Heavy Machinery: How to Write the Rust Belt

Description

The AutoEthnographer

Heavy Machinery: How to Write the Rust Belt

Authorâ??s Memo

Born and raised in a Rust Belt town in West Virginia on the banks of the Ohio River where coal and steel converge, I am highly attuned to how industrial forces shape not only the environment and local economies but also cultural ecosystems. Deindustrialization transformed my community not only economically but existentially. As factories and plants closed in the 1980s and 90s, they left black holes in the landscape. The attenuation of labor unions affected not only the political climate but also the social infrastructure.

I now live in Queens, NY, and Charlottesville, VA, and my autoethnographic practice is shaped by a fraught but enduring relationship with the maligned and misunderstood region where I was born and raised and where my family still resides. Moving away from home helped me comprehend and theorize Rust Belt Appalachia as one of many American â??sacrifice zonesâ?• exploited and degraded to fuel the energy consumption of the nation.

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stasis, and paralysis, all of which, I contend, are part of the affective landscape of American capitalism. As a child of poverty, I was taught to feel shame for existing. An autoethnographic approach to my experience allows me to connect the individual experience of poverty to larger systemic structures in American society, economic and environmental, and to reexamine how self-abnegation is inextricably linked to capitalist exploitation.

As my region has now become a site for new forms of extractivism and â??slow violence,â?• including crude oil production and hydraulic fracturing, I am propelled by a sense of climate urgency coupled with a belief in the potential of place-based storytelling to give voice to the suffering of class inequality. In this autoethnographic symbol system, the characters Mother Rust, Father Dust, are embodiments of the affective experience of deindustrialization. Without restoring the dignity of those weathered by the rust, revitalization efforts remain an empty gesture.

The Artful Autoethnographer

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By Michael Schaffler for Unsplash

In Medias Res

It was around the time

Mother Rust began to weep

hard water,

after Father Dust lost his job

at the steel mill,

the factory,

the plant closed,

the mine caved inâ??

her mouth caved in,

it was after the turn

to hard liquor

in the middle of the Oxy years

following the Lithium period,

post-partum, pre-Zyprexa.

There was just a hint

of Fentanyl in the air,

a trace of meth in the tap,

back in the days of rent-to-own,

video poker in back rooms,

illegal cable, petty theft,

before the pipe liners,

the gas wells,

the frack waste.

It was around the time

Mother Rustâ??s faucet began to leakâ??

nobody tried to fix it,

and so, it dripped.

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Marcellus: An Invocation

Sing colossus of geology,

of a Permian past

of forests of wild turkey

and hills of bituminous gold.

Sing of the stately aluminum architecture

of trailers, gloriously trashed

of kerosene-coated walls

and furnishings of the finest melamine.

Sing of oxycontin alchemy,

fentanyl patches chewed

by broken teeth.

Sing of Appalachian archaeology

of bones of ancient cars,

rusted hubcaps, fenders,

mufflers, coils, shards

of glass, of peat, fossilized CDs,

broken skulls of TVs.

Sing of pill bottles

of whiskey bottles

of dollar general baby bottles.

Sing of Americaâ??s red-headed stepchild

born in the middle of tectonic collision.

Sing of cigarette butts,

burnt spoons, and half empties.

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Bugler

On the high holy first of the month

Mother Rust rolls cigarettes

from her heavenly throne

dropping shreds of tobacco

from the sky like dirty snowflakes

the devils catch on their tongues.

Thatâ??s how it is in this townâ??

when it rains nicotine,

it pours,

but at the end of the month,

when the drought sets in,

the devils get hungry again

living off resin while

Mother Rust blows nothing

but second-hand smog

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Snow Devils

In the dog days of winter,

the little devils start howling again,

they shiver and scratch their heads,

picking, flicking, and crushing

fleas and lice on the cold tile floor.

It is bath time for the devils.

But, alas, the pipes are frozen again,

and Father Dust must descend.

Headfirst into the crawlspace,

he dives, attacking the spikes of ice,

with his Bic lighter

and when he rises, triumphant,

a soggy cigarette,

bobbing beneath his frosty mustache,

the devils clap and cheer,

for even little devils want to be clean.

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Credits

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