

Past and present: Immigration and museum exhibitions in the anthracite coal region

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Abstract

Northeastern Pennsylvania was home to the anthracite coal industry for about two centuries. The area was originally settled by various waves of immigrants, first from western then southern and eastern Europe. The new immigrant miners faced many forms of prejudice and were exploited in a system of unchecked capitalism. They were racialized and placed at the bottom of the job hierarchy. Some capitalists did not consider them human, and therefore not deserving of safe working conditions, descent housing and equal pay. At the turn of the twenty-first century, a new wave of Hispanic immigrants from the Caribbean, Mexico, and South and Central America entered the region to work mainly in low-paying fulfillment center jobs. Their arrival is being met with various forms of xenophobia, much like the immigrant miners faced over a century ago. The online exhibition "We Are Anthracite," hosted by the Anthracite Heritage Museum, addresses the call from the American Alliance of Museums for museums to be civically engaged, build social capital and connecting new populations to place. The exhibition bridges the experiences between the past coal mining communities and new Hispanic immigrants. The state-operated museum hosting this exhibition lends validity to the new immigrants' place in this region, creating a narrative that their experiences are similar to the region's inhabitants' ancestors. By connecting common experiences, past and present, we are creating a form of bridging social capital that connects these different populations. While the northeastern Pennsylvania immigrant story is not well-known, it is rich and complex like many Rust Belt communities undergoing similar major demographic shifts.

KEYWORDS

Hispanic community, immigration, northeastern Pennsylvania, online exhibitions, oral history

INTRODUCTION

Since 2010, the Anthracite Heritage Project in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Maryland has been performing heritage research in the anthracite coal region of northeastern Pennsylvania. Our initial work focused on the lives of the mining communities with the goal of using archaeology to understand the social, economic, and material consequences of unchecked capitalism in these mining communities. Our work helped to find the original location of an 1897 labor massacre site (Roller, 2019; Shackel, 2018). Subsequently, the archaeology project focused on the immigrant miners and their families in the various coal patch towns in the region. While we made significant contributions to developing the untold stories of the historic working class, it became clear that our heritage work was developing in the contemporary social and

political upheavals of the arrival of a new set of immigrants in the region (Shackel, 2023).

The dominant narrative of the region's heritage focuses on the immigrants that arrived over a century ago to work in the coal mines. This narrative is reinforced by the state-operated museums, Eckley Miners' Village and the Anthracite Heritage Museum, overseen by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC). Both museums were established in the 1970s and early 1980s, during a time when the coal industry was on its last gasp. The region's economy was collapsing, and there was a significant outmigration. When these museums were established, there were no new populations to consider when interpreting the region's narrative. However, within a few decades, the region's population began to change dramatically and quickly with the in-migration of a new, foreign-born population, with some anthracite communities transforming into minority-majority populations within a decade (Shackel, 2016).

Since the two PHMC museums were developed over 40 years ago, there has been very little change and few updates to the museum's exhibits and its official narrative. Because of our long-standing commitment to the region, we were invited by the Site Administrator of the Anthracite Heritage Museum to begin to develop a more inclusive message about the composition and meaning of the anthracite region to its new residents. The Hispanic¹ community, migrating from the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central and South America, has endured overwhelming forms of racism, much like the descendants of the existing white community did several generations earlier. This exhibition responds to the call by the American Alliance of Museum for museums to be civically engaged, and it follows the lead of other museums connecting new populations to place and community history (Little, 2023), in particular through forms of bridging social capital. Therefore, the "We Are Anthracite" exhibition makes the new immigrants experiences visible to the region and shows how they participate and are part of the everyday lived experiences in the area. The goal is to connect the descendants of earlier Italian and Slavic immigrants with present-day Latino immigrants through universal values that we all want and desire—such as peace, good health, education, and the ability to sustain oneself. We argue that it constitutes a "liquid exhibition" and that such connections help to build empathy and make the history of immigrant work—relatable to anyone, regardless of the group they identify with.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: RACE AND RACISM IN THE ANTHRACITE REGION

While anthracite coal was discovered in northeastern Pennsylvania in the late eighteenth century, large-scale extraction of this carbon fossil fuel did not begin until the mid-nineteenth century. Many coal patch towns developed with increased coal extraction and the influx of immigrants. During the early nineteenth century, newcomers to the coal fields came primarily from England, Wales, and Germany. By the mid-nineteenth century, they had migrated from Ireland. By the end of the century, most of the new immigrants came from eastern and southern Europe (Blatz, 2002, 27; Palladino, 2006). This large-scale migration to the region created a ready workforce, usually with more available workers than jobs. Surplus labor allowed the coal operators to keep wages relatively low with the threat that there were more available, hungry men willing to move into the mines (Roller, 2015, 2018, 2019; Shackel, 2019).

The anthracite coal industry thrived from the 1850s and peaked during the WWI era, with the employment of 180,000 men. However, federal laws, such as the *Emergency Immigration Act of 1921* (aka The Johnson Act of 1921) and the *Immigration Act of 1924* (aka The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924), severely limited immigration into the country with the specific goal of curtailing immigration from southern and eastern Europe (Pavalko, 1980).

The anthracite coal industry gradually declined as competition from other fuels, like oil and natural gas, slowly penetrated the market. While the demand for anthracite coal increased slightly during WWII, the coal industry in northeastern Pennsylvania virtually collapsed in the 1950s (Dublin and Licht, 2005). Large-scale capital fled the region. The downtowns of many towns and cities began to decay from the lack of capital and reinvestment. Today, only a few small coal extraction corporations continue to mine, employing a few hundred people, a far cry from the industry's massive size a century ago. Coal extraction continues to shrink every year with the increased popularity of inexpensive natural gas (Shackel, 2020).

Even though the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 nullified much of the 1924 anti-immigration law, the region, once known as an entry point for new immigrants, saw very few newcomers over the next several decades. There continued to be a steady and noticeable decline in the region's population. The fleeing of capital and the area's deindustrialization has led to severe personal, local, and regional hardships (Shackel, 2023).

Cowie and Heathcott (2003:5) note that in industrial communities, "working people saw in the decline of this industrial order the dissolution of their society, culture, and way of life, and the betrayal of their trust by those whose decisions shape their fate. But owners, investors, and corporate officers did not perceive the world in quite the same terms. For them, profitability of their enterprise, the need to stay competitive, and prosper and thus theoretically serve the greater market good, trumped any considerations for the lives of working families on the ground."

The continuous downward mobility of the region and its generally poor health and well-being encouraged the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to create tax-free economic zones in 1999, known as the Keystone Opportunity Zone. The zone in northeastern Pennsylvania initially attracted almost a dozen distribution centers to the Hazleton area, including businesses like Office Depot, Amazon, American Eagle Outfitters, Michael's Craft Store, Wegmans, and a Cargill meatpacking plant (Jackson, 2015).

While there has been a steady out-migration of the traditional white population, many members of Hispanic communities have come to the region to work in these low-paying jobs. For instance, Hazleton's population stood at about 23,000 residents in 2000. With the establishment of an economic zone adjacent to the city, within 5 years, the city had grown to about 31,000. Approximately 30% of the population identified as Hispanic (Bahadur, 2006; Englund, 2007, 887). Much like the community's European ancestors who fled poverty and oppression over a century ago, many new Hispanic immigrants coming to this region are also escaping similar circumstances in their homelands. They are coming to Hazleton and other communities in the area, searching for a new beginning while seeking low-paying jobs in the region's new economy. While many white younger adults left the area because of the lack of high paying jobs, the new immigrants are more than willing to fill the many new

low-paid jobs in the Keystone Opportunity Zone. Today, the Hispanic population in Hazleton is over 50%. The low cost of housing is very attractive to families of low-paid workers (Longazel, 2016).

Ironically, some residents of European descent reminisce in oral histories on fond memories of hearing many different languages on the streets of Hazleton over a half-century ago (Shackel, 2023). Yet, they have little tolerance for hearing the Spanish language in urban areas, even though some downtown areas are being revitalized by the newcomers. The ideas of the Tea Party gained strength in what once was a Democratic stronghold. The Tea Party movement is an American fiscally conservative political movement within the Republican Party that began in 2009, calling for lower taxes, a decrease in government spending, and rejecting universal healthcare. The movement also has a strong anti-immigration stance, especially concerning people coming through the southern borders. While the Tea Party is not explicitly referenced in mainstream political debate anymore, these ideas are now embedded in the conservative wing of the Republican Party.

Fear and loathing of the outsiders and the federal government are now prevalent in the region. Lopez (2014) explains that white voters have been convinced by powerful interests that minorities are their true enemies. They fail to connect the political agendas they support and the surging wealth inequity that is taking an increased toll on their lives (Lopez, 2014). “Dog whistle politics” is prevalent in the region, which is coded racial appeals that cautiously manipulate hostility toward non-whites with repeated references to criminals, welfare cheats, illegal aliens, and Sharia law. Lopez writes, “Superficially, these provocations have nothing to do with race, yet they nevertheless powerfully communicate messages about threatening nonwhites” (Lopez, 2014: ix).

While the mid to late-nineteenth-century immigration from Europe fueled the region's growth, it seems somewhat incongruous that the “illegal immigrant” movement was promoted by the mayor (now former mayor and former congressman), Lou Barletta, a descendant of Italian immigrants. In response to the influx of Hispanic immigrants coming to the region to work in companies in the newly established economic zones, there is a perceived threat to an existing way of life, a phenomenon not uncommon throughout much of the United States (Chavez, 2008). However, some whites feel threatened by this new surge of immigration. For instance, Huntington (2004, 31–32), a Harvard professor of political science, writes, “The persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages. Unlike past immigrant groups, Mexicans and other Latinos have not assimilated onto mainstream U.S. culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves – from Los Angeles to Miami – and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American Dream.” Here, Huntington emphasizes a potentially country-killing clash of cultures (Lopez, 2014:121).

One anthracite region resident, using code and not explicitly referring to the Hispanic community, explains, “Probably a good portion of the immigrants that came off of Ellis Island,

came over from different countries, they were coming because they were hard workers.... Whereas today I think a lot of people come here because they know how easy it is to live off of the government” (Interview, B.M. 2010). There is a repeated mantra throughout the region that undeserving poor abuse government help, robbing hard-working taxpayers. Another resident of the region claims, “the American citizens when they hear immigrants, that's what they look at. The people that come here for free. Everything is entitled....” (Interview, Y.B. 2012). She then explains, “the illegal immigration just coming in here and destroying everything, taking everything” (Interview, Y.B. 2012).

Continuing the same coded mantra, one resident repeats the same stereotypes of the new Hispanic immigrants in the region. He claimed, “it's just, unfortunately, a lot of them, that's the biggest portion of who's immigrating for now, a lot of them you see are fairly lazy.” Unlike the historic immigrants, “they're coming here because, you know, someone said ‘Hey, you could live in Hazleton for very, very cheap prices and you don't even have to tell them that you're there.’... And it's sad because there's an immigration fever, but it's not in the same attitude that it was years ago” (Interview, B.M. 2010).

While performing ethnography in the southern portion of the anthracite region, sociologist Jennifer Silva found a common theme among white residents about how the new immigrants were taking advantage of the welfare system. Silva explains, “I heard the same story again and again – of watching helplessly as people pile bags and bags of frozen crab or lobster in their shopping carts or casually brought expensive steaks with their food stamps to feed their dogs” (Silva, 2019, 56).

In July 2006, the mounting anti-immigration sentiment became codified when the Hazleton city council passed an ordinance known as the Illegal Immigration Relief Act (IIRA), doing so because they felt that the federal government was not doing its job to control immigration. They claimed that with the influx of “illegal immigrants” there was also an increase in the use of drugs, an increase in violent crimes, and an over-crowding of hospitals and schools. The IIRA required everyone in Hazleton who rents an apartment to go to City Hall with a passport, birth certificate, immigration documents, or citizenship papers to show that they are legally in the country. The ordinance also established English as Hazleton's official language (Kroft, 2006; Longazel, 2016, xii; Shackel, 2018).

Barletta and those on the City Council used “dog whistle politics” to solidify their power in a once predominantly white community. However, in November 2006, a federal judge granted a temporary restraining order suspending the implementation of Hazleton's anti-immigration laws (Englund, 2007, 891; Jackson, 2014, June 14). On July 26, 2007, the District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania ruled that the Illegal Immigration Relief Act was unconstitutional. On March 3, 2014, the U.S. Supreme Court voted not to hear an appeal of the Hazleton law, ending the city's fight for legislating against undocumented immigrants (Jackson, 2014). When the City of Hazleton lost the IIRA lawsuit, it had to pay the plaintiffs \$1.4 million in legal fees (Bradlee Jr., 2018, 60).

Wuthnow (2018, 77) explains, “Conventional wisdom suggests that conflicts and setbacks within tight-knit communities prompt members to seek outsiders to blame.” In the case of northeastern Pennsylvania, it was Washington, D.C. and racial and ethnic bigotry—Washington, D.C. with all of its unnecessary environmental regulations that created the “war on coal,” and racial prejudice in the form of discrimination against the new Hispanic immigrants finding work in low-paid jobs.

Understanding the politics of the area, a regional blog, Anthracite Unite: A Voice for the Working Class (2018), states, “If there was one thing Lou [Barletta] was good at, it was convincing white working class people to see themselves and their interests through a racial lens rather than as workers who struggle to get by because the rich hoard every damn penny of the wealth the working class created in this country” (Anthracite Unite, 2018).

Generally, the white population of the anthracite region continues to feel forgotten and not understood by the general public. They tend to be proud of their anthracite coal heritage and often discuss their hard work and struggles to make a living and support their families and their ancestors' struggles in building the industry that helped ignite the industrial revolution. While in need of social and medical resources, many are convinced that they are paying too much in taxes and the “other” are taking an unfair share of their tax money. There is a sense in the community that tax money is being drained from northeastern Pennsylvania and sent to Harrisburg (the state capital) and then redistributed to the larger urban areas of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, where it is spent on undeserving people, like immigrants and other people who are on welfare. When, in fact, coal companies did not pay taxes, and the burden of the taxes fell on the region's residents. In addition, today, with the establishment of the Keystone Opportunity Zones, companies are given leases and tax relief, some for as many as 10 years.

Arlie Russell Hochschild explains that the liberals, those who believe that government should promote social welfare and be active in supporting social and political change, were asking people to direct their resentment toward the rich with their ill-gotten fortunes. The Tea Party redirected the community's resentment toward the poor, stating that what they had were ill-gotten resources (Russell Hochschild, 2016, 35). Russell Hochschild (2016, 220) sees the Tea Party as creating a new type of secession. Instead of the South seceding from the North, the Tea Party encouraged the rich to separate from the poor. In other words, to no longer feel obligated to help the poor. She explains, “Conservatives of the North are following those of the South – in a movement of the rich and those identified with them, to lift off the burden of the help for the underprivileged. Across the whole land, the idea is handouts should stop. The rich around the nation will become free of the poorer. They will secede” (Russell Hochschild, 2016, 220). In northeastern Pennsylvania, the poor now include the new Hispanic immigrants, so the conservative war is not only on the poor who need assistance but also on the new, ethnically different immigrants.

BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL AND THE ANTHRACITE HERITAGE MUSEUM

These newest immigrants to the anthracite region have not been given equal access to regional identity and its cultural stories, and they have been excluded from broader historical narratives. Therefore, our goal was to work with the regional museums and develop a web-based exhibit focusing on one of the new, under-represented voices of the anthracite region, the Hispanic community. There are very few accounts that address the plight of the newest immigrant in the anthracite region (except Longazel, 2016). Recent scholarship about this region focuses on the “forgotten,” underemployed, white working class (Bradlee Jr., 2018; Silva, 2019). Including the views of the new immigrant, who are the recipients of the rage of the “forgotten,” provides a powerful narrative about universal values between the two groups. It creates a form of bridging social capital.

For political scientist Robert Putnam, there are different types of social capital—bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Bonding is exclusive and homogenizing. It builds internal cohesion within groups, such as self-serving exclusive gangs and hierarchical patronage systems. Conversely, bridging acts to cross social divides and creates networks between socially heterogeneous groups (Putnam, 2000). Bridging social capital brings individuals and communities together, finds a common heritage, and promotes a socially just present and future (Arefi, 2003). As the American Alliance of Museums points out, in recent years, museums have been a powerful tool for bridging divides (Doak-Keszler, 2023). For example, in Charlotte, North Carolina's the Levine Museum of the New South responded to Robert Putnam's report on social capital, which identified the city as having a low level of intergroup trust. Therefore, the museum staff developed new exhibitions that focused on issues of race, racism, and trust. Launched in 2004, an installation entitled *Courage* addressed the issue of trust and focused on the history of school desegregation. The museum worked with community groups and professionals from across the city to create discussions on this topic (Farrell & Medvedeva, 2010, 20).

A well-known example of developing a common heritage by linking the historic to the present is the Tenement Museum in New York City. The Tenement Museum helps visitors understand the experiences of historic and recent immigrants. The focus on the immigrant experience helps unite people across time and culture. Discussions of the historic immigrants' situation can create a sense of empathy and tolerance for the new immigrants (Russell-Ciardi, 2008, 42).

In January 2014, 20 museums and historic sites in the United States launched the National Dialogues on Immigration Project. These programs use historical perspectives to connect the new immigrant populations to places and historical sites where they might not have an obvious connection. The goal is to create a dialogue on immigration and use the past to facilitate a dialogue to help address some contemporary issues relevant to the new immigrants

(National Dialogue on Immigration, 2023). Like many museums associated with the International Sites of Conscience, these museums create a safe space for open dialogue. The development of these safe places is important and timely since issues related to immigration continue to be discussed and debated on the national level.

Over half of the foreign-born population in the United States today come from Mexico, the Caribbean, and South America. The southeastern United States is now the fastest-growing Latino region. Recently, the Levine Museum of the New South, Atlanta History Center, and Birmingham Civil Rights has developed a project titled “Latino New South” to connect southern museums and Latino audiences by emphasizing immigrant history (Levine Museum of the New South, 2015).

The descendants of northeastern Pennsylvania's mining immigrants are the power brokers of the region, holding political office, owning major businesses, and controlling and staffing the police departments. They also control the narratives of the region's official public memory. Much like the above examples, the Anthracite Heritage Project is trying to bridge the heritage of the situated community with its most recent immigrants. Our goal is to use the concept of immigration to bridge the Hispanic immigrant to the long-time resident to help develop a common heritage—immigration—which can lead to greater dialogue and understanding. The emphasis on the heritage of immigration can potentially bridge a common experience between the established European-descent populations with the new Hispanic immigrants. Therefore, we are using this web-based exhibition to build bridges between disparate communities with the ultimate goal of using heritage to create a bridging social capital in a racially tense and poverty-stricken region (Little & Shackel, 2014; Putnam, 2000).

In conjunction with the Anthracite Heritage Museum in Scranton, we developed an online exhibition highlighting the relationship between past and present immigrant communities. The exhibition uses oral histories provided by six Hispanic immigrants who currently reside in northeastern Pennsylvania to demonstrate how similar the plights of recent immigrants are to over a century before. Hispanic voices are the core of the exhibition.

In the summer of 2022, a small research team formed, comprised of the authors from the University of Maryland, and representatives from University of Wyoming and the PHMC. This team collaborated with local Hispanic immigrants to create a collection of oral histories addressing their personal histories. The narrators serve as a cross-section of the community—a store keeper, newspaper editor, community leader, artist, educator, and NGO member. All interviews performed follow the strict protocol of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). All informants have given permission to use their images and statements, and they have agreed to be identified.

The oral histories were audio- and video-recorded. All but one were held in English; one interlocutor elected to speak in Spanish, which was then translated into English for the exhibition. The interlocutors discussed their journeys to northeastern Pennsylvania, their families and current communities, and their views on the importance of anthracite coal history today.

These oral histories tell stories of both joy and hardship, covering topics ranging from relishing the region's natural beauty to the specific challenges COVID-19 and industrial parks pose to their communities. Every interlocutor shared experiences with racial prejudice and xenophobia, several speaking directly to the immense tension created by the IIRA. Many stressed the importance of community solidarity, as forming close ties to other Hispanic residents work to alleviate difficulties, facilitating hunts for jobs and housing as well as accessing medical care. These community ties are also a source of emotional connection to previous homes. One interlocutor specifically discusses the large turnout for Dominican holiday celebrations. The bonds formed through shared cultural food and music are a common theme as well.

Each interlocutor agreed that anthracite coal history is important to their lives and their communities. Most voiced awareness of how similar their experiences are to those of historic immigrant communities. One interlocutor, Annie Mendez, draws a straight line between past and present communities: “A lot of people have resentment of seeing newcomers, but I have an old friend in Hazleton and she told me stories about how – any other population that had come to Hazleton have gone through the same thing. You know, the Irish did it, the Italians, too. She says you're just in the new generation that's coming and, you know, things are gonna be bad, but then they're gonna get better. And it did, you know, it did.” Another, Dafne Paramo, directly links her current work of providing service to Hispanic students at King's College in Wilkes-Barre to the college's founding legacy of educating the sons of coal miners. Overall, the collection of oral histories conveys the complex relationships recent immigrants have with Northeastern Pennsylvania. Despite their struggles, every interlocutor expressed a deep appreciation for their home and its history.

The online exhibition showcasing these oral histories is entitled *We Are Anthracite: New Voices of Anthracite Pennsylvania* (<http://www.anthracitemuseum.org/we-are-anthracite/>). The exhibition lives on the Pennsylvania Anthracite Heritage Museum's website. It is accessible through a link in the navigational menu at the top of the museum's homepage. Clicking this link takes you to the exhibition's landing page. This page presents a short overview of the anthracite region's history, beginning with the Euro-American settlers' removal of the region's original inhabitants, the Delaware People, in the 18th century through the region's growth throughout the following centuries. The page states the reason for the exhibition: that despite existing to “[tell] the stories of the people who came here and established industries, communities, and shared cultures,” there are “other people in this region not well represented in the museum” (Pennsylvania Anthracite Heritage Museum, 2023). This includes people who were not miners nor were involved in the anthracite industry, “people who were here to support and provide services to the broader community, descendant populations, and people who came here as the industry declined and new, smaller industries developed” (Pennsylvania Anthracite Heritage Museum, 2023). At the bottom of the page is a link to a separate page dedicated to the Hispanic community, which was the result of the oral history collection project.

The Anthracite Heritage Museum intends this exhibition to include links to similar pages for other groups in the future, like the region's African American community.

The webpage for the Hispanic community is where the most important work of the exhibition is done. Superimposed upon a banner image of a restaurant storefront for Manuel Empanadas, advertising jugos naturales and free delivery, are the words, "We Are Anthracite: The Hispanic Community" (Figure 1). The exhibition text begins with two subsections that discuss "Early Communities" and "New Communities." "Early Communities" sets the historical stage, covering the waves of 19th and early 20th century immigration and the problems they faced, including poverty and discrimination. It also points out that the second wave of immigrants, from eastern and southern Europe, dealt with the same issues faced by the Irish immigrants a generation before. "New Communities" explains that northeastern Pennsylvania is facing another wave of immigration today, this time from Central and South America and the Caribbean Islands, and that these people contend with issues similar to their historical counterparts. This section also conveys the exhibition's structure to visitors, introducing the six interlocutors and the stories they share.

Following these introductory paragraphs is a gallery displaying portraits of the interlocutors. These photographs are stills from the recorded oral histories, and underneath each portrait is the interlocutor's name. Clicking on a portrait will direct the visitor to the portion of the exhibition where their voice is featured the most.

Scrolling past the portraits takes the visitor to the first of seven subsections. Each of these subsections highlights a different theme addressed in the oral histories that also connects the past to the present. The subsections all provide a paragraph explaining how the theme relates to both historical immigrants and those of today, a 1- to 3-min clip from the oral history recording in which an interlocutor addresses this subject directly, and a link to a separate page with the full transcript of the interlocutor's oral history. Interspersed throughout the exhibition are pull-quotes in a large font, each providing a poignant remark from the interlocutors related to the subsection's theme. The subsections are as follows: "Arriving in

Anthracite," addressing immigrants' journeys to the area; "Love of the Land," conveying the connection many feel to the region's natural beauty; "Challenges and Integration," grappling with xenophobia, prejudice, and the role local non-profit Casa Dominicana de Hazleton played in responding to the IIRA; "Mines and Factories," comparing historical and contemporary labor issues; "Solidarity and Community," emphasizing the important role community plays in immigrants' lives; "Connecting the Region's Stories," discussing a book written in Spanish by an interlocutor that connects the region's past immigration to current issues; and "History and Moving Forward," which concludes the exhibition, highlighting the significance interlocutors place on anthracite coal history and underscoring the relationship between legacy and futurity.

At the bottom of the page, just above the acknowledgements, is a short advertisement for potential additional participants. There is a link to a Google Form where visitors can answer questions about the makeup, culture, and challenges faced by their community. This information is stored by the Anthracite Heritage Museum and may be used in future projects.

The final component of this exhibition is its Spanish-language mirror. Accessible through the navigational menu at the top of the page as well as a sidebar link on the Hispanic community page, the Spanish-language mirror hosts the exhibition in Spanish. This translation was completed by a graduate student at the University of Maryland. The links to full oral history transcripts also direct the visitor to pages where the interview is translated into Spanish (though the interview that took place in Spanish is the original transcript).

Museums have taken advantage of online spaces since the 1990s, and this became increasingly common in the lead-up to the COVID-19 pandemic. From making object and archival collections searchable by the public to curating entirely born-digital exhibits (Schweibenz, 2019) and employing YouTube to reach new audiences (Grincheva, 2018), museums have increasingly incorporated technology into their operations. In 2020, when the COVID-19 removed physical visitation as an option, online spaces became the primary way many museums could engage with audiences at all. The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam proved to be particularly agile, as it established a



FIGURE 1 The masthead for the *We Are Anthracite* online exhibition.

comprehensive presence on publicly-accessible Google Arts & Culture (Neurock Schriner, 2021) and purposefully generated engagement by “challenging” the public to recreate artworks in their collection with common household objects (Ullrich & Geis, 2020). In addition to creating new avenues for remote engagement, it became clear that online presences for museums were quicker to mobilize than physical spaces and facilitated interaction with wider audiences. Though the initial fervor for online museum visitation waned as quarantine times extended (Ullrich & Geis, 2020), the pandemic demonstrated just how advantageous online spaces can be.

When the production process began for *We Are Anthracite* in 2021, online exhibits had already arisen as a hot topic. *We Are Anthracite* exists as an online exhibition rather than one in physical space reasons related to cost, time, and ease of creation. As a museum overseen by the state government, the Anthracite Heritage Museum faces challenges in funding, and consequently, staffing and resources. An exhibit housed on the museum's preexisting website, with labor provided by an external team of researchers, was a logical and practical way to create an exhibit like *We Are Anthracite* quickly and without the need to secure additional funding. With this in mind, it is important to note that because *We Are Anthracite* is not part of the rest of the museum's offerings in physical space, the museum's content related to the Hispanic community is inherently separate from the historical narrative being woven through tangible exhibitions. However, while this is indeed a concern, it is not the Anthracite Heritage Museum's intention to keep *We Are Anthracite* purely digital forever. The museum's site administrator plans to bring the material presented online into the physical space. This online exhibition was a way to turn this vision into a reality while the lengthy process of securing funds, space, and labor for bringing these stories into the physical realm. As Ullrich and Geis (2020) note, online exhibits are not endlessly engaging.

COMMEMORATING IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

This exhibition is a unique tile in a broader mosaic of cultural institutions celebrating the voices of Hispanic and Latino communities. Museum exhibitions in both English and Spanish are becoming increasingly common. *¡Pleibol! In the Barrios and the Big Leagues*, which was on view at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History for 2 years, and *¡Presente! A Latino History of the United States*, on view indefinitely at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Latino, are two high-profile examples. The latter contains a significant oral history component, presenting diverse stories of immigration to the United States. Though these exhibitions' physical installations present material in both English and Spanish, their online counterparts are predominantly in English (National Museum of the American Latino, n.d.; National Museum of American History, n.d.).

We Are Anthracite is more similar to the growing number of oral history collections dedicated to immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries with online components. The

Nuestras Raíces: The Latino Oral History Project of Rhode Island is a digital collection of oral histories from Rhode Island's Latino communities and is managed by Rhode Island Latino Arts, a local nonprofit (Latino Oral History Project of Rhode Island, 2023). The collection's website explores both the community's history as well as its future, using the oral histories to explore themes like “Community Advocacy and Political Growth” and “Latino Places that Matter” (Latino Oral History Project of Rhode Island, 2023). Much of the website is in English, but there are numerous places text is presented in both English and Spanish. Oral history collection is ongoing, as the website contains a page eliciting further contributions from the community.

Another similar project is the virtual exhibit, *Voices of Centro Humanitario: Labor, Barriers and Hope in COVID-19 Times*, created by Centro Humanitario Para Los Trabajadores. Centro Humanitario is a nonprofit in Denver, Colorado advocating for day laborers' rights and well-being. A team of curators from this organization collected oral histories from local Latino immigrants working low-wage jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic, collecting “stories of hope, faith, struggle, and job discrimination” (History Colorado, 2023b). The virtual exhibit presents audio selections from the oral histories, along with links to full transcriptions and vignettes written by the curators to introduce the interlocutors and give context to the selection. The audio excerpts and written transcripts are available in both English and Spanish; the rest of the exhibit is in English. Importantly, this exhibit is hosted on History Colorado's website. History Colorado is a historical society that works in association with the State of Colorado, administering multiple museums and historical sites across the state (History Colorado, 2023a). Using History Colorado as a platform, *Voices of Centro Humanitario* “aims to amplify and give visibility to voices of immigrant workers little heard during the pandemic and create opportunities for community listening, dialogue, learning and celebration” (History Colorado, 2023b).

Perhaps the closest analogue to *We Are Anthracite* is *New Roots: Voices from Carolina del Norte*, a digital archive created by the Latino Migration Project, Southern Oral History Program, and the University Libraries at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The archive is composed of oral histories from Latin American migrants to North Carolina, “collecting stories of migration, settlement, and integration” in a “state that has faced extraordinary demographic transformations in the last 30 years” (New Roots/Nuevas Raíces, 2015a). The archive's website allows visitors to filter the oral histories by interviewee, themes, country of origin, interviewer, and interview year, and presents interactive maps charting countries of origin and the North Carolina counties where the participants reside now. Like *We Are Anthracite*, *New Roots*' homepage gives visitors the option to view the website in Spanish or English; the two versions are mirrors of each other, ensuring no information is left out. The size of this archive dwarfs *We Are Anthracite*, as it contains contributions from over 150 participants (New Roots/Nuevas Raíces, 2015b).

Each of these examples demonstrates the increasing presence of Hispanic and Latino voices in museums and other cultural institutions. These exhibits, collections, and archives

all celebrate community and culture while working to build bridging social capital, (some, like those at the Smithsonian institutions, more explicitly than others). *We Are Anthracite* contributes to this movement, pushing museum anthropology in a direction that is deliberately more inclusive, celebratory, and responsible to its communities.

LEGITIMIZING ACCEPTANCE: A “LIQUID EXHIBITION”

Though northeastern Pennsylvania is not well-known for its place in US immigration history, like many other industrial communities, its story is rich and complex. As *We Are Anthracite* strives to demonstrate, its richness and complexity is derived from how closely its past and present are linked. In preserving and amplifying Hispanic voices, this exhibition works toward the goal of building bridging social capital to bring communities together. As museum anthropologists grapple with the contemporary role of museums in society (Prince, 2022; Sorensen, 2021; Turner, 2022), particularly in an increasingly polarized political climate, the International Council of Museums' (ICOM) definition of a museum becomes relevant.

In August 2022, ICOM approved a new definition for the museum:

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.

Though ICOM's definition of a museum has been continually revised since the organization's inception in 1946, the inclusion of concepts such as public accessibility, diversity, and community participation are in more line with contemporary global museologies. Juan Gonçalves (2019, 4) for examples, argues that in the 21st century museums dedicated to social intervention “must find or construct its definition based on the understanding of contemporary society”. Gonçalves views contemporary society through the lens of Zygmunt Bauman's theory of “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2000, 12), as a society facing “fragility, temporariness, vulnerability and inclination to constant change” (Bauman, 2000, 83). Gonçalves follows that because society today is unstable, uncertain, and chaotic, rather than fixed and stable, museums must adapt accordingly. A “liquid museum” would be responsive to this modernity, focused on contemporary societal conditions, its role as “an instrument for the creation of personal and critical consciences,” “social co-responsibility,” and “the use of new information and communication technologies to the individual”

(Gonçalves, 2019, 6). Gonçalves does not provide examples of liquid museums. However, in the wake of a pandemic that highlighted the precariousness and fragility of livelihoods, and given the ever-evolving nature of anti-immigration rhetoric and legislation, *We Are Anthracite* finds itself situated in a regionally-specific liquid modernity. And as such, as a community-based and community-oriented exhibit that takes advantage of modern technology to bridge contemporary social capital, *We Are Anthracite* may be considered a liquid exhibit.

As discussed above, *We Are Anthracite* follows a growing museological trend that incorporates the stories of the new populations into the existing narratives of place and community. This exhibition extends the anthracite region's community and immigration story into the 21st century. Including the perspectives of the new and previously “unseen” residents provides insights into how northeastern Pennsylvania is coping with deindustrialization and the sudden influx of new immigrants, from the perspective of the new immigrant. The exhibition's location online ensures that it is easily accessible. Though much of the Anthracite Heritage Museum's programming requires purchasing admission, *We Are Anthracite* is viewable online at no cost, reducing monetary barriers for visitors. Additionally, visitors can view the exhibition from anywhere, needing only a stable Internet connection to do so. This is significant, as travel to the physical museum may pose challenges to those with limited mobility or limited access to transportation. Incorporating the Hispanic voices into the permanent exhibit is a goal of the museum, and it will bring a sense of permanence and legitimacy to the community.

There are many projects that share the spirit of *We Are Anthracite* with the goal of bridging different populations in an atmosphere of xenophobic tensions, but the exhibition remains unique. The constellation of oral history collection, a focus on Hispanic immigration, options to fully browse in both Spanish and English, and association with a museum ensure that this exhibition stands out.

Further, though the exhibition is smaller in size and scope than others, *We Are Anthracite* bridges social capital in an accessible manner. While it is accessible to the descendants of the mining community as well as to the new Hispanic community, the main theoretical thrust of the exhibition is the relationship between the region's past and present. *We Are Anthracite* highlights the similarities between past immigrants' experiences with those of today, drawing parallels between xenophobia among the existing residents, language-based prejudice, and the prevalence of low-paying, exploitative, and often dangerous jobs. These connections are both stated explicitly in the text and expressed by the interlocutors themselves. For example, interlocutor Annie Mendez informs visitors that, “What the factory did during the COVID pandemic, it was as bad as what they did with the coal miners. It was as bad. It was as bad.” With an eye on the region's current political climate, this exhibition reckons the region's past with its present to lessen tension and create a climate less hostile to immigrants.

We Are Anthracite's association with the Anthracite Heritage Museum plays a significant role in the bridging of social capital during a tense societal moment. In drawing parallels between

heritage and modern experiences, the exhibit positions modern immigrants within the larger narrative of the region's history. In doing so, the museum is using its authority to lend validity to the immigrants' place in this area, legitimizing their presence against voices who would claim otherwise. Sending the message that the immigrants are not so dissimilar to the region's inhabitants' ancestors, the museum works to interrupt centuries-old cycles of xenophobia. Given the proliferation of anti-immigrant sentiment in recent highly publicized political campaigns, *We Are Anthracite* purposefully pursues this definition by opposing spiteful and xenophobic narratives at a local level.

Though the exhibit has only been public for several months as of the time of writing, the Anthracite Heritage Museum's long-term plans dictate the need for an iterative process of evaluation and adjustment. The museum will need to determine whether the exhibit is having the desired impact. Analyzing quantitative web traffic data and gathering qualitative data by speaking with museum visitors, community members, and the contributing interlocutors will provide much-needed context. In line with Smith (2022), this is particularly important given how difficult it is for museums to consistently convey clear messages to visitors about place, power, and belonging. As Smith's (2022) research shows, untangling the emotional nuances involved with visiting heritage sites is a complex task, but is central to understanding how messages are received. As such, regular performance evaluations are necessary for an exhibit like *We Are Anthracite* to ensure that the museum is doing its best to achieve its goals of building bridging social capital. When *We Are Anthracite* begins to move into the physical space, and when the museum begins a similar project dedicated to African American communities, the performance of this online exhibition should guide their actions.

Though small in size, *We Are Anthracite* has much to say. It is not the first online space to collect or preserve Hispanic oral histories, nor is it the first time a museum has sought to tackle issues of identity, place, and community (online or otherwise). However, its place within Northeastern Pennsylvania's tense social landscape positions it as one tool (among many) against entrenched prejudice. The exhibit's focus on and amplification of voices in the region's Hispanic community are a meaningful step toward the Anthracite Heritage Museum's goal of building bridging social capital. As an online exhibit in the 21st century, particularly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, *We Are Anthracite* shows that size is not a factor when museums striving to affect social good.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, the authors are grateful for contributions from our interlocutors: Amilcar Arroyo, Annie Mendez, Dafne Paramo, Gigi Perez, Victor Perez, and Eddy Ulerio. Additionally, the authors would like to thank Dr. Bode Morin of the Pennsylvania Anthracite Heritage Museum, as well as Aubrey Edwards for her photography and videography. This research and exhibition were supported with funding from the Behavioral and Social Sciences College Dean's

Research Initiative at the University of Maryland, College Park. Research approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Maryland, package 1427858-1.

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ Recognizing the differences between the terms Hispanic, Latino, and Latinx, this paper prioritizes self-identification. As such, the term Hispanic is used here to refer to the community of immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries and their descendants who now live in northeastern Pennsylvania because this is the term the community uses to describe themselves. When discussing other projects that employ Latino or Latinx, this paper defaults to terminology used by those projects.

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How to cite this article: Schriener, Aryn G. N. and Paul A. Shackel 2023. "Past and Present: Immigration and Museum Exhibitions in the Anthracite Coal Region." *Museum Anthropology* 00 (0): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/muan.12281>.