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ARTICLE

Putting a Human Face on It: Gender and Photographic Meaning in a Canadian Women's Coal Mine Campaign

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Abstract

In January 1999, the Canadian government announced their withdrawal from the Cape Breton mining industry with a settlement package for redundant miners, which was considered inadequate by miners and their families. In response, a group of women organized a community-based campaign, United Families (UF), led by two women who traveled to Ottawa to meet national politicians presenting themselves explicitly as "miners' wives." While the UF located their campaign within the context of family and community, as expected of miners' wives, their principal focus was the men disadvantaged by the settlement. Here they strayed onto the terrain of the men's union.

To support their case the women took photographs of miners leaving the pit at the end of a shift and organized them into an album. This became a catalyst for the disjuncture between the gendered expectations associated with female roles, and the women's efforts to represent the interests of the men. Intended as objective evidence in support of their position, the photographs carried a range of complex emotions relating to the women's campaign: They expressed the subjective meanings of the women's relationship with mining and the men photographed, as well as providing material evidence of the condition of the miners. This subjectivity was overlaid onto gendered subtexts inscribed within the history of photography in the public and domestic spheres.

In campaign negotiations the women struggled to control the meaning of the photographic images and their endeavors resulted in only very minor amendments to the original settlement. The UF women's creative use of photography ultimately undermined the legitimacy of the women's negotiations. However, the photographs remain a testament to the history of mining in Cape Breton and to the emotional commitment of women to a partnership with men forged through the sexual division of labor in coal mining.

This article draws upon a range of evidence and theories of gender, activism, and photographic practice to analyze the ways in which the women were disadvantaged in their campaign.

Keywords: coal mining; women's campaign; Cape Breton; photographs

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Introduction

In April 1999, five women campaigners in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, trespassed onto a colliery site with analogue cameras to take photographs of coal miners finishing a shift. The resulting images are a unique record of miners at Phalen Colliery in New Waterford, eight months before it closed.[1] The purpose was to gather evidence in support of the women's campaign to win an improved settlement for miners soon to be made redundant by the colliery closure. They were members of United Families (UF), a community-based organization established in the wake of an announcement that the last two coal mines in Cape Breton would be closed.

The Minister for Resources, Ralph Goodale, had informed miners and their families gathered at the Delta Hotel in Sydney, Nova Scotia, on January 28, 1999, that mining would no longer be subsidized by the government through the Cape Breton Development Corporation (DEVCO). Phalen Colliery would close in 2000, and Prince Mine, with associated operations situated in North Sydney, would be put to auction. If no buyer could be found for the loss-making Prince Mine, it too would close.

The promised compensation over a four-year period of a $68M community development fund was perceived as a weak response to the loss of male work in an area already enduring industrial decline and high levels of unemployment.[2] However, it was the settlement package offered to miners that caused the most frustration. The federal government funded package of $43M allowed a minority of older miners and their families to receive pensions and medical rights up to the age of sixty-five. The remaining majority were mainly younger miners, recruited to the industry in the wake of the 1970s oil crisis.

The Nova Scotia mines had experienced long-term managed decline, interrupted by the oil crisis. Responding to a renewed demand for local coal in the 1970s, DEVCO had invested in new mines, including the opening of Phalen and Prince and associated surface operations, whilst maintaining the closure program of older mines.[3] A thrity-three-year contract with the local power station had suggested a secure future and young men were recruited to the industry. These younger miners were disadvantaged by the closure settlement that calculated levels of severance according to age and length of service. Younger men would receive no pension or medical insurance on the grounds that they could find alternative work. Support of up to $8,000 per person was available for retraining. This offer was seen as inadequate and inequitable, compounding the employment and social difficulties that coal mining families were facing.

By 1999, aware of the lack of profitability, the low quality of their coal, and the difficult underground conditions, mining families were resigned to the demise of their industry: this did not temper the shock when the limits of the settlement were realized. Within days of the announcement, facilitated by the regional office of the United Mine Workers of America, (UMWA), Edna Budden (now Edna Lee Lewis) from Glace Bay, and Bev Brown from New Waterford began organizing a community-based response to bring about an improved settlement. Their combined energies stimulated the creation of UF, for which they acted as co-chairs and representatives.

The women believed that the miners who were offered severance only had been unfairly treated, that pension rights should be improved, and that medical benefits should be extended to all miners. The division between those who qualified for pensions/medical insurance and those who did not militated against the possibility of a

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united response. The women's initial efforts thus highlighted the collective community impact to encourage a coherent response. They began a campaign in association with UMWA representatives, organizing a petition and a local rally, which was attended by over two thousand people on Valentine's Day 1999. Afterward, they turned to political lobbying supported by several locally organized fundraising and celebratory events, which they sustained until the middle of 2000.[4] Only two women could be funded to represent the UF beyond Nova Scotia, and it was Edna and Bev who undertook a punishing schedule of provincial and national meetings with influential politicians and influential groups.[5]

The community-family base of UF activism drew on a substantial tradition of female activism relating to coal mining in the United States and Canada, and was reminiscent of the approach of the British Women Against Pit Closures of 1984–1985 and 1993.[6] The campaign was grounded in the long history of interconnectedness between work, home, and social life, emphasizing labor solidarity, community cohesion, and partnership between men and women. Women identifying as miners' wives, organizing families at the neighborhood level, were understood as supplementary and complementary to male trade unionism. As in the US and British cases, the extremity of the crisis, involving the threat of loss of male employment, and the dynamic impetus of the women's activism, breached the boundaries of the traditional gendered division of labor. As women brought their campaign directly into the political arena, they implicitly challenged the hegemony of the work-based, masculine trade union. When the women representing UF sought to engage with decision-makers, they did so independently and without reference to any political party or trade union, and outside traditional industrial relations and masculine terms of reference. There were no procedural precedents, organizational niceties, nor inherited discursive frameworks to mediate their engagement. The women were motivated by intergenerational knowledge and experience, and by personal feelings and relationships. They had a political perspective, but this was not framed within any ideological/political position. The Cape Breton women's decision to use photographs to support their case about the impact of underground work on miners' bodies must be understood in these terms.

The photographs were intended to ground the terms of the discussion in real lives and make an uncontroversial claim regarding the physical toll of coal mining on workers. An appeal for family photographs had failed, so the women decided to take their own photographs. They were, intended as objective evidence in support of numerical data that they had collected regarding the health of miners. However, the photographs were taken in a relational context and in response to strong feelings about mining. Consequently, they contained a strong subjective charge. This was to have consequences for the use of the photographs in formal negotiations; for the expression of such emotion was suffused with female identities relating to women's place and their emotional labor in mining communities.[7]

Carefully organized into an album bound with Nova Scotia tartan, the introduction of the photographs into the proceedings of one important meeting in Ottawa subverted and disrupted discursive conventions. This article seeks to understand the values inscribed within the images in terms of gender relations in mining life, the gendered dimensions of the struggle of the Cape Breton women to improve the mine closure settlement, and the role played by the photographs.

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The Research

Carol Stephenson contacted UF activists Edna Lee Lewis, Bev Brown, Betty McCloud, and Milly Ghetto during a British Council funded research project initiated by Northumbria University in 2005. By this time, coal mining had ended in Cape Breton. Geological faults at Phalen precipitated closure before the end of 1999 and, no buyers being found, Prince closed in November 2001.[8] The social consequences were exacerbated by the closure of Sydney steelworks in 2001.[9] Ethnographic research by Carol Stephenson and Dave Wray completed in Cape Breton in 2005 and 2006 intended to compare the post-mining economic, social, and cultural environment there with Northeast England.[10] The contextual information for this article derives from those visits, from related informal conversations and interviews, and from a range of published sources.[11] A number of semi-structured interviews were undertaken in Cape Breton by Wray and Stephenson with a local priest, teachers, politicians, union leaders, ex-miners, and finally the small group of UF woman whose stories are the focus of this paper. In these initial interviews, the UF campaign was mentioned only incidentally by the women with reference to the realization of the fears that had informed campaigners regarding impoverishment, ill-health, and the fracturing of traditional social relationships.

Informal email communication between Carol Stephenson and Edna Lee Lewis brought into focus Edna's desire to tell the UF story. A further three telephone interviews were recorded with Edna, Betty McCloud, and Bev Brown in 2012. During these long-distance interviews the significance of the photographs in the UF campaign emerged. Edna sent copies of forty-nine photographs, and in a 2018 telephone interview, offered a commentary regarding her current reading of the images. Considering each photograph in turn Edna spoke about the men portrayed with reference to the experience after mine closures, which frequently referred to economic migration, depression, alcoholism, and the collapse of relationships and marriages. This highlighted the weight of meaning that the images carried and their role in the UF campaign. Subsequently, Stephenson undertook two further long-distance interviews with Bev Brown and Betty McCloud. These two women did not have copies of the photographs as reference points and here the photographs became much more of a prompt for a general discussion about how they were used in the UF campaign, and the meanings attached to their use.

The interview material is complicated by retrospective understanding, tricks of personal memory, accepted collective narratives consolidated over time, and the personal trajectories of the women interviewed and the men photographed. The material must be understood with reference to the problems of oral history accounts in general.[12] For example, there are ethical issues regarding the naming of individuals currently living or living in the remembered past. Opinions are associated with the real names of respondents with the understanding that narratives/facts may be contested and disputed.

There is unevenness of emphasis in our interview material, which distorts the account of the order of events and the personnel present in meetings. Edna's commentary on the photographs is retrospective and our own reading of the images is as outsiders. Documentary research was undertaken to provide a clearer timeline of

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activism, the range of meetings, and the substantive arguments pursued in the UF campaign. Transcripts of committee and legislative meetings, contemporary newspaper reports, and local press opinion pieces offered information that contextualize the women's accounts of the response to the closure settlement. The transcript of the Provincial Assembly committee meeting in May 1999, when Edna and Bev reported the outcome of their first visit to Ottawa, includes a detailed digressive interjection by the two women about the photographs. This account encouraged our view that the meaning of the photographs to the women was worthy of attention in ways that went beyond their simple illustrative value.[13]

Background

The Prince and Phalen mines were situated in North Sydney and New Waterford on the northeastern coast of Cape Breton. These areas were colonized between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, from an industrializing and unsettled Europe, predominantly from Scotland by peoples traumatized by the clearances of the Highlands and islands.[14] The immigrants forged communities based on farming, fishing, and logging. Coal mining began in 1720, becoming the dominant occupation by the early twentieth century. Folk memories of displacement, mining heritage, industrial conflict, and collective strength in adversity, remain culturally present in folk music and in the adoption of the distinctive Cape Breton tartan.[15] Stephenson met Edna Lee Lewis and Milly Ghetto in 2005, at the annual Davis Day event that commemorates the killing of miner William Davis by police during an industrial dispute in 1925. This troubled history continues to distinguish Cape Breton as distinct from mainland Canada.

Intergenerational memory as well as first-hand experience of industrial decline informed the UF campaign around the mine closure settlement. The traumatic ghosts of forced migration, mining disasters, and industrial class conflict were ever-present in the campaign.[16] It was understood that the absence of adequate economic regional investment and personal support, mine closures would precipitate another unwanted wave of outward migration:

> Our fear was that we would lose everything; young people would move away from Cape Breton . . . in part it ended my marriage. . . . After the mines closed, he started going out west, to get money from the huge mines.[17]

> A lot of men went away- out west (to Tar Sands in Alberta); a lot of marriages broke down; some men went into depression and have never come out. It was very tough. We were all beaten down by it, really beaten down. It used to turn my stomach just to think about it. People really struggled. Marriages broke down.[18]

Following the mine closures, the women's fears were all too fully realized as men were forced to migrate for work, community cohesion was fractured, people experienced multiple deprivation, and families were broken.[19]

The campaign focus in 1999 included the need to maintain an employment market in Cape Breton. The UF women had a strong commitment to maintaining Cape

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Breton as a viable place to live and work. Loyalty to place and people was associated with the experience and memory of the friendliness and trust among mining people. Nevertheless, as in mining regions elsewhere, the women in Cape Breton had an ambiguous relationship with the industry. It was the source of their security and identity but extremely dangerous for the men.[20]

The UF women repeatedly referred to the hazards of mining as a principal concern about the inadequacies of the closure settlement:

> My father was a coal miner for over 48 years. After retiring he was diagnosed with silicosis and suffered extremely for years and years until finally, he died last year with that. My biggest fear is how many of our coal miners now have undetected hazardous illnesses from the mines. They will be put out on the street, basically, as it stands right now with no medical plans. That is a very big concern, because I watched my father suffer for years and years with silicosis before his death. . . . I married a coal miner. When he was 24 years old, he was buried underground. It was what we knew. He went back to work with no problem after he recovered over a year. He worked for over 20 more years and after his accident there was the No. 26 explosion. He lost three very close friends who were raised and living very closely on the same street as us. So many of these people have suffered themselves through accidents, they have lost family members and friends.[21]

Whilst Bev[22] suggested that it was "not for me to make a judgement" about men's relationship to the dangers of mining, Edna later admitted:

> Truthfully, I must tell you I was relieved when it [Prince] closed, because I felt it was just a trap, like it was going to take people.[23]

Awareness of the dangers of mining bound women to the cause of the men in ways that are often not fully understood by those who have not experienced mining life. The women's ambiguity about mining was complicated by their dependence on work that was exclusively male and characterized by gender inequality. Nonetheless, a general feeling of regard for men as miners overrode ambiguity whilst the cohesion of community life only made sense with reference to the work of the men in the mines.

> I think mining has . . . carried Cape Breton. It was here for hundreds of years; it was more than just a job, it was part of our culture, it was a way of life. I think it shows that when you look at the conditions that these men worked under—their strength, their dedication to their families, . . . their dedication to community, to be able to do this type of work and the danger that they worked under.[24]

The community-based activism of the women reflected their social position in family and neighborhood life. Such positioning implicitly assumed female and family dependence upon men and mining. Community and industry were differently gendered,

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and their interests were inscribed within different organizations, but these were inextricably interwoven, and not emotionally separate for the women.

The miners' union, US-based UMWA, stood apart from the concerns of the women. Local UMWA activists, and the miners themselves were not passive in the face of the immanent closures. However, UMWA represented their work-based interests in well-defined ways. Inevitably, UF and UMWA, particularly in the person of the local union representative Steve Drake, increasingly diverged in their approach to the prospect of mine closures:

> During the campaign the union had their meeting and we had ours, but the women had no real association with the union. At the beginning they let us use some of their resources and they came to our rallies, but we felt we had to go further to get things done.[25]

The women's determination to take their case directly to Ottawa, the center of political decision-making, exposed the limits of the responsibility of the mining unions whilst simultaneously intruding into union territory.[26]

> The unions wanted to keep us at bay. They wanted us to be behind the scenes—but we were "out there"—we had a lot of press and political success—we opened doors that the unions couldn't get into. The unions were doing what unions do and we were doing something different.[27]

Women who were interviewed claimed that when they had made some headway in their campaign, the union representative, Steve Drake, intervened to subvert their achievement:

> Edna and a party of the women went away to Ottawa and came back with a promise of a pension . . . for all the miners. It would be pro rata based on length of time served but nonetheless there would be a pension for all. . . . But Steve Drake said that they had sole rights to negotiate, and he negotiated a worse deal, no pension agreement for all.[28]

Relationships between UF and UMWA inevitably soured and, according to the women interviewed, confidence in union representatives was lost. The situation came to a head in January 2000, when the Prince miners, frustrated with the inaction of the union, staged an unofficial walk out in support of some of their colleagues who had staged an underground sit-in. The women claimed that the miners had not been supported by their union.[29] The fracture between UMWA and UF was now complete:

> The most disgraceful part was when the miners got desperate . . . and went underground and took over the mine, they did not get the backing of their Union, and in fact, the Union pretended that they were helping them, but from what I have heard, they didn't do anything and when they were coming up . . . they allowed them to come up hiding their heads by themselves. [The union} said if there is any damage down there you will be held accountable.[30]

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The women believed that the activist miners were disempowered and shamed by their union. Perceptions of union failure meant that the UF, built through informal neighborhood networking, became the voice of opposition, and hope for a better outcome:

> You'd get people running up to you, shop keepers and all sorts, wanting an update, some hope. They placed all hope in us.[31]

Driven by their relational commitment to the miners, the women came to carry the whole weight of expectation for an improved outcome:

> Bev said that when she came back into the community, she had to manage the expectations . . . people were hanging on everything she said: "How did it go on? Did it work?" Even with her own husband, she didn't want to disappoint him. There was a hell of a lot of emotion—she was trying to manage her own emotions and other peoples'.[32]

Edna and Bev, as co-chairs of UF, were aware of the enormity of the trust placed in them when they were tasked with taking the miners' case to government ministers in Ottawa and it heightened the emotional pressure they experienced. This was not necessarily wholly negative as it fed their energy and inspired creativity:

> We were inventive doing one thing while planning the next.[33]

> We did other things . . . get a coal miner made of coal and have it presented to Jean Chrétien, the Prime Minister. We did that. The ladies came up with tee-shirts and picks and shovel pins and we had them sent to the Prime Minister and his wife. It was always to keep them in the forefront of their minds—the men.[34]

The first visit to Ottawa was made in late April 1999. The decision to take photographs to support their case was part of this UF's creative drive, unconstrained by bureaucracy or the formalities characteristic of industrial relations settings. The women felt free to move beyond economic and financial discourses, to refer to human values using tools that were expressive and meaningful in those terms.

> What we wanted to do was give the family front, show them the human face of mining—that was what UF was about.[35]

Nevertheless, they perceived the photographs to be supportive of the *objective* case that they wanted to make based on data about the health of miners that they had collected:

> . . . we rang so many hundred miners in a big survey to ask about lung disease so that we had information for the government and the press, so that they knew how many didn't have good health and so couldn't get medical cover.[36]

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The photographs were meant as data, to visually demonstrate the physical condition of miners. In presenting what they believed to be objective information; Edna suggested repeatedly that the women hoped to "shame" the decision-makers into amending the settlement. In this regard the information already went beyond the purely factual: both the survey data and the photographs were perceived by the women to carry a value-based, moral charge. The images were intended to "put the human face" on hard numerical facts, because, as Bev said, 'A picture paints a thousand words.'[37] In use then, they shifted the meaning of the information toward the human and the personal and implicitly bore the weight of the relationship of the women to the men as miners. This impacted significantly upon the negotiations with politicians.

The Photographs

The five UF women who took the photographs trespassed onto colliery territory, normally out of bounds to women. Witnessing the collective condition of the men emerging from the mine shocked them, strengthening their resolve:

> The women were crying . . . we knew they had been doing this for 20 to 30 years. They were soaked. They were chock full of coal dust. . . . It was so overwhelming that I said to Edna, "If I had strength and power before within me to do this, I have it one hundred-fold now. Looking at these men and what they have endured, this is wrong. We must get justice done here."[38]

Taking the photographs provided an opportunity for further discussion with the men:

> We spent a whole day talking to the miners at the site . . . and I think that that just makes us even more powerful because it's a human factor. I think that is what we portrayed in Ottawa.[39]

This was a key moment in the campaign, consolidating the women's emotional commitment to the men, emphasizing their desire to portray the humanity of miners, and reinforcing the trust between the miners and UF.

At the end of the twentieth century, analogue cameras were commonly owned and used, but not usually in everyday life, being reserved rather for recording special occasions. Beyond professional and serious amateur photography, the use of cameras was both circumspect and circumscribed. Taking photographs represented a special and considered moment in the women's campaign, requiring planning, preparation, and decision-making as well as some photographic competence. Two of the cameras taken by the women to the pit yard were "cheap disposables." Edna reported that one of them didn't work. The photographs that were eventually used were mainly taken by Doreen Bishop with an SLR camera requiring some photographic skill to operate effectively. Photographic film available mainly in reels of twenty-four or thirty-six images, limited the margin of error and the film then had to be developed commercially. Accordingly, there was no artifice involved in the production of the prints and the images were not subject to manipulation.

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(1) Miners leaving Phalen mine April 1999.

These portrait photographs show men of different ages, in groups, pairs, or alone, unwashed and in their work clothes. Some miners actively posed for the camera, some appear apprehensive, but there is no sign of resistance to the women. The men were aware of UF and increasingly believed the women to be their last hope for an improved settlement. The photographs are therefore a unique expression of the inter-subjective relationship between the men and women and of the commonality of their interests. It would not have been possible for a professional photographer, whose access depended on formal processes of consent, to take such a set of images, and it is questionable that the men would have acquiesced to being photographed under such circumstances. By taking these photographs and presenting them in the public domain of the campaign, the women were subverting the "otherness" attached to most mining images and were claiming a center stage for their own concerns.[40] These images enabled the subjective situation of the men to be revealed through the particularity of their relationship with the women. The camera was an objective tool, but in their photography, the women were doing more than "capturing" an objective moment. The resulting images have meaning beyond what is written on the surface.

The focus of the photographs is primarily upon the men's faces. As "the prime symbol of the self" faces represent a deep humanity.[41] Portraits stimulate the observer

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(2) "*What we wanted to do was …show them the human face of mining*" (Betty 2012)

to identify with the image-as-person. In 2018, Edna commented on the men's eyes, seeing in one water that might be tears, and in others anxiety. Facial expressions provoke empathetic responses and as such solicit sympathetic understanding. In Cape Breton, this focus acted as a counter to financial calculations that objectified the men and reduced them to numbers. Throughout their campaign, the women sought to shift the terms of consideration toward the consequences of the closure settlement for living people. Photographs were a means to achieve this. The ageing impact of mining was a key trope in the campaign narrative:

> Mining ages people. . . . We were able to say, "look at these people, they are young, but they look old." Twenty years down a coal mine is like forty in any other work.[42]

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(3) "*These photos did have an impact because you know they were not just hearing voices come out – they were seeing people they were making decisions about*". (Edna 2012)

The focus was upon the plight of younger miners, but the photographs were of miners young and old, stressing both their common condition and their otherness from the women photographers and from the political decision-makers. The point was to highlight the special case for medical benefits:

> I see the grime, the dust, and the dirt on their face and on their clothing, I can only visualise what is inside their body and in their lungs. So, they would have been affected very much, health wise, by working underground all those years.[43]

The women saw "Beautiful men"[44] in the miners' images, understanding the quality of personhood that underpinned the sacrifices of miners to provide for their families. This perception of beauty was inspired by the relationship of the women to the living miners, rather than any "objective" aesthetic characteristic of the photograph and the women treated the photographs with the care that they believed was worthy of their human quality.

The organization of the prints into an album bound in Nova Scotia tartan emphasized the significance of mining to Cape Breton identity. It also highlighted the familiarity of mining relationships by drawing on the conventions of the family album. This positioned the photographs within a domestic tradition of family

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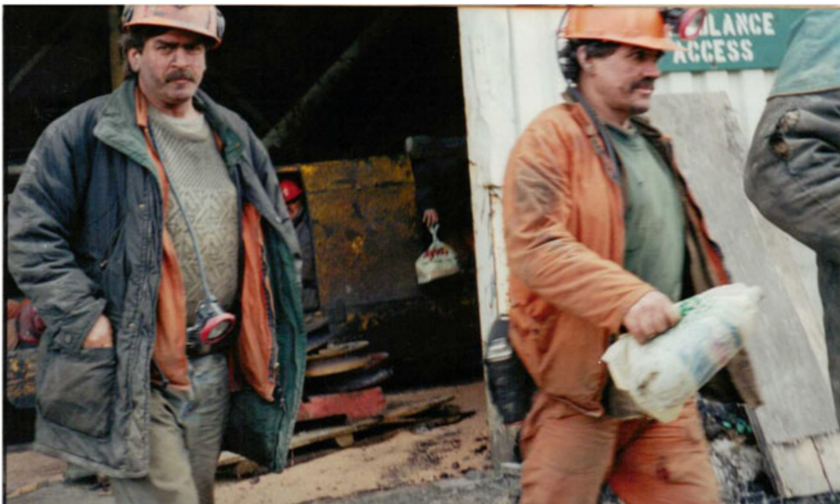
(4) "*They were choc-full of coaldust*" (Bev, 1999)

(5) "*I see the grime, the dust and the dirt on their face and on their clothing. I can only visualise what is inside their body and their lungs*" (Edna 2018)



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(6) "*Despite what I said, there are miners who loved jobs they loved being in a coal mine*" (Edna 2012)

photography, which historically has been largely curated by women.[45] The album format emphasized personal interconnectedness and the "specialness" of a community of belonging in which mining was central. Bev and Edna believed that in presenting their album, as a mother might open a family album for friends, they would connect personally with decision-makers, eliciting recognition and sympathy based on a shared understanding of familial love. This family allusion, underpinned by love, was deeply felt:

> Where we grew up and we saw these men everyday coming home from work and so there was that love there for them.[46]

Feelings of love in mining life, especially at moments of threat, encourage women to override the realities of gender inequality in favor of the broader class solidarities needed to deal with the crisis. Ironically, in the process, the traditional condition of women, dependent on the male mining wage, is reconfirmed, curtailing the potential of female activism to challenge gender inequalities.[47] This apparent contradiction

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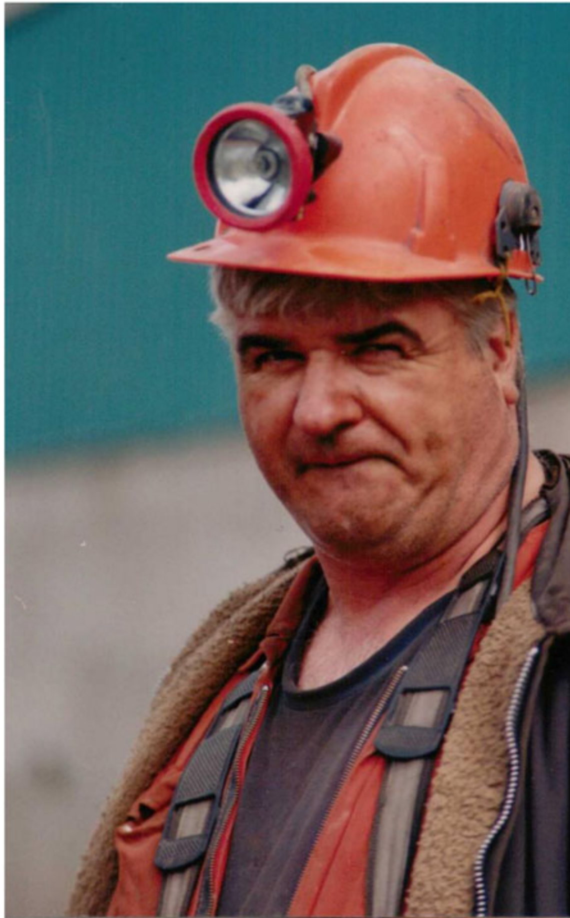
(7) "*These were men in their 40s, 50s and 60s…these are the people you are destroying….we were trying to put a face on it*" (Bev 2012)



informed the way in which Edna and Bev presented themselves and used their photographs in the context of their campaign negotiations.

Ottawa Negotiations

When Edna and Bev travelled to Ottawa in April 1999, to engage formally in political negotiation, they entered a traditionally masculine environment. However, they were granted *special* access to this environment specifically as *female* campaigners. They were not offered opportunities to plead their case as representatives of the men—that was the job of the union—but rather as dependents of the men, and principally as miners' wives. These were the terms in which "doors were opened."[48]

The sincere, sympathetic response of male decision-makers to the women's case was implicitly gendered and outside the hard economic priorities of politicians that

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(8) *"We took the pictures, five of us and they were beautiful. They were close ups, they had coal dust you could see the water on their clothes"* (Bev, 1999)

restricted scope for concessions. Consequently, as Bev concluded, "A lot of political people claimed to be supportive but were not."[49]

Edna and Bev were alert to the fact that it was as "authentic" female representatives that they gained a hearing and believed that they were more likely to be taken seriously by presenting themselves as "respectable married women."

> We began every meeting by saying, "we are just two miners' wives." We always dressed the part—respectful, no yelling and screaming. We were next to some armed guards when we were trying to meet with the PM, and they let us through because of how we behaved and who we were.[50]

Bev's comments betray self-consciousness in playing down political intentions and reacting to external views of "miners' wives" that implied the need for role-playing. Such role playing in the search for legitimacy re-inscribes women in traditional gendered subject positions, constraining their agency to the arenas of family and community in the process.[51] The need to respond to traditional expectations of mining femininity and its family-community location created tension with the women's desire to be accepted as serious actors in the industrial- political sphere. Edna and Bev did not wish to disturb traditional gender roles but were engaged in a struggle in which their focus was the industrial relations concern of the miners.

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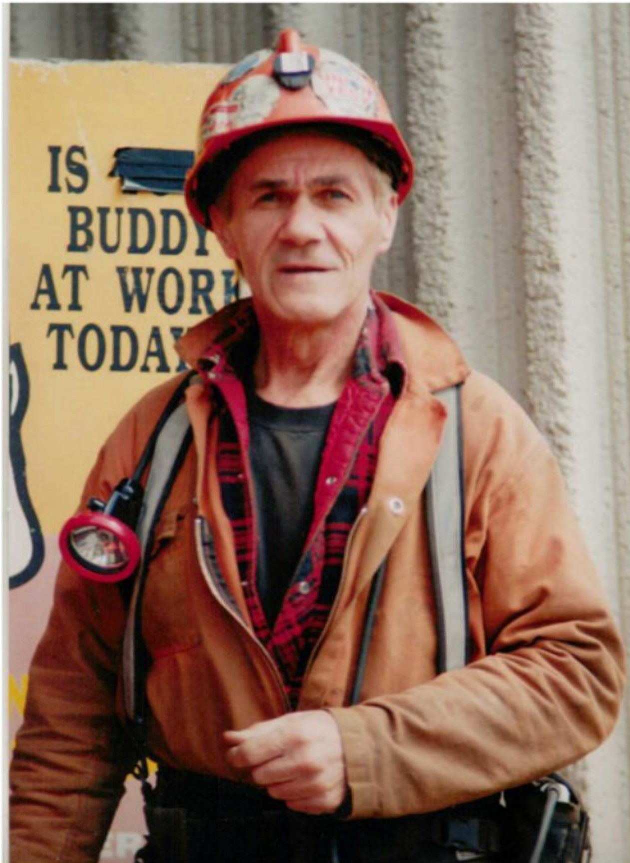
(9) "*Mining ages people. We were able to say look at these people they are young, but they look old. 20 years down a coalmine is like 40 in any other work*". (Bev 2012)



They were inadvertently invading union territory, whilst transgressing the gendered boundaries inscribed in female subject positions. Their self-presentation as "only miners' wives" was in tension with their claim to factually represent the case of men with whom they had dependent, emotional, relationships. Their self-presentation granted them access to political brokers, while simultaneously obstructing their efforts to have their case heard impartially. It distracted from the validity of their data-based evidence in favor of an emphasis on their personal-emotional investment in the men. In this context, the emotional weight within the photographs obscured their informational value.

What began as a process of humanizing the evidence of the impact of mining on the male body, evolved into a process of humanizing the photographic prints. Carrying a weight of expectations from "back home" and performing according to perceived expectations of their gender position, the photograph album transformed into an expression of the power of the womens feelings for the men. The photographs began to substitute for the absent miners. The materiality of the album that could be

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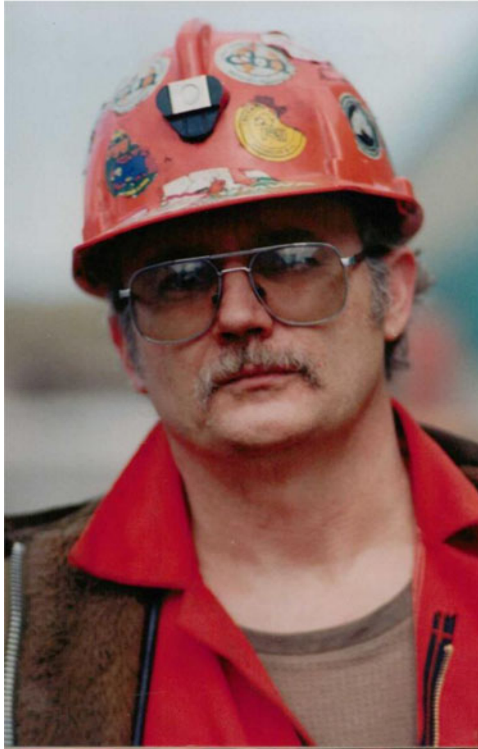
(10) "*When we grew up, we saw these men coming home from work every day and so there was love for them*" (Edna 2012).



presented, touched, passed around, studied, and explained abetted this substitution process in which the women sought to use the images to provoke shame and sympathy in decision-makers.

In the Ottawa meeting, Edna, and Bev's attempt to "put a human face" on their evidence by "laying out the album on the table," and introducing individual miners animated their own deeply held emotions. When they encountered resistance, they felt exposed and vulnerable and their efforts to use the photographs as hard evidence were confounded. Once their emotions were triggered, the women no longer faced decision-makers as equals, but as supplicants. Any shame that politicians and bureaucrats might have felt about the impact of their economic decisions was thereby deflected by embarrassed and antagonistic responses to emotion-laden material that did not conform to the discursive conventions of formalized procedures of negotiation.

Organizational decisions-making conventions are designed to facilitate rational and orderly discussion and consequently exclude emotional considerations. The women who were already defined in terms of their affective relationship with the miners were disadvantaged by these conventions. The introduction of the portrait album disturbed the whole edifice of rational decision-making:

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(11) "I *said 'this is a man…he is short two years from a pension'. He was full of coal dust. I said he 'look he is soaked to the bone'……he has been down there for 7-8 hours*" (Bev 1999)

> When we showed it, . . . I said . . . this is a man, 28 years he is short two years from a pension, he was full of coal dust. I said, "Look, he is soaked to the bone. He came up, he has been down there for seven to eight hours. . . . Imagine if it was your father and someone did that to him? He is a Crown Corporation employee just like you are. Imagine if he was down there for 30 years and suddenly, the government said, 'Okay, now we don't need you anymore.'"[52]

> We were both crying, and we passed the pictures around, "look these are not young men." We must have broken down two or three times. . . . That meeting got very nasty; we were very emotional. . . . We said, "These are the people you are destroying! Look at them!" We were trying to put a face on it.[53]

Even when presented as objective evidence, the portraits stirred human recognition. However, the terms of the affective response depend upon the subject position

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of the viewer. Despite their trust in the power of human images, the UF women's response to the men's' faces did not necessarily correspond with the understanding of the politicians asked to consider them. Although some negotiators seemed moved by the images, their concern failed to give the women any greater purchase. Edna claimed that she perceived sympathy among some of those present, singling out the advisor to the finance minister:

> I especially saw compassion in his eyes, and he tried to talk to us, and I think he really felt the sense of what we were trying to say . . . I believe we touched [him] most.[54]

Significantly, Edna is not suggesting that the advisor was convinced by their arguments and evidence, but rather "touched" by their sentiment. His sympathy encouraged Edna and Bev to believe that they might show their photograph album in their meeting with the prime minister, Jean Chrétien. However, their senator, who had facilitated the meeting, discouraged the use of the photographs:

> He said, "Leave the album." We didn't want to do something that would jeopardise the fight. . . . He was our Senator, so we took that advice, and we ended up actually giving him the album of the miners and really it was intended for the Prime Minister.[55]

The senator believed he was "helping" them to be taken more seriously. Edna and Bev appreciated his efforts and did not object to his keeping the album. Yet he removed the medium that most forcefully symbolized the terms of the women's commitment to the men and their determination to keep the men at the center of their discussions. Consequently, they were forced not only to continue to perform as traditional miners' wives, but also to subdue the power of their emotions and accommodate their approach to procedures in which the connotations of being a miner's wife devalued their intervention.

The legitimacy of the women's presence as miners' wives, which would have afforded some emotional leeway, was contradicted by Edna and Bev's insistence that they were primarily representing the miners whose absent presence was manifest in the photographs. The photographs were intended to give the men a "place at the table" and the materiality of the prints substituted for the material presence of the men. Later Edna suggested that they were not fully conscious of what they were doing:

> Now I see that is what we did. We brought them into the meeting and so that put the meeting on a different level. Actually, [the negotiators] had to regroup after it was all over, they were so shook.[56]

The co-operation of the miners in the efforts of UF to pursue their case, exemplified in their willingness to allow the women to take their photographs, informed the women's belief in the legitimacy of their right to negotiate on behalf of the men. The photographs expressed this claim to legitimacy, but this was not acknowledged by politicians. Legitimacy was confined to the unions. Encountering the UF women partially, as representatives only of family and community, displaced the photographs and consigned them entirely to the domestic, relational arena.

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Understanding the Photographs

Women have used photography as an expressive medium since its inception. However, professional, and serious amateur, photography, using expensive equipment, has been historically male dominated. Women have been more circumscribed in their subject matter, limited by gender mores and the realities of female domestic responsibilities.[57] They have had more photographic agency in the domestic sphere using less expensive or technically complex cameras. The disposable cameras brought to the colliery yard by two of the UF women are a case in point.

The gendered fault lines in photography are characterized particularly by a disjuncture between the conventions of professional and amateur, public, and private (domestic) photography that includes different technical expectations. Although any claim that photography can unproblematically capture "reality" has been comprehensively challenged, the common-sense supposition is that the camera can "bear witness" to real things, places, and events. Documentary photography tends to emphasize the "otherness" and separation of the photographer from the subject even when participant in the situation observed.[58] Not all public photography is "documentary," but standards of objectivity or rules of interpretation that account for subjectivities are applicable to all images that are used in truth claims. Such standards and rules are irrelevant in domestic photography wherein the subjectivity of the photographer and relationships between photographer and photographed are assumed and may be the primary motivation. The use and display of photographs reinforces the distinction between the public document and the domestic image. Professional photography operates as both "art" and "information" and is available for critical interpretation. Domestic photography is held within families and communities, displayed within the home and local institutions where critical reading seems inappropriate.

The UF women's photographs demonstrate technical competence, and the subject matter aligns with public documentary traditions in which industrial images are placed. Objectively, they simply show miners in their work clothes. The images lack names, date, place, or political context. When this information is provided, they become historical documents recording an important moment in the history of Cape Breton coal mining and are valuable in these terms. Yet the photographs were produced within the domestic photography tradition. This is particularly evident in the use of the album and in the women's belief that qualities of love and beauty are self-evident in the images. The meaning of the campaign photographs derives from the women's relationship to the men rather than to the photographs themselves, and the volatility of the images as presented in political/bureaucratic negotiations resides in the transgression of the gendered fault lines associated with the division between public and domestic in the history of analogue photography.

In political activism, photographs used to record events and to communicate issues have been mainly produced and mobilized within the masculine inflected conventions of "public" and "professional" documentary photography. For example, huge numbers of photographs were taken by "participant observers" during the 1984–1985 UK miners' strike, some have become iconic images directly communicating the nature of that dispute.[59] The photographs taken by the UF women were not intended as documents in this sense but as integral evidence in support of their campaign. This

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is unusual in the history of politically informed photography, and the political negotiators in Ottawa would have had no reference points from which to interpret the significance of the images.

Domestic photography has been used transgressively in the public domain, notably for example, by the Mothers of the Missing in Argentina.[60] Here, photographs produced in the domestic sphere representing affective familial relationships were used to disrupt the public silence surrounding missing people. As public documents, those domestic photographs, which would otherwise have remained within the arena of private grief, powerfully disrupted the public-domestic, political-personal divide. The UF photographs were disruptive in a different way, defying easy classification: They were industrial and familial, political and personal, devised within a domestic tradition but produced and deployed as public documents.

The camera can be a democratizing tool for disadvantaged people. bell hooks points to the curation of photographs in the homes of Black people wherein the Black gaze and private values run counter to the public, colonial gaze on Blackness dominating conditions of racial segregation.[61] In Cape Breton, the women's photographs operate in a similar vein in relation to class but go further by taking the images into the public-political arena. Their photographs of men leaving work in a dying industry, which had shaped the existence of a community for over two centuries, and their inclusion in the familial space of an album, can be understood as both an act of evidencing and of self-definition, asserting an alternative vision of what is valuable to that contained within the narratives of those who held decision-making power over miners and their families. However, it was ultimately a vision of the powerless that, when it touched the sympathies of decision-makers, was experienced at the least as disruptive and at the worst threatening. Unsurprisingly, the UF campaign won only a minor concession to the terms of the settlement.[62]

Conclusion

The photographs were removed from the public gaze at an early stage in the UF campaign and have remained in domestic keeping ever since. They must be now understood in the context of the disappointed hopes of the UF campaigners and the harsh economic and social consequences of mine closures. The retreat into private lives to deal with the consequences of mine closures and the failure of the campaign is manifest in the keeping and "putting away" of the set of images that continue to emit their emotional charge.

During the campaign, the photographs were not the subject of reflective reading, and their complexity was not delineated. As documentary evidence of the impact of mining on male bodies the prints were part of the armory that the women took with them to make their best case. Yet even in their mobilization as objective evidence, the intention of the women "to put a human face" on their campaign, meant that from the outset the photographs were imbued with the relational subjectivities of the women and their feelings for the men.

No stable set of meanings adhered to the photographs themselves. It would have been impossible for Edna and Bev to predict that in using the album to express their feelings about the injustices visited upon the miners, they would become entrenched

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more firmly in their affective feminine subject positions. The very power of the photographs for the women was indicative not only of the powerlessness of the men to be invited to the negotiating table, but of their own powerlessness as women to comprehensively represent the men's interests.

The complexity-in-use and the volatility of interpretation attaching to an apparently simple set of photographs taken by a group of campaigning women, illustrates the difficulties of controlling the meaning of images. In the context of political campaigning, photography can be a powerful tool but in the public arena of industrial relations, there is no mechanism through which emotional responses can be contained. These matters become particularly important in the contemporary social climate in which digital images have become an integral feature of the lexicon of relationships and decision-making. A much more nuanced understanding is necessary, including the gendered meanings inscribed in the history of photography, if the power of such images is to be harnessed to moral and political causes campaigning around questions of justice.

Notes

1. Alan Sekula, "Reading an Archive: Photography Between Labour and Capital" in *Visual Culture: The* Reader, Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, eds. (London, 1999).
2. In 1996, unemployment in the Cape Breton was 25.7 percent in New Waterford, 27.1 percent in Glace Bay, and 30.3 percent in Sydney Mines, www.gov.ns.ca (accessed on October 4, 2020). See D. Wray and C. Stephenson, "Standing the gaff: Immiseration and its consequences in the de-industrialized mining communities of Cape Breton Island," *Capital and Class* 36 (2): 323–39.
3. DEVCO comprised two arms—one initially charged with managing the decline of the coal industry and the other intended to foster economic-social development. Following the 1973 Oil Crisis, Phalen, Prince, and the Lingan mines were opened as new enterprises and miners were recruited. The older collieries were closed. Increasing costs of production, loss of markets, and competition from cheaper coal imports during the 1980s reversed the fortunes of the collieries.
4. The women talked about letter writing, data gathering, family social events, a fundraising concert, a flea market, and a fancy-dress protest: Marie MacSween, "The Road to Resistance: The Stories of Four Cape Breton Women," Centre for Newfoundland Studies (MA thesis, Memorial University, 2004), www.research.library.mun.ca (accessed on October 5, 2020).
5. An account of political meetings was given to the provincial government by Bev Brown and Edna Lee Lewis, in *Report to Standing Committee on Economic Development*, Halifax, Tuesday, May 11, 1999, p. 27, https://nslegislature.ca/fr/legislative-business/committees/standing/economic-development/archive/economic-development/ed990511.htm (accessed on October 6, 2020). The provenance of the National Women's Caucus is unclear—possibly the National Liberal women's Caucus.
6. For Britain, see Meg Allen, "Carrying on the Strike: The Politics of Women Against Pit Closures into the 1990s" (University of Manchester, PhD thesis, 2000); Jean Spence, "Women, Wives and the Campaign Against Pit Closures in Co. Durham: Understanding the Vane Tempest Vigil," *Feminist Review* 60 (Spring 1996): 33–60; Jean Spence and Carol Stephenson, "'Side by Side With Our Men?' Women's Activism, Community and Gender in the 1984–85 British Miners' Strike," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 75 (1): 68–84. For the United States and Canada, see B. Kingsolver, *Holding the Line: Women and the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983* (Ithaca, NY, 1989); *A Wives' Tale*, directed by Martin Duckworth, Sophie Bissonnette and Joyce Rock, 1980, written by Bissonnette and Rock, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0137249/ (accessed on October 4, 2020).
7. J. Zeng, "The politics of emotion in grassroots feminist protest," *The Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 15 (1): 41–52; H. Flam and D. King, eds., *Emotions and Social Movements* (London, 2005); S. Franzway, "Women Working in a Greedy Institution: Commitment and Emotional Labour in the Union Movement" *Gender, Work and Organisation* 7 (4): 258–68; James M. Jasper,

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"Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty years of theory and research," *Annual Review of Sociology* 37 (14.1–14.19): doi 10.1146/annurev-soc-081309-150015.

8. "Cape Breton Mine to Close," *Globe and Mail*, Sydney, Nova Scotia, May 17, 2001, www.theglobeandmail.com (accessed on October 4, 2020). "Ottawa shuts down last coal mine in Cape Breton," *CBC News*, May 16, 2001, www.cbc.ca (accessed on October 4, 2020); Sharon Montgomery-Dupe, "Like a drive-by shooting," *Cape Breton Post*, January 27, 2019, www.capebretonpost.com (accessed on October 4, 2020).

9. Lachlan MacKinnon, *Deindustrialization on the Periphery: An Oral History of Sydney Steel, 1945–2001* (PhD thesis, Concordia University, 2016).

10. D. Wray & C. Stephenson, (2012). 'Standing the gaff': Immiseration and its consequences in the de-industrialised mining communities of Cape Breton Island. *Capital & Class*, 36 (2): 323–338. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309816812437925D; D. Wray, "'Daddy Lives at the Airport': The Consequences of Economically Driven Separation on Family Life in the Post-Industrial Mining Communities of Cape Breton," *Employee Responsibility and Rights Journal* (2012): doi:10.1007/S10672-012-9196-4.

11. Standing Committee on Natural Resource and Government Operations, Wednesday, May 17, 2000; Nova Scotia Legislature: Hansard, Resolution No. 2521, Dr. John Hamm, https://nlegislature.ca/legislative-business/hansard-debates/assembly-57-session-1/57_1_h99apr01.htm (accessed on October 4, 2020); Senate of Canada, Ottawa, Proceedings of the Special Committee of the Senate on the Cape Breton Development Corporation: Issue 1 – Evidence (March 17, 1997) Sitting, *https://sencanada.ca/en/Content/Sen/committee/352/dev2/01evb-e* (accessed on October 4, 2020); and Issue 2 – Evidence (November 19th, 1997), https://sencanada.ca/en/Content/Sen/committee/361/devc/02ev-e (accessed on 4th October 2020); https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/362/NRGO/Evidence/EV1040356/nrgoev34-e.htm (accessed on 6th October 2020). Newspaper reports include: Douglas Martin, "When Nova Scotia Mines Die, Hopes Perish Too," *New York Times* (April 26, 1984), Section A, p2, www.nytimes.com (accessed on 7th October 2020); Sharon Montgomery-Dupe, "Like a drive-by shooting," Cape Breton Post, January 27, 2019, www.capebretonpost.com (accessed on October 4, 2020); "Cape Breton Mine to Close," *Globe and Mail*, Sydney, Nova Scotia, (May 17, 2001), www.theglobeandmail.com (accessed on October 4, 2020); "Ottawa shuts down last coal mine in Cape Breton," *CBC News* (May 16, 2001), www.cbc.ca (accessed on October 3, 2020). Related primary research includes: Lachlan MacKinnon, *Deindustrialization on the Periphery: An Oral History of Sydney Steel, 1945–2001* (PhD thesis, Concordia University, 2016); Marie MacSween, "The Road to Resistance: The Stories of Four Cape Breton Women," Centre for Newfoundland Studies (MA thesis, Memorial University, 2004), www.research.library.mun.ca (accessed on October 5, 2020).

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