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THE ARTS OF LIVING UNWELL: POSTINDUSTRIAL LIVES AND WASTE AS AN EVENT

Introduction. – Environmental problems are key to understanding the living conditions in areas where industrial development takes place. This is particularly due to the increasing attention paid to the contradictions in places where development driven by extractive economies hinders people's health and livelihoods. Once extractive economies decline, these places, now heavily depressed by lack of economic activity, suffer from divestment, demographic exodus, and lack of public and basic services. In parallel, the attrition deployed in the environment by industrial waste pollutes air, soil, water, and bodies of animals, plants, and people. The lingering compounding effect of industrial pollution remains a threatening ghostly presence in the area. Weber (2022) has addressed the problem of waste temporalities as something bigger than the policies of the now. These temporalities highlight the problems of neglected past and detachment from future events. The lack of adjustment in this unbalanced relationship between production, consumption, waste, and repair establishes a handy framework of analysis for the situation in the area of study. This work focuses on how people live and why they stay in areas with high levels of industrial pollution. In this context, this article explores social reproduction amidst environmental and economic problems in West Virginia's northern panhandle. Due to the length and the variety of topics addressed in the article, this can be considered an exploration rather than a rigorously scientific piece. Nevertheless, the density of the comments and the approach to the information provide valid and interesting insights into the everyday mechanisms of negotiation that people establish with economic, social, and environmental challenges.

Framing waste before its evaporation. – The understanding of industrial waste in the area has primarily focused on byproducts, especially hazardous waste polluting water and soil, which have had an impact on legislative terms; turning them legible. However, other types of pollution,

such as nuclear waste left over from oil extraction and fracking, have yet to be addressed by public policy. In his seven-year investigation in the area, Nobel examines how byproducts of extractive industries, such as brine, often used as an anti-icing solution for roads, though not considered environmentally unfriendly, contain radioactive components that are hazardous to both human and terrestrial life. The radioactivity of brine, however, remains active and uncontested as long as it has not been addressed or clarified from a legal standpoint. Therefore, the focus on the exploration of waste needs to be shifted: waste is not merely the accumulated layer of undesirable byproducts in the surrounding area of a productive location, divided into the residual and the desired, but rather a dynamic agent that reshapes, through myriad vectors, the quality, vitality, and structure of hazard. From dust carrying radioactive and cancerous particles across the roads of northeastern America to crops absorbing those particles and then being shipped elsewhere with the malice within.

As Liboiron (2022) explores the famous quote by Douglas (1966, p.36), «dirt as matter out of place», it becomes clear that dirt is not the same as waste. Dirt is something that eventually disintegrates, lacking a positive function but serving a negative one: helping to define value in those things still considered whole. In contrast, waste and trash occupy specific positions within social relationships. Through a complex set of symbolic frameworks, waste, and trash are categories that define value by separating purity from danger, desirability from disinterest, and so on. By designating certain elements as abject, a positive value is constructed in opposition to a negative one, which must exist elsewhere on the periphery or opposite side of a given symbolic function. Thus, the relationships between value and worthlessness can be situated, either symbolically or practically, on particular elements over others. Waste is not merely surplus or matter out of place; it is a phenomenon politico-economically placed.

Waste, often regarded as unhealthy, incorrect, and an undesirable byproduct of productive human activity, exerts a contagious effect that shapes perceptions of people living nearby (Zimring, 2016). The impact and significance of waste must be considered in its relational scalarity (Liboiron, Lepawsky, 2022), meaning its role and influence depend on the context and goals of specific phenomena. Waste plays an undeniable role in shaping territories, but it is better understood through situated knowledge. Therefore, the scalarity of its effects and the relationality of its

evaluation are critical for understanding its role in social and environmental contexts. These observations about waste are not only useful for developing and analyzing this discussion but also for framing and addressing two key issues.

Excess, such as waste, has historically been associated with abjection, especially in the West, where it entails racial and class evaluations (Newell, 2015), as well as emotive responses such as disgust (Nussbaum, 2006). Regarding the framing, my exploration takes waste as its background but does not center it as the main subject. This case engages with waste studies because it occurs in one of the most polluted areas in the United States, often regarded as a "sacrifice zone" where industrial production intersects with human destruction.

However, to what extent do waste and its effects disrupt the flows of livelihoods? Acknowledging that waste and its consequences—such as pollution and environmental hazards—form the backdrop of this exploration, I pose the question: how can one live, and what kind of life is worth living in an area frequently perceived as abandoned and facing undeniable present and future environmental threats? In this context, the concept of the good life emerges as a crucial lens to examine the intersection of hazardous environments and everyday experiences.

Life, violence, and endurance. – The image of the hillbilly – often used to describe rural poor Appalachians – and the more recent rural *Trumpist* subject carries the stigma of backwardness and reinforces classist and racist tropes that even go so far as to equate certain political traits in these areas with an anti-democratic threat, the latter resulting in public debates that either reinforce the stigma or try to make sense of these unethical and misguided accusations (Flaccavento, 2024; Lunz Trujillo, 2024). The consequences of environmental and economic attritions suffered in areas considered zones of sacrifice (Hedges, Sacco, 2012) are well-documented, and their reach ranges from unemployment, depression, and increasing drug addiction hindering both the psyche (Halling and others, 2022) and the bodies of people in these areas (Hendryx, Holland, 2016), to a violence that allocates in the private realm, affecting gender relationships, and social reproduction (Nixon, 2013).

The case area studied is mostly West Virginia, as shown by the data, entails an increasing problem of morbidity in non-transmissible chronic

diseases, being West Virginia the top State nationwide with the highest death rate in the country per 100,000 persons (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Almost any statistical data shows a situation of crisis, and ongoing problems, however, as Anderson and others (2020) have unpacked, the evidence and data of a crisis, in the sense of either slow death or violence (Nixon, 2013) does not imply an emergency, for neither people suffering and mostly for institutions. Emergencies are made out of urgent, ultimate, concrete, and addressable catastrophes; however, the everyday experiences wearing out people from their present and future are considered to be like any other daily bump in a life that only needs to endure problems, in their view, like anywhere and anyone else.

Here, material abjection and life amidst waste – or ruins – enact people's own depreciation and evoke a general sense of abjection (Stoler, 2013). This means that the foreseeable future and quality of one's life is lowered in contrast with the experiences so far lived and possible to imagine. As explored by Auyero and Swistun (2009), living in an industrial town next to industrial pollution ends up wearing out people's future and well-being, only establishing an afflicted relationship with the present, from which they cannot escape, or which they will not be able to survive. In this intersection, slow violence, as coined by Nixon (2013), is enacted upon bodies and social organizations with long-term consequences in people's everyday lives. In this situation, slow violence is not only enacted by divestment and lack of employment, but due to the material hazards that threaten the very socio-environmental conditions where people deploy their everyday lives (Skewes, Guerra, Espinoza Rivera, 2023).

The discussion about the "good life" addressed by Berlant (2011) has proven invaluable for understanding the ongoing transformations in economic and social life amidst a profound crisis in the liberal Western order. These crises manifest tangibly in forms such as depression, precarious labor conditions, and uncertain futures. Over the past two decades, precarity has emerged as a critical subject of study, particularly with the growing job and financial insecurities experienced by populations in the West (Chamberlain, 2018; Lazzarato, 2015). The effects of precarity are increasingly evident: working-class individuals face structural barriers to social mobility, being thrown into a game of endurance and attrition (Povinelli, 2011). Simultaneously middle-class groups encounter the diminishing prospects of wealth accumulation. This context underscores

the erosion of social mobility and economic well-being, both of which are central to the liberal project as defined by Latouche (2018). As these aspirations become increasingly unattainable within the parameters of existing systems, the "good life" is reimagined. It is either pursued through relentless negotiations and compromises or relegated to a distant, almost unattainable desire, persisting as a lingering hope rather than a concrete goal.

Berlant pairs the good life with the concept of cruel optimism. Nesting into the idea that certainties and security dwell into stability and negation of change, Berlant evidences that the desire and project of a cozy and stable life in family and within the democratic boundaries of citizenship, promising upward economic mobility, have been hindered by the current state of affairs induced by late liberalism. Therefore, the post-war hope that drove ideas of development and an attainable good life in countries such as France in *Les Trente Glorieuses*, or in the post-war US, is in its critical terminal phase. However, the alleged 20th-century social developments were never more than another period ingrained by a liberal fantasy concealing the unequal distribution of violence among races, genders, and within the nation (Lorey, 2016; Stovall, 2021).

The conundrum represented by the good life is one faced by every person going through an economic crisis, a period of unemployment, or job insecurity. Or, even if someone has not faced a concrete effect of it, the fear of losing what is thought as achieved engenders a fear that rules every action to prevent calamity from happening (Massumi, 2010). Therefore, the good life also can be a project to be achieved, and its achievement relies only on enduring structural hardships and problems as if they were individual ones. Thus, the possibility and acknowledgment of such a situation helps to put oneself in the context of being vulnerable, as an ontological condition of our political life (Butler, 2020). Under the theoretical scheme presented, another element helps us to put together the assessment, mobilities, decisions, and ideas organizing the project to achieve or attain the good life in a zone of environmental violence. What is the material and bodily cost paid for the quest to achieve or retain the good life?

The downward spiral in which life is allocated under economic and expansive brutal forces destroying the environment (Sassen, 2014) has been conceptualized, particularly in the US case, by Geronimus (2023) as "weathering". This concept entails biological processes of accelerated decay, the production of non-transmissible chronic disease, and high rates of

morbidity as the result of a life that demands more than people can do and give to it. At this point, as mentioned earlier, the exploration does not focus on waste, waste management, pollution, or a specific event. Instead, it develops with an understanding that waste, specially industrial – and its agency, with its terrible effects on the environment – forms the background: looming large but not always visible.

The idea of analyzing the good life in the area arose from the contrast between the literature on socio-environmental risk analyzed and the fieldwork executed. This exploration mixes theoretical dialogues, updated information about the major economic and environmental movements in the area, and the grounding information provided by locals to develop a comprehensive analysis regarding how to live and thrive in an area framed as environmentally problematic.

Re-investing, polluting, and assessing hazards. – Extractive economies play both the role of defining and promoting the longstanding vitality and national importance of the Ohio River Valley. As Anderson (2014) notes, West Virginia has been historically a depressed and overexploited area in the US. The State, organized around misery, and low wages driven by extractive economies, is also one of the states with the highest number of unemployed people in the United States. The job market fluctuates according to out-of-state situations: high demand for coal from international markets, war, the steel industry, etc. In this context, Anderson (2014) stresses the responsibility of the State, private companies, and the narrow room assigned to communities in designing what their present will be, and on what economic basis their future is being built.

Hoerr (1988) notes that the decline of industrial activities during the 1980s came as no surprise, particularly in the steel-driven Appalachian region. Fueled by global capital seeking better industrial performance at lower costs overseas, the local manufacturing industry plummeted, even as the stock market surged. Some industries, such as pottery (e.g., the Homer Laughlin China Company), remain active but with significantly reduced workforces.

Economic hardship, depopulation (Raby, 2021), and the opioid epidemic (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022) have persisted, showing little improvement despite investments in a new, energy-oriented economy. Furthermore, the "pay-to-pollute" agreements

(Hirji, Natter, 2023), in which industries and the State prioritize profits over people's safety and livelihoods, exemplify the "unsocial contracts" described by Bowles (2022). In this context, the region – despite more than a century of extractive industries – remains an untapped source of potential investment, perpetuating a cycle of job creation, industrial pollution, and looming environmental crises.

Recently, the old Weirton Steel Mill, a kernel knot of industrial activity for people from Ohio, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania during the 20th century reaching an almost 13,000-person workforce, has been the subject and aim of current and future interventions throughout several projects. In May of 2023, a new investment landed in Weirton by the Boston-based company Form Energy, with offices in Pittsburgh, which aims to produce iron-air batteries (Noor, 2023). On top of this investment, Joe Manchin, Senator for West Virginia, granted $50M for another Massachusetts-based company in the old Weirton Mill facilities, Boston Metal (United States Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, 2023).

The power of both projects, Boston Metal and Form Energy, is political, driven by the promise of a better future for local communities. This brighter future takes the form of new positions in the job market, reskilling both old and new workers, and decreasing the impact of former industrial activities (*ibidem*) – or at least, that is the goal yet to be achieved. For Barnett (2020), the renovation of depressed areas using industrial activities always poses serious challenges. He notes how difficult it is to separate actual solutions to the global environmental crisis from those that commodify the crisis and create economies around this narrative, thus reproducing old risks with a new coat and providing vertical solutions that disregard horizontal and locally based ones.

As examined by Noor (2023), local unions view the investment as a beacon of hope for recovering communities, while researchers warn about the cycle of unequal investment that these new projects will bring to the area. As for locals, the discussions are grounded in the industrial activity's consequences in their everyday lives.

Unearthing problems. – Waste is part of everyday life in the Tri-state area of Pittsburgh, which entails West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. In this context, waste is an inescapable force and the most common byproduct of the industrial areas surrounding this region. Consider, for example, the

largest coal ash dump in the U.S., Little Blue Run Lake. The lake appears as an eerie, unearthly blue color because of the white coal ash waste lining its bottom. This scintillating artificial lake, located since 1975 between Beaver County (Pennsylvania) and Hancock County (West Virginia), is currently leaking, as are the seven other coal ash waste deposits in the United States. Myriad grassroots denunciations from citizens, neighbors, and community organizations have been deployed throughout the years, including documents asserting that leakages of chloride and calcium could have been contaminating groundwater since 1989. Only in the last few years (2019) have fines been applied, and it has been decided that Little Blue (fig. 1) should close by 2029.

As reported by The Allegheny Front (2018)[1] in an interview with a family directly affected by the largest coal ash impoundment in the US, there are mixed feelings between the opportunities provided by the area in terms of serenity and conditions to raise a family, and the underlying environmental hazard faced: «Having children grow up in this area, it was fun and our grandchildren, but just in my heart I think, did we damage them by living here? Debbie said. Their health?» (*ibidem*).

Fig. 1 – *Little Blue Run Dam, Beaver County (PA) and Hancock County (WV)*

Source: Image Science and Analysis Laboratory, NASA-Johnson Space Center

[1] https://www.alleghenyfront.org/the-cautionary-tale-of-the-largest-coal-ash-waste-site-in-the-u-s/

This case highlights a similar pattern in the discussion yet to be addressed: normality, a good, happy life, which has certain bumps-major ones like Debbie's situation, but never enough to destroy or demand exile.

At this point, beyond the potential economic development for the economy and experts' perspectives on the environmental dangers, locals' assessments about the quality and possibilities of life for locals are worth exploring.

In this context, I conducted ethnographic work from October 2022 to December 2024 in the vicinity of Little Blue Run Dam, particularly in Newell, West Virginia. The following sections, along with the analyses produced from theoretical queries and the conversations, notes, documentation accessed, and the observations of locals' everyday lives, helped me focus on the role of pollution in the community. As mentioned earlier, and as a foreigner (neither a U.S. citizen nor part of the region), my understanding of the area was shaped by environmental humanities, economic geography, and issues related to the limits of social reproduction due to pollution. However, this exploration sheds light on the role of waste-driven pollution from a critical perspective. Following Adorno's (1966) negative dialectic, I argue that waste is not a final condition but one that is organized as a recognizable situation due to its materiality, role, and place. While I do not intend to negate the effects largely assessed by natural sciences, such as pollutants in the environment, I emphasize that the role of waste, although outlined before reaching the area, is not as clear as it could be. As unpacked by Rancière (2000), visibility organizes the distribution of the sensible, which defines the contents and production of politics, and what people interprets as relevant; therefore, it determines what organizes their realm of lives and the agencies affecting such a phenomena. Consequently, as noted earlier, I do not address the question of waste directly, but rather I follow the organization of life in an area understood as polluted, in order to unearth the place of waste.

Negotiating places. – Liboiron and Lepawsky (2022) address how a political economy of desirable and undesirable lives is precisely organized about what, to whom, whose, and where to discard and not. Although their argument is broader and ranges from cleaning streets in snow seasons to the compounding effect of pollution in areas already organized as territories of discardment, the political government of the everyday in this

area lies upon these premises. A strong attachment towards a place suffering under an extractive economy, that eventually reaches high levels of pollution, establishes a symbolic relationship with the possible paths to govern that area: the emission of either chemical, physical, material or immaterial waste as a byproduct of the industrial activity, which eventually is covered with negative value (waste, excess, rejection) ends up producing valuable commodities, actions, and livelihood possibilities, the latter thanks to the job market brought about by such industries. This contradictory relationship of revitalizing an area by destroying it is a common problem of extractive zones. However, among residents, not everything seems to be lost or purely driven by destruction.

People live their lives sustained in ideals of affordability, security, and jobs worth keeping. At the same time, leisure has taken the form of the main narrative in the area, such as nature, outdoorsing and hunting. As commented by a retired 60-something steel mill worker and West Virginian native: «The hunting is cheaper than in other states, and we have good game areas». Spatial relationships rose as important in this exploration: proximity to services and to job offers, affordability of a house close to other family members, closeness to activities deemed as part of everyday leisure, and the willingness to commute somewhere else only when necessary are key in the relationship that keeps the imaginary of these areas, for the dwellers of West Virginia and West Pennsylvania, as a desirable one.

In this context, leisure is often organized around "cafes" (fig. 2) – a euphemism for video lottery machine establishments – instead of hunting, which has specific seasons and dates throughout the year, besides being a mostly masculine-centered activity, both of which are rather abundant in Hancock County. The cafe gambling market has reactivated and readdressed the economy of a depressed and aged area. Cafes in this context are key to providing socialization and vitality to these places. If for Oldenburg (1999) third places are places of connection and communication, leveling socioeconomic differences although racially homogeneous, the cafes check most of these boxes. Cafes foster a sense of sociability for many retired workers, including veterans, steelworkers, truck drivers, police officers, greenhouse clerks, pottery workers, convenience store owners, among other dominant occupations in the area.

Fig. 2 – *Cafe in Newell's downtown, Hancock County, West Virginia*

Source: Author, December 2024

Cafes, although they are gambling places and mostly an isolated activity in front of a screen rather than a place of active engagement and socialization with other people as Oldenburg's third places canonical description, grant people with a place for leisure and acknowledgment of their presence by others. The role of cafes as crucial places of socialization is asserted by an old retired couple from the area, one of whom worked in a local casino for the last 15 years: «We usually go to the cafe. Although mostly [his wife] goes there. We spend the day over there and then we come back home».

The good life is key in this exploration because regardless that the area falls into what is known as a sacrifice zone (Hedges, Sacco, 2012) to some extent, the interviews and conversation never went so far as to assess the socioenvironmental attrition or the destruction of the environment as a problematic situation.

Discussing with locals from the Newell area what are their feelings about living in this zone, they bring up the largest urban (Pittsburgh) area nearby as a counterpoint to highlight the perks of living in Newell: «This place is more peaceful than the city where you live (referring to Pittsburgh)» , «they are

renewing that chemical factory now with an energy plant, so money is being invested here» or «I couldn't pay that much for a house, at least here we have a yard» (fig. 3) are uttered to show the conformity with the current place of habitation, and somehow, its improving conditions.

Fig. 3 – *Local yard near New Cumberland, Hancock County, West Virginia*

Source: Author, November 2023

The tradeoff between employability or affordable retirement, stability, the preservation of one's network, and environmental consequences has been rarely addressed, or even commented on. Furthermore, the places of sociability and the known world stand out as a part of what constitutes the everyday wellbeing for the residents.

The weather, the distances, and commentaries addressing the affordability, connectivity with family, and stability stand out as the most important elements provided by locals' experience in the area. Linked with other explorations about life in rural areas, as shown by Parr and Philo (2003), the formalities and informalities of the politics of care organize certain proximities and codependency upon which people inform intimate experiences with their caregivers. In this context, family is the key performer of caring practices, and then, the specific consultation of rural doctors. The tendency in most of the comments received in this

exploration place the good life as something between the attainable perks that can inform a life which is never ideal, but at least good enough to keep it. These types of comments were shared by several locals between ages 45 and 65+. They have strong apprehensions and concerns, not about the alternatives of different futures, but about losing or radically changing the life they have already created. Environmental violence and chronic diseases may be causes for concern, but they are not variables that will necessarily condition the development of the locals' current life projects in the area.

Keeping the good life? – To some point, the dispute over deindustrialization can also be narrated as a step forward rather than a loss. Walley (2015) tackles how in certain narratives of people who have suffered deindustrialization, there is a stark contrast between the perceived loss and the promised progress into leaving behind industrial work and moving forward into the service industry (Hoerr, 1988). However and Walley (2015, p. 635) also stresses that:

> The profound sense of loss associated with the disappearance of industrial jobs is not because such jobs were industrial (it is, indeed, difficult to romanticize the work) but because the ladder they provided up to middle-class lives and communities and to job stability in the post-World War II era has today largely disappeared.

Thus, security, associated with the job market and the sense of belonging to a community, having a future, and thinking of a graspable role in society through work tends to become diluted when job opportunities end, regardless of which they are.

This is also the point upon which Berlant's (2011) proposal gains consistency. What happened with the American promise of achieving individual success and security through work and effort? For Linkon (2013), deindustrialization, the lack of a job market, the end of a period of economic productivity defining the rest of the elements of the social and material life, matters as it informs the present as well along with the hopes organized around it.

The cruel optimism addressed by Berlant (2011) takes form into a particular set of achievable desires and long-term goals among those with whom I shared this exploration: security, affordable housing and

affordable retirement, cheap groceries, leisure time, outdoors and wildlife, tranquility, and a job position that is easy to commute to. These things are translated into myriad elements: lack of city traffic, close relatives to attend to if needed, cheaper dinner places, and low relative prices in certain groceries, provided by international monopolies such as Walmart. The expectations of upward social mobility, of unproblematic health situations, and other ways of participating in society through the market, are ruled out or are not as strongly stressed as the steady price of cigarettes, and the convenient price of gas in contrast with the nearby States (fig. 4).

Fig. 4 – *Sunoco in Newell, Hancock County, West Virginia*

Source: Author. December, 2023

One shared element of the experiences explored in this paper are the generational acquisition of housing. This situation is not extraordinary, nor is it a luxury, but a complex process of endurance in which properties and land are handed down to the newest generation, providing stability through periods of lack of employment. This local perk enhances the sense of belonging, or at least, that owning a house already solves a lot of problems. Housing is much more than the bare minimum, and to jeopardize the current situation of stability to achieve "a better life" once

one has a "good life" is not worth it. Thus, housing and a steady – though not necessarily good – job, are key elements that, in contrast with other contexts, are achievable, or at least were achieved, and are worth preserving. One of the most common ways to obtain housing back in the 1940s-50s in the area, strongly benefited from this process, was the G.I. Bill signed by Roosevelt in 1944 which helped war veterans to fund housing, college, and get unemployment insurance. This housing acquisition was driven by endurance and compensation, as any other given trade-off upon which people have been subjected in the area: go to war to get perks, to live in an isolated area, to afford a house, and from that point on, to produce a baseline of services and wellbeing.

From all of the above, the market in its myriad forms, mostly through jobs, housing, transportation by gas, and groceries, are those things that constitute not necessarily the ladder toward middle class, as noted by Walley (2015) but the elements that make the current life a bearable one that can be considered good. At that point, the production of the good life in this area of study, despite its problems, is worth defending; or, at least, the promise is good enough to keep trying.

Living unwell. –The structural stressors set by a precarious environment, lack of opportunities, and a polluted environment are decisive whenever people can heal, or avoid the end of their life due to illness way before they can reach a plateau of economic stability. Geronimus' (2023) idea of Weathering is key to unpacking this situation. When people's lives have undergone so much stress and hardship, the harm has been done already, and chronic diseases will unveil later on. In this context, slow violence is detected as problems that hinder the achievement of the good life (diseases, lack of social security, narrow mobility, uncertainty, and wage stagnation) but that are not deemed harsh situations due to the strong naturalization of these process of violence as the normal result of playing by the rules, besides the conformity with affordability and stability of housing and jobs in an economy that evaporates this opportunity for newer generations.

Living unwell is more than a phenomenon; it could be called an art. The art of living unwell involves decisions shaped by historical and current events that trap individuals, families, and communities in positions where they must choose the form and intensity of the violence they endure: How

do I cope and respond to this? Can I create a better life here compared to over there? Is developing a long-term chronic disease preferable to other forms of violence?

Contrary to the liberal notion of rational actors selecting from a myriad of options to optimize favorable outcomes, the amount and quality of available information is often inadequate or entirely unknown, as demonstrated in a case. A Newell, WV local, now a retired steelworker, lost his sense of smell after more than 20 years of daily work at the mill. This was someone who never suffered a workplace accident, never smoked, never drank, nor used drugs – yet he went from five senses to four by "playing by the rules". If playing by the rules cannot guarantee a life free from harm, then what can?

At this point, waste returns to the scene, but not as the symbolic expression of the extension of people as surplus capital – then as some sort of social waste due to their characteristics as population surplus, incapable of being funneled back into the center of production (Wacquant, 2001). Here, I refer to the return of waste by addressing that this comes back in the exploration as an agency, than even when not always present, leaves traces capable of tracking back.

On one hand, pollution and industrial waste are completely ruled out of the equation in local narratives about the present. They seem to disappear in the comments of those living in the area, as though the lingering temporality of such waste (Weber, 2022) has become too distant to recall, or only distant, so it belongs to the past. As a result, the dynamics that render waste an active agent in reorganizing the environment fade into obscurity and vanish from discourse. By relegating waste to stasis – imagining it as a pond, an event that happened "back then", or a localized consequence of specific industrial activities like steel production in the past or fracking and petroleum extraction today but somewhere else – waste's dynamic agency dissolves and becomes invisible.

On the other hand, waste's agency keeps carving and shaping the environment. Drawing on Liboiron and Lepawsky (2022) the scalarity of waste's agency is what allows locals to assess whether they should be concerned of it. In this context, whether waste plays a central or peripheral role in people's lives depends on how identifiable it becomes. As in the opening case, Little blue, when the accretional effect of waste turned people's houses and lives unlivebable, it is when it becomes a problem. All

of the sudden, it was no longer a matter of scales, but waste's effects became it all. Notwithstanding, its consequences are there, and the relationship between the lingering effects, and unmatching recalling of waste agency, shape a way to get by and keep oneself focused on certain stressors that one can handle. As a local commented at the time I was finishing this draft, «You cannot stress about everything; you will go crazy. We know that it is all polluted, but how much could you do about it?».

Conclusions. – The arts of living unwell are shaped by various social and economic factors, including the interactions between the hazards surrounding people's lives and the benefits and stability that make life not only bearable but also enjoyable. At this juncture, the declining liberal order, along with the promises of its job market and wealth accumulation for the working class, is unable to provide definitive answers regarding the geographies of grief and enjoyment. Hazards related to pollution exist, but they are mostly associated with areas with large economic activity rather than idling industries in the background of a town. Furthermore, the evidence shows that pollution-related hazards in depopulated post-industrial areas tend to decrease due to the lack of industrial emissions (Llóret and others, 2024).

However, elements such as economic uncertainties, the depopulation being faced in these areas, and the reduced job market prevent the promise of liberal social democracies from materializing: upward mobility, wealth accumulation, and, in this case, low levels of pollution. Thus, within the narrow framework of life decisions that can be made by actors in places of low social investment (whether through industry or state programs), the negotiation of the best deal to achieve a good life – always organized as a relational category entailing what is known, imagined, and the current levels of conformity – establishes an unsocial contract upon which the bodily consequences of environmental pollution are either ignored or suspended.

At this point, slow violence (Nixon, 2013) plays its role as a long-lasting hindering force that presents indicators such as Weathering (Geronimus, 2023) in the bodies while evidencing how vulnerable the terms and conditions of life are (Butler, 2020) for people in zones where endurance and ongoing negotiations are key aspects of their political everyday decisions (Povinelli, 2011).

Care is at the very center of political actions in this context, because it ingrains and produces the basis of reproduction of life. In this context, the mix of poverty, lack of public health coverage, and the perk of being close to family structures which are the first and the last of care provisions, weigh heavily in the organization of the good life. Thus, to leave the place exposes people to uncertainties and the lack of a strong network already honed to protect the social and biological life of individuals. So far, the key elements of this exploration are not the chronic diseases developed or the consequences on people's bodies, the restricted horizon of mobility, nor the current scope of actions among economic and environmental conditions. It is rather the crafting of the standard of the good life, and the elements that can make that idea a thing on which people can put effort and decide to invest their life in. There is a looming temporal and physical threat acting in subterranean and subcutaneously in the air, soil, water, and driven by a concealed structure of violence that places people in a corner and forces them to take a decision with narrow options: what type of malice do you prefer to live with?

Economic urgency seems to always overcome the decision-making space that subordinates environmental and health safety beneath economic decisions. Therefore, the art of living unwell has to be learned and managed to the point of preserving hope and a good life in a context that presents mostly hardships.

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Le arti del vivere male: vite postindustriali e il rifiuto come evento. – Questo articolo esamina le sfide ambientali ed economiche affrontate dalle comunità in aree con economie estrattive, in particolare nella parte settentrionale della Virginia Occidentale. L'articolo mette in evidenza gli effetti dannosi dell'inquinamento industriale sull'aria, sul suolo, sull'acqua e sugli organismi viventi, che persistono anche dopo il declino delle industrie estrattive. Allo stesso tempo, l'argomentazione cerca di comprendere in che misura questi elementi riflettano le preoccupazioni degli attori locali e pongano loro delle sfide. In questo contesto, affronto i rifiuti come un

fenomeno che rimane sullo sfondo, ma anche come elemento con una scalarità e una temporalità che, come mostrato nell'articolo, possono essere ritenute più o meno rilevanti dagli attori locali. Inoltre, esploro in che modo i residenti organizzino la loro vita quotidiana come qualcosa da sopportare, dove gli elementi strutturali dell'economia e le opportunità offerte dall'area sono spesso considerate più rilevanti di quanto emerge dalle indagini che hanno alimentato questo articolo.

Keywords. – Studi sullo scarto, Inquinamento ambientale, Violenza lenta

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