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# Spectres of Pictou County: Regional Hauntings in Leo McKay Jr.'s *Twenty-Six*

BETHANY DAIGLE

ON MAY 9, 1992, A METHANE GAS explosion ripped through the Westray coal mine in Plymouth, Nova Scotia, killing all twenty-six miners working underground at the time. Despite rescue attempts, there were no survivors. In his debut novel, Nova Scotian author Leo McKay Jr. offers an only slightly fictionalized portrayal of this disaster. *Twenty-Six* (2003) tells the story of Ennis, Dunya, Arvel, and Ziv Burrows, a family living in the Red Row of Albion Mines at the time of the Eastyard (i.e., Westray) explosion, in which Arvel is killed. While the explosion itself provides an important historical context for the novel, McKay focalizes characters' struggles in the time leading up to the explosion, as well as during the public inquiry in the aftermath, and he implements Gothic literary conventions throughout to emphasize the unnatural, heightened dangers of the financial and cultural problems that led to the tragedy.

Instead of being haunted by anxieties of national authenticity often found in English-Canadian Gothic texts (Kertzer 24, cf. Sugars 49-74), McKay's characters are haunted by a regional economic dispossession and an uncanny conflation of past and present. This importantly problematizes both the unequal distribution of socioeconomic opportunities throughout Canada and the marketing of Atlantic Folk culture to tourists, which Herb Wyile criticizes throughout *Anne of Tim Hortons*. In *Twenty-Six*, a lack of personal capital prompts characters to suffer under unsafe working conditions and renders them spectral by reducing them to the status of unemployed — or useless — and therefore immaterial persons. Albion Mines is not haunted by a "lack of ghosts" (Birney 15), but by the dead and the dispossessed living; it is also threatened by a heritage of injury, death, and oppression that is resuscitated by a gratified nostalgia for a former, primarily masculine way of life. By portraying these elements as dangerous and antagonistic, McKay extends the causes of the explosion beyond the confines of the mine itself.

The term “accident” has often been used regarding the Westray mine disaster (McCormick 24); The Nova Scotia Museum of Industry similarly describes Westray as “ill-fated” (“Coal Mining” par. 2) and claims that “miners worked without fear” (“Blood and Valour” par. 1). However, a public inquiry reveals the extent to which profit was consistently privileged over safety in the mine (*Westray Story*), and McKay suggests that the miners *were*, in fact, fearful — unable to escape the looming specters of death and/or unemployment that haunted them and the Pictou County region. McKay’s literary treatment of the disaster as inherently Gothic frames the miners as victims and aligns him with critics such as Steven Bittle, who refers to the incident as “a violent and mass killing in which twenty-six Canadians died” (2), rather than an accident.

Without minimizing the dangers associated with natural resource extraction — for which the Atlantic provinces are well known — McKay moves away from the older, “typically Canadian” Gothic trope of the natural landscape as the source of fascination, horror, and fear (Northey 22, 23). Instead, implementing the “tropes of haunting and possession” that “pervade contemporary Canadian fiction” (Goldman 3; cf. Edwards, *Gothic Canada*), he depicts the economic and cultural landscape of Pictou County as the most dangerous, uncanny, and potentially fatal element of the work. The novel thus places responsibility for the disaster on the regional economic disparities that led to the deindustrialization of Albion Mines, the high levels of unemployment, and the nostalgic desperation of various characters before and after the explosion. While serving as a literary memorial of the Westray mine disaster, *Twenty-Six* emphasizes regional vulnerabilities, problematizes the nostalgic airbrushing of history (Wyile, *Anne* 170), and delineates which things Canadians should remember — and how.

### A Matter of Region

The characters of Albion Mines are intricately connected to, and suffer from, the regional economic problems affecting Albion Mines (i.e., Stellarton, Nova Scotia). In “Extraction, Memorialization, and Public Space in Leo McKay’s Albion Mines,” Peter Thompson analyses how the abandoned industrial sites in *Twenty-Six* call attention to “breaks and slippages in our relationship with the past and with development” (105). These sites are present in McKay’s descriptions of “abandoned

industrial rail lines” and “small factories that had been sitting empty since before Ziv was born” (127-28), but Albion Mines suffers from a far more general disappearance of commerce (70) than deindustrialization. In the Highland Square Mall, for instance,

There were empty shop stalls, their windows papered over with For Lease signs or the Coming Soon signs belonging to the next, lower-end business that would set up shop. A couple of the trendier, higher-priced women’s clothing stores had gone under almost right away. There was a Dollar Deals store in the mall now, an ultra-low-end department store dealing only in items that cost exactly a dollar. (116)

Unlike Halifax, which offers Arvel’s wife Jackie “a better job and a better life” (39), Pictou County exhibits signs of decline best summarized by Ennis’s scrapbook of newspaper clippings, in which he saves “articles on unemployment, workplace automation, two-tier contracts, and the massive wave of layoffs washing over every industry” (131). The inherently regional nature of this recession is accentuated by the presence of the Trans-Canada Highway, a “huge marker of . . . prosperity” elsewhere (25) and a Tim Hortons, which alone represents “the unmistakable stamp of the present on the main street of Albion Mines” (71).

*Twenty-Six* portrays the malign aspects of the “triumph of free market economics” (Magnus and Cullenberg vii) as global by aligning the explosion at Eastyard and the death of Yuka’s husband in Tokyo, where he succumbed to “*karoshi*, death from overwork” (55). Nonetheless, McKay targets the localized nature of the poverty and the hopelessness that haunt Pictou County, Nova Scotia. While *Twenty-Six* equates the globalization of the free market with the universal reaches of poverty through Meta Nichols, who observes that “there was poverty and desperation and violence just about anywhere,” the novel emphasizes redistribution and the regional economy above all: “It was concentrated in the Red Row. It was so thick there, it formed its own horizon, one that at times was impossible to see beyond” (100). Meta, who has been earning money by working in Japan, experiences “a sense of freedom and power” when able to “pay for [a hotel] room, cash, without flinching, without even thinking about flinching” (223) after returning home to “the hemmed-in world of poverty, ignorance, and violence she’d been forced to look at up-close” (61). Other characters — those most dispossessed of such financial freedom — instead exemplify “the way that

capitalism retailers, constricts, and disfigures humanity . . . haunts, deceives, and seduces those who live under its sway" (Houston 36). McKay perhaps best expresses this form of oppression in the title of Chapter 6: "A Handicap of Place" (93).

The Burrows family and others inhabiting the Red Row have inherited a cultural and historical legacy of coal mining, which initially seems to imply the possession of a deep sense of place and belonging. Yet, the younger generation of characters — and Ziv and Arvel in particular — remain dispossessed figures. In short, they exhibit a spectrality that results not from a lack of heritage, or ghosts, but from a lack of visible, obtainable, and potential employment and capital. Because of the "reframing of human identity within a highly 'financialized' vision of the social order" that Herb Wyile addresses in *Anne of Tim Hortons* (233), Ziv's and Arvel's identities have become dependent on, and are manipulated by, their ability — or, rather, *inability* — to work. Ziv's recognition that "people were defined by their work" is accompanied by his description of the "growing class of people now . . . who didn't do anything" (6) and therefore, presumably, are no longer defined as "anything." Zellers's classification of Ziv as an *extra*, for instance, haunts him by interpellating him as unvalued, rendering him spectral through a lack of benefits, pension, and schedule (6). In the capitalist world of retail, Ziv is temporary and ghostly. He is not a permanent worker.

According to Gail Turley Houston's overview of the intersections between the Gothic and economics, capital functions both as the distinguishing factor between "effective and ineffective beings" and as "the decisive judge of what is human" (35). Accordingly, McKay explains that Arvel, a man who was "qualified for something, good for nothing" (246), went "five and a half years without work that was steady or reliable" (243). Eventually, he comes to recognize himself as dehumanized: realizing how "unvalued he himself was," Arvel "knew that the sort of work that had been sustaining him was economic table scraps, and when you are being thrown table scraps, you are no better than a dog whose owner doesn't care enough to buy it its own food" (244). Arvel is acutely aware of the explosive gases in the Pictou County mines, but, McKay informs readers, "Unemployment was at its highest level since the thirties" (108); therefore, Arvel reasons, "This was the only real job application he'd filled out in years where there was even a remote possibility at getting a steady job" (246).

While former miner Gavin Fraser suggests that all the Eastyard workers leave their positions at the mine in protest against the dangerous working conditions imposed by management, the twenty-six men are compelled to stay because leaving would mean the loss of a desperately needed job (78). Having been taught as children that a “productive classroom was a silent one” (82), Arvel and his coworkers have been socially conditioned and driven by desperation to comply with the industrialist managers’ unjust demands, demands that rob them of their agency and, in many ways, of their humanity. Their response reflects what Thom Workman (qtd. in Wyile) describes as “the internalization of neo-liberal ideology, which cultivates an ambivalence in workers, who ‘feel frustrated and bitterly disappointed with their jobs on [the] one hand, yet relieved that they even have a job on the other’” (*Anne* 81). As was the case at Westray, the grievances of the Eastyard workers include “being pressured to work longer hours than the mining act allowed and the dangerous levels of explosive dust in the drifts, to the methane gauges on machinery that had been tampered with and rendered useless” (77). In his analysis of Lisa Moore’s *February* (2009), Wyile describes the “strategic concealment of the redistribution of risk” as a “crucial aspect of neo-liberalism” (*Anne* 82). This analysis is extendable to *Twenty-Six*, for despite the foreshadowing present in Arvel’s reference to the coal mine as “that grave” (32), he continues to work underground. Due to an individual and a regional lack of work and money, he is at the mercy of the “political economy of risk” (see Wyile, *Anne* 84), and “his life now existed beyond his ability to control it” (66).

It is through the character of Alec Morrison in particular that McKay demonstrates the pervasive hopelessness associated with a regional lack of capital. Alec’s father is a wealthy man but, despite the Morrison family’s access to money, Alec is haunted by the region’s lack of career prospects. As Ziv tells him, “You don’t have a job, and with things looking the way they do right now, you’re not going to get a job” (142). Despite his parents’ financial security, Alec deems himself incapable of earning money and thereby proving himself to be an effective human being — and in particular an effective working male. He comes to represent financial dehumanization in a manner similar to that of Arvel in his search for work. A member of what McKay refers to as “the least-fortunate generation of the century” (83), Alec is haunted by fears that are financial, rather than cultural or geographical. When

he commits suicide, compelling his physical body to join his already spectral identity, he hangs himself from a significant beam of wood: a “two-by-six.” McKay stresses this measurement multiple times (161-63), suggesting that when Alec takes his own life, he symbolically joins the ranks of the twenty-six miners whose deaths were also related to a “handicap of place.” This occurrence shows that this “story about the political economy of death and profit” (McCormick 30) encompasses much more than the Westray mining disaster; it more broadly interrogates Canadian socioeconomic discrepancies and the resultant anxieties plaguing individual and regional identities.

McKay augments his portrayal of the spectral identities of unemployed and underemployed characters by incorporating the gothic trope of twinning, or doubling (see Crow 172; cf. Edwards, *Gothic Passages* xxvi-xxvii), in his descriptions of the Burrows brothers, portraying the simultaneously haunted and haunting natures of the dispossessed living. Ziv is regularly mistaken for Arvel and, even more significantly, after the explosion the identity of his deceased brother is frequently thrust upon him. Although the men interviewing the Burrows brothers for a job at Eastyard want to know if they are twins (250), at no other point is Arvel said to resemble Ziv. Rather, the opposite occurs throughout the text (12, 140, 206, 292, 308). This emphasizes the instability, or the ghostliness, of Ziv’s identity (see Edwards, *Gothic Passages* xxv), a topic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick addresses in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. Writing about transmigrant identities, Sedgwick approaches the “insidious displacement of the boundaries of the self” that occurs during doubling as inherently gothic (33). Characters’ misrecognitions of Ziv highlight the instabilities inherent in his identity, but they also carry even more sinister connotations. In *The Double and the Other*, Paul Coates identifies the Double as a harbinger of the uncanny (1) and, within folk legend, as marking “the imminence of death” (32); accordingly, while Ziv no longer works in the mine, he is haunted by the same regional problems as Arvel and Alec, and it remains possible that he too will suffer the same fate.

According to Louis Althusser, the “rituals of ideological recognition” (such as being called by one’s name) guarantee that “we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects” (117). Of these rituals, it is the act of *interpellation*, or verbally hailing someone, that “‘transforms’ . . . individuals into subjects” (Althusser

118). Ziv is often hailed by others throughout *Twenty-Six*, but many of these instances serve as misrecognitions that challenge the concept of his natural, concrete individuality. When Bundy Burgess hails Ziv by saying, "It's you, Arvel!" (12), he is effectively recognizing Ziv not as a concrete subject himself, but as an Other, fragmenting his identity and intertwining it with that of his brother. A similar situation occurs after Arvel's death, as Ziv is not only interpellated as his brother, but as his *dead* brother, and therefore is recognized by others as a subject he knows is spectral (292). However, McKay writes, the Burrows brothers are nonetheless inseparable: "This is what brothers are: non-intersecting curves that form a single entity. With Arvel gone, Ziv is half of something whose wholeness has ceased to exist" (375). Therefore, when Ken Morrison approaches Ziv to tell him, "I know what it's like to lose a brother" (373), he acknowledges the fragmented identities each possesses not only as a result of economic dispossession, but also because they are intrinsically connected to the dead, a fact McKay amplifies by emphasizing the brothers' physical similarities. Ziv's spectrality is accentuated when Meta learns that Arvel, and not Ziv, had died in the explosion and determines that "Ziv had died and come back to life" (188). Though Arvel is dead, some believe him to be alive through his brother, and this association renders Ziv ghostly; moreover, it identifies both the dead and the living as spectral beings that haunt Albion Mines.

The lack of capital and opportunity in the region leads McKay's young male characters to suffer adverse fragmentations of identity, but they receive no sympathy from older generations of workers. Arvel and Ziv's father Ennis blames the high unemployment levels in the county on the self-emasculation of the country's young men, rather than on a regional lack of opportunity. Thompson argues that Ziv and Arvel are "lost and alienated without [the mining industry]" precisely because they are "constantly being made aware of this lost way of life" (112, 107); yet, it is not simply the knowledge of their coal mining heritage that alienates them from their father's generation, but rather the accusations leveled at them by the "industrial workers whose twenty years of pay raises had lifted them from impoverished childhoods into the lower reaches of the middle class" (83). After Jackie kicks Arvel out of their home, Ennis sees Arvel as even further emasculated and tells him, "If you want to know why your wife kicked you out, it's because you don't have a job. You think she kicked you out for getting drunk? If you were



pulling in twenty-five grand a year she'd be up there right now mixing the rum and Pepsis for you!" (126). Ennis compares Arvel's failure to his own success, declaring, "I've got thirty-fucking-eight years' seniority down there. You don't have shit. You don't have thirty minutes" (125). This sentiment echoes that of an old man on the news, who also calls the unemployed youth of the 80s a "bunch of crybabies" (109).

Held up to the scrutiny of the more fortunate older generations, the young men of Albion Mines are expected not only to attain work in a time of high unemployment rates, but also to adhere to the legacy of an inherently masculine work ethic reminiscent of an industrial era that no longer exists in Pictou County. Like other old-timers who razz young miners for having it "easy . . . compared to the pick-and-shovel days" (17), Ennis compares his sons' upbringing to that of his own in the "good old days": "Ennis had grown up in the old Red Row. The mean one. He had shovelled coal, picked peas, driven rivets, loaded wood. And he'd learned how to take a punch and give back two for every one he took. Arvel had grown up soft in comparison" (30). Ennis's nostalgia for a childhood in which hard physical labour and violence are equated with masculinity and success portends not a desire for his sons to find steady jobs but for them to find masculine work associated with the regional prosperity of an earlier era. Faced with a recession plaguing the deindustrialized Pictou County, Ennis wishes for the resurrection of the past.

### The Good Old Days

In *Anne of Tim Hortons: Globalization and the Reshaping of Atlantic-Canadian Literature*, Herb Wyile discusses the effects of neoliberalism on the economy and changing nature of work in the Atlantic provinces (29). He draws attention to the economic disparity between the East Coast and the rest of the nation by stating that "the region suffered and still suffers from a double standard in economic policy: what's good for Central Canada is 'national,' and what's good for Atlantic Canada is 'regional'" (*Anne* 12). One result of the nation's localization of wealth and poverty, Wyile points out, is the "manufacturing and promotion" of a Folk image of the Atlantic provinces. A means of "commodifying and retailing the region's underdevelopment," this image packages the region's "inability to keep up with the times" as "salutary" and the

“relative lack of development and industrialization on the East Coast” as “part of the region’s charm” (*Anne* 22). *Anne of Tim Hortons* focuses on the “broader trend in recent Atlantic-Canadian literature of writers highlighting the disparity between outsiders’ expectations about life in the region and the more complicated and less idyllic lived realities of Atlantic Canadians” (1). In part, it addresses the problematic identification of the Atlantic regions as antimodern by an external, tourist gaze. McKay, however, complicates this process of identification, suggesting that it is not merely external. Instead, the inhabitants of Albion Mines internalize a nostalgia for the Folk and a quest for the Glory Days, a process *Twenty-Six* depicts as dangerous in its capacity to obscure contemporary issues such as the unequal distribution of work, wealth, and poverty throughout Canada.

Wyile describes the Atlantic Folk stereotype in terms of farming and fishing (*Anne* 240), and his discussion of the history of the mining industry as presenting “obstacles to the celebration of the figure of the independent petty producer of Folk mythology” (*Anne* 55) suggests that mining is not actually an element of Folk culture. However, while McKay’s depiction of the coal mining heritage of Albion Mines is indeed complicated, it nonetheless ascribes to many aspects of Folk culture identified by Ian McKay in *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*. The lack of development and industrialization in Pictou County is not perceived by inhabitants as “part of the region’s charm” (Wyile, *Anne* 21); nonetheless, characters’ longings for “the glory days” (L. McKay 17) of their industrial past is not dissimilar to the concept of the Folk as “a way of thinking about the impact of modernity” (I. McKay 8).

Through the “antimodernist Myth of a Golden Age” (I. McKay 15), the Folk historically attempted to transcend class divisions and challenge the degenerative qualities of change accompanying modernity (I. McKay 12-14). However, while characters such as Ennis uphold the myth of the earlier “glory days,” McKay challenges this nostalgic representation of the past by foregrounding the role of unions throughout the novel. Both Ennis and Arvel are associated with unionization, but while Ennis experiences success, Arvel’s attempts at organization are met with failure. In the front room of the Burrows family’s house, the walls display plaques awarded to Ennis for his involvement in the unionization of the Allied Food and Restaurant Workers, along with

his service to the United Steelworkers of America, his organization of a National Day of Protest, and his acquaintance with New Democratic Party and Labor Council leaders (34). Meanwhile, Arvel's attempts to organize Eastyard through the United Mine Workers and later through the Auto Workers come to naught (71, 74), and he is unable to convince his coworkers to organize a walk-out and quit their jobs together (80). While the different outcomes of Ennis's and Arvel's attempts to unionize could indicate a worsening of regional employment conditions, the involvement of both father *and* son in a similar struggle for workers' rights also suggests a shared experience of regional workplace oppression. However, Ennis's internalization of the myth of a Golden Age overshadows the lived reality of his past and prevents him from fully supporting his sons or appreciating their struggles in the present. McKay's inclusion of this generational struggle aligns with Ian McKay's argument that one must critique essentialism by going "beyond the folk" (301) — more specifically, by going beyond the "romantic and essentialist treatments" of suffering as brought about by experiences with nature to incorporate a sense of suffering at the hands of "systematically oppressive class relations" (I. McKay 299). Highlighting the presence of class conflict in Albion Mines across multiple decades, the discussion of unions throughout *Twenty-Six* overwrites the idealized history of work so often perpetuated by the Folk.

Inspiring what Ian McKay identifies as "a politics in the present," Folk theory also presents strong ties between the Folk and romantic nationalism (15): "The Folk, transcending and preceding all divisions into classes, testify to the imagined organic unity of the nation, and the cultural phenomena associated with them are indispensable for the purposes of symbolic identity" (I. McKay 16). Coal mining itself might not necessarily be a staple of Atlantic Canadian Folk culture; yet, McKay's characters long for the glory days of mining and industrialization that preceded the more recent national redistribution of work and the economic devolution of Pictou County. Their nostalgia invokes a narrative of success in which the region is made part of the nation's backbone through its involvement in the resource extraction industry.

Throughout *Twenty-Six*, McKay emphasizes the romantic nationalism inherent in the coal mining heritage of Albion Mines by depicting correlations between mining and war, both of which provide cultural background to the region. Cynthia Sugars argues in *Canadian Gothic*

that the First World War holds “symbolic resonance . . . in Canadian collective memory . . . for its nation-defining status” (252), and in a similar manner the mining industry in Pictou County is memorialized as an integral aspect of the region’s culture and heritage. Ziv refers to coal mining as “a job he’d heard spoken of his whole life as the rough equivalent of being a soldier in a war” (252) and recounts hearing one of his grandfather’s tales of the pits told “like a story from the trenches of a war” (270). Significantly, his recognition of this correlation is realistic, overwriting otherwise romanticized metanarratives of nationhood and community:

He’d grown up with the myth and the lore of the Pictou County coalfield, and that lore was about nothing if it was not about injury, perilous danger, and violent death. He’d learned about the Hundred Years War in Grade 11 history, but all that remained with him now was the name. The queasy, sick sensation that was starting to grow in his stomach might be something felt by a soldier going off to fight in a war like that, a conflict that had claimed or maimed or changed generations of your own family. (265-66)

Ziv exposes the realities of danger and death associated with seemingly laudable nationalist endeavours — realities often obscured by the airbrushing and romanticization of the past. McKay’s novel connects the coal mining industry with war through the topics of memory and nostalgia, for Albion Mines is visibly filled with both war memorials and mining memorials (see 70, 83, and 157), each packaged to signify heroic self-sacrifice upon which the nation and the community are allegedly founded. The significance of the coal mining heritage of Albion Mines eclipses that of the war, however, as the miners’ monument on Foord St. has “more names on it than both sides of the war monument put together” (17).

*Twenty-Six* is dedicated “to memory” itself (v), foreshadowing the text’s (dual) function in addressing the past. On the one hand, the contents of *Twenty-Six* prompt readers to consider the very things they may have forgotten in the pursuit of a romantic nationalism, such as the dangers of coal mining and the oppressive legacy of an overtly patriarchal culture of industry. Secondly, however, the novel also functions as a memorial to the miners who died at Westray and thus exemplifies the very thing for which it advocates — that is, remembrance. Thompson

astutely points out that *Twenty-Six* “reminds readers that the narrative of belonging and sacrifice that nationalism constructs necessarily depends on the ability to forget certain things” (98-99). Emphasizing the extent to which these elements are in fact Gothic, *Twenty-Six* features characters who are literally haunted by their pasts and offers an uncanny conflation of past and present.

Throughout the text, McKay creates the illusion of temporal distortion through his characters’ dreams, a sensation Dunya Burrows describes as “moving forward and backward at the same time” (169). In their dreams, Ziv and Arvel Burrows are depicted as living in — and even trapped by — the past. Arvel meets his grandfather in one such dream and disappears into the coal mine with him. His claim that the buildings of his dreams “have been written on his mind by something stronger than memory” (68) blurs the separation between characters and timeframes. Likewise, when describing Arvel’s hard hat, McKay obscures the distinction between past and present and between previous and current generations of miners:

It was like a fossil retrieved from the prehistoric, black-and-white world of his grandparents. But it wasn’t a fossil at all, because fossils were impressions of bygone worlds, and as though having slipped through a hatch in a sci-fi movie, Arvel’s pre-past, the world of his grandparents, had been transported through time. . . . It connected him to a past he’d been told was over. (82)

Other characters, such as Meta and Gavin, also embody this uncanny conflation as they incorporate the identities of their ancestors into their own perceptions of self, and in Ziv’s dream after the mining disaster, the identities of his grandfather and Arvel appear to be fluid and interchangeable.

By representing various characters as manifestations of previous generations, McKay suggests that the descendants of former coal miners are possessed by the spirits of their ancestors. However, while the presence of ancestral spectres does root the inhabitants of Albion Mines to the place itself, it also reveals the extent to which they themselves are haunted — not only by their ancestors, but also by the tragedies to which they are connected. Whereas characters are “caught between fondly remembering and renouncing [the coal mining] industry” (Thompson 112), the passages in which McKay offers reminiscences of an earlier

mining era appear more critical than nostalgic. After all, most of his characters possess familial memories revolving around past mining disasters not dissimilar to that of Westray. Gavin, for example, is elated “to be descended from such a skilled and brave man as Leander Fraser” (228), though his uncle’s local renown as a draegerman resulted from his involvement in the Moose River mining disaster of 1936, which resulted in the death of one miner (227-28). Similarly, Meta’s empathic connection with her ancestor is inseparable from the mining industry’s legacy of life-threatening disasters: “She felt she was living in the wrong decade, the wrong century. She felt like her own grandmother, who had done this same waiting first for a father, then a brother, and then a husband” (186).

Inhabitants of Albion Mines exhibit an “*anxiety about history*” (Sugars 6) that Sugars identifies with the national uncanny, wherein “a haunting by an absence of haunting . . . gives way to a desire for haunting” (15). However, as McKay illustrates, the presence of haunting and the internal preoccupation with regional history can result in an uncanny (and unhealthy) inability to move beyond the trappings of the past. While corporate interests have repackaged Atlantic regions’ lack as “unspoiled and culturally distinctive” rather than “underdeveloped and backward” (Wyile, “Going” 164), *Twenty-Six* illustrates an all-consuming backwardness that must be overcome. On one level, the text accomplishes this by emphasizing the dangers of coal mining. The legacy of danger and death associated with mining easily renders the mine itself a Gothic entity, but *Twenty-Six* augments this association by depicting it as a grotesque entity that consumes while being consumed. The mine produces a fine powder that is described as devouring the bodies of miners as they inhale and choke on the dust (73, 86); meanwhile, it swallows entire houses (182) and even excrement (86) and coats miners’ bodies with explosive substances that cannot be entirely wiped away (85, 197). While these Gothic attributes highlight the dangers often overlooked in romanticized narratives of the past, they also symbolize the threat of consumption facing characters absorbed by a nostalgia for this time.

Although the mine itself is inarguably Gothic, it would be wrong to suggest that this removes responsibility for the Westray explosion from the management and owners of the operation. Despite its many grotesque aspects, the mine is possibly the least threatening entity in

*Twenty-Six*. As reviews of the novel have pointed out, the text's sense of place is haunting (Hynes 38), a sentiment that is apparent in McKay's description of Albion Mines: "When you stood back from this place you could see the marks, like looking at the rings of a stump: the growth, the stunted growth, the decay, the resuscitation. Albion Mines was not so much a ghost as an exhumed corpse, a half-charred body pulled prematurely from the crematorium" (257). The image of the town as a resuscitated corpse perfectly captures the essence of a place haunted by a past that refuses to be buried. McKay invokes this same sense of haunting by referring to Stellarton as Albion Mines (see Thompson 98), as well as by portraying multiple instances of repetition and inter-generational doubling throughout the novel.

As Ziv walks through the Red Row, "he saw his whole life twisted around itself like a dog staring at its own tail, running in circles, too stupid to know it was chasing itself" (7). McKay's narrator expounds, "He was drunk and sick and useless. And tired. Tired into the marrow. This walking, this pointless circling of the neighbourhood, had gone on for years" (8). Ziv's redundant walks through the Red Row appear to symbolize other problematic recurrences taking place in Albion Mines. Repetition through the ages is apparent, for instance, through characters who appear as uncanny doubles of their ancestors (28, 299). Commenting on the extension of the past into the present, Ziv recognizes the attempt to return to an industrialized past in a deindustrialized era as backward and dangerous: "Coal mining? In 1987? That's like deciding to be a caveman. Do you have any idea how many people have been killed mining coal in this country?" (250). His perception is accentuated by descriptions of the town as "grey as an old photo" (266), the mine manager's "woolly, decades-out-of-fashion mutton chops" (268), and Arvel's grandfather's comment to him as they watch men descend into the mine in his dream: "*I wish this could be different*" (68).

### When Men Were Men

While coal mining itself is presented as a dangerous, even Gothic, occupation in its capacity as a resuscitated industry, McKay does not vilify mining itself. Rather, he challenges the airbrushing of the region's mining heritage, the nostalgic pursuit of this way of life, and the perpetuation of the overtly patriarchal culture associated with this heritage. For

characters like Ennis, who serve as an embodiment of this culture, the Eastyard mine is a welcome addition to the region. Not only does it offer the prospect of work to the unemployed young men of the area, but above all it portends a return to a way of life he appreciates and understands, a world in which men do physical labour, get drunk, and rule their families as authoritative patriarchal providers. As a symbol of this masculine ideology, Ennis is often associated with violence and alcohol, like many other men throughout the novel. Unhappily disconnected from his family, he only partially blames himself, holding his sons' lack of employment largely responsible for his disappointment with them. When Ziv and Arvel get jobs at Eastyard, Ennis is overjoyed and takes them out to drink together: "Finally, his sons had begun lives he could understand. . . . They were finally going to do real work. For the first time ever, the three of them were going to do something together: get drunk" (262-63).

Throughout *Twenty-Six*, alcohol is associated with masculinity and mining, and it is often described in negative terms. Like coal dust, alcohol is described by characters as poison (31, 147), as clogging or cloying the skin (112, 147, 333-34), and as potentially fatal. Ziv says that one day his father's drinking problem will lead his family to find him "keeled over with a heart attack or drowned in his own puke" (19). Like the coal dust the miners choke on, which clogs their pores and eventually kills Dunya's father (68), alcohol is depicted as a dangerous substance intrinsically related to a regional climate of desperation. For example, Ziv only receives enough money from Zellers to "pay his keep and to get drunk a couple of times a week" (6). Likewise, "Just about everyone Arvel knew had a father who drank too much" (112). Mr. Morrison's inebriation even prevents him from saving Alec's life, as he gets up to investigate a clatter in the garage — the sound of the ladder hitting the ground as his son hangs himself — "but he forgot why he'd stood up. He paused a moment, swaying unsteadily with only one hand on the table to hold himself upright, then sat back down" (164). Meanwhile, despite Ennis's claim that Jackie wouldn't care if Arvel drank, as long as he had a job (126), she does not mention his unemployment but instead tells him, "I will not be married to a drunk" (106). Yet the legacy has permeated the heritage of the region. Like coal mining, "Drinking had been such a large part of his life for so long that he never managed to step away from it completely" (45).



Ziv recognizes the problems inherent in this legacy, and as a result he hates himself for drinking like his father expects him to and also hates his father for being a drunk (8). Ennis and Ziv are unable to understand each other in many ways, especially in their approaches to unemployment and work, but they share a penchant for alcohol. This, however, does not soothe their troubled relationship but instead leads to more anger; when they are drunk, their exasperation with one another increases, for it is “as if when they looked at each other, they saw themselves” (380). Alcoholism spans across generations of men in Albion Mines, despite the different socioeconomic realities facing each age group, and McKay uses its prevalence to critique the hypermasculine norms perpetuated throughout the region. Among the many functions alcohol serves throughout *Twenty-Six* — as a celebratory tool for those who attain work; a nostalgic ritual for older, retired generations; and a form of self-medication for the unemployed — it operates above all as an emblem of masculinity; for some, it is the only accessible emblem of a hypermasculine identity from which they are otherwise excluded.

The mining heritage haunting Albion Mines upholds a masculine ethic of physical labour and agency, and the nostalgic response to this history proves oppressive to women and unsupportive of female empowerment. Critical responses have overwhelmingly focused on McKay’s male characters, and David Macfarlane’s brief description of Dunya as watching (par. 6) provides one of the only descriptions of female passivity in the novel. Arvel and Ziv’s generation is presented with a heritage of masculine work and physical capability, but also one of female inaction. When Arvel joins his grandfather in his dreams, he looks into the kitchen and sees his grandmother washing apples — stationary in the house as they move toward their work (67). Likewise, when Meta hears about the Eastyard explosion and is unable to do anything but wait, she associates this with her own heritage: “She felt like her own grandmother, who had done this same waiting first for a father, then a brother, and then a husband” (186). This legacy of female passivity under a patriarchal, industrial regime is carried into the present of Albion Mines. Arvel and Ziv’s mother, Dunya, remains silent and passive through most of the novel, while Ennis looks right through her (172), envisions a happy family life in which he and his sons drink while she prepares their breakfast (35-36), and feels annoyed when she so typically doesn’t ask him what secrets he is keeping from her (131).

From the desperate scream of the daughter Arvel neglects while he lay passed out drunk in the living room (119) to the quiet desperation of Amanda Morrison, who creates new faces for herself then immediately washes them off (160), the female struggle for recognition is apparent. However, the women living in Albion Mines are rarely seen or heard by their male counterparts.

Yet, despite portraying a Gothic setting in which female empowerment is limited, McKay addresses the problematic nostalgia subsuming Albion Mines by tracking the shifting movement of women from passivity to eventual agency. The younger generation of men in Albion Mines is faced with dire economic circumstances because of deindustrialization and the pressing legacy of masculine work to which they are expected to adhere; however, their female counterparts find relative success in the changing global marketplace. In the service sector, which has largely come to replace industrial work in the Atlantic provinces, Arvel's wife Jackie is both skilled and successful, but she is also subject to the regional economic downturn and looks to Halifax as a place of greater opportunities (39). Similarly, Meta finds success working as a teacher in Tokyo, Japan, having removed herself from Albion Mines and its poverty. Both adapt to the changing marketplace and gain economic success, though not without leaving their homes.

However, combating the seeming necessity of out-migration facing characters like Jackie and Meta, Dunya chooses not to flee but instead asserts her own agency and implements the beginnings of cultural change within her own home. Thompson, who focuses on public space in *Twenty-Six*, briefly touches on the importance of domestic objects in the novel (107), but the actions of Dunya herself have yet to receive critical analysis. Mourning the death of Arvel, for which Dunya holds him responsible (198-99), Ennis continues a legacy of masculine — in this case literally domestic — violence. He trashes their house, throwing around the reminders of their family history and the coal mining heritage until Dunya “could not move without stepping ankle-deep in some mess that needed sweeping” (236). In reaction to Ennis's behaviour, the resultant mess, and above all his encouragement for Arvel to work in the mine, Dunya slams his face with a cast-iron kettle, “as if everything in her life had been leading to this moment, as if all the years of rage had arrived at this breaking point, as if the reason her son had been taken from her lay drunk and unconscious at her feet. . . . ‘You bastard!’ she

said. ‘You bastard! You always make everything worse’” (209). Earlier, Ennis had asked Dunya who she blamed for Arvel’s involvement with the mine, and she had remained silent (198-99); at this point, however, she finally claims agency and lays the blame for her son’s death on her husband, who embodies the nostalgia and masculinity in which Albion Mines is steeped.

McKay’s narrator explains that “Ennis was determined that someone had to get to the bottom of what happened. Those responsible had to be held accountable” (211). It is apparent through Dunya’s actions that one person who was responsible (albeit in the private rather than the public sphere) *was* held accountable. In a moment of violent agency, Dunya strikes out against Ennis: the symbol of the backward-looking patriarchy that allowed the past to subsume the present. However, while Dunya injures Ennis to the point where his mouth is medically restrained shut (210), she decides not to kill him (235). Instead, this violence lasts but a moment, rather than becoming the legacy of a new era, and she takes a new approach. Dunya throws away her family’s belongings and gets Ziv to paint the inside of the house white (239). Taking over the front room, which used to display all Ennis’s achievements (34), she creates “a clean, white space for herself to thrive in. She thought of it as culturing herself, the way they cultured bacteria when they did a test on you in the hospital. She needed an environment where she could breathe and live” (239). Despite her acknowledgement that she does not yet know how she is doing (239), Dunya renders her home — with its physical and symbolic ties to the regional culture and the Eastyard explosion foreshadowed by its objects, such as the cabinet in Ziv’s room that is labelled explosive (237) — unfamiliar (301). Ziv feels out of place in this blank space, experiencing a sentiment reminiscent of settler anxieties, but he determines that the house now has “a refreshing feeling of possibility” (301). By removing the presence of an oppressive heritage from her own private space, Dunya challenges the dangerous nostalgia so prevalent in Albion Mines while asserting a female agency that the masculine, industrial legacy of the region does not recognize.

### The Necessity of Remembrance

Although Dunya’s removal of the heritage visible throughout the family home is a positive moment of change and renewal, it would be wrong to

suggest that McKay generally favours the erasure of culture or heritage. In fact, *Twenty-Six* argues the opposite in its discussion of the Eastyard silos, which Ziv believes should not be torn down. McKay's novel offers a stimulating discussion about not only what should be remembered but also how it should be remembered. The Eastyard silos serve as the "constantly visible focal point in the debate over how to acknowledge the disaster" (Thompson 110). Moreover, they also exist outside of the "ordered settings" in which "objects are spatialized so they may serve, for instance, as commodities, icons of memory, cultural or historical exemplars, aesthetic focal points or forms of functional apparatus" (Edensor 312). The remnants of an abandoned industrial site, the silos are a "live site . . . of struggle" (Kidd 3) that challenges the coal mining industry's abuse of workers' rights. Moreover, they have not been censored by "the government, who wish to erase the whole affair from history" (L. McKay 341).

Both Wyile and McKay problematize the susceptibility of Atlantic Canadians to "wallowing in and romanticizing" the past as a means of evading the "tenuous present and uncertain future" of the region (Wyile, *Anne* 171). While some of McKay's characters view the silos as "an unnecessarily painful reminder of an event they will in any case never forget" (375), Ziv believes that "the silos must be saved, preserved, made part of a larger display that memorializes the whole ugly history of coal mining in the county" (382). As "a symbol of all that's wrong with Nova Scotia's political and economic life" (375), the Eastyard silos challenge the romanticized narratives of the past. By advocating for the preservation of the Eastyard silos — and consequently contesting the destruction of the Westray silos — Ziv articulates the necessity of remembering the very things that unhealthy forms of nostalgia leave out of their narratives.

As a literary memorial to the twenty-six miners killed in the Westray mine disaster, *Twenty-Six* cautions against the possibility that this occurrence could, like others from the past, be subsumed into the romanticized metanarrative of Atlantic heritage and Folk culture. Embracing realism over the airbrushed stories of Pictou County's heritage, McKay depicts the regional problems leading to the despair, systematic abuse, and eventual deaths of the Eastyard miners. Moreover, he implements Gothic conventions to highlight the uncanny, unnatural, and threatening essence of the economic disparities and nostalgic

repackaging of culture facing the Atlantic provinces. While refuting the categorization of the methane gas explosion as an accident, these elements expose the regional, political, economic, and cultural factors largely responsible for the tragedy. *Twenty-Six* emphasizes the necessity of critiquing both the internal and external factors responsible for fostering regional vulnerabilities to economic dispossession, antimodern sentiments, and oppressive ideologies in Pictou County and more widely throughout the Atlantic provinces.

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