operation as possible, many mines encouraged their employees to ignore more minor equipment failures and problems that should have otherwise been addressed. One group of miners vividly remembers a season in which all of the ramps were narrow and pressed directly against the highwalls, which made their trips from the shovel to the crushers more dangerous than normal. The crew supervisor repeatedly explained that the increased pressures to move a lot of coal while prices were high had translated into insufficient

material being made available to create wider road. The crew agreed, but they also faulted management for not taking those factors into account in their mine plans. Their frustration built upon their longer-standing concern regarding managers cutting corners to quickly process large quantities of coal. In addition to these periods of expansion, major contractions in the industry have also shaped the contours of the miners and their families' everyday lives. Frequent market collapses have shut down mines and oftentimes turned bustling communities into ghost towns, compelling families to move around the western U.S. in search of work that pays well given their qualifications.

Scholars and public policymakers should critically consider the social relations that our current energy practices engender. This dissertation demonstrates that in order to keep the mines in the primary hub of the domestic coal industry running 24 hours a day, a large sector of the population lives on completely different rhythms of time than do their families, many businesses and community organizations. Miners work 12-hour shifts that can stretch into 16 hours away from home when lengthy commutes are taken into account. Many of these workers can go a full week without seeing their spouse or children, only to later find themselves with long stretches of leisure time while everyone else is at work or school. Balancing work and family responsibilities is particularly challenging for single mothers, many of whom prefer to go without sleep rather than sacrifice time with their kids.

I have demonstrated that people in the basin have developed strategies for meeting these challenges, but in the coming years they will also be faced with a new generation of problems to tackle. What work will their children do and where? It seems likely that Wyoming's almost exclusive reliance on extractive industries will propel their

children to move to different states, unless they train as educators, open a small business or work in the extractive industries. If their children decide to stay in Gillette and take a mine job, how will they address the increasing erosion of workplace family relationships that they value so highly? Moreover, a potential shift in national energy policies that would phase out coal has prompted many miners to worry about the employment futures of their younger coworkers and their children who have pursued careers in the industry. Additionally, the fall 2008 financial crisis has put many miners' retirement goals indefinitely out of reach, since many had been planning on funding their retirement through 401k accounts and stock market investments. In contemplating their retirement, many wonder whether the companies will honor their pensions and promises of continued health care coverage, even if no contract requires them to do so or if the mines in the Powder River Basin become less profitable. It is clear that in order to begin addressing these and other pressing questions about future national energy policies, scholars and public intellectuals must engage in caring from a distance in order to, as my friend in Gillette put it, think beyond the wall and consider the entire chain of social and environmental relations implicated in a simple flip of a light switch.

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