

A Post-Carbon Future?

Narratives of Change and Identity in the Latrobe Valley, Australia

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The Latrobe Valley Region – an Introduction

The Latrobe Valley contains substantial brown coal reserves, which have been developed in earnest from the early 1920s (Barton/Gloe/Holdgate 1993). A state-owned mining and electricity generation industry, administered by the State Electricity Commission of Victoria (SECV) supplied the state's power needs and shaped the region's economic and urban development (Langmore 2013). The power stations Yallourn A (opened in 1924) and Yallourn B (1932) were constructed adjacent to the open-cut mine at Yallourn. There was further expansion in the post-1945 period when new open-cut mines and power stations were constructed east of Yallourn. The first major project of the post-1945 era was the Morwell open-pit mine (1955), and the adjacent Morwell Power Station and Briquette Factory (1959). Hazelwood Power Station, also fuelled by the Morwell mine (now often referred to as the Hazelwood mine), was opened in 1965, and reached full capacity in 1971. The final element of the Latrobe Valley power hub was the Loy Yang open-pit mine with the Loy Yang A and Loy Yang B power stations operating from 1989 and 1992, respectively. Meanwhile, expansion had continued at Yallourn, adding the power stations C, D, and E between 1954 and 1961. Between 1977 and 1980, gas-fired peaking stations were completed at Jeeralang. The Yallourn W station was completed in 1969. From 1993 to 1996, the three large brown coal mines and power stations – Yallourn, Hazelwood, and Loy Yang – were privatised (Loy Yang A and B sold separately); until recently, they supplied 85% of the state's power needs (Fletcher 2002). Between 1989 and 1990, the SECV employed 8,481 workers, but through privatisation and asset sales, the workforce had declined to less than half that number by 1994/1995 (Cameron/Gibson 2005: 274).

Hazelwood Power Station, an eight-turbine brown coal generator, was the centre of an ambitious programme of state-sponsored economic and community development from the late 1950s (Peake 2013; Eklund 2017). At its inception, it represented a world-class, innovative, and ambitious approach to power generation. Through decades of paternalist management and welfarist approaches to workers and communities, the identity of the station was firmly fixed in the public mind. The power station continues to be referred to as "Hazelwood" after its privatisation, and now, during decommissioning, its continuity is emphasised in the popular discourse, rather than the rupture of a serial resale of the station. Prior to decommissioning, Hazelwood's reputation had moved from being beloved (underpinning the local community's stability) to a more widespread demonisation. From 2004, it was widely known as Australia's "dirtiest"

power station, producing approximately 3% of the nation's total greenhouse emissions. This was the result of a very effective campaign led by WWF, and other environmental groups, which targeted Hazelwood.¹ Photographs of it were used to illustrate a broad range of media stories about climate change and carbon dioxide production.²

In the 1990s an abrupt and comprehensive programme privatised SECV assets including, the three brown coal mines along with the power stations, dramatically changing the social and economic landscape of the Latrobe Valley. These changes were accompanied by major local government amalgamations. The region now faces the further challenge of an economic transition for decommissioned coal-fired power generation in the context of climate change and climate change politics. Complex national and international debates have very little to do with regional experience. The region is variously portrayed as a hapless victim, totally dependent on employment from electricity generation, or emotionally and financially wedded to “dirty” power production. The impact of these debates is to effectively decentre the “blame” for climate change onto a place of production, and obscure city-based electricity demand. We are not the first locally resident scholars to observe (and live through) rapid change in the Latrobe Valley. Since the early 1990s, what Somerville and Tomaney call “the material and discursive production” of the Latrobe Valley has been observed and critiqued by scholars; firstly, in the immediate aftermath of the SEC's privatisation, and secondly, in the midst of the climate change talks in Rio and Copenhagen in 2008 and 2010. A common theme across these observations, and in ours offered below, is that the Latrobe Valley functions as a symbol with considerable rhetorical power that is harnessed by varying sides of the political debate (Cameron/Gibson 2005; Tomaney/Somerville 2010).

Dealing with Closure – Representations

On Thursday the 3rd of November 2016, Engie, the French company and majority shareholder of the Hazelwood power station and its adjacent mine, announced that the plant and mine would shut by the 31st of March 2017 (Engie Press Release 2016). There had been weeks of speculation about the closure, the Australian press featuring stories that ranged from a definite programme for closure to its opposite. The Federal and State Governments' publicly stated positions were firstly, that the decision rested with the company, and secondly, that coal-fired power stations remain a vital part of the Australian-wide energy infrastructure. The company's position was that the workers would be the first to know, and that no decision had been made yet. This remained Engie's public position until the 3rd of November, when workers were called to a 10 a.m. meeting; moments after the meeting finished, the public announcement was made. In fact, the French press had been reporting both that the plant would close and that the company had reached this decision the week before the meeting with the Australian workforce (Feitz 2016).

1 See, for example, <http://www.replacehazelwood.org.au/> (11.10.2016).

2 See, for example, “Australia's Climate Change Authority says scientific predictions have led it to revise up the recommended carbon emissions reduction target”, ABC News, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-02-27/smoke-rises-from-hazelwood-power-station-in-la-trobe-valley2c/5288960?nw=0> (14.10.2016), which features a photo of Hazelwood. The Australian Financial Review's story (“Climate Change Authority backs emissions trading scheme”) has a photo of Low Yang B, though it is not identified. See <http://www.afr.com/business/energy/climate-change-authority-backs-emissions-trading-scheme-20160831-gr5hsu> (12.10.2016).

The announced closure also appeared in the context of the *Hazelwood Mine Fire Commission Report* (December 2016), the last of a series of commission reports that looked into Victoria's worst recorded environmental disaster, a fire that burned in the Morwell/Hazelwood open-cut mine for 45 days from the 9th February 2014. The report recommended that "mine operators develop an integrated research plan that identifies common research areas and priorities for the next 10 years" (Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry Report: 113). One result of the Hazelwood closure along with the associated mine is that Engie is now working on an exit strategy, the endpoint of which is the sale of the cleared site, and a relatively swift mine rehabilitation schedule that includes the company's preferred option – a "full pit lake". Once the site is sold and/or handed back to new owners, Engie is free of obligation or liability – "any subsequent land use, once surrounding private land is sold and the lake transferred to a new entity, is a decision for the new owners and regulators in consultation with the community" (Engie Mine Rehabilitation 2018). The exit strategy includes, then, finite mine rehabilitation (16 years), site remediation (to deal with asbestos and other site contaminants) through demolition of the power station, associated stock sale (some items of which have already been found in online auctions), and a consequential return of the bond held by the State Government (Engie Mine Rehabilitation 2018).

The announcement of the closure, then, came as a shock to workers and the community in general. That State and Federal Governments were already apprised of the likelihood of a closure was suggested by the State Government website that was launched the day of the closure, the concurrent announcement of the establishment of the Latrobe Valley Authority (LVA) by the State Government, and the funding that both levels of government pledged to the Valley within hours of the stories about the workers "fearing for their futures" beginning to circulate.

On that first day, the media reports were a mix of celebratory ("the dirtiest coal mine closes") and what we have called victim narratives that emphasised, for example, "fear for the future", a narrative about life in the Valley without the income generated by power company employment. Figures used to support this story ranged between the official numbers of redundancies of 450 (250 of them staying on for five years for mine rehabilitation) and up to 1,000 affected workers, according to an extrapolation and estimate including sub-contractors and support industries.

By Friday the 4th November, the story was calling attention to questions about support packages, and a "good money after bad" narrative emerged, one radio announcer defining the Valley's population as welfare dependent, underpinned by narratives of entitlement and generational disempowerment (ABC Radio Melbourne/Faine 2018). While there are large areas of poverty in the Latrobe Valley, there are also pockets of wealth, and the redundancy payouts and superannuation for long-term power workers were significant. Moreover, the idea that poverty in the Latrobe Valley was directly linked to the economic conditions associated with privatisation or subsequent changes to subcontracting employment arrangements, was not canvassed.

Narratives of Closure

After the announcement, and in the immediate weeks that followed, a number of common themes can be discerned in the responses to closure. The rhetorical strategies to support the victim narratives are familiar, ranging from a fuzziness in the figures to a

lack of clarity about quite where or what exactly one is talking about. For example, when determining the massive and all-consuming damage that this loss of industry was going to have in the Latrobe Valley, media often reported the unemployment rate for Morwell alone – often stated as 20% – rather than for the region that includes Traralgon, Churchill, and Moe. The Latrobe Valley unemployment rate had peaked in December 2016 at 11.4%, and then actually dropped during 2017, despite the job losses at Hazelwood. There was, similarly, a lack of social or historical context, as well as a tendency for the Valley to be discussed as being isolated and geographically determined by heavy industry, and as being entirely confined to electricity generation. In fact, at the point of closure, the workforce in both mining and electricity generation had decreased substantially, and its largest employers had become health and education. The Latrobe Valley, then, was excised from its broader region, Gippsland, and its wider geographical and historical frame.

An almost constant emphasis upon electricity generation rather than usage allows the distancing of the residents and industries of the city, and causes regions outside of the Valley to be conveniently ignored, either as the producers of the demand for so-called cheap electricity, or the consumers of “dirty electricity”. Thus, the Valley becomes the “Valley of despair”, as it has been expressed – a geographically defined place, blackened and blighted by dirty industry and poverty, a place cripplingly dependent upon a monolithic, polluting industry. The age and image of the Hazelwood power station became emblematic of the outdated and redundant in a narrative of rural and regional primitivism versus city civilization. A 2012 survey of 300 Victorians from outside of the Latrobe Valley found that, where they did have knowledge of the Valley, their strongest associations with it were electricity generation, mining, and pollution (Ellis-Jones 2012). The Latrobe Valley was persistently cast as a cultural vacuum, a demonised “community”, where the idea of community was narrowed to encompass only Hazelwood power station workers. It was implicitly a masculinised space too, as the focus was placed on industrial work rather than the home, with a continued focus on the decline of white male blue-collar jobs.

If the city experienced any sense of change between the 31st of March and the closure of Hazelwood on 1st of April 2017 it was most likely in the form of a sense of righteous endeavour – a reduction in greenhouse gasses – and a slightly higher electricity bill. For the people of the Latrobe Valley, the first effect was a reduction in pollution, a cost unacknowledged but one that was asked of this community in order to underwrite the cheap electricity production.

While the State Labor Government made a political investment by presenting itself as a friend of the Valley, the Federal Government (a conservative coalition government including the Liberal and National Parties) was playing a more intricate game. The Federal Government continued to play to their political base, which expresses doubt about climate change science, resentment towards structural adjustment funding for downsizing industries, and ongoing support for brown coal industries including power generation. Upon closure, the public face of the Federal Government was a firm commitment to the Valley, although funding commitments included the whole of the federal seat of Gippsland and not just the Latrobe Valley – this electorate is 33,182 km² in size, the Latrobe Valley sitting at its western edge (by way of comparison, the size of Bel-

gium is 30,528 km²). The Australian Government had, however, ratified the Paris Climate Agreement, which came into force on the 4th of November 2016, the day after the announcement of the Hazelwood closure (UNFCCC 2016).

The announcement, then, assisted the Federal Government to meet the goals of the Paris Accord with an immediate 3% reduction in Australia's greenhouse emissions. The link between the closure of Hazelwood and the needs of the Federal Government to deliver on its ratified targets, however, had been carefully obscured. The then Federal Minister for the Environment, Josh Frydenberg, in fact claimed publicly that the closure was the result of both the State Labor Government's policy and the inaction of previous federal Labor administrations. The minister had also met with company Chief Executive, Isabelle Kocher, and his French ministerial counterpart, Segolene Royale, in Paris in late October 2017 prior to the scheduled announcement. There was no sense of a unified State and Federal Government response to the closure, one that would go beyond party politics. The strongest indicators of this were the Victorian State Treasurer Tim Pallas' and Federal Minister Frydenberg's separate trips to Paris. Instead of being used to formulate a united governmental response, the experience of closure was utilised in an ongoing rhetorical battle in what is known as the politics of blame, and was a valuable face-saving option when senior Federal Government ministers attended an international climate meeting in Marrakesh, Morocco, on the 4th November (Frydenberg Press Release; Butler Press Release 2016; ABC News 2016). In fact, the ratification of the Paris Accord and the formal announcement of the Hazelwood closure strongly suggest that the timing was mostly about global and national climate change politics.

Remembering the Valley and Its Industries

Collective memory is forged in a dialectic between experience and representation (Ricoeur 2007: 9; Halbwachs 1992). People construct their memories around common narratives, and there is no denying the power of political and cultural renderings of the Valley. The rhetorical strategies and common themes outlined above were highly influential on the people and institutions of the Valley. Yet despite the power of these discourses to shape and define the meaning of the Valley and its representations, there are informal or vernacular renderings of the Valley's deindustrialising experience that stand in stark contrast to the "Valley as victim" narrative.

While the current closure narrative is overwhelmingly focused on the present challenges of closure, economic transition, and workforce retraining, locals perceive it as a continuation of a longer tradition of major setbacks to the regional economy. They intuitively evoke past disruptions. One local power station worker, Ron Bernardi, was interviewed on the day Engie announced the closure of the Hazelwood power station by March 2017. The report noted: "Responding to media suggestions the Valley will become 'ghost town' without Hazelwood, Ron said the closure news would be nothing like the power industry's privatization in the 1990s."

Bernardi's memories went back to the early 1990s, and focused on a specific incident of seeing the then Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett, one of the key architects of privatisation, at Melbourne Airport:

To this day I dislike Jeff Kennett for what he did [...] I saw him give an interview at the Tullamarine airport about the SEC being privatised and it took all of my energy to walk past him and not tell him off. He treated the Valley very badly (Bernardi, quoted in Whittaker/Plummer 2016).

Some workers associated the Valley experience with other recent industrial and manufacturing redundancies throughout the state. Hazelwood Power Station's Denis Clough was quoted saying employees should have been given advance notice:

I've heard about Hazelwood closing for 20 years. It was inevitable. It was done in a pretty ordinary, pretty bad way by the company [...] Ford, Holden, and all those people, they've had three years' notice. These blokes here have got five months (Clough, cited in Darroch, 2016)

In this case, Clough is evoking knowledge of other closures, and criticising the company for the short notice. The fact that Victoria went through a number of major industry closures in manufacturing in the last five years shaped an immediate context that the company could not control. Moreover, with a State Labor Government in power, the political imperative was to be prepared, and to show support and solidarity with the Latrobe Valley. The other recent closures also allowed the political parties to prepare their own responses to developments in the Valley far more carefully. It was still critiqued, however, that a longer-term plan was not put in place since the decline of the brown coal electricity industry was seen as inevitable by many, including Hazelwood workers such as Clough. The public relations strategy of Engie was, by contrast, to deny the reality of the closure up until the last few hours. This local obfuscation created not insignificant financial problems and psychological strains for the workforce (Darroch 2016).

Furthermore, there is a vigorous though poorly resourced industry and community heritage movement which has attempted to preserve and interpret the Latrobe Valley's industrial past. Local activist Cheryl Wragg has been at the forefront, nominating both the Morwell and Hazelwood power stations for inclusion in the State Heritage Register. She was successful in the case of the Morwell station, but the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria recommended against the nomination of Hazelwood (Heritage Council Morwell Power Station 2017). Another significant locally-based heritage sentiment is represented by efforts to preserve the model workers' community of Yallourn, designed by the SEC and opened in the 1920s, but subsequently dismantled from the late 1960s onwards to make way for an extended open-cut mine. This decision was controversial, and Yallourn remains anchored in the minds of many former residents and others, achieved by regular annual social events and a website which seeks to imagine a virtual Yallourn.³ An earlier project conducted in 1988 and sponsored by the Gippsland

³ See <http://www.virtualyallourn.com/> (14.11.2016).

Trades and Labour Council sought to interview former residents and was self-confidently about contesting and correcting the SEC version of the town's history.⁴ The myriad of social as well as technological efforts to preserve the memory of Yallourn, even if only in intangible form, is a powerful resistance to the modernist commands of the SEC which deemed the town surplus to requirements, and its humanised living space less important than the value of the coal that lay beneath it.

Additionally, the "Valley as victim" narrative also belies the social and geographical complexity of the Latrobe Valley. Although official representations suggest the opposite, not everyone works in or is reliant upon the power industry or the mining industry. In 2016, the Australian Census found that 4.2% (or 1,219) of the Latrobe Valley's workforce were in the "fossil fuel energy generation" sector, but 5.0% (1,477) were located in the "hospitals" sector, and 3.1% (907) worked in "supermarkets and grocery stores" (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016). Located amongst and within stories of industrial life, and indeed deindustrialisation, are other stories from people who reside in nearby communities that have little or no relationship to the industry in question. One of the success stories of the Valley has been the agribusiness sector, including a growing organic food movement. This has seen the development of new industries and new kinds of positive representations of the Valley, as embodied in the Gippsland Food and Wine Trail.⁵

Furthermore, there is a diversity of household types in the region, even though the media presentation and government responses to closure often assume a single, male earner with a dependent family. In couple households in the region, both parents not working represented 24.7% (3,656) of all couple families, while the number for both parents being employed full-time was 15.2% (2,248); one parent working full-time and the other part-time represented 23.7% (3,516), and the percentage for one working full-time and the other not being in paid employment was 14.2% (2,107) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016). These figures alone suggest that existing regional unemployment should be as important a policy priority as job losses from restructuring. The experiences of a diverse range of local residents also add depth and breadth to our understanding of the region's social history. A ground-breaking sociological study by Jerzy Zubrzycki looked at migrant settlers to the Latrobe Valley in the early 1960s. This work built the foundation for later studies which explored the multicultural history of the Valley, often utilising oral history or memoir with a local or vernacular intent (Zubrzycki 1964; De Prada 1904; Mirboo North Primary School 1987).

The recent State Government response to the overall challenge of regional development and recent job losses, embodied in the LVA and its transition programmes, for example, has been strongly focused on power industry and construction jobs, which are usually dominated by male workers.⁶ Andrew Coles, Peter Fairbrother, and others have analysed the gendered dimensions of these responses and found strong masculinist themes, which echoes the media focus on both male job losses and job creation in industries usually dominated by males (CPOW 2017).

4 See 'The Yallourn Story'. Transcripts are available in the Gippsland Regional Studies Collection at the Federation University Churchill campus. See CGSV 4438, 4129, 4137, 4396, 4139, 4134, 4136, 4132, 4131, 4133, 4130, and 4392. A detailed list is available on request.

5 See Gippsland Food and Wine Trail, <http://www.visitvictoria.com/Regions/Gippsland/Food-and-wine/Gippsland-Food-and-Wine-Trail> (10.11.2016).

6 See the Latrobe Valley Authority website, <https://lva.vic.gov.au/> (24.07.2018).

After the 1990s round of restructuring the state-owned electricity operations, Jenny Cameron and Katherine Gibson noted how the focus on the region as an industrial problem with “needs” led to a development approach which sought to replace large-scale industries with more large-scale industries, effectively overlooking a communal economy with a “richness and depth of skills and capacities, dreams and passions of those who had been marginalised by the SEC’s restructuring” (Cameron/Gibson 2005: 274–285). This way of constantly looking beyond the borders of the region for solutions is characteristic of a deficit approach to regional economy and society. This approach suggests there is no capacity for local or regional endogenous innovation or growth. Such an approach only serves to leave assets that are regionally present unacknowledged. Another industry in the Valley is the higher education sector, which has been present in Churchill since 1971 when the Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education was established with a distance education and an on-campus programme. In 1990, this organisation became a part of Monash University, with approximately 400 staff and 7,000 students by 2013. In 2014, the campus was taken over by Federation University Australia. There are few higher education providers located in rural Victoria, and those that do exist are sited in major regional cities. It is a curiously repressed fact about the Latrobe Valley that it is, in reality, a hub for an important higher education provider, and the only university campus in the east in the state of Melbourne.

Heritage and History

As Ralph Samuel once noted, collective memory is contested, and the struggle over who controls this process of remembering and how it might be done has only just begun (Samuel 1994; Smith 2006: 297). The capacity of the Valley to hold onto structures that are rendered by decommissioning heritage is both contested and negated. Both decommissioned power stations, Morwell and Hazelwood, are in the process of demolition as we go to print. This applies despite Morwell Power Station having been granted State Heritage listing in February 2018. A change to the Heritage Act (2017) allows a minister to intervene in the heritage assessment process. Planning Minister Richard Wynne signalled his willingness to intervene if any submissions were received in response to Heritage Victoria’s finding that Hazelwood did not meet heritage standards (Whittaker 2018). When submissions disputing the findings by Heritage Victoria’s Executive Director, Steven Avery, were received, the minister made good on his promise and “called in” the matter, circumventing the prescribed process. He determined in late August 2018 that Hazelwood Power Station was not of heritage value, and that the company was under no obligation to keep anything (Wynne 2018). Engie announced that the company has settled on a preferred supplier for demolition, and the eight stacks were demolished on the 25 May, 2020.

The narratives around destroying the material heritage are familiar to those who work in the area of industrial heritage. They are a combination of an unworthy or toxic aesthetic, or an ongoing, inappropriate burden of community debt. At the point of writing, there is more money available for the demolition of both power stations through the closure and remediation funds attached to them (as well as the return of rehabilitation bonds) than there is proffered to support conservation. This is the case despite conservation potentially falling within the terms of required remediation, public interest and concern, and, of course, the historic profitability of the industry.

Even the production of a “social history” is managed by the State Government entities tasked with overseeing the rehabilitation of all three Latrobe Valley open-cut brown coal mines – the Latrobe Valley Regional Rehabilitation Strategy (LVRRS) and the Mine Rehabilitation Commissioner (LVMRC), both coming under the auspices of the Latrobe Valley Authority (LVA). The subsumption of what you might call both “community vernacular history” and “formal historical practices” within a State Government entity primarily concerned with engineering (and producing a “feasible” outcome for all three gargantuan open-cut mines) is troubling. Its location in “Land Use Planning”, along with the commissioning of a third-party metropolitan consultancy to shape and produce the history, shows that the contest over what is recalled and how it is remembered is very real (Latrobe Valley Authority 2018; Whittaker 2018; Slater 2018; Latrobe Valley Social History, 2019).

Oral history is work that legitimates and records the experiences of individuals and uses respondents’ testimony to inform an understanding of a whole community. As it is practised professionally, it is fundamental to “history from below”, and it is an expansion of a historical record and understanding through the inclusion not simply of “stories” or narratives, but of testimony and description. The subjective, individual nature of the testimony is triangulated with other forms of historical material, creating a complex and layered historical record. The moment of transition from an industrial to a post-industrial era in the Latrobe Valley – defined discursively as the moment of closure of the Hazelwood power station – becomes a moment to collect memories and experiences in the form of oral testimony as the present (everyday industrial routine) becomes the past through decommissioning.

In the case of the Latrobe Valley “social history report”, we have a commissioned history attempting to utilise the form of the vernacular. Our following comments focus on the State government’s role in designing and framing the process. We do not criticise the consultants here since they were simply responding to the brief. As the language of social history is being mobilised, one finds that the process and output has more in common with public relations than oral history. Public relations practice is defined by a focus upon the intentionality of the author. All emphasis is placed on framing the message so that the intended message is received and “accepted”. Thus, community engagement and public relations-style practices such as consultations and stakeholder meetings are the vehicles through which a social history project is turned into a social history.

In this case, the process is exclusive, prescribed, and tightly framed, and most interestingly, perhaps, it is confidential due to the principle of “commercial in confidence” having been evoked to limit the availability of drafts for the client (the State Government agencies and selected and approved attendees). Through that designed and enacted process, anecdotes offered by individuals at closed meetings – individuals selected as “representative” of both prescribed groups and the broader community – are recorded (if at all) as “community consultations”, and then authorised as the experience of the individual (Latrobe Valley Social History 2019). In other words, the social and communal history is codified and mapped back onto the individual in a form of discursive containment.

There are clear signs that the idea of this history (given the legitimising name of a social history) is part of a series of governmental actions on behalf of securing a social

licence for a sequence of activities, and that it was, if not designed, at least enacted to mollify a community and shape narratives of the past in the interest of the present.

Now for a point concerning the social history itself, when one of the authors phoned the commissioned company to ask about the history and specifically its parameters, they were told it was commercial in confidence, and between the client (the governmental department) and the heritage organisation. Drafts produced by the commissioning body and provided to those groups and their representatives were marked confidential. In addition, the above-mentioned author sought information about a publication date, and whether draft copies were available.⁷ No answer was provided, and the final document was published on the web in late 2019 (Latrobe Valley Social History, 2019).

The use of the historical and heritage knowledge of selected members of the community, who are typically providing their expertise on a voluntary basis, represents extractive meaning production in action. An advertisement was placed in the local papers, and participation in the social history project was decided through application. The strategic direction and intent of this social history venture was predetermined. The sampling of community members was purposive but without any transparency. Key issues which were subject to current government policy or concern, such as the heritage listing of the Morwell and Hazelwood power stations, were explicitly excluded from discussion. “Extractive meaning”, then, in this case extends to knowledge appropriation; value-adding is used here as a means to divert income and reputational enhancement away from the Valley to city-based consultants. As such “extractive meaning” replicates an extractive industry discourse that devalues industrial heritage and culture, while allowing the tangible financial benefits (income and profit) to be removed first to the city, and secondly off-shore. Local communities are often not as homogenous as prevailing discourses maintain, nor as passive; so, in many senses, the battle for the control of social history has only just begun.

Conclusion

We are observing closure and the production of meaning and social memory as it is happening, and have been witness to its rhetorical and political demands. It is in this context, a literal as well as a rhetorical context, that the lived experiences of individuals, families, communities, and residents are being shaped and preserved. The capacity to capture, celebrate, or simply record the lived experience – consolidate the collective and individual memory – will depend upon money. We can only wait to see how much money will be set aside for a cultural endeavour in a place defined externally as devoid of culture. We can only wait to see how much money will be provided to produce what some would argue has all the appearances of a state sanctioned history. Similarly, it is an open question as to how much money will be available for anything more than “jobs” and the “relocation of industry” as the determinate image of the industrial Latrobe Valley dominates.

The overarching narratives are just that: they slide over the top of the Valley’s complexity, providing useful tools for political or cultural representation, but are only loosely grounded in the Valley’s reality. Just as the Valley’s wealth and its generated power follow the highway and railway lines to the city of Melbourne, so too do the

7 E-mail to planning.implementation@delwp.vic.gov.au, 18.10.2018.

extractive meanings of the Latrobe Valley beat an inexorable path to outside interests and dance to the tune of outsiders and their agendas.

In early 2017, Hazelwood's eight chimneys marked the ongoing commitment to coal-fired electricity generation, the faded but persistent glory of the modernist endeavour, and an icon of human-induced climate change. They were a symbol of production even if uncertainty had pervaded their ongoing presence for almost twenty years. In mid-2018, after the actual closure the chimneys were the signs of impending change, change on an industrial scale. These chimneys and the wisps of brown coal smoke that formerly rose from their heights are nostalgic emblems of a past now gone. Their meaning has been changed within the very place itself, and for the people who live here. The smoke stacks are a little less threatening, and our view is tinged with a little more nostalgia, as we count down the months and the years away from that defining point in time, the closure. In the last two years we have been witnessing the demolition of the Morwell and Hazelwood power station chimneys altogether. How quickly these icons of the era of industrial electricity production have shifted from modernist symbols of progress to greenhouse pariahs to demolished absences in a deindustrialised landscape.

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Abstract

The Latrobe Valley, Australia, is a resource community in transition. The post-carbon future has yet to be realised, and the immediate future is one of economic uncertainty. A state and national economy was built upon energy production from brown coal (or lignite) since the early 1920s, but the realities of changing international and national markets and economies for coal-fired electricity are seeing its value diminish. The consequences of mining and power generation, of course, were left to be experienced by the residents of the Valley. The 2017 closure of Hazelwood Power Station and the Morwell or Hazelwood open-cut mine (as it has been called since the 2014 mine fire) proved to be the Valley's tipping point for a future without brown coal generation.

This article uses the case study of the Latrobe Valley to explore government and corporate renderings of the transition, and the closure of Hazelwood Power Station in particular. We introduce the concept of "extractive meaning" to understand and theorise the way that narratives are evoked by government and coal-related corporations that use the structures of collective memory and oral history, but that appear to be more akin to practices that seek to codify, confine, and strip popular and local experience of its meaning. Regional memory and oral history are blanketed under a powerful set of discourses. In this exploratory analysis, we contend that in this version of regional restructuring neo-liberalism is given full rein, history and heritage are in flux with strong Government and corporate direction to assist current policy priorities, even whilst dissonant elements of a vernacular interpretation of regional changes are still discernible.