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# Radical hope: re-contextualising oral histories from deindustrialised mining communities

Paul Shackel

Anthropology, University of Maryland - College Park, Takoma Park, USA

**ABSTRACT**
The anthracite coal mining landscape of northeastern Pennsylvania is in ruin, a by-product of two centuries of unchecked capitalism. Much of the land is stripped of its timber and surface mines lay abandoned. The industry began its decline after WWI and virtually collapsed during the post-WWII era. Waste piles of coal litter the landscape, and the streams and rivers are considered dead because of the minerals and high acid content of water draining from abandoned mines. Many scholars have written about the extreme work conditions the coal workers faced, the demise of the coal industry, and the impact of deindustrialization on the region's people. Often overlooked is how members of the mining communities had a radical hope. Radical hope helps oppressed people to see that another condition and another world is possible, although not guaranteed. Re-examining oral histories from the anthracite region recorded in the 1970s, when the industry was in its great decline, demonstrates how these mining communities anticipated a future good, understanding the struggle to attain it.

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## Introduction

Anthracite coal mining of northeastern Pennsylvania peaked during WWI. However, competition from other fuels, like oil and natural gas, led to the coal industry's gradual and steady demise. The industry collapsed after WWII, and the region never experienced the affluent society of the U.S. post-WWII era (Dublin and Licht 2005; Wilson 2002, 184). As the mines closed, the unemployment rate climbed, well above the national average. Many women found jobs in the newly arrived garment factories, and some men found manufacturing work in neighbouring states (Dublin 1998, 10; Keil and Keil 2015). By the 1970s, the textile industry began its exit from the region to avoid organised labour, first moving to the American South, and then eventually locating off-shore (Dublin 1998; Wolensky, Wolensky, and Wolensky 2005).

With the coal industry's demise, the region was left without a bright tomorrow and with little hope for a prosperous future. Because of these deteriorating conditions and the fear of losing a traditional lifeway associated with industrial progress, historians and folklorists came to the region starting in the 1970s to perform oral histories and record stories about the vanishing work and lifeways of the people of the anthracite region. Scholars have used these transcriptions to provide insights into the daily struggles of mining families.

The questions asked in the 1970s anthracite region interviews focused on the lives and struggles of the community to survive during the industry's collapse. These interviews created informative and important documents addressing many of the concerns of the new social history. Scholars have

**CONTACT** Paul Shackel pshackel@umd.edu Anthropology, University of Maryland - College Park, College Park, Takoma Park, MD 20742, USA

used these oral histories and other historical documents to write about the impact of unchecked capitalism and the process of deindustrialisation and how it negatively affected the social, economic, and general well-being of the area. For instance, Bodnar's (1983) *Anthracite People* focuses on the hardships of everyday life in the region. Thomas Dublin's (1998) *When the Mines Closed* and Dublin and Licht's (2005) *The Face of Decline* delve into the everyday life in a postindustrial region. Michael Roller's (2018) *An Archaeology of Structural Violence* outlines the social connections and eventual demise of an anthracite community. While Paul Shackel (2018, 2019, 2023) details a labour massacre and the economic and environmental destruction of the coal mining region. Wolensky and Keating (2008) describe in *Tragedy at Avondale* one of the major coal mining tragedies in the history of the anthracite region. Other histories titled *Hard Coal, Hard Times* (Salay 1984), *Hard Places* (Francaviglia 1991) and *Anthracite Labor Wars* (Wolensky and Hastie Sr (Wolensky and Hastie 2013). are all part of an extensive literature that focuses on the demise of the region and the consequences of working and living in a post-industrial region.

Stephen High (2017, 110–129) calls on us to re-evaluate how we use and analyse older oral history projects. He explains that we must go beyond the 'juicy quotes syndrome' and develop a more complex and contextualised understanding of lived experiences. He explores how particular voices are recorded, shared, accessed, and reused. In the same vein, Niamh Moore (2006, 21–32) also explains the need to develop a more in-depth contextual and reflexive understanding in qualitative research. While the researcher may privilege the production of specific data, we can shift attention from context as something fixed to the processes of the identification and construction of context. By doing this, we can understand reusing qualitative data as the process of re-contextualising data. This process can then open more possibilities of meaning-making from reusing data.

This study of oral histories reveals new meanings of everyday life in coal mining communities. Recorded on cassette tapes, many of these oral histories I use have been transcribed, and typescript versions are deposited in the Pennsylvania State archives. A total of 26 oral histories from the northern anthracite region (the Scranton area) and 54 from the middle region (the town of Eckley) are re-examined. The majority of the narrators were retired coal workers. Most of the narrators from the Scranton area were men, while the Eckley narrators had a significantly larger proportion of women. A re-contextualisation of these oral history transcripts from the 1970s provides an avenue for exploring other, new interpretations of the failed anthracite coal industry. In particular, I explore the concept of hope, an idea and feeling that is often absent in studies of post-industrial communities, and in this case, the failing coal industry. I provide clues about how members of these anthracite communities, despite their hardships, had hope for a better future. Living in oppressive conditions and facing dangerous work situations, their faith and everyday demeanour allowed them to resist their conditions and hope for a better outcome.

## Hope

For centuries, philosophers and social scientists have explored the meaning of hope. Ernst Bloch (1995) is considered by many to be the philosopher of hope. According to Eagleton (2015, 93), Bloch's search for hope is a form of Marxism and a critique of it. He explores utopianism and the utopian impulses present in art, literature, religion, and other forms of cultural expression. He wrote about a future state of absolute perfection. There are many other explorations into thinking about the meaning of hope. Patrick Shade's *Habits of Hope* (2001) links hope to action and considers this action a form of persistence, resourcefulness, and courage. Another scholarly work includes Joseph J. Godfrey's *A Philosophy of Human Hope* (1987), where he discusses the works by Ernst Bloch, Gabriel Marcel, and Immanuel Kant and focuses on the 'ultimate hope' in God. Gabriel Marcel's *Homo Viator* (1962) is a discussion from a phenomenological and existential perspective. His work includes discussions of Heidegger and Nietzsche. There are also many religious

perspectives on hope, such as Joseph Pieper's *On Hope* (1986), which explores it from a Christian perspective (van Hooft 2014, 135).

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274 CE), one of Europe's great medieval Christian theologians, discussed the concept of hope in his monumental work, *Summa Theologica* (*Summary of Theology)*. Aquinas explained that we hope for those things that we desire. However, he distinguished hopes from desires and wishes based on four conditions. 'First, it must be for something good (as opposed to fear, which is of something bad). Second, its object is in the future. Third, its object must be something arduous and difficult to obtain (which is how it differs from a desire or a wish). And fourth, this difficult thing must be something possible to obtain, for one does not hope for that which one cannot get at all' (van Hooft 2014, 5). Therefore, hope seeks a future good that may be difficult, although possible to obtain (Shade 2001, 43). The desired future good is obtainable because the individual has the necessary resources, ability, and strength, and the circumstances are promising. What prevents hope is thinking that good is unobtainable and we do not act to obtain it. Within the context of Christian theology, Aquinas emphasises that the principal object of hope is eternal happiness (Shade 2001, 44–45, 179; van Hooft 2014, 5–6).

Therefore, hope is a type of wish, a desire for a possible object or outcome. It implies some degree of control, although it also implies limits to that control. 'When we hope for something, it may be that we can do something to achieve it, no matter how effective it might be, whereas when we wish for something, we simply wait to see if what we wish for comes about' (van Hooft 2014, 25). Therefore, a wish may not be attainable. It may be associated with a feeling that there is nothing or little we can do to fulfil it. Wishing may be an option when a situation is without hope, and we may not be actively pursuing the outcome, perhaps because it is unrealistic to do so (van Hooft 2014, 25).

This study of oral histories from the anthracite coal region aligns with other recent scholarship in political philosophy of individual and political struggle (Cherry 2021; Falcato and da Silva 2021). For instance, Derrick Bell (2002, 76), in *Ethical Ambition*, writes, 'In hard times, my Christian faith provides reassurance that is unseen but no less real. It never fails to give me the fortitude I need when opposing injustice'. Bell (1992, 197–198), in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*, explains that enslaved people and freed Blacks realised their oppression and how a power structure has placed them in a lowly rank on the evolutionary scale. Yet they maintained faith and hope, giving their life meaning. Scholars Khan-Cullors and Bandele (2018, 153) write about how sustained faith in a greater being or spirit provides strength in difficult times. There is a feeling that the believer is not alone in their struggle. Other scholars of the Muslim faith (Habib 2019, 154) have noted that faith is a source of resilience and is described as a bedrock for hope. People turn to faith to inspire hope.

Faith and hope can sustain people who face difficult circumstances. It allows them to strive for what is morally right while they exist in an oppressive state. Faith helps to provide these oppressed coal mining families with a sense of hope. McGeer (2004, 101) explains, 'To live a life devoid of hope is simply not to live a human life'. Aaron Ben-Ze'ev suggests that 'hope is a kind of background framework crucial for human life' (Ben-Ze'ev 2001, 475). We often struggle with hope as we navigate the world (Stockdale 2019).

Some have contempt for those who hope. They argue that hope may mean that one is either naïve enough to believe the world can deliver what one is hoping for, or we can be desperate and have nothing else to save ourselves (Shade 2001, 4). Stockdale (2019, 156–157) explains that while faith benefits many people in struggling against oppression, there are risks. 'There are, of course, important risks that come with having spiritual faith quite like the risks of hope. In offering people strength and support in the face of setbacks and failures, spiritual faith might make some people prone to wishfully hoping badly. If God has a plan, I can take comfort in my faith that things will be okay, that whatever happens does so "for a reason". Those who suffer in this world will – at least – be at peace in the next'. It is this type of situation that Karl Marx (1970, 131) expressed that religion was 'the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of the heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people'.

## Radical hope

Despair is the absence of hope. One enters into a state of despair when one observes limitations, and these limitations appear to be permanent. There is no prospect of successfully reaching a positive outcome. Hoping, then, becomes an impossibility (Shade 2001, 147). Soren Kierkegaard (1980, 18) sees despair as a form of longing for death, and yet, one cannot die. While the state of despair is a frequent characterisation of historically oppressed people in deindustrialised regions, examining the historic oral histories from the Pennsylvania anthracite region shows that radical hope existed among members of this community.

Radical hope is a philosophical and psychological concept that helps oppressed people not to accept the *status quo*. It allows for the hope that another condition and another world is possible, although not guaranteed. Oppressed people have historically demonstrated their ability to have hope despite relentless oppression and insurmountable challenges (Chang and Banks 2007). Therefore, radical hope is the belief in the collective capacity among oppressed groups to heal and transform oppressive forces into a better future despite the overwhelming odds (Duncan-Andrade 2009). The future can be within reach or found in the afterlife.

For Justin Henderson (2020), radical hope is different than other forms of hope in three distinct ways. First, radical hope is active. It is fuelled by our values, not just our goals, and it encourages us to act because there is no alternative. We must be clear to ourselves and our community what values will guide us in this work. Second, radical hope is connected. In the psychological literature, hope is predominately described as an individual subjective experience; however, radial hope is connected to others. When hope is understood in relation to others, connectedness creates a purpose for continued resilience in the face of adversity. Radical hope also connects us to cultural practices and the past with the goal of a better future. It draws its power from the past. The change that we want to see comes from the struggles of many generations and connects us to something larger than ourselves for a future often beyond our vision. Third, radical hope is courageous. Those who exemplify radial hope engage in meaningful work in the face of the unknown, although they may lack the appropriate concepts to understand it. Embracing uncertainty is an essential part of radial hope (Henderson 2020).

In *Radical Hope, Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Lear 2006), Jonathan Lear describes Chief Plenty Coups (1848–1932), the Crow Nation's last great chiefs, and how he led his people through warfare and reservation settlement. By the 1890s, the Crow had lost about two-thirds of their tribe before being placed on a reservation. Chief Plenty Coup and the Crow Nation also faced the destruction of the buffalo herds and the end of their traditional way of life. His people had to reimagine their culture to redefine their ways of living to avoid complete despair. Lear asks the radical ontological question: 'When cultural collapse is such that the old way of life has become not only impossible but retroactively unimaginable, what radical tools for cultural revival exist?' (Van Broekhoven 2020).

According to Lear (2006), radical hope is about future goodness and anticipates a good, although a person or a community may need the appropriate concepts to understand it. For instance, Plenty Coups described the cultural devastation experienced by the Crow and remarked, 'But when the buffalo went away, the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this, nothing happened' (Lear 2006, 2). Lear explores in depth Plenty Coups's statement, 'After this nothing happened'. He questions 'what it could mean for history to exhaust itself?' (Lear 2006, 3).

Plenty Coups had a dream that European Americans would one day take control of the Crow homeland. The dream took the form of the Chickadee's strategy for survival. 'In that tree (the sole tree standing after a terrible storm) is the lodge of the Chickadee. He is willing to work for wisdom. The Chickadee is a good listener . . . . He gains successes and avoids failure by learning how others succeeded or failed, and without great trouble to himself . . . . The lodges of countless Bird-people were in the forest when the Four Winds charged it. Only one person is left unharmed, the lodge of

the Chickadee person' (Lear 2006, 70–71). Plenty Coups's interpretation of this divine appeal was to accept the outcome. To survive and perhaps even flourish again, his people had to give up almost everything they knew about their past existence without assurances of a successful outcome.

Therefore, Plenty Coup believed cooperation with the Europeans would benefit his people. He allied the Crow with the U.S. government, while the Sioux and Cheyenne (traditional enemies of the Crow) fought against European expansion. He believed this strategy would allow the Crow to survive as a people, perhaps even their customs and spiritual beliefs. Aligning with the U.S. government, the 'Crow could not have foreseen that much of their lands would be taken from them, their resources depleted, their rituals forcibly denied, or the humiliation and suffering they would endure by being herded into reservations' (LaMothe 2011).

Eagleton (2015, 112) explains that faith and hope are needed where knowledge is hard to come by. Plenty Coups mentions that when they lost the buffalo, 'nothing happened'. Lear interprets this statement as the end of history for the Crow. 'The Crow had lost the concepts with which they might construct a narrative. Since the schema that determined what counted as an event had been shattered. There was nothing more to recount' (Eagleton 2015, 113). Yet the subjective death of the Crow sets the stage for the tribe's rebirth.

Lear (2006, 100) writes that Plenty Coups had a 'daunting form of commitment to a goodness in the world that transcends one's current ability to grasp it'. His vision ensured that his people would survive peacefully into the twentieth century (Hamby 2021; Tribune Staff 2011).

The immigrant miners came to the United States with an expectation of building a better future for themselves and their families. However, when they arrived in the anthracite mining communities many of them had no choice but to endure the harsh conditions of the mostly unregulated industry. They had to develop a commitment and vision for survival. The industry maimed many of them, and those that survived mining tragedies faced poor health and food insecurities. Much like the Crow who faced a type of cultural death so too did the new coal miners in their new physical and cultural environment. Despite facing loss and uncertainty many had the courage to create a platform for a radical hope and redefine their life.

## Radical hope and religion

Hope is the foundation for the Judeo-Christian faith, and it is a frequent theme in literature and religion (Shade 2001, 8). Religion is an expression of hopefulness and a form of radical hope. 'Metaphysical beliefs in supernatural entities such as God, life after death, and eternal salvation are the products of our hopefulness' (Polan 2020, 32; van Hooft 2014, 111). Humans can be instruments of God's actions; however, only God can accomplish what needs to happen in a particular situation (Polan 2020, 33). In the Judeo-Christian creed, progress should not be confused with redemption. While waiting for the coming of the Messiah, each generation must exercise power on behalf of the oppressed, bringing the poor to power in the hope of bringing about his advent (Eagleton 2015, 28).

There are several references to the word 'hope' in the New Testament, including letters of Saint Paul and the Epistle to the Hebrews. Saint Paul insists that if one hopes only in earthly things, then one misses life's greatest significance; hope is about God's redemptive action in Christ, and thus in you and me" (Polan 2020, 38–39). While Christians see the advent of the kingdom of God as a given, they still hope for it. They place their hope in something that is certain to come about. For instance, for St. Paul, hope means waiting patiently and confidently for the coming of the Messiah (Eagleton 2015, 79).

In *Hope for Renewal*, Pope Francis (2022, 2) writes about the season of Lent as a time for renewal and an opportunity to be remade into a people more resembling the image of God. Renewal, leaving the past behind, and a hope for a better future is radical hope. Pope Francis states, 'We are invited to do what is often painful and difficult for us with the hope that the reward will be a closer relationship with God that will lead to eternal life' (Pope Francis 2022, 2). He continues to say that even amid difficult times, 'God always saves the best for us. But God asks us to let ourselves be surprised

by his love, to accept his surprises. Let us trust God!' (Pope Francis 2022, 21). These guiding principles probably guided the lives of the coal mining communities.

## (Radical) hope in mining communities

Historians, anthropologists, and folklorists interviewed members of anthracite communities from the 1970s. The questions they asked of each interviewee varied slightly. The goal of the questions was to develop a historical context for work and life during the coal industry's collapse. The men were asked about their experience working in the coal mines and some general questions about the community, migration, and social relationships. The women were asked questions about working in the garment industry (if applicable), cooking, recipes, and domestic chores. The topics of food insecurities and general health and well-being were occasionally discussed. While the interviewers did not ask about hope, the interviewees sometimes spoke about their faith within the context of a radical hope, and these responses provide a picture of how members of the coal mining communities viewed their everyday circumstances. Focusing on this concept of hope allows us to go beyond the 'juicy quotes syndrome'.

Anthony F.C. Wallace's (1978) ethnohistory of antebellum Rockdale, Pennsylvania, a cotton factory town, described the 'mill lords' who presided over the labour and daily affairs of the workers. He explained that by the end of the first half of the nineteenth century, 'romantic, freethinking radicals . . . tried – and failed – to wrest control of the machines away from the private owner and place it in the hands of the community' (Wallace 1978, 246). Most workers became part of the industrial order. They were subsumed by an entrepreneurial oligarchy that acted on behalf of divine intervention and subjected workers to new industrial work behaviours and the disciplining of the latest technology and machinery. Some ministers and priests would teach that spiritual enlightenment will allow for our eventual escape from mortal existence. The clear orientation was towards the future with the idea that the workers would be rewarded in the afterlife to compensate for the suffering in current life, which is not deserved (Wallace 1978). The next life will be without suffering, and there will be a call for justice (van Hooft 2014, 116). The clergy helped maintain a somewhat docile workforce, although they did not have absolute power over the workforce. Different forms of overt and subversive forms of protest, weapons of the weak, were common in the industrial world (Scott 1985).

In the anthracite region, adjacent to and north of Rockdale, coal workers often acted as private contractors, paid by the amount of coal they extracted. They had some sense of autonomy, and the coal operators did not have complete control over their production. Many families were devoted Christians and prayer and faith in God was a big part of their lives. One interviewee stated, "Yes, the family [recited the] rosary and the grace before meals. And we went to church on Sunday (Thomas Handing, Interview 1973). Another reported, 'My father was a great church goer. And going to church was like getting up to go to breakfast' (John Inglis, Interview, 1973).

During the Great Anthracite Strike of 1902, George Baer, the Reading Railroad's president, wrote a letter to a Wilkes-Barre clergyman declaring the coal operators' divine right to control the workers. Baer wrote,

> 'I see that you are a religious man, but you are evidently biased in favor of the right of the workingman to control a business in which he has no other interest than to secure fair wages for the work he does. I beg of you not to be discouraged. The rights and interests of the laboring man will be protected and cared for – not by the labor agitators, but by the Christian men of property to whom God has given control of property rights of the country, and upon the successful management of which so much depends' (quoted in Reynolds 1960, 95)

Baer's letter was released to the newspapers. His 'divine right' argument created a backlash among the many religious coal workers. The workers and their families operated with the idea that through church and prayer they could connect to a higher being and petition for a better tomorrow, rather than going through Baer and the coal barons as their intermediaries. Baer's statement swayed public opinion away from the coal operators in favour of the strikers. In September 1902, the New York

State Democratic Convention met and called for government ownership of the anthracite mines (Miller and Sharpless 1998, 276; Shackel 2020). The coal workers did not surrender the position of God's steward to the coal operators even though the capitalists controlled the workers' livelihoods. The workers and their families believed in God. They built churches with their own savings so that they could be closer to God. Walter Dutchak explained that his mother and father saved $500. 'They knew that area needed a Ukrainian parish so that's what my father did with the money, he . . . put money into the church' (Walter Dutchak, Interview, 1973). They surrounded themselves with religious symbols in their domestic environment, and religion was a vehicle for hope for a different outcome and a better future. Hope gave their lives meaning.

## Material culture helps to reinforce hope

A belief in God is about a belief in a hopeful future. Many of the coal workers' houses were furnished with religious objects and images, reminding the mining families about the ever-presence of God. Pope Francis reminds Catholic followers of God's presence, an idea that was the foundation for the different Christian denominations in these coal communities. He writes, 'Always know in your heart that God is by your side. God never abandons you! Let us never lose hope!' (Pope Francis 2022, 21). It is the material culture found in these homes, the images and symbols, that reinforced the idea of a continual presence of a greater spiritual being, which also reinforced the idea of hope. One interviewee described the interior of his house as being whitewashed, and he explained, 'All the Catholic people had religious pictures' (Interview, Bruno Laganosky, 1972). Eva Sulkosky described the interior of her house in the poorest section of town. The only objects on the walls were religious pictures found throughout the house. 'Nothing but religious pictures in the parlor' (Interview, Eva Sulkosky, 1972). The kitchen also had religious pictures and religious objects. She said that a picture of the sacred heart was on the wall of her kitchen. 'Well, I keep it in the kitchen, like now, that's the Lord's Supper. Well, I keep that all the time here because we have your meals here, you know' (Interview, Eva Sulkosky, 1972). After every supper, the family would pray at Eva's house, which the interviewer noted was common among Catholic Eckley households. Praying and calling for a divine being to assist you with a specific outcome supposes that you have some control over the outcome and the hope that your god will come to your aid and secure it for you. There is humility in acknowledging the limitations of one's control over the situation. Although, there is a hope that the divine powers will align with your goals and desires (van Hooft 2014, 36–39).

As Pope Francis (2022, 21–22) explains, 'Men and women who pray know that hope is stronger than discouragement'. The interviewees often stressed that praying and hoping for better outcomes was part of their daily routine. After the evening meal, Eva's father would lead the family in prayer, perhaps in the hope for a better tomorrow. They would recite the rosary, say a few prayers, and then the family would sing a few religious songs (Interview, Eva Sulkosky, 1972). Joseph Michel remembers, 'Boy, your religion was very important back then. In fact, we'd go to church for three hours and come home and kneel in front of a picture of the Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane and say a prayer . . . ' (Interview, Joseph Michel, 2012). When asked if there was a special place in the house to pray, Anna Maloney (Interview, Anna Maloney, 1972) replied, 'Oh yeh. . . . We'd pray together after supper in the kitchen . . . I think you could hear that "Hail Mary full of grace" every day after a meal'. Clifford Falatko also mentioned that his house contained many religious pictures. "We had holy pictures in every room, and there was a cross or something. Sure, but we are not hillbillies or some dam thing like they don't believe in a cross or holy picture, or nothin' (Interview, Clifford Falatko, 1972). These religious objects created a sense of the ever presence of a greater power. Pope Francis (2022, 21) explains, 'Let us never allow hope to die in our hearts! Evil is present in our history, but it does not have the upper hand. The one with the upper hand is God, and God is our hope!' Perhaps these religiously adorned houses helped to reinforce among these working families the idea that a belief in God allowed for hope for a better tomorrow.

Bound by unfavourable working and living conditions, the agency of the oppressed mining communities may be limited; however, the persistence of faith helped create a moral-political solidarity-solidarity based on a shared moral vision that creates hope for justice and just rewards (Stockdale 2021, 145). For instance, some Indigenous scholars explain that many North American tribes are plagued with poverty, unemployment, domestic violence, and other social and health issues brought about by forms of oppression. They note that oppression exists when 'it is one's inability to sustain one's family, and the truly devastating feelings this situation leaves on that person' (Gonzalez et al. 2014, 45). This may be the oppression these coal mining families faced, and it encouraged them to place their hope in faith. Faith creates hope and allows people to face the obstacles of oppression. Stockdale (2021, 82) explains that if hope is not realised in oppressed communities, it may undermine the struggle to resist oppression.

## Hope for a better reward

Theologian Karl Rahner explains hope as an abandonment of the self. It is a commitment to what one acknowledges to be beyond one's control and calculation. Therefore, hope resembles faith, allowing one to enter upon the incalculable. The familiar yields to the unknown (Eagleton 2015, 79). In the coal region, there were few doctors; those available belonged to the coal company, and the coal workers did not trust them. There are many accounts of people placing their hope of being cured in the hands of a healer. Helen Fedorsha spoke about a healer in a nearby community and how he would heal by praying. 'Mr. Wald used to do it [healing] all with prayer, nothing but prayer. And the children got better' (Interview, Helen Fedorsha, 1972).

Persistence is one of the underlying qualities of hope. Persistence requires courage, which can be a lonely and trying affair, and courage is needed to stay the course (Shade 2001, 120). The persistence of faith and hope is evident in Helen Fadorsha's commitment to faith. She explained, 'I find it is my duty to say the rosary every day. And when I was retiring from work in one way, I was happy that I have the chance to say my rosary every day'. She said it was her duty to say the rosary because the rosary helps her cope with everyday life. She explained that Our Lady of Fatima urged people to 'say the rosary because that's the only way the world will be saved, to say the rosary' (Interview, Helen Fedorsha, 1972).

While Christians see the advent of the kingdom of God as a given, they still hope for it. They place their hope in something that is certain to come about. For instance, for St. Paul, hope means waiting patiently and confidently for the coming of the Messiah (Eagleton 2015, 79). Helen Fedorsha spoke about her faith and hope in the second coming of Jesus Christ. She explained that in preparation for the coming of the Messiah, Christians had to be buried facing east. She explained, 'In St. Mary's, they're laid in the cemetery facing east. There is going to be a second coming of Christ, and when he does come, he is going to come from the east . . . . After you die there's only a temporary judgement . . . . But at the second coming of Christ, you will get your final judgement . . . . I never question what the church taught' (Interview, Helen Fedorsha, 1972).

For many miners and their families, the process of immigration was about hoping for a new beginning. Many people gave up everything they owned to travel to the United States and work in the anthracite industry, hoping for a better life. In a 1972 interview, George Barron explained, 'Many of the men who came to Eckley would leave sweethearts in Europe. . . . The man would put his name in for a house, and when it was about time for him to get a company house, he would send her the money to come to Eckley'. (Interview, George Barron, 1972). He also spoke about how workers would migrate without resources and place their hope in a potential job. 'These men who were working in the Eckley mines would "line up" a job for their friends plus find a place for them to board. Then they would go to a Slavish lawyer or "broker" . . . and have this man draw up papers to get a passport for the new immigrant. . . . In about a month time, the new immigrant would arrive in New York and from New York he would come straight to Eckley. He would arrive in Eckley with nothing but the clothes on his back' (Interview, George Barron, 1972).

St. Catherine of Siena, who lived in the 14th century, endured the Black Plague and spent the rest of her life caring for the unfortunate. She is known for saying, 'Nothing great is ever achieved without enduring much'. Expanding on this idea, theologians have noted that individuals may experience tough times; however, if you are hopeful and endure, you will share the good things God has planned for you. These miners left their native lands and left behind a culture that they knew and a social network that may have helped them survive. They came to these mining towns with religion at their side and a radical hope that they could survive the struggles of working in the coal mining industry and make a better future for themselves and their families.

While theologians explain that God does not intercede in human affairs, many people will petition their god for help with a specific problem (van Hooft 2014, 36). In a crisis, George Petrushka found himself and a co-worker amid a mine explosion, and he explained that the ignited methane (also known as black damp) would increase with every movement he made. His co-worker was injured, burned, and lying unconscious near him. He hoped for a better outcome, '[I asked] the Blessed Mother for help. And just at that moment . . . I turned around and started kicking him out. . . . And I rolled him maybe twenty feet before we come to an edge of a chute, and I throwed him down a chute. So, finally, the boss was down there, and they picked him, and they dipped him in a ditch, you know, right in the water'. While he lost much of his skin, the doctors gave him 2 hours to live. However, he claims that his faith got him through the ordeal, and nine years later, he told this story (Interview, Gorge Petrushka, 1972).

A popular belief in the Christian doctrine, Pope Francis (2019, 9) wrote, 'The true history – that which will remain in eternity – is the one that God writes with his little ones'. Those workers who have suffered and are oppressed will find their reward in the afterlife. We can make some inferences about faith in a higher spiritual being and that radical hope was part of everyday life in these coal mining communities. People prayed to a higher being, hoping to save the world or save themselves and others from imminent danger.

## Conclusion

Many studies of deindustrialised communities focus on the effects of unchecked capitalism on people and communities and the demise of an industrial region. This genre dominates the history of the anthracite coal industry. There are also different interpretations that can be developed with the re-examination of the same histories. Similar to a type of radical hope is the concept of radical nostalgia. Robinson (2016, 380) explains that radical nostalgia is a type of nostalgia which uses the past as a reference to remake the present. The past is used to address historical injustices and is rooted in telling an alternative story. It can honour those who would otherwise be forgotten and continue their social justice struggles (Bonnett 2010; Glazer 2005; Shaw and Chase 1989).

However, a focus on a radical hope can give meaning to an oppressed people. Terry Eagleton (2015, 84) explains that hope anticipates a future good. However, there may be a struggle to attain it. Hope can help one focus on overcoming the struggle and can make for more effective action (Eagleton 2015, 84). It focuses on an uncertain future that cannot be controlled entirely, although the desired outcome is realistic and frees us from intolerable situations. Hope can bring about a resolution to a problem and create a way around an obstacle (Shade 2001, 50). There is a promise of some improvement, either liberation, growth, or change. 'A prayer-like element can be the basis of our hope. However, there is a risk that what we hope for might not happen. That we have to live within such limitations is what makes hope a virtue. To live within our limitations is of ethical value in that it is conducive to living life happily' (van Hooft 2014, 39).

Johnathan Lear (2006) described the future of the Crow Nation as they were placed on reservations in the late nineteenth century. Their traditional way of life was ending, and they struggled to survive the destruction and devastation of their traditional lifeways. The Crow believed that God chose them to flourish on this earth. However, when faced with oppressive circumstances, they asked, 'How could a good and powerful God allow this to happen to us? The problem is especially pressing when God

seems to remain silent' (Lear 2006, 134). Inspired by a dream, the Crow's chief, Plenty Coup, responded to this new oppression with radical hope directed towards a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. 'Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it' (Lear 2006, 103). It is not about avoiding the circumstance but rather coping with the present and being optimistic about the future. These dire circumstances require courage, and radical hope can be an essential part of courage (Lear 2006, 107). For Plenty Coup, while the survival of individual members of the tribe was important, it was also crucial that a new and different future flourishes with traditional tribal values in a new context (Lear 2006, 145).

Like Plenty Coups and other oppressed people, the miners in the anthracite communities faced devastating conditions with courage and hope. The mining families worked and lived in an oppressive state of unchecked capitalism. The men worked in unsafe and unregulated conditions in an occupation with one of the highest casualty rates in the industrial U.S. On the domestic front, they surrounded themselves with material culture that reminded them of their God and maintained a faith for a better future. They hoped for better outcomes in dangerous situations by calling upon a spiritual being and hoping for survival. Many in the mining communities believed they could exist within this exploitive economic system while also praying and hoping for better outcomes, a future, either here or in the afterlife, where they may be rewarded for their toil. While Plenty Coups's dream of the Chickadee meant that the Crow had to redefine the virtue of courage, the mining communities relied on the Christian faith to guide their hope for better outcomes. Pope Francis writes, 'Blessedness to those who trust in a merciful God. Saint Paul summarizes all this with the expression, "In this hope we were saved"' (Rom. 8:24) (Pope Francis 2019, 15).

The faith and radical hope found among these community members allowed them the ability to deal with oppression and the many conditions associated with their exploitation. Hope allowed for the possibility of a positive outcome in the lives and experiences of these working families.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Paul Shackel* research projects have focused on the role of archaeology in civic engagement activities related to race, class, and labor, which is the focus of his coauthored book with Barbara Little - ARCHAEOLOGY, HERITAGE, AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT (2014). He is currently engaged in a project that centers on labor and migration in northern Appalachia in the United States. This work is discussed in REMEMBERING LATTIMER (2018), THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF UNCHECKED CAPITALISM (2020), and THE RUINED ANTHRACITE (2023).

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