

# UC Santa Cruz

## Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal

### Title

Mining Things: Confronting Loss and Flux in the Slate Industry Ruins of Northwest Wales

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1jb7j7r4>

### Journal

Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal, 3(1)

### Author

Wigdel-Bowcott, Seb

### Publication Date

2020

### DOI

10.5070/R73151201

### Copyright Information

Copyright 2020 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

## Mining Things: Confronting Loss and Flux in the Slate Industry Ruins of Northwest Wales

Seb Wigdel-Bowcott



*Figure 1 Rhosydd Quarry level 9, with the ruins of the barracks to the left and the outline of the mill to its right. Image courtesy of the author, August 2019.*

Returning to a familiar environment after a prolonged absence has a strange way of pulling features out from their habitualness. This was my experience during a visit to the ruins on level 9 of Rhosydd Quarry, which formed part of a walk with friends on the mountain, Cnicht, and surrounding Cwm Croesor, while on a visit back to the area of northwest Wales where I grew up. The physical traces of the slate industry that had occupied a seamless place among my everyday surroundings now seemed to demand a recognition of a certain out-of-placeness. What I previously understood as the idiosyncrasies of a

landscape shaped by a formerly world-leading national industry, I now saw as geological scars that stand as monuments to an industrial capitalism that exited as aggressively as it imposed itself, testifying to its remarkable ability to reshape environments both physical and social.

There is a powerful sense of a threshold being crossed when reaching the site of the level 9 ruins from Cnicht. The plateau-like micro-landscape formed by the slate waste makes for a stark physical border when stepping off the mountain's exterior and onto its excavated rock. One side of the clearing opens out onto the valley, with the other side enclosed partly by the mountain and the towering waste tips from the quarry's upper levels. The separate structures of the ruins are dispersed along this latter side. The vast open space in front of them is interrupted only by the remains of the stack-yard fencing: thick slabs of slate that stand upright at waist-height like gravestones. Intact archways rest next to walls that have fallen and lodged the pattern of their structure into the earth. Most striking is the sight of the former barracks, two large structures each around forty meters long that stand in parallel at one end of the site, considerably intact compared with the rest of the ruins. The outlines of chimneys, doorways, and windows remain in thick walls made from a motley of carefully arranged slate stones, the sunlight illuminating their various hues of purple, blue, and gray.

A chilling drop in air temperature can be felt near the entrance to the mine, evidence of it having been left open. Together with the various bits of discarded machinery and wagon parts scattered among the ruins, the unclosed entrance produces a sense of sudden abandonment. This combines with the threshold-like experience to create a sense of time having been arrested and enclosed at the site, as if the precise moment of its desertion had been captured in an image. But this feeling of temporal fixity is undercut in turning attention to the interaction of the ruins with their surroundings. The ephemerality of the image becomes clear as the ruins undergo a slow process of decay back into the mountain from which their materials were originally mined.<sup>1</sup>

There is an enigmatic quality to the site that is generated in the interaction between the presence of the past described above and the raw physical immediacy of the barracks. The sprawling scale of the site alludes to the significance of a history that can be felt even as its details remain out of reach, due to the absence of any museal framing or heritage recognition. This absence of historical information creates an indeterminacy of meaning that contributes to the disorienting experience of the site's scale and temporality, but which also created a space of possibility during my visit. This was not a feeling of estrangement from the site's history; on the contrary, these elements amounted to an encounter with an entanglement of historical traces that were making their presence felt. But I felt conflicted by the alternative experience of history that the site offered. My embrace of its unmediated quality risked a valorization of

decay, and it was clear that preservation is needed if the site's history can continue to be experienced at all. I left with a desire for a radically politicized public understanding of the ruins while fearing the kind of apolitical narrative closures that heritage and conservation projects often entail.<sup>2</sup>

In researching the history of the site following the walk, I found that emergency fundraising for a conservation effort had recently been organized to preserve ruins at adjacent levels of Rhosydd and the neighboring Cwmorthin Quarry. In 2015 the volunteer group Cofio Cwmorthin Remembered carried out stabilization work on notable structures in the valley, "capping" them with concrete to prevent their imminent collapse that coming winter.<sup>3</sup> Despite being able to identify a small bit of stabilization work that had been carried out on one of the barracks' chimneys, there was no mention of level 9 in the group's conservation plans, in all probability because the rest of the site has reached a stage of decay beyond the scope of conservation. Alongside this active process of ruination, I was confronted by the absence of a comprehensive written history of Rhosydd Quarry and particularly any documentation of life in its barracks. A recent study by Rhain Bower suggests that this is part of a wider problem, with records of barrack life in Welsh slate quarries being scarce, and inaccessible and fragmented where they do exist.<sup>4</sup> The lack of records has presented a challenge in trying to piece together a history of the Rhosydd Quarry barracks in this essay and speaks to a general feeling of loss that can be experienced at the site. Considered alongside the uneven conservation of Rhosydd's ruins, questions are raised about the dynamics of visibility and erasure in the preservation of a peripheral, Welsh working-class history that sits at a distinctive intersection between the industrial and the domestic.

These questions have gained added significance while I was writing this essay, during which the UK government has supported a nomination for the northwest Wales slate mining landscape to be considered a UNESCO World Heritage site.<sup>5</sup> The prospect of institutionalized commemoration requires a consideration of the politics of hypervisibility: in making histories palatable and digestible as a tourist activity, heritagization may heighten the dynamic of erasure in level 9's ongoing decay by choosing to highlight the better-known and less remote sites of the slate industry landscape.

Following my experience at Rhosydd, I have been curious to understand how traces of histories can make themselves present at sites of ruination despite the forces of exclusion that make traces of them in the first place. A consideration of this tension between multiplicity and singularity will run through the remainder of this essay as I discuss both the evasive and expressive qualities of the traces I encountered and explore the histories that their presence can help narrate. I also offer reflections on the way that objects and spaces can mediate both productive and destructive responses to the experience of flux, specifically the melancholic role that ruins can come to play in imperial

narratives of loss and decline. At stake is a broader question relating to the material testimony of abandoned sites and discarded objects in the context of disappearing, peripheralized histories. To what extent can neglected spaces and objects “speak” their histories, as well as resist confinement to reductive singular narratives?

### **“Thingness” and the Temptation of Master Narratives**

Things lie beyond the grid of intelligibility the way mere things lie outside the grid of museal exhibition, outside the order of objects.

— Bill Brown, “Thing Theory”

I begin my analysis with a discussion of how level 9’s “thingness” became apparent in my encounter, aiming to establish an understanding of the site’s disorienting quality and loaded atmosphere. Thing theory presents itself as a productive lens for understanding my disorientating encounter at Rhosydd because it designates a certain interruption, when the threads holding together a web of meaning break, and heterogenous potential emerges in its place, albeit tentatively.<sup>6</sup> Instead of turning directly to the ideas that inform the content and meaning of objects in our interactions with them, thing theory addresses the “irresolvable enigma” of things, taking as its starting point the co-constitutive encounter between subjects and objects in order to account for the transformative social and ideological effects of our material environments.<sup>7</sup> Bill Brown proposes that objects assert their “thingness” when they disrupt a habitual subject–object relation, destabilizing the habits and expectations that have been established in relation to objects in a given context.<sup>8</sup> “Thingness,” then, points to both an opaque, inaccessible void prior to the constitution of this relation, as well as to the “excess” found in objects, when “their force as a sensuous presence” cannot be contained by the parameters of meaning established by their materiality or conventional usage.<sup>9</sup> Ruins, as spaces and objects that inhabit a logic of incompleteness, holding a status as former objects in a sense, are exemplary for thinking and encountering this dichotomy of “latency” and “excess” in things:

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us . . . when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.<sup>10</sup>

The way the site on level 9 revealed its “thingness” can be understood as two-fold: first, relating to its general status as a ruin, understood as a place that has lost its original function. This resonates strongly in the material traces of large-scale industry at the site, where the production process has stopped in the most literal sense, but also in the fainter traces of domestic space that linger in the ruins of the barracks. Second, the absence of museal framing at Rhosydd provides a useful way to think a dynamic between ruins, heritage, and thingness. My unfamiliarity with the space was suggestive of the reincorporating quality that heritage framing has by instilling defunct spaces with newly prescribed functions. Level 9 stopped working for me in the sense that it did not fit with any preestablished frame that I had for understanding ruins as heritage and history, and expressed a resistance to any of the attempts I made at placing the site within a neat historical narrative: “On the one hand, then, the thing baldly encountered. On the other, some thing not quite apprehended.”<sup>11</sup>

Given the absence of mediation at Rhosydd, I found myself making futile attempts to fill in the gaps, both in the material sense of trying to picture the structures that had been reduced to outlines and in the historical sense of trying to compensate for my lack of knowledge. The ruins seemed to attest to the experience of an end point and the sense of flux that can follow, leading me to picture the people who would have been immediately affected by the closure of the quarry. But the ruins also evoked an epochal sense of flux by functioning as a symbol for the end of industrialization more broadly, and I was looking to them to try to help me make sense of Britain’s rapidly changing political landscape in the present.<sup>12</sup>

The intensely remote location of the ruins inevitably summoned a discourse of Wales’s position in the UK, alongside an overlapping dynamic between a rural periphery and an urban center, and I was reading the class dynamics of industrialization through this lens. As a literary and historical study of social and economic change, Raymond Williams’s *The Country and The City* provides a starting point for thinking through these intersections. Williams insists on the need to understand the dynamic between country and city as an economic relationship central to capitalist development. Their very separate literary depictions have allowed the economic causes of alienation to be obscured by a melancholic mode of nostalgia that pits country and city against each other, creating a past rural idyll that functions as a placeholder for a sense of innocence that has been lost to urbanism.<sup>13</sup>

With regard to class and rurality, Williams details the impact that a peak period of parliamentary land enclosures in the mid-eighteenth century had on class formations in Britain:

Improvement of the land required considerable capital, and therefore the leadership of the landowners. . . . this not only

increased the predominance of the landed interest; it created, by enclosure and engrossing to make large and profitable units, a greater number of the landless and the disinherited, who could not survive or compete in the new conditions.<sup>14</sup>

The emergence of early industrial methods for working the land sharpened existing class divisions and saw much of the landless population become the new industrial working classes.<sup>15</sup> In line with this, Bower and Paul Manning both highlight that the slate industry in Wales was largely a case of English capital being generated by local Welsh labor through exploitative working conditions.<sup>16</sup> The owners of the larger quarries such as Dinorwig were members of an English landowning aristocracy, with smaller operations tending to be investments made by English entrepreneurs.<sup>17</sup> As a result, the mining and quarrying of slate in Wales entailed a “linguistic division of labour.”<sup>18</sup> Manning details how these national and class tensions were inscribed into the very language of the industry, with a revealing division discernible between the English (and mostly courtly) terms given to slates that were finished commodities, and the system of Welsh-language terms used to navigate the work of extracting the rock in its raw form.<sup>19</sup>

Despite overlapping in complex ways, I found that this set of binary frames could provide only so much insight in trying to grasp the political and historical dynamics of the ruins during my walk. In trying to make sense of the ruins as a constellation of national, class, and geographic tensions, the fluid and multiple temporalities I had initially been confronted by seemed to harden and recede. Although not necessarily inaccurate, I felt that I was clutching at the nearest inherited discourses that I had available when faced with the unknown, performing a closure of meaning by incorporating the ruins into master narratives, subsequently bypassing nuance and shutting off other, intersecting histories. While acknowledging that any future heritagization would need to carefully consider which subject positions are latently being celebrated in the landscape’s recognition as heritage, I also became aware that the absence of museal framing is not necessarily a safeguard against unilinear historical narratives. If we can understand the encounter of “thingness” as a destabilizing experience of uncertainty, the Rhosydd ruins were a reminder of the temptation and conservative impulse of reductive explanations that accompany confrontations with flux.

The encounter with traces of other histories made it clear how little grasp I had of Rhosydd’s local history but also of the lives that are connected by the extraction of slate in northwest Wales on a larger scale. To use Brown’s terminology, it was an encounter with the site’s latency: a sense of concealed



*Figure 2 Stack-yard fencing, with the outline of the mill midground and the barracks in the background. Image courtesy of the author, August 2019.*

meanings that remained inaccessible, resisting articulation, and a form beyond mere traces. The intelligibility that these traces nevertheless acquired can be understood as an experience of the site's excess, a weighty atmospheric register that ricocheted out as a "sensuous presence." This symbiosis pointed to an absence making itself present that was suggestive of what Margarita Palacios has described as the "material testimony of abandoned objects."<sup>20</sup> In the following section I elaborate on the link established by Palacios between thing theory and affect theory as I attempt to correspond the experience I had at Rhosydd's ruins to a fragmentary written history of the quarry's barrack life.

### **The Atmospheric Experience of History**

Brown describes the experience of a thing's excess as an encounter with "what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects."<sup>21</sup> In wanting to account for the way that this excess can manifest, I follow Palacios's understanding of "the powerful, loud and yet untranslatable" affective registers that find a presence at sites of ruination.<sup>22</sup>

Palacios discusses the politics of memorialization that congregates around ex-detention and extermination sites in Chile, where competing modes of remembrance interact in regimes of visibility and erasure. Her case studies range from small, underfunded efforts to sites of institutionalized memorialization. The critical observation she draws from their comparison is that a



higher level of mediation does not necessarily lead to a more stable guarantor of meaning. Sites with very limited intervention and those where mediation is highly condensed both encourage acts of “resignification.”<sup>23</sup> This speaks to an “unbridgeable incommensurability” that inevitably exists between the representation of violence and the event itself.<sup>24</sup> This “incommensurability” is registered through an encounter with a site’s thingness and its affective registers, which can interrupt and reframe the interpretation of the site’s history. Palacios understands this as an agency of sorts, with spaces and objects of violence being able to convey “truths” that their memorialization, regardless of the level (or complete absence) of museal mediation, is unable to fully conceal.<sup>25</sup>

Palacios utilizes a Deleuzian concept of affect to articulate how sites of violence can signify beyond the limits of their memorial frames. Here, affect is defined as “bodily intensities that are autonomous from conscious perception and language” and aids understanding of the social and political dynamic of emotional and sensory experience.<sup>26</sup> In this respect, affect has a spatial and “atmospheric” public dimension that distinguishes it from the private experience of emotions.<sup>27</sup> But Palacios is keen to stress that this does not mean that affect can be understood as a type of medium that allows for spaces and objects to unproblematically “speak” their truths. Although it is experienced separately from language, conscious feelings, and active thought, the sociality of affect means that its meaning and effects will always be produced in dialogue with these other spheres.<sup>28</sup>

My experience at Rhosydd resembles Palacios’s discussion of “faithful failures” in Chile, where ruins convey the weight of their history despite the specific type of erasure that results from an absence or near-absence of memorialization.<sup>29</sup> My visit to the level 9 ruins was telling of an affective experience of loss, cued by various signs that amalgamated in a “hazy” entanglement.<sup>30</sup> The principal node of these signs was the exaggerated physical presence of the barracks, which illuminated the trace of lost domestic space in a setting that is otherwise overwhelmingly defined by the industrial.

Wales became the center of the world’s slate industry at the end of the nineteenth century, accounting for 92 percent of Britain’s slate production.<sup>31</sup> A demand for workers necessarily followed global demand for slate, and on-site barracks were built at Welsh slate quarries to accommodate quarrymen during the working week who lived as far as twenty-five miles away.<sup>32</sup> Bower details the commute involved for some of these quarrymen, which could start at 3 a.m. on Monday morning and not finish until Saturday evening, when they would return to their families for a day before the working week restarted.<sup>33</sup> Barracks were built at Rhosydd sometime during this peak period of global slate demand, when the quarry employed over two hundred workers and the large mill on level 9 became its hub.<sup>34</sup> The particular remoteness of Rhosydd meant that an atypically large proportion of its workforce stayed in these

barracks, with Lewis and Denton speculating that at its height, as many as 150 quarrymen were living on-site in overcrowded, squalid conditions that were notorious in the industry.<sup>35</sup> The barracks were damp and stuffy, with lice-ridden beds being shared and no sanitation facilities available, drawing regular scrutiny from health inspectors that led to minimal improvement.<sup>36</sup> Illnesses such as cholera, diphtheria, and silicosis were prevalent as a result of these working and living conditions,<sup>37</sup> and together with the regularity of fatal accidents meant that the average life expectancy between 1876 and 1885 for quarrymen in the Ffestiniog area was forty-four years old (compared to fifty-six otherwise).<sup>38</sup>

Despite these harsh circumstances, a strong cultural and educational tradition was able to establish itself in slate quarries by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>39</sup> On-site chapels and the *caban* became community hubs that facilitated political organization and fostered a literary culture from which several well-known Welsh bards emerged.<sup>40</sup> Manning suggests that the Welsh quarryman became an important figure in Welsh language and culture in this context, operating as “a major ideological exemplar of Welshness in the formation of a distinctive and hegemonic culture of language in nineteenth-century Wales,” central as an audience for, and contributor to, a burgeoning Welsh print culture.<sup>41</sup> With the limited written history available, the poetry of barrack-dwelling Rhosydd quarrymen such as Tegfelyn (Edward Lloyd) and Ioan Brothen (John Jones) provides one of the few forms of firsthand testimony that exists for this fragment of history:<sup>42</sup>

Yn y Barics

*Hwmn (a blin oedd hynny)—yn fy oer*  
*Anifyrraf lety,*  
*A theimlo brath amal bry’*  
*Ar waelod y budr wely*

In the Barracks

*Sleeping (horribly at that)—in my cold*  
*And miserable lodging,*  
*Feeling the bite of insects*  
*At the bottom of the filthy bed.*<sup>43</sup>

The trace of the domestic in the ruins functions as a reminder of the mostly unknown people who lived in the barracks, who despite extreme adversity would have found small ways to claim ownership of that space. The barracks acquire a symbolic function in this respect, serving as a reminder that the industry’s decline would have entailed a loss of livelihoods for a generation

caught in the flux of a transitional economic phase, and by extension an established way of life for the communities of the “slate towns” that formed around quarries in nineteenth-century Wales.<sup>44</sup> Many of the towns and villages shadowed by slate waste tips throughout northwest Wales are instances of the vast social infrastructure produced by the industry’s promise of work, and have frequently fallen victim to severe degeneration as profitability has made its inevitable flight elsewhere.<sup>45</sup>

The atmospheric sense of loss at Rhosydd was also created by the interaction of the ruins with the landscape, in being able to observe the slow decay of the site back into the mountain. The weight of this loss was compounded by the sense that the site’s history has unarticulated elements and a complexity that has been inadequately understood. The vague grasp I had on the details of this history, of who exactly lived in these barracks and when, created a poorly delineated and incomplete object of loss. I could see that a history was potentially being lost, but I was unsure of what it was exactly that I was preemptively mourning. In trying to make sense of the affective experience that resulted from the destabilizing encounter with the site’s thingness while picturing generational loss and flux for slate mining communities, questions arose concerning the politics of these affective structures. I recognized loss and change to be among some of the most frequently and heavily instrumentalized notions found in contemporary, and specifically reactionary, political rhetoric. What narratives are drawn on to navigate uncertainty and instability? What is depicted as having been “ruined” within these narratives, and what causes are ascribed to account for their ruination?

In my understanding, the key element that emerges from a consideration of the sociality of affect is its intimate relationship to power, whereby both dominant and dissident forms of power can be understood to operate affectively.<sup>46</sup> Despite the qualifications that Palacios makes on this point, it is not fully elaborated on in the analysis of the case studies in Chile. Palacios’s focus remains on describing the different ways that the excess encountered at memorial sites can disrupt the confines of contrasting modes of memorialization. The image of affect that emerges from this is of a subversive force produced by hegemonic power as an unintended by-product, escaping its grip and thereby always facilitating progressive resignifications. This characterization is understandably tied to a very specific set of case studies, but in wanting to abstract from Palacios’s framework, what feels missing is a discussion of how the surplus affects found at sites of ruination can also be politically stifling, leading to reactionary resignifications and identifications.

Sara Ahmed provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the sociality of affect in relation to power. Ahmed directs attention to the workings of affective economies, where affect is understood as something that circulates “between objects and signs[, accumulating] affective value over time.”<sup>47</sup>

This framework provides added clarification to the spatial quality of affect as it relates to power: “Emotions involve subjects and objects, but without residing positively within them. Indeed, emotions may only seem like a form of residence as an effect of a certain history, a history that may operate by concealing its own traces.”<sup>48</sup> This is an account of the density of historical forces that are confronted in attempts to disarticulate certain meanings from the materiality that they become attached to, while still insisting on the possibility of doing so. Specifically, Ahmed’s theory of affect is a reminder that the emotional experience of objects and spaces takes place within a social field and has a history, meaning that in given contexts, certain affective experiences will be aligned with the discourses of nation and empire.

In wanting to account for the way dominant forms of power exist affectively, I turn to a discussion of the presence of melancholia in national and imperial discourses and the role that ruins can come to perform within them. The need to consider the relationship between loss, nation, and power brings me back to Raymond Williams, whose insights, along with Ian Baucom and Paul Gilroy, point to the need for an analysis of the lost or tainted object that gets constructed in melancholic narratives.

### **The Postcolonial Melancholia of Ruins**

In *The Country and The City*, Williams outlines a tradition of melancholia in British literature that has developed over several centuries in response to the societal ruptures caused by capitalist development. During the “modernisation of the land” in the eighteenth century, Williams identifies “a conventional structure of retrospect” that emerges in literary depictions of the rural.<sup>49</sup> There is an observable shift away from portrayals of a rural idyll to “a deep and melancholy consciousness of change and loss.”<sup>50</sup> Thus a withdrawal to an “unalienated . . . rural past” allows for the construction of a precapitalist innocence that obscures the common cause of alienation in city and country life alike.<sup>51</sup> The logic of this melancholy involves the construction of a lost object that functions as a displaced explanation for the recurring experience of loss. Williams sees in this melancholic impulse both the danger of a socialist critique stifled by an attachment to an “irrecoverable world” and the potential for a reactionary sentiment of belonging that can serve as the basis for an “offensive against democracy in the name of blood and soil.”<sup>52</sup>

In diagnosing the legacy of empire in processes of identity formation in postcolonial, War on Terror–era Britain, Paul Gilroy has described melancholia in similar terms, as a contagious, collective refusal and displacement of loss. Gilroy characterizes postcolonial melancholia as a type of national amnesia concerning the brutalities of Britain’s empire that allows for feelings of guilt

and complicity to be deferred.<sup>53</sup> In Britain, there is an institutionalized inability to mourn the imperial past, leading to a gaping void in attempts to understand the cause of the loss of stability that has resulted from its decline.<sup>54</sup> Postcolonial melancholia attempts to fill this space, offering misattributions for both the causes and the object of this loss.

Going beyond Williams's analysis of the construction of lost innocence, the lost object that Gilroy identifies as emerging from the imperial knot of nation, ethnicity, and race absolutism is a homogeneous, white British identity. Its homogeneity is secured through a logic of displacement onto the figure of nonwhite immigrants, who "not only represent the vanished empire but also refer consciousness to the unacknowledged pain of its loss and the unsettling shame of its bloody management."<sup>55</sup> This displacement is key to the construction of a pure, white Britain while also positioning it, and the greatness of the nation, as jeopardized:

In the case of Britain, . . . a refusal to think about racism as something that structures the life of the postimperial polity is associated with what has become a morbid fixation with the fluctuating substance of national culture and identity. In a revealing pattern established by Winston Churchill's influential triangulation of the post-1945 world, the core of British particularity is deemed to be under disastrous attack from three different directions: Americanization, Europeanization, and a nonspecific subsumption by immigrants, settlers, and invaders of both colonial and postcolonial varieties. Behind these multiple anxieties lies the great transformation that quickly reduced the world's preeminent power to a political and economic operation of more modest dimensions.<sup>56</sup>

Like Williams, Gilroy presents melancholia as a mechanism that develops in response to the destabilizing and disorienting experience of change. After the result of the referendum on European Union membership in 2016, Gilroy's diagnosis of contemporary British political culture, with its "obsessive repetition of key themes—invasion, war, contamination, loss of identity,"<sup>57</sup> reads with an added pertinence and is echoed by analyses of the outcome that have taken into account the legacies of empire in contemporary formations of national identity.<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, postcolonial melancholia is a longing for the stable identities that can be found in a time when Britain's prestige and moral values were still unthreatened.<sup>59</sup> In a further act of displacement, stability is now found in the promise of racial identity that postcolonial melancholia contains. Britishness is made synonymous with threatened whiteness, so that "the

melancholic pattern has become the mechanism that sustains the unstable edifice of increasingly brittle and empty national identity.”<sup>60</sup>

Alongside the Churchillian construction of past imperial greatness, key to which is a mythological memory of Britain’s role in the Second World War, Gilroy also identifies a different and more complex expression of postcolonial melancholia that “turns inward, seeking resources for national renewal in the treasure trove of Englishness.”<sup>61</sup> Here, depictions of the countryside are coupled with an imperial logic of race and belonging in a mournful yearning for a lost sense of home and the feeling of security that it provided. Ian Baucom has suggested that a turn to Englishness developed as a response to the threat posed to the racial and cultural homogeneity of Britishness by the elastic quality of its imperial boundaries.<sup>62</sup> An English identity emerged that invested itself in “quintessentially English locales, as its authentic identity-determining locations.”<sup>63</sup> Baucom sees here the nodes required for a nostalgic mode of Englishness to emerge that has become a consistent trope in English fiction writing. From these spatial investments in identity there inevitably develops a need to protect these spaces from the corrupting spatial practices of outsiders. Again, the campaign to leave the European Union comes to mind with its contradictory articulation of border anxiety alongside the desire to rekindle imperial prestige.<sup>64</sup>

The access to the past offered by ruins inevitably provides an appeal as objects with which narratives of decline and loss can be articulated. Baucom offers an understanding of how postcolonial melancholia can find expression at sites of ruination, and specifically to the way ruins and a sense of place can become complicit in discourses of nation and empire. In his reading of V. S. Naipaul’s *Enigma of Arrival*, the temporal element of ruins becomes key in allowing a past to be constructed that alleviates the anxiety of the unfulfilled promises of the present.

Naipaul’s account of arrival in Britain is one of disappointment in being confronted with the fraudulent quality of the idea of England and Englishness that he had been sold while growing up in Trinidad.<sup>65</sup> Having internalized this image, the acknowledgment of its deceit also entails the destabilizing experience of being confronted with the “inventedness of his own identity.”<sup>66</sup> According to Baucom, ruins and the concept of decay become mediators for Naipaul’s melancholic response to his anxiety. For Naipaul, ruins provide a certain authenticity to the past that allows for the evidence of fabrication to be countered. A decaying country house becomes proof of an original: a surviving fragment of the lost England of his imagination. Melancholia offsets the evidence of fabrication by replacing it with an idea of belatedness. Naipaul’s encounter with ruins allows for the establishment of the idea that an authentic England has been and gone prior to his arrival. The access to the past offered by ruins

preserves a fantasy, allowing Naipaul to bury his disappointment and hold on to an identity that was otherwise being exposed as artificial.

But Baucom's reading sees more than a simple nostalgic operation of recalling a past through ruins, with Naipaul's fixation on decay pointing to a further narrative function that is put to work. In valorizing decay as "perfection in itself,"<sup>67</sup> Baucom sees a switch in Naipaul's object of desire, from a lost past to the immortalizing capacity of ruination itself: "[The ruin] accommodates that past but accommodates it by signalling that past's terminus, by marking, in fallen stones, its boundary."<sup>68</sup> Ruins function as "the final page of a national epic, . . . the final utterance in an imperial discourse of cultural belonging."<sup>69</sup> They become objects that provide access to an authentic past, but also become a part of that past by embodying its end point, and hence perform the compartmentalization necessary for nostalgic visitation. The crucial move that Baucom outlines here is that in seeing perfection in ruin, Naipaul secures not only the authenticity of the idea of England he arrived with but also the perfection of its imperial moment.<sup>70</sup>

Baucom ultimately sees an act of refusal in *The Enigma of Arrival*. Naipaul registers that a return to the untainted imperial past is impossible, but rather than allowing for this to lead to an acknowledgment that continuation requires an act of reinvention enabled and preceded by mourning, he opts instead for a melancholic withdrawal into the past, the authenticity and perfection of which has been secured through his particular engagement with ruins.<sup>71</sup> Naipaul's rejection of the future underscores the need to find ways of engaging with ruins that break with postcolonial melancholia's destructive feedback loop of loss. Charlotte Williams's novel *Sugar and Slate* provides direction in this respect, demonstrating how dialogue with objects and spaces can play a part in more reparative responses to experiences of flux and disorientation.

**"A Place of Empty Pubs and Chapels and Vacant Stares":  
The Power of "Things" in Charlotte Williams's *Sugar and Slate***

*Sugar and Slate* is an autobiographical novel that tells the story of a mixed-race woman of Welsh and Afro-Guyanese heritage who grows up in north Wales, Sudan, and Nigeria and subsequently lives in Guyana and Wales. Williams offers meditations on belonging and inherited memory as she weaves together various place-based memories from her life. It is a story of a search for the



Figure 3 A doorway in the remains of the level 9 mill. Image courtesy of the author, August 2019.

“references” that can help overcome the experience of feeling dislocated from “anything that you are or that you might be.”<sup>72</sup>

In the novel, this process of searching out and constructing a history is regularly performed through objects. Food, hair accessories, items of clothing, furniture, and nail polish all become nodes of identity and history at various points; for one character, a trumpet provides a sense of home when place and nationality can no longer be relied on.<sup>73</sup> Places also carry the “physical imprint” of memory and history in *Sugar and Slate*, facilitating “a particular type of remembering [that is] an all-consuming experience.”<sup>74</sup> There is an archaeological metaphor threaded throughout the novel, which depicts the search for identity and origins as a dig for fossils that can uncover the “collective memory lying buried below the immediate moment.”<sup>75</sup> The chapter “Icon and Image” begins with Williams’s account of accompanying her father on excavation digs in West Africa while he was studying icons sculpted for ritual worship, objects that could articulate a history of the transatlantic slave trade and provide shape to the story of his own origins:

There’s an African proverb that goes, “A thing is always itself and more than itself.” It means that even inanimate objects have a life within them. . . . These effigies were objects but at the same time much more than mere objects. They were symbols of worlds of meaning; sacred representations of ways of life long gone. . . . The digging took us closer and closer to the



answer that stared back at him from every little metal figure and was buried in the fabric of every metal artifact. Iron. The iron bar was the key to the story that bound us all together.<sup>76</sup>

Through the materiality of these small objects, Williams forges connections between the demand for iron in Africa, industrial development in Wales, and slave labor in Caribbean sugar plantations. The link made between slavery, colonialism, and industrialization is repeated toward the end of the novel, in relation to Penrhyn Slate Quarry in Bethesda, northwest Wales:

Penrhyn Castle looms on my own horizon now, a monument to my double historical heritage. The twist for me is that this whole empire would not have been possible at all had it not been for the huge fortune Richard Pennant made from what he called his *West India interests*. It was the cruelly driven slaves; men, women and children who toiled and sweated for the huge sugar profits that built the industries in Wales. Out of the profits of slave labour in one Empire, he built another on near-slave labour. The plantocracy sponsored the slateocracy in an intimate web of relationships where sugar and slate were the commodities and brute force and exploited labour were the building blocks of the Welsh Empire. My slate memories and my sugar memories are forged together.<sup>77</sup>

Nineteenth-century British aristocratic wealth was inevitably complicit in a deep complex of economic relationships tied to the slave trade, but there has been a categorical failure in the written record of the Welsh slate mining industry to foreground this dimension of its history in any meaningful way.<sup>78</sup> In the case of Richard Pennant, Member of Parliament for Liverpool and a leading antiabolitionist, wealth generated from the forced labor of enslaved people in inherited sugar plantations in the Caribbean funded the acquisition of the Penrhyn estate.<sup>79</sup> Pennant invested his wealth in the infrastructural innovations of Penrhyn Quarry, which set “the technological and organisational norms that other quarry capitalists would follow as they swept into north Wales in the first decades of the nineteenth century.”<sup>80</sup>

Williams proceeds from the above passage by questioning how Pennant’s Welshness will be received by the national conscience as his story comes to light. In doing so, she highlights the shifting parameters of Welsh national identity and history more broadly, both engaged in a constant process of re-writing and the possibility for visibility and erasure that exists in this pliability. Like country and city, colonialism and industrialization have acquired distinct and insular depictions in Britain’s collective memory.<sup>81</sup> The passage answers to

a need to speak of colonialism and industrialization in the same instance, and as an extension of this, Williams goes on to identify the need for Wales to find a language that can articulate its position in the UK without relying on a borrowed colonized-colonizer discourse. Without appropriate modification, the space needed to facilitate a “recognition of the black man who is Welsh or the Welshman who is black” is erased,<sup>82</sup> and the specificity of Wales’s subjugation within the UK remains underformulated.<sup>83</sup> A new narrative is required that can do justice to the nuance of Wales’s position as peripheralized but simultaneously entangled in empire through complex spatial and economic relationships, often against its will and other times not.

*Sugar and Slate* demonstrates how global stories can be told through the smallest objects while also mediating the construction of personal histories.<sup>84</sup> Williams closes the “Icon and Image” chapter with a poem that details an encounter with souvenirs in “the Africa shop” that sits next to the slavery museum in Liverpool.<sup>85</sup> The poem mirrors the description of her father’s archaeological trips that opens the chapter, with Williams looking at the souvenirs to try to make sense of her personal story and its place within a wider history:

Three hundred years down the ancestral trail  
 I stand;  
 object and subject, it and other  
 me and mine  
 . . . . .  
 Ritually silent, expression denied  
 in ebony figures the beings reside.  
 The historical signature, the coded motif.  
 Behind mask, masquerade  
 and mirrors of imagination  
 I stand  
 face to face with  
 Trinket or artifact? Icon? Image?  
 Me?<sup>86</sup>

The souvenirs echo the theme of dislocation that runs throughout the novel by extracting and distorting the iconography of sacred objects of worship. They represent “Africa in the mind of Wales,” but Williams understands this depiction as an integral part of her story, recognizing that it is hers “to capture and reinvent with time.”<sup>87</sup> It is part of the “body map” of her identity: the souvenirs speak to the experience of being estranged from a history but also destabilize notions of authenticity relating to identity, allowing for an acknowledgment that origins and roots require active construction from a “mixed up jumble of things.”<sup>88</sup>

*Sugar and Slate* speaks to the power of objects and spaces as meeting points of intertwined histories: to the power of erasure that they hold but also the potential for reclamation and rewriting that lays dormant in their traces. Spaces and objects can be activated as sites of struggle where the possibility of rewriting history is opened to make space for one's own. In this sense the novel attests to the power of storytelling as a medium for establishing a sense of home, and the ability to construct cultural identities through objects as a response to an "aching fear of disappearance."<sup>89</sup> But Williams stresses that this fear can only be remedied if lingering sentiments of purity are corrupted.<sup>90</sup> By rejecting postcolonial melancholia, the journey toward a sense of home can become a process of constant rewriting that aims for the "integration and reconciliation of [the] contradictory legacies of the past."<sup>91</sup>

## Conclusion

What's distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely. I used the term haunting to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. . . . Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way, I tried to suggest, we are notified that what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us.

— Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*

Every place has its own story, or even a proliferation of stories, and every spatial practice constitutes a form of re-narrating or re-writing a place. . . . Spirits or ghosts . . . signify the shared memories that render space . . . habitable as place.

— Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*

Rhosydd Quarry's closure was slow and drawn out, beginning in 1930 and not finalized until 1948.<sup>92</sup> After hopes of restarting operations were eventually discarded, a small company moved in to squeeze out any residue of value that remained in the walls of the level 9 mill itself, tearing down its structure to

make roofing slates from its slabs.<sup>93</sup> This final period of work accounts for much of the site's current appearance as a vast clearing, interrupted only by the stark physical presence of the barracks, which would have seemed small next to the mill during its time. It is worth considering the short-term mentality that went into the erection of many slate quarry buildings, which were built quickly in response to evolving demands.<sup>94</sup> The destruction of the mill for vestiges of usable slate is characteristic of a purely functional sentiment toward these buildings that will inevitably be at odds with the kind of value that they may now be imbued with as heritage.<sup>95</sup> Longevity was not a priority and thus heightens the speed of decay and sense of ephemerality that we are now confronted with in trying to piece together a history.

I began this essay with a description of an experience of defamiliarization, the slate industry ruins I grew up surrounded by suddenly seeming out-of-place. What I have come to appreciate through an active engagement with this history is a distinct sense of placeness that develops when this history is considered in its complexity and experienced spatiotemporally. I have engaged with the idea that I was confronted with the "thingness" of the level 9 ruins at Rhosydd, where my relationship to the ruins was unsettled and I was met with the affective presence of historical traces, some of which I have been able to unravel in the above. This includes the slate industry barracks as a key site in the formation of a modern Welsh-language identity, which arose in the context of a seismic experience of change and rupture as industrialization took hold in rural Wales. With regard to the slate mining landscape of northwest Wales more broadly, this also includes histories wherein the ties between slavery, colonialism, and industrialization are intimately woven.

The prospect of heritage status for the northwest Wales slate mining landscape raises questions about the power of framing, with its ability to make certain histories visible while rendering traces of others. This hierarchy of visibility would result from singularity being opted for in place of multiplicity. My reflections on the reactionary political potential of an affective structure of loss have been conducted with this move toward singularity in mind. More explicitly, I have aimed to account for some of the histories that will likely be obscured if slate industry ruins are incorporated into a sanitized celebration of British industrialization.

In a postcolonial context, the ever-evolving narratives of empire have a tendency toward accounts of a great past that hinge on notions of lost or tainted purity. These narratives have responded to imperial decline with a melancholic affective structure that produces feedback loops of loss as national



*Figure 4 Moelwyn Mawr from Cnicht. Image courtesy of the author, August 2019.*

sentiment, a legacy that is reverberating in contemporary Britain. Heritage has been known to play a part in this project,<sup>96</sup> but this essay has aimed to show that the absence of heritage framing does not necessarily safeguard against the pitfalls of singularity. My encounter with the ruins at Rhosydd demonstrated the attraction of reductive narratives and binary explanations when faced with incomprehension, instability, flux. I hope to have shown that a resistance to this impulse can lead to an establishment of the complexity of overlapping histories that are tied to overlapping temporalities and geographies: the movement of value, capital, physical landscapes and people, both forced and voluntary. This involves the indispensable need to speak about industrialization and empire in the same instance. It is of necessity that the traces of each are identified in the other: only then is it possible to break with the haunting feedback loop of melancholia and begin to work through the flux.

\*\*\*

Seb Wigdel-Bowcott is a research MA student in the Cultural Analysis program in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Amsterdam. His research interests hover loosely around a few nodes—aesthetics, politics, and technology; British nationalism(s); borders and migration; and curated spaces and narrative.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rhian Bower, “Baricsio: The Slate Quarrymen’s Barracks of North-West Wales,” *Journal of Architecture* 23, no. 1 (2018): 158, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2018.1426030>.

<sup>2</sup> Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2006). Smith’s theorization of the “authorised heritage discourse” (29) addresses the specific type of erasure I refer to here.

<sup>3</sup> “Introduction,” Cofio Cwmorthin Remembered, accessed July 31, 2020, [www.cwmorthin.com/introduction](http://www.cwmorthin.com/introduction)

<sup>4</sup> Bower, “Baricsio,” 141.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Morris, “Welsh Slate Mining Landscape Nominated as World Heritage Site,” *Guardian*, January 24, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jan/24/welsh-slate-mining-landscape-nominated-as-world-heritage-site>.

<sup>6</sup> Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1344258>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Tumultuous parliamentary affairs and the omnipresence of the Brexit negotiations created a pervasive atmosphere of uncertainty in the UK throughout 2019. The referendum on European Union membership in 2016 was weighing heavily on my mind during the walk, specifically attempts to understand the decision to leave in all its complexity.

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and The City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 96.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>16</sup> Bower, “Baricsio,” 141; Paul H. Manning, “English Money and Welsh Rocks: Divisions of Language and Divisions of Labor in Nineteenth-Century Welsh Slate Quarries,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44, no. 3 (2002): 486, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417502000233>.

<sup>17</sup> “Quarry Proprietors,” Slatesite, accessed July 31, 2020, <http://www.llechicymru.info/IQP.english.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> Manning, “English Money and Welsh Rocks,” 484.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 506–7.

- <sup>20</sup> Margarita Palacios, “The Aesthetics of Memory: Ruins, Visibility, and Witnessing,” *Sociological Review* 67, no. 3 (2019): 609, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02F0038026118818832>.
- <sup>21</sup> Brown, “Thing Theory,” 5.
- <sup>22</sup> Palacios, “Aesthetics of Memory,” 604.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 615.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 610.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 611.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 606.
- <sup>27</sup> Felix Guattari, “Ritornellos and Existential Affects,” *Discourse* 12, no. 2 (1990): 67, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/41389153>.
- <sup>28</sup> Palacios, “Aesthetics of Memory,” 606.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 608.
- <sup>30</sup> Guattari, “Ritornellos and Existential Affects,” 67.
- <sup>31</sup> Bower, “Baricsio,” 141.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 145, 150.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.
- <sup>34</sup> Michael J. T. Lewis and John Horsley Denton, *Rhodydd Slate Quarry* (United Kingdom: Peter Burgess, 2018), 48.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 83, 87.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 87–88.
- <sup>37</sup> Bower, “Baricsio,” 157.
- <sup>38</sup> Lewis and Denton, *Rhodydd Slate Quarry*, 41.
- <sup>39</sup> Bower, “Baricsio,” 153.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 145, 150. *Caban* was the quarry’s lunchroom.
- <sup>41</sup> Manning, “English Money and Welsh Rocks,” 483.
- <sup>42</sup> Lewis and Denton, *Rhodydd Slate Quarry*, 89.
- <sup>43</sup> An *englyn* by former Rhodydd quarryman John Jones, also known as the bard Ioan Brothen, in John William Jones, ed., *Llinell neu Ddwy, gan Ioan Brothen* (Blaenau Ffestiniog: Rhedegydd office, 1942), my translation. *Englyn* is a traditional Welsh verse form.
- <sup>44</sup> Lewis and Denton, *Rhodydd Slate Quarry*, 83.
- <sup>45</sup> Bower, “Baricsio,” 137.
- <sup>46</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 117–39, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/55780>. See, e.g., Ahmed’s discussion of the affective economy of hate: “In such affective economies, emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments” (119).
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

- <sup>49</sup> Williams, *The Country and The City*, 61.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., 298.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid., 36.
- <sup>53</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 99.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., 99.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid., 101.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., 12.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., 14.
- <sup>58</sup> Gurinder K. Bhambra, “Brexit, Class, and British ‘National’ Identity,” *Discover Society*, July 5, 2016, <https://discoversociety.org/2016/07/05/viewpoint-brexit-class-and-british-national-identity/>.
- <sup>59</sup> Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, 90.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid., 106.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid., 115.
- <sup>62</sup> Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 10.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid., 12.
- <sup>64</sup> Bhambra, “Brexit, Class, and British ‘National’ Identity.” Bhambra details the Brexit campaign’s toxic knot of war iconography, racism, and a longing for a form of sovereignty that has never existed in Britain.
- <sup>65</sup> V. S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival* (London: Viking, 1987).
- <sup>66</sup> Baucom, *Out of Place*, 177.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid., 182.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid., 183.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>70</sup> Ibid., 184.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid., 186–87.
- <sup>72</sup> Charlotte Williams, *Sugar and Slate* (Aberystwyth: Planet, 2006), 47.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid., 154.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid., 130.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid., 11.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid., 89–90.
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid., 175.
- <sup>78</sup> Marian Gwyn, “Wales and the Memorialisation of Slavery in 2007,” *Atlantic Studies* 9, no. 3 (2012): 311, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2012.688629>.
- <sup>79</sup> Chris Evans, *Slave Wales: The Welsh and Atlantic Slavery, 1660–1850* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), 69.
- <sup>80</sup> Ibid., 70.



<sup>81</sup> Williams, *The Country and The City*, 279: “Much of the real history of city and country, within England itself, is from an early date a history of the extension of a dominant model of capitalist development to include other regions of the world. . . . Thus one of the last models of ‘city and country’ is the system we now know as imperialism.”

<sup>82</sup> Williams, *Sugar and Slate*, 176.

<sup>83</sup> Hywel M. Griffiths, “Water under the Bridge? Nature, Memory, and Hydro-politics,” *cultural geographies* 21, no. 3 (2014): <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474013510109>. Griffiths provides a succinct overview of the acts of land seizure and displacement that were carried out by the UK government in Wales throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth century (451).

<sup>84</sup> James Walvin, *Slavery in Small Things: Slavery and Modern Cultural Habits* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

<sup>85</sup> Williams, *Sugar and Slate*, 92.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 92–93.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Lewis and Denton, *Rhosydd Slate Quarry*, 49.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, 52.

<sup>94</sup> Bower, “Baricsio,” 140.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Smith, *Uses of Heritage*.