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## Wyoming: A State in Fantasy

Wyoming has built itself on coal. As of 2013, mining accounted for approximately 35 percent of Wyoming's GDP, making it the most mining dependent state in the entire nation (Ballard). Wyoming produces 41% of the United States' coal which is more than the next six top producing states combined (Wyoming State Geological Survey). The profit, jobs, and product produced by the coal industry have all transcended their normal boundaries and become both the economic and cultural foundation that the state has built itself on. The masculine ethos and conservative politics of the state are predicated on the coal industry, and Wyoming understands itself through the lens of a coal-driven society. Thus, much is at stake for the state as the coal industry continues to decline. In response, Wyoming's residents have constructed a fantasy of the coal industry being threatened only by the Democratic party and its political agenda. This fantasy can be defined through Slavoj Žižek's understanding of fantasy as being rooted in a fundamental, Lacanian approach.

This fantasy keeps the desire for coal to continue to be an economic force and a cultural informant alive by maintaining the belief that enjoyment could be achieved if only "the other", in this case the Democrats, had not stolen the enjoyment of the thriving coal industry from Wyoming. The achievement of the fantasy remains seemingly attainable because Wyoming has created an embodied form, a tangible "other", that is responsible for their stolen enjoyment. This fantasy has become detrimental to the state of Wyoming because it misconstrues the reality that coal is not coming back, and it eradicates the ability for Wyoming to begin diversifying its economy and finding other modes of identity and enjoyment.

Slavoj Žižek explains that a community is created by shared enjoyment, what he names, "the Thing." The Thing is a multi-faceted concept which consists not only of its "feasts, its

rituals of mating, [and] its initiation ceremonies” (Žižek 201), but also of the belief that these components make us who we are and allows us to become members of our community. As Žižek writes, “the national Thing exists as long as the members of the community believe in it” (Žižek 202). For the state of Wyoming, the Thing has become the coal industry. It provides the fiscal means for maintaining the rituals that comprise Wyoming’s “way of life,” while simultaneously creating and informing the culture in which those rituals are enjoyed. The coal industry becomes the “bond linking together its members” (Žižek 201) and Wyoming citizens retain “a shared relationship” (Žižek 201) with it.

In an article written for California Sunday Magazine, author Abe Strep went to Gillette, Wyoming, the city located in the heart of Powder River Basin, where the majority of Wyoming’s coal is produced. He interviewed several different residents, exploring the culture and lifestyle of the state’s most infamous coal town. Strep found that, “Everyone I met said that the community’s bond was the best part of life in Gillette” (Strep). According to Žižek, this bond is based on the shared relationship to the Thing, in Wyoming’s case, the coal industry. The people in Gillette, and the larger Wyoming community, feel that shared sense of community due to their shared rituals of life, which are made possible by access to the coal industry.

The coal industry has become the literal basis for Wyoming’s “way of life.” The money it produces is the largest and the strongest influence in the state’s shared relationship to the industry and that money helps foster a sense of community. In 2014, taxes on coal accounted for approximately a quarter of the state’s revenue, and from 2005 to 2015, the industry provided an approximate 1.9 billion dollars to public schools in the state (Strep). According to a fact sheet, compiled with information from the Energy Information Administration and the Office of Natural Resource Revenue, “Federal mineral royalty receipts help fund schools and colleges,

highway and road construction, city and town budgets and the state's budget reserve" (*Fact Sheet: Federal Coal Royalties and their Impact on Western States* 1). The residents of Wyoming enjoy well-maintained roads, high-quality public education, pristine state parks, and access to affordable college, all due to the revenue generated by the coal industry. Coal "appears as what gives plentitude and vivacity to [Wyoming's] life" (Žižek 201).

This coal-funded way of life adheres to a conservative culture. According to a 2017 Gallup poll, Wyoming is the most conservative state in the nation, with 49 percent of its residents identifying themselves as conservative, and only 14 percent identifying themselves as liberal (Gallup). Speer's article about Gillette, "Coal. Guns. Freedom: A Week in the Life of the Town that Keeps Your Lights On", exposes the coal industry's cultural manifestations that help to form and frame the conservative culture. The head engineer of Cloud Peak's Cordero Rojo mine has a sticker on his hard hat that reads, "COALS GUN FREEDOM". At a pro-coal rally, then Congresswoman Cynthia Lummis exclaimed to the crowd, "We should use what God has given us!" (Streep), meaning that Wyoming should continue extracting coal from the mines. Out of jealousy for the athletic prowess and wealth of the Gillette high school athletics, high school students around the state call the Gillette Camels of Campbell County, the "Campbell County Cocksuckers" (Streep). A masculine ethos dominates the state's narrative, as seen in men like Shawn Beeson. Beeson helped move the Belle Fourche River to run through a Gillette mining site and stated in an interview, "'We're proud of the work we do'... 'People say we're raping the earth. Well, it's better than when we found it!'" (Streep). The casual use of the term rape and the belief that the river is better because of it reflects the crippling masculinity of the entire town.

Studies have been conducted on the masculine ethos that surrounds mining communities. Shannon Bell and Yvonne Braun cite a 2010 study done by sociologists, Shannon Bell and

Richard York that explored masculinity in the coal mines of Central Appalachia and found that, “the hegemonic masculinity of the coalfield region of Central Appalachia has historically been, and continues to be, tied to coal mining and the coal industry more generally” (Bell and Braun 798-799). Bell and Braun cite yet another study, writing:

Yarrow argues that coal mining has been “socially constructed as the epitome of ‘men’s work,’” and Beckwith (2001, 310) contends that the Central Appalachian coal-mining workforce has been so male dominated that it has created “a context in which ‘miner’ and ‘male’ [have] become conflated, a conflation that is so deeply ingrained that it is virtually uneducable.” (Bell and Braun 799)

As illustrated in the interviews with local Gillette miners, the same masculinity found in the Appalachians has entrenched itself in the mines of Wyoming.

This masculine and conservative way of life is threatened. A Research and Planning report found that between 2014 and 2016 Wyoming lost over 1,000 coal jobs due to the economic downturn in the energy industry and that this loss resulted in the disappearance of \$11 millions worth of salaries that used to support the Wyoming economy (Richards). A report published by the Center on Global Energy Policy found that the drop in coal-related tax revenue, combined with the decline in oil and gas-related revenue reduced the funding for public education by 25 percent in Wyoming (Houser, Bordoff, and Marsters 15). This loss of money and jobs illustrates that Wyoming’s way of life is undergoing a change that can be felt at the individual level. The cuts create tangible effects that can be felt by the citizens of Wyoming. As Tom Gallagher, manager of the Research and Planning Division of the Wyoming Department of Workforce Services, said in an interview with Heather Richards, ““That’s money not spent on car repairs, haircuts, groceries ... This is something that’s not terribly visible. It’s something that

quietly works its way through the system” (Richards). The financial decline is a threat to Wyoming’s way of life, to Wyoming’s precious Thing, the coal industry.

Here, in desperation, is where Wyoming created an Other. With the price of coal plummeting, and the state finances suffering, the citizens began to see a threat to their relationship with the Thing. Žižek writes, “This relationship toward the Thing, structured by means of fantasies, is what is at stake when we speak of the menace to our ‘way of life’ presented by the Other” (Žižek 201). He continues:

National identification is by definition sustained by a relationship toward the Nation qua Thing. This Nation-Thing is determined by a series of contradictory properties. It appears to us as “our Thing” (perhaps we could say *cosa nostra*), as something accessible only to us, as something “they,” the others, cannot grasp; nonetheless it is something constantly menaced by “them.” (Žižek 201)

Wyoming’s national, or communal, identification is sustained by its relationship to the coal industry. As Žižek writes, “A nation *exists* only as long as its specific *enjoyment* continues to be materialized in a set of social practices and transmitted through national myths that structure these practices” (Žižek 202). Wyoming represents the nation in this case, and its existence appears to be at threat due to the change in social practices being suggested by the left. The Democrats, with their adherence to protective climate regulations, renewable energy, and other progressive legislations are alienated from understanding the Thing. The Democrats’ culture, politics, and way of life are all inherently different from the core of Wyoming’s voting base, and in a state that is comprised of less than 14 percent of self-identified liberals, they become an easy group to transform into the Other. To a majority of Wyoming voters, the Democrats seemingly cannot grasp the importance of the culture or the industry that is built on coal, because their lives are not inextricably linked to and predicated on it, yet, they pose a constant threat to its existence.

As Žižek claims, “The basic paradox is that our Thing is conceived as something inaccessible to the other and at the same time threatened by him” (Žižek 203).

The creation of the other was magnified and solidified in the 2008 election of President Barack Obama, as a new era of culture and economic change was ushered in. Only 32.7 percent of Wyoming residents voted for President Obama, and the state’s citizens were aggravated when he began implementing his Clean Power Plan that aimed at cutting the level of emissions from 2005 by 26 percent before 2025. In his article, Strep exposed some of the thoughts about President Obama from local Wyoming residents:

I went into the cheese shop, where the owner, who wore a JESUS SAVES belt buckle, told me that President Obama was a Muslim. Such sentiments would, over the course of the week, become routine. To ask about the president was to invite vitriol. It was as though one man had single-handedly fabricated global warming, designed the solar panel, and created the hydraulic-fracturing technology that has allowed natural gas producers to undercut the coal industry. “That black sonuvabitch in Washington” was the phrase used by a man with thinning dyed blond hair and a gold chain. (Strep)

The racist remarks about Obama indicate the process of othering that occurred in 2008. Wyoming’s population of 585,501 people is staggeringly homogenous, 92.8 percent of its residents are white, according to the U.S. census Bureau. When President Obama began implementing changes that impacted Wyoming’s culture, the state viewed him as an Other, intent on destroying their way of life with his oppositional views, a process that was exacerbated by racist sentiment. Obama threatened not only the coal industry, but also the homogeneity that Wyoming residents had come to believe was normative.

A majority of Wyoming expressed similar sentiments towards President Obama’s policies. Wyoming Magazine wrote an article stating, “The federal government is essentially using its power to crush an industry. Instead of allowing capitalism to control the energy market

they are artificially killing the coal industry by burying it in bureaucracy, taxes and red tape. In Wyoming we are offended by these actions” (Wyoming Magazine). From the outset, the citizens and politicians in Wyoming conflated the environmental regulations with an attack on not only the industry, but an attack on Wyoming’s culture. Wyoming’s Governor, Matt Mead was resounding in his disapproval of the plan, and joined twenty-three other states in suing the EPA. Governor Mead believed that Wyoming’s future was compromised in the plan and he told Stephanie Joyce in an interview:

I think that the energy strategy overall is I want to make sure we have a way to responsibly develop our minerals in an environmentally sound way. That we can do so and not only meet what other states are doing but frankly set the example for the country on how to go about doing this, so that 10 years, 50 years from now, we can say, we have number one uranium reserves, number one in coal, top ten in oil and gas and we’ve continued to develop those. We have protected our environment, we have found the right balance and that we’ve provided the wealth to the citizens of this state that resulted from that development, that builds our schools, builds our roads, funds our family services, funds our department of health. And that we do it in a way that 50 years from now, we still love the look, the feel the taste of Wyoming. (Joyce)

Matt Mead draws a causation between the new regulations and the end of Wyoming as it currently exists, and hopes to adjust the approach to climate change, something he admitted he is a skeptic of. He wants to maintain, “the look, the feel, the taste of Wyoming” which he believes is under threat from the new regulations.

Wyoming has helped sustain the notion of the Other by investing in other fantasies, such as one coined by Imre Szeman, “techno-utopianism.” Techno-utopianism is, “a discourse employed by government officials, environmentalists, and scientists from across the political spectrum” in which “scientific advances will enable access to oil resources hitherto too expensive to develop ... while simultaneously devising solutions for carbon emissions” (Szeman 812). Techno-utopianism allows the collective community to avoid actually solving the energy

and climate crisis by believing that future technology will mitigate the problem. As another bid to keep coal and the culture alive, Wyoming politicians and citizens have been perpetuating the myth that coal can become a clean energy. Matt Mead stated in an interview, “The better way to do it is what we're trying to do in Wyoming, is with innovation and research, looking at how we make coal as clean and as efficient as possible while still allowing it to continue” (*Wyoming Governor: EPA Is 'Shutting Down The Coal Industry'*). Wyoming Magazine also made the call for technology to save the coal industry:

Coal companies understand that simply burning coal for energy creates pollutants. No coal company or state would argue that point however if you take into consideration the carbon capture and clean coal technologies coal becomes a very attractive energy source. Imagine if our coal companies and federal government came together to improve clean coal technology. The industry would thrive and provide the energy our country needs from energy sources within our own borders. (Wyoming Magazine)

But, this is an unsustainable belief. There is no technology that will make coal a clean energy and help the industry thrive again, but the belief that Wyoming can continue utilizing coal as it has been, allows the state to believe that they can ignore President Obama’s climate regulations. It helps further demonize the Other for demanding that less coal be produced when there is another “viable” option that allows the coal industry to remain unchanged.

Thus, Wyoming found hope in Donald Trump. The state elected him with 68.2 percent of the vote, the highest percentage of any state in the nation (New York Times). Trump became the embodied representation of the effort to reclaim Wyoming’s culture. Trump upheld conservative culture, and he promised to bring coal back. At a rally in Charleston, West Virginia, Trump stood in front of a crowd of people, put on a hard hat, pretended to shovel some coal, and exclaimed, “If I win, we’re going to bring those miners back.” Trump became the carrier of the myth, that coal could return, if only it were not for President Obama and the Democrats. Within his first

weeks in office, President Trump took actions to dismantle the Clean Power Plan, signing the piece of legislation while coal miners looked on from behind him.

Yet, the belief that President Obama killed the coal industry and that Trump will bring it back is a fantasy. A study done by the Center on Global Energy Policy found that, “Increased competition from cheap natural gas is responsible for 49 percent of the decline in domestic U.S. coal consumption. Lower-than-expected demand is responsible for 26 percent, and the growth in renewable energy is responsible for 18 percent” (Houser, Bordoff, and Marsters). The report also found that environmental regulations played a significantly smaller role than the other factors and that changes in the global market also impacted coal’s decline. The report found that:

Implementing all the actions in President Trump’s executive order to roll back Obama-era environmental regulations could stem the recent decline in U.S. coal consumption, but only if natural gas prices increase going forward. If natural gas prices remain at or near current levels or renewable costs fall more quickly than expected, U.S. coal consumption will continue its decline despite Trump’s aggressive rollback of Obama-era regulations. (Houser, Bordoff, and Marsters)

The report exposed Trump’s rhetoric for what it was, a myth. Yet, the people of Wyoming still believe in the fantasy he has helped sustain. Žižek writes, “The national Thing exists as long as members of the community believe in it” (Žižek 202). Despite scientific evidence to the contrary, Wyoming still believes that coal will come back, and that the only thing preventing it from doing so is the Democrats. Žižek illustrates that communities, “do not need any external proof or confirmation of the truth of [their] belief” (Žižek 202) and that the belief itself is what upholds the Thing. Yet, this blind belief has become exceedingly detrimental to Wyoming and the possibility for a sustainable future.

Wyoming possesses the resources for a sustainable future. Wyoming has immense amounts of coal, but also has immense amounts of wind. According to an article written by Sarah

Strauss and Devon Reeser, Wyoming has “up to 50 percent of the best and most accessible wind in the Western part of the country. Wyoming is among the top ten state producers of wind-powered electricity” (Strauss and Reeser 110). Yet, as of January 2017 Wyoming was “considering a bill that would effectively outlaw renewable energy in the state” (Pentland). The bill titled, “Electricity Production Standard” proposes a penalty of \$10 per megawatt hour for all utilities that were produced by solar and wind energy. Wyoming is not doing enough to diversify its economy and take advantage of the rising renewable energy market with the state’s abundant clean resources. The problem being that renewable energy has become associated with the left. Strauss and Reeser write, “Such laws [that implement wind power] would infringe on property rights and increase government control, changing Wyoming culture” (Strauss and Reeser 111).

As Strauss and Reeser state, “Wyoming has been forced to examine its values, seeking balance between preservation and prosperity” (Strauss and Reeser 111). Up to this point, Wyoming has chosen preservation, for it is easier to believe in a fantasy than it is to believe in reality. In order for Wyoming to embrace the renewable market, it would also have to embrace the Other and the culture it represents and Wyoming’s belief in the fantasy of the prosperity of the coal industry allows it to retain its identity while rejecting the Other. Yet, this fantasy cannot be sustained. The economic truth remains; coal is dying and Wyoming needs to decide whether or not it wants to die with it.

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