Home to Harlan: African American Miners' Children Celebration of Homecoming

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HOME TO HARLAN: AFRICAN AMERICAN MINERS’ CHILDREN

CELEBRATION OF HOMECOMING

by

Jessica L. Cushenberry

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

American Studies

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ABSTRACT

Home to Harlan: African American Miners’ Children Celebration of Homecoming

by

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Utah State University, 2018

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For decades, Harlan County has been studied for its unique characteristics—coal, class, power, and segregation, which have allowed many fields to understand the deeply rooted history of the region. It has become increasingly clear that Harlan County is unlike many other mining regions in the Appalachian area. Harlan County mines developed “model towns” with schools, hospitals, stores, and housing for their workers, thus, drawing in migrant workers, native Appalachians, and immigrants. Among these people were African Americans.

African American coal miners have been heavily discussed in literature, especially in West Virginia and Alabama. These accounts document the African American experience of migrant works while pointing out the harsh conditions of working in the coal mines. This work focuses on African American mining families in
Harlan County, Kentucky. Harlan County is different than other Appalachian mining regions because the work environment was perceived as better and safer than those of West Virginia and Alabama; there is also a strong sense of unity found within this region among African Americans, despite the harsh treatment imposed upon them.

This work focuses specifically on a small mining town in Harlan County, KY named Lynch. “Home to Harlan” explores two main ideas: the formation of community as a way to understand group among African American miners’ children and how community in continued in the present as seen in homecoming. The community formed a social club, the Eastern Kentucky Social Club (EKSC), to reaffirm bonds built in childhood after the decline of coal caused outmigration. This club hosted two annual gathers that encouraged return migration to bolster communal bonds. “Home to Harlan” focuses on the Memorial Day celebration and its evolution express that communities can continue gathering despite outmigration and how celebrations are recontextualized to fit the needs of the attendees.

(61 pages)
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

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Jessica L. Cushenberry

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Jessica L. Cushenberry
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INTRODUCTION

Appalachia always has been an important center of folklore studies. Nineteenth century fiction writers like Will Allen Dromgoole, Sarah Barnwell Elliot, Mary Noailles Murfee, John Fox, Jr., and Will Wallace Harney romanticized the region and by the twentieth century early folklorists identified Appalachia as a region rich in folklore, particularly music and crafts (Brunvand 1996: 36; Ensor 1995: 633-635; Lewis 1999: 20-21). As David Whisnant notes “the discovery of indigenous culture by writers, collectors, popularizers and elite-composers and concertizers” led to romantic images of Appalachia as a site of folk culture in the national imagination (Whisnant 1983: 6-9). These romantic images of Appalachia coupled with resistance among native workers and farmers, economic colonization, and the proliferation of missionary workers during this period can arguably express that Appalachia historically has played a large and romantic role in the national imagination.

Folk schools played an important role in the creation of this image. Folk schools are institutions with the dual purpose of educating and preserving traditions of populations with valuable culture. In Appalachian folk schools, also known as urban settlement schools, northern outsiders and educators sought to provide basic education to rural Appalachians and preserve the traditions of these Appalachian that were “valuable in the received culture of urban immigrants” (Whisnant 1983: 20). These folk schools created a fruitful place for some ballad collectors, like Olive Dame (Campbell), to do ethnographic work (Whisnant 1983: 110). Other ballad collectors such as Cecil Sharp, C. Alphonse Smith, Arthur Kyle Davis, Jr., Frank C. Brown, Josiah H. Combs, Hubert G. Sherin and John Harrington viewed Appalachia as a unique region in which old,
European ballads were still sung, and they sought to preserve these folk songs that were
dying out in other parts of the world because of industrialization (Brunvand 1996: 36;
talk culture in the region was groundbreaking in that it preserved traditions among
Appalachian natives. For these scholars, who were often northerners, Appalachia was a
great place to engage with and preserve traditions of Appalachia’s mountain people and
their efforts resulted in bringing attention to the region.

Unfortunately, however, these efforts also contributed to enduring stereotypes.
Appalachia as a whole was often represented through the lens of “hillbilly” native whites,
who were paraded on national platforms as ignorant, rural, isolated, poverty stricken,
uneducated, and illiterate (Bronner 2006: 35-36; Brunvand 1996: 36; Portelli 2011: 29-
31; Watts 2007: 20). Appalachia became characterized by the stereotypes associated with
these regional themes and distorted outsiders’ view of the region. For example, federal
agencies perpetuated stereotypes of Appalachian life by keeping some artifacts, like old
buildings and equipment, and destroying others (Brunvand 1996: 37). In essence, this
selective preservation of Appalachian folk culture and tradition created an incomplete
representation of the region by over- exaggerating their folk culture at the expense of
other identities. For a community shunned and stereotyped for their ruralness, lack of
education and poverty-stricken way of life, it is ironic that they were valued by scholars
as a population who preserved old European traditions (Bronner 2006: 36; Brunvand

As David Whisnant reveals in his work *All That is Native and Fine* (1983), the
systemic cultural intervention of northerners in southern spaces caused “a negative effect
[to] follow from a positive intent, and vice versa” (Whisnant 1983: 14). More recently, however, there has been a shift in Appalachian studies to include the marginalized voices and experiences of underrepresented groups to create a more well-rounded narrative and understanding of the region. The historic focus on Appalachia as poor and white means that African Americans have not been discussed and studied as extensively. This is not to say that all scholars have disregarded diversity in Appalachia. Works discussing African Americans in Appalachia by scholars such as Deborah J. Thompson and Darrin Hacquard (2009), Ronald Lewis (1987), Joe William Trotter, Jr. (1990), Thomas E. Wagner and Philip J. Obermiller (2004) have attempted to deconstruct white Appalachian stereotypes by focusing on these more marginalized voices. Texts such as *Coal, Class and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia* (1990), *Black Coal Miners in America* (1987), and *African American Miners and Migrants: The Eastern Kentucky Social Club* (2004) describe coal mining and community life among Appalachia’s Black mountain people through the lens of labor struggles. Also, these texts shed light on how race and class are used to negotiate social relationships among African Americans and show how Black Appalachian miners interacted in spaces where their presence was not valued the same as their peers (Lewis 1987: 99-118, 121-125; Trotter 1990: 15, 26-30). Unfortunately, however, such studies of Black Appalachians are few.

This thesis, then, builds on the small body of work by exploring community among African American miners’ children in Lynch, Kentucky, during the 1950s and 1960s. I argue that African Americans maintained a strong sense of community during this time, a community largely based on shared values. These values include education, kinship-like bonds, and a strong racial identity. I also argue that that strong sense of
community continues to shape and influence people's lives today, as seen in Lynch’s Memorial Day homecoming celebration—a gathering where community members return to homeplace. Because of the strong interpersonal connections between members, I suggest that African Americans did not feel inferior to their white peers despite segregation laws, and their strong connection to group allowed them to bolster and continue a strong sense of community.

Harlan County is a small southeastern county in Kentucky’s Appalachian Mountains that touches the borders of Virginia and Tennessee. Prior to the discovery of coal, native white Appalachians worked the land in this mountainous region. Many people had limited education and possessed few skills to work in industry. In the early 1900s large amounts of coal were found in Harlan County. Because Harlan was undeveloped and lacked infrastructure, it was hard to access the region. The discovery of coal brought industrialization as many small company-owned mining towns began littering the county’s formerly rural area, creating opportunities for native Appalachians, immigrants, and migrant workers alike.

At its peak, Harlan County was a prosperous community driven by the coal industry, but it also is known for union strikes, and the violence, sickness, and disease associated with coal mining. Harlan County particularly is known for its labor struggles, including the Harlan County War, which gained the nickname “Bloody Harlan County” in the 1930s (Kopple 1976; Portelli 2011: 176-178, 187). The most well-known recent study of Harlan County is Alessandro Portelli’s They Say in Harlan County (2011). Portelli seeks to create a holistic and historic representation of Harlan County by looking at labor struggles and the effects they have on class struggles and segregation. His work
includes the voices of native, immigrant, and migrant workers and their families. It also seeks to include the voices of racial minorities and women. (Portelli 2011: 4, 8-9).

The town of Lynch is located in Harlan County. Lynch was named after Thomas Lynch, the first president of U.S. Steel’s subsidiary U.S. Coal and Coke Company. The town was built between 1917 and 1925 (Portelli 2011: 127). U.S. Coal and Coke purchased 19,000 acres to build the town. It was intended to be a “model” town and was the largest coal town in the world (Estep 2017). U.S. Steel, like other mining companies, created a town to provide its workers and their families with the necessities to work in the mines and sustain life outside the mines. These towns and the dwellings in the towns were owned and operated by the mining companies, so the conditions of these towns varied (Shifflett 1991: 33-34). By its completion in 1925, Lynch had two white schools, one colored school, a hotel, a commissary, a lamp house, two bath houses, several churches, a fire station, a police station, a hotel, a hospital, and several single and multi-family living quarters. Additionally, U.S. Steel built and operated a full working railroad to transport goods and coal in and out of Lynch. At its peak, Lynch was home to 10,000 residents of various racial, ethnic and geographical backgrounds. Some inhabitants were migrant workers, while others were natives to the region (Estep 2017; University of North Carolina, n.d.).

Lynch was more than a coal town. It was a thriving, vibrant community that encouraged social gatherings of all sort. Within the small community was a ball park where Lynch’s football teams played games—whites on Friday and Blacks on Saturdays, where circuses, carnivals and other attractions were held, and where the company’s sport teams played (Austin 2017; University of North Carolina, n.d.). A grand hotel stood atop
the hill. The 133-room building had five fireplaces and many amenities. Carved from local limestone by Italian masons, the Lynch Hotel was majestic. In it were four bowling lanes, three pool tables, a beauty shop, a barber shop, a clothing store, a shoe shop, a cigar shop, a jewelry store, a restaurant, a soda fountain, and 108-guest rooms. Famous musicians from all over the country would come to play at the Lynch Hotel’s dances hosted by various organizations. Lynch intended to provide its residents with the conveniences of the city (University of North Carolina, n.d. Wagner et al. 2004: 55-56). Lynch was built not only to house its workers but also to keep them happy by providing them with more than the necessities of life.

Today, however, Lynch is quite dilapidated, with little evidence that it was once known as “the world’s largest company-owned coal town” and home to the world’s second largest operating coal mine when it was in operation (Schmidt 2017; Portal 31 Tour 2017). The beauty and majesty of the hotel are gone. Lynch’s buildings are mostly boarded up. The seven-street town only has three or four operable streets. Many houses have been torn down. Aesthetically, Lynch has lost its wonder and enchantment. The decline began as early as 1919 when the demand for coal began to fall; it continued for several decades. Mines began reducing labor forces, moving toward more automated systems, and closing progressively over the next (almost) century, as the nation shifted from coal to other sources of energy, like oil, gas, and electricity. The reduced demand for coal nationally and the increased demand for more automated and mechanical mining processes left many miners and families without stable income (Shifflett 1991: 199; Wagner et. al 2004: 47). Miners and their families began leaving the region in search of better, more stable work. Coal mining families who reminisced about Lynch’s mine
owners spoke highly of U.S. Steel, which was seen as “benevolent and humane” owners by miners and mining families (Wagner et. al 2004: 56), particularly in comparison to Arch Coal, which came later. For example, U.S. Steel maintained housing, provided equal wages for workers regardless of color, provided a good education for miners’ children, and supported the people (Austin 2017; Brown-Clark 2017; Lewis 1987: 143; Wagner et. al 2004: 47). It is unclear why community members remember U.S. Steel fondly; maybe it’s because they did not like Arch Coal. It is clear, however, that mining families appreciated U.S. Steel’s investment in them as people and not just workers.

My family migrated to Lynch like many others. In the 1940s, my great-grandfather, Charlie P. Johnson, Sr., was advised of coal mining jobs in Kentucky. Already a miner in Alabama, he moved the family from Alabama to Kentucky in 1945.

As my uncle described the move in an interview with me, “[they were] like gypsies for a while,” moving around Kentucky, before settling in Lynch and soon the family of six quickly grew to a family of ten (Johnson, Ceasar 2017). Life, as members recall, was good. In Lynch, they developed personal connections with other community members, including band members, teammates and friends. In Harlan they fostered a strong sense of community with their peers. My research about what life was like in mid-century Lynch draws on the experiences of two family members: my grandmother, Patsy “Pat” Johnson, and her brother, Ceasar Johnson. Pat and Ceasar are two of the oldest living family members I have who still have fond memories and strong connections to Lynch. Ceasar was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1943. Pat was born in Hazard, Kentucky in 1946. The family moved to Benham, Kentucky—Lynch’s neighboring town—around 1946. There my great-grandfather worked as a miner. The family stayed there for almost
four years before moving to Lynch. Together, Ceasar and Pat lived in Lynch from 1950 to 1956. Both spent their early and mid-adolescent years in Lynch. I interviewed Pat by phone on March 15, 2017 and January 28, 2018 and Ceasar by phone on March 17, 2017 and January 28, 2018. I asked each of them questions surrounding home life, their connection to other community members in Lynch, the family’s exodus, and racial tension in Lynch. Each provided unique memories and perspectives of their former home as children of migrant workers. Pat left Lynch in 1956 to move to Indianapolis, Indiana but returned the following two summers to visit with family. Ceasar left Lynch in 1961 to move to Indianapolis, Indiana shortly before moving to New York City.

I also draw on the experiences of two additional community members to supplement my family’s information. Lorene Brown-Clark is a lifelong resident of Lynch. She was born in 1931 in Lynch. She attended the Lynch Colored School where she graduated in 1949. She is a retired nurse and former Marine wife who has fond memories of the coal town when it was a thriving community. Gean Austin is the son of a migrant worker. He was born in 1930 in Alabama and raised in Lynch. Austin spent his youth in Lynch and graduated from Lynch Colored School with Brown-Clark. The two are childhood friends. Austin is a former U.S. Marine and coal mining supervisor. Except for military service, Austin and Brown-Clark have always lived in Lynch. Brown-Clark is the widow of Austin’s childhood friend, Charlie Clark. In a combined interview that took place on August 19, 2017, both speak about their connection to Lynch. I asked them questions surrounding their childhood in Lynch, their connection to the coal mines, the selling for the mine and life afterward as many African Americans moved out the region.
Both their perspectives offer insight on the role Lynch played in building community among its members.

Community among African Americans in Lynch intersects educational, kinship-like and racial ties. Together these three elements show how community creates strong ties among African Americans. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, community is defined as “the body of people having common or equal rights or rank, as distinguished from the privileged classes; the commons; the commonality” or “a body of people who live in the same place, usually sharing a common cultural or ethnic identity. Hence: a place where a particular body of people lives.” However, I believe the definition combining the aforementioned definitions best describes community in Lynch as: a group of people distinguished from the privileged who occupy a shared location and share a common ethnic or racial identity to emphasize the importance of commonality among members and racial/ethnic ties. Using this definition of community, I illustrate in the section below how educational, kinship-like and racial ties intersect to create community for African Americans in Lynch during the 1950s and 1960s.

Community includes individual identity, collective acts or shared identity, “[response] to external ascriptions or oppression,” and acting in common, to name a few of the many ways in which community is performed (Noyes 2003: 29). Together these elements work to express inclusion. I have chosen these four specific elements of community because they best describe community in Lynch. For each, I will briefly define the idea related to community and provide a synopsis of how it relates to my group.
Identity includes social constructions like gender, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, sexual orientation, age, religion, disability, and language (Kirk et al. 2006: 9). It is not linked to one factor but several. Therefore, individual identity is a combination of how a person chooses to identify themselves and how they are identified by others. Identity also can be used to classify how a person chooses to differentiate themselves from others (Abrahams 2003: 204-206).

When individuals share common values within a group, a shared identity emerges. Shared identity connects people “as individuals [with] how [they] are perceived by other people and classified by societal institutions” (Kirk et al. 2006: 9). Neatly put, shared identity is how a group sees themselves in relation to other group members around them and how other groups view them; identity is therefore relational. Identity is connected to community because it is one of the foundational elements. As noted by Dorothy Noyes, “the strength of an individual is identified with the strength of a whole” meaning that the foundation of a community is not found in a single person, but as a collective. Therefore, to experience the truest form of strength or solidarity among a group, one cannot be reliant on a single member, but must be reliant on the whole (Noyes 2003: 30). What makes community (group) and identity so dynamic and interconnected is reliance on others. As I will discuss later, the community in Lynch depended on each other to succeed. When looking at how community was formed in Lynch, I have found that the community created its shared identity through education, fictive kinship bonds, and race to deal with external social institutions like segregation.

Noyes notes that groups often react to “external ascriptions or oppression” (Noyes 2003: 29). The mining families in Lynch were oppressed by Jim Crow laws, which were
enforced by U.S. Steel through segregated living quarters and schools. Community for them was partly choice—as they chose who they interacted with both white and Black—and partly a response to imposed segregation. Members lived out the expectation of the law, so segregation was normal. By creating a shared identity partially rooted in oppression, members used a shared sense of values within the community to navigate through institutions of oppressions without necessarily feeling oppressed. In this way, they were acting in common with one another to further express the interconnectedness of group and identity.
EDUCATION, FICTIVE KINSHIP, AND RACE

Education

The importance of education was a recurring theme in my interviews with Lynch community members. There was a strong emphasis within the community on seeing to it that children knew something when they graduated high school. For community members it was not enough to just attend school. Rather, school was an important part of their identity. According to community members Lorene Brown-Clark and Gean Austin, Lynch Colored School was a place where education was valued. Lynch Colored Public School was located on the main street just a few blocks west of Lynch grade school and Lynch High School, which were the white schools in Lynch. The school was a multi-room two-story building built in 1923. It went from kindergarten to twelfth grades. Lynch Colored Public School was the only school people of color could attend until the 1960s, when schools integrated. African American students attended a school with staff and peers who resembled them in appearance; everyone was African American. According to community members Gean Austin and Lorene Brown-Clark, the educators at the school ensured the children received a strong education and the quality of education they received at the Lynch Colored Public School was exceptional. The school also offered several extracurricular activities like band and sports like football and basketball. According to community members, Lynch Colored Public School was “just as nice as the white school” but not as big (Brown-Clark 2017). In a combined interview on August 19, 2017, they discussed the importance of the school to the community:

Gean Austin: We had a thing going on here [in Lynch]. It wasn’t any reason why a kid didn’t graduate from high school here ‘cause it wasn’t anything else to do but go to school.
Lorene Brown-Clark: Go to school. Get your lesson. Play sports. Do whatever you wanna. Get in the band. We had a band. I was in the band. Tried to toot a little horn or whatever. That’s all you had to do was just go to school, get your lesson…Daddy said, “Don’t come in here telling me you got no bad grades ‘cause all you had to do is study.”

GA: We were brought up here like that and I taught my kids that. Why would you wanna miss a day a school when all your friends are in school and all the fun’s in school? If you home ain’t nobody there but you. [W]hat you wanna miss school for? That’s where everything was going on, in school.

LBC: It wasn’t no such thing as you not going to school. You have nothing to do but go to school. (Gean Austin and Lorene Brown-Clark August 19, 2017, pers. comm.).

In this excerpt, Austin and Brown-Clark expressed the importance of education for themselves and others in Lynch. As children, it was their job to go to school and do well implying that this is what their parents valued and expected of them. The children complied because their community instilled in them the importance of education.

Schools were vital in Lynch because they educated coal operators’ and miners’ children, and taught children obedience (Wagner et al. 2004: 29, 31-32). The emphasis on obedience was vital because the job security of families depended on obedient children. According to Wagner and Obermiller, miners could lose their employment if their children were seen as problematic or unruly. Housing was closely linked to work. If a miner lost his job, he ultimately lost his home (Wagner et al. 2004: 30-32). Schools therefore not only provided the children with a sound education, but also were a way for U.S. Steel to control its workers. The schools ensured that children attended and enforced attendance by sending truant officers out in the community to make sure children were present. Below, community members Gean Austin and Lorene Brown-Clark discussed how adults in their community ensured that they received their education and were obedient.

GA: They also have truant officers. They went to both schools to check if any kids missed school—
LBC: Miss Pearson. I’ll never forget her.

GA: By 8:30 they’d be at your house checking to see why you wasn’t at school.
LBC: And Miss Pearson, that little black coat in the winter time and that black hat...If you didn’t go to school and she go to the store and you in that store, well your mama had to come get you from school ‘cause she say “Why ain’t you in school?” “Uh, my mama sent me to the store.” “No, you going to school.” She’d take you right to the school and your mama had to come get you *chuckles* ‘cause it was no such thing missing school to go to the store for your mama—you know how some kids would do. Nooobody missed school. It was just like that.

Everybody knew it, so they go to school rather than Miss Pearson embarrass them and take ‘em out the store—post office—whatever and take ‘em to school. And they ain’t want that so everybody just went to school. (Gean Austin and Lorene Brown-Clark August 19, 2017, pers. comm.)

These anecdotes illustrate both the importance of education for African Americans in the community and U.S. Steel’s control. The children had to attend school: there was no other option. The example of Miss Pearson makes it clear that the responsibility of education was everyone’s, not just the child or educator. Miss Pearson also illustrates how U.S. Steel controlled the mining families’ children by making sure children attended school and were obedient rule followers. Whether children in Lynch were aware that their family’s well-being was dependent on their obedience is unclear, but what is clear is that in their minds, school was their job and they were going to make sure that they took their job seriously.

Brown-Clark further described the teachers’ dedication to the children’s success when talking about the changes she saw in education with the integration of schools in the generation to follow:

LBC: The only thing I would say is back then when we were going to school it wasn’t like it is now. You had to know. That’s the difference between white teachers and Black teachers to me—you had to know something to pass. Even from the first grade, the Black teacher would see to it that you knew your lessons. You knew how to write cursive and just knew everything. But, now they don’t teach like that. They really don’t. When you passed you could say you know what you were doing when you passed to the next grade because you had to know what they was telling you. They were very strict. Wasn’t mean—might have had one or two mean teachers—our teachers wasn’t mean but they wanted you to learn. They
saw to it that you knew what you was talking about. ‘Cause the way they have graduations now—I was really surprised even when my kids graduated from high school at graduation cause when we was coming up the valedictorian and the salutatorian had to know their speech by heart. Looong speeches. You didn’t get up there reading off a piece of paper, none of that, and sit down. Nope. Salutatorian and valedictorian, they had long speeches that they had to write and they had checked and everything. And they had to stand there and speak. They couldn’t read off a piece of paper ‘cause they saw to it that you did that. But now, first graduation I went to I was just surprised. Kids come up reading off a little piece of paper and sit down. (Loren Brown-Clark August 19, 2017, pers. comm.)

The community ensured that the children received a strong education. For them, education was a way to foster growth within the community and ensure that the next generation would be more successful than the previous. Community members pushed the importance of “getting your lessons” and used this tactic to build comradery among members. As illustrated above, community members like truant officers and teachers looked after the children to make sure they were getting to school and understanding what was taught to them. Brown-Clark described how deeply embedded the notion of education was for their success. It became important that each child graduated knowing “something.” That “something” is undefined, but I believe it implies that each child walked out of Lynch Colored Public School prepared to be critical thinkers and learners for their next journey—whether that be higher education or starting a career.

In many regards Lynch’s African American community was like New York’s freed African American population in the 1820s and 1830s, which also had schools to educate children. New York’s free African American population had access to education but many African Americans in the 1820s and 1830s were enslaved and lacked access to schooling. These schools were rooted in “concern with character and self-improvement…as the means of instilling the proper values in Black youth,” with the hope that they could teach African Americans how to act, become useful members of society.
and aid in their moral development (Hines 2016: 624, 631). New York’s African Americans believed that education gave children leverage tools for themselves and their families in the advancement of the Black community (Hine 2016: 619). They believed that educating their children would lead to the liberation of Black families while advancing the civil rights of African Americans as a whole. According to Hines, “[a]ccess to and attainment of education was an intensely charged issue for free African Americans” because education was not something all African Americans had access to in this era (Hines 2016: 619). Education was viewed positively as a way to make young, free African Americans upwardly mobile people.

Clearly, ideas about African American freedom and education were well settled by the mid-twentieth century, but education was still seen as a tool for the advancement of African Americans in Lynch. In Lynch, the school’s intent was to educate children and provide them tools to be marketable in spaces outside their community. For Lynch’s Black miners, the education of children was important because it allowed the children to access opportunities that could propel them forward in society and created mobility. For example, students who wanted to go to college or join the army needed an education. The mobility provided to the children through education explains why there was such an emphasis on students receiving a quality education in Lynch.

Despite being more than one hundred years between the time when my informants were raised and educated in Lynch and the free Black community in New York discussed above, the values held by New York’s Black schools appear to transcend time and place. Lynch’s community was concerned with developing character and self-improvement, and creating good, obedient students and strong learners. Austin and Brown-Clark made it
evident that education was concerned with character and self-improvement. They both highlight the importance of going to school and the community saw to it that they did. The anecdotes from Austin and Brown-Clark imply that their parents carried these values, too. Brown-Clark explained that her father insisted that she study and not bring home bad grades. She stated, “cause all you had to do is study...It wasn’t no such thing as you not going to school.” Her comments illustrate that education was a part of the African American mining community’s values and as a child she was responsible for upholding these values by being an academically strong and obedient learner. This may also explain why teachers were concerned with creating orderly students. Not only did the family’s livelihood depend on it, but also it was a long-standing tradition that students were educated to be orderly pupils. For African Americans in mining communities, miners and educators saw to it that children had the tools to be successful outside the mining community. Education then, was clearly a cornerstone for the African American community in Lynch.

Fictive Kinship

In addition to strong educational values, familial-like bonds or fictive kinships were valued. Fictive kinships are created when persons without marital or blood bonds act as and are accepted as family (Chatters et al. 1994: 297). These bonds allow members to negotiate connectedness with their peers without having to explain the details of relationships. Informal kinship has allowed African Americans to create complex family structures since slavery. It is a way for people to create strong interpersonal bonds and connect in spaces that lack true familial connections. These relationships are “maintained
by a consensus between individuals involved and can be relinquished at any time” and are usually hard to break (Chatters et al. 1994: 301, 303; Stewart 2007: 175). Fictive kinship is important in African American communities because “participation in extended kinship or family networks [have] been important to [their] survival and/or advancement” and these connections “continue to exist within the context of extended family structures” of African Americans (Stewart 2007: 165).

Many of Lynch’s African American families were migrant workers. When they came to Lynch they often did not have extended families or strong social networks. Thus, they developed strong interpersonal relationships with one another. Community members became extended family members (maternal figures, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.) looking out for each other’s well-being. The behavior of children was closely linked to the well-being of the family, so informal families became necessary for survival. Community members watched out for children, ensured children received a strong education, and disciplined children when necessary. Fictive kinships were an important dimension of the Lynch community.

Schools played an important role in this regard as well. Not only were they important because they educated the students, but teachers acted as fictive kin. For example, according to Gean Austin, educators’ desired to see students succeed and he described them as caring and maternal:

GA: U.S. Steel went to Kentucky State, Wilberforce College, West Virginia State and they [recruited] Black teachers for us—some of the best they could get ‘cause they paid good. And the teachers in a lot of ways was just like your mother to you…You could talk to them with your problems. It was easy to get along. They understood you and we’d have a good time. (Gean Austin, August 19, 2017, pers. comm.)
In a closed community with few familial ties, African Americans, including teachers, adopted roles as informal families. Teachers were instrumental in the family structure because they were accepted as both educator and family, and upheld the standard of both. For example, as educators, they were expected to teach the children and prepare them for future endeavors because education was valued; as fictive kin, they were expected to look after the children in the community like their own because they were accepted as and acted as family (Stewart 2004: 178). Children may have been like family to teachers, too. Many teachers, as Gean Austin pointed out in his interview with me, were recruited by U.S. Steel. These teachers were not necessarily connected to Lynch. Without familial ties of their own, the community may have become fictive kin, explaining why students felt like teachers were family. The community accepted teachers into the informal family and teachers responded by accepting their roles as fictive kin (Stewart 2004: 179).

Austin’s use of language implies there was an unspoken, yet recognized bond between teacher and student. He stated the teachers “were just like your mother to you,” implying it was understood that they were a part of an informal family structure. He stated in a separate interview for the book *African American Miners and Migrants*, “the teachers were like family to you. They stayed in the community and associated with you every day…you enjoyed going to school because their teachers really made it pleasant and you learned” (Wagner et al. 2004: 94). Teachers were not separate from the community, but a part of the community. The relationship between teacher and students was vital for the advancement and survival the students.
These fictive kinships of the past also affect the present. Community member Lorene Brown-Clark is a widow and one of the oldest community members from Lynch. She talked about how the Lynch community continues to ensure her well-being:

LBC: Sometimes different ones come by, like that guy over there. “Ms. Lorene you have the oil checked in that car?” “Yeah, I did this time.” Sometimes I [say] “No.” “Take it to get the oil changed. Or I’ll take it for you.” You know, like that…But, they’re real nice. Everyone around here are very nice. Like the lady [Deborah Hampton] who brought you around here, that’s my step daughter. My husband’s her daddy. She checks on me every day. She’ll check and come down or I’ll go up there…Everybody around here with anybody, everybody check. They sure do. We’re just an old coal mining town still trying to hang on to whatever.” (Lorene Brown-Clark August 19, 2017, pers. comm.)

Community members act as family. Brown-Clark’s anecdote highlights how informal families continue to be necessary for survival and well-being. There is no discussion of how members are connected in informal families, but the phrase “everybody around here with anybody check” expresses the community’s closeness and interdependence on one another. It illustrates that community members continue to carry out acts of kindness for one another out of love and obligation, like families would.

_Race_

Race was also a key component of community in Lynch. It was the foundation for education and fictive kinship bonds. Education and fictive kinship bonds were essential in creating community, but race was a crucial unifying factor that connected African Americans. Because of segregation, Black community members had limited choices of where they could socialize. Naturally, strong bonds formed in places where members could find acceptance within the community, like school, allowing members to create a sense of normality and maneuver through Lynch’s segregated spaces. Terms like “us,”
“we” and “them” were signifiers of inclusion among people. Daily interactions between African Americans often, but not always, excluded whites in social spaces because of segregation. Understanding race and why it matters clarifies why race was a factor in creating shared identity.

In Lynch, there were few formal opportunities for African Americans to interact with whites in large group settings. People recalled having separate living quarters and schools. African Americans in Lynch socialized with people who resembled them partly because they were forced to. Lynch was in the “separate but equal” south where Jim Crow laws were legal mandates enforced by U.S. Steel. This systemic segregation required people in the Lynch community to find commonalities with each other. Critical race theory notes that systemic structures have been organized to keep minority groups, particularly African Americans, subordinate to white western rule. It also illustrates how systemic racism and acts of oppression influence the daily lives of a group who share intimate connections (Holland 2005: 406-408, 409; Kendi 2016: 6-8). African Americans complied with the law by navigating through social spaces with people who looked like them, illustrating this idea of systematic oppression.

Interestingly, however, the Lynch community members I interviewed said they did not feel racial tension growing up, despite segregation. Alessandro Portelli’s *They Say in Harlan County* discusses segregation as an imaginary line that was seldom crossed. Many of Portelli’s white participants shared how they had limited interactions with “coloreds” in their youth (Portelli 2011: 169-170). Portelli’s participants grew up in the 1910s and 1920s, so they are older than my informants, but their stories share some parallels regarding segregation like housing, education, and daily interactions. In both
cases there was a racial divide in public spaces outside the mines (Portelli 2011: 169-170, 174). My participants, however, told a different story about race relations; they shared fond memories of interacting with whites in non-threatening ways that did not leave them feeling ostracized or lacking in the town. Lorene Brown-Clark, for example, recalled friendly race relation among miners’ children in Lynch:

LB: All the children got along. We never had a problem here where Black kids and white kids fighting. All that. We just didn’t have that problem here. They played together and everything. They’d go out to the park and play together. Of course, now the Black school had they own school. They had they school down there. [We] had a band. The white kids had a band…Black had a football team. The white had they football team and basketball team. And then we had ball games on Friday night and Saturday night. The white had their games on Friday night, didn’t they? 
Gean Austin: Mm hmm.
LBC: Their band would march with their school down here to the park.
GA: Mm hmm.
LBC: Everybody just go down there up on the – we used to call it the hillside then. You could walk out there and watch them play. The band marching. Doing their little things in the park. (Lorene Brown-Clark August 19, 2017, pers. comm.)
Gean Austin added:
GA: … back in the ‘40s way before integration started the Black school had they own—we had a good football team, good basketball teams. We’d practice two or three times a week against the white team. We didn’t play regular scheduled games, but we’d practice basketball and football all the time against each other. And it never was any problems ‘cause we all played together all the time anyways. (Gean Austin August 19, 2017, pers. comm.)

Austin and Brown-Clark’s comments highlight that as children, they did not feel they faced racial tension with their white peers because they were in constant fellowship. My informants did not feel like Lynch was a community with strong racial tensions, or at least they did not feel threatened or uncomfortable in their childhood.

This perceived lack of racial tension, however, does force me to wonder whether their perception is accurate or shared by others, as there are historical accounts of tension in Harlan County and Lynch between African Americans and whites (Portelli 2011: 168-
One of Portelli’s white informants, Nellie Leach, recalled fearing African Americans in childhood. She stated:

We was raised up and taught to be afraid of the colored. We were taught they carried sharp razors and they could cut your throat. My mom taught us to be afraid of them. And I was always afraid of them until I got grown, we got acquainted with colored people. I saw they were just like we were, [it was] just the color of their skin, that’s all. (Portelli 2011: 170)

The problem with selective memories is that they can be inaccurate, and it is likely that adults living in Lynch experienced racism. But there are no resources available to discuss the experiences of African American miners’ children in Lynch, and so these memories “provide information about the narrators and their experiences beyond the mere statement of dates and events” in a community lacking documentation (Williams 2001: 45). These memories, therefore, are useful in understanding what Lynch is remembered as being like, and also what it means to people now. People who grew up in Lynch as children remember it as a very peaceful place among races. For my African American informants there was no tension. African Americans and whites interacted peaceably with one another in informal settings like play. As children, they did not perceive their experiences in Lynch as oppressive, and as adults, they remember their experiences of childhood in Lynch fondly.

Race allowed community members to interact with people who looked like them in safe spaces, interact with their white peers in a friendly manner, and create an idea of a “normal” life in a segregated space. As Austin and Brown-Clark stated above, people like teachers and truant officers showed care for community members. Austin and Brown-Clark’s experiences suggest shared community between African American and white children existed more in one-on-one situations, like play, rather than large groups. Individual interactions between whites and African Americans may then support the idea
that racial tension did not exist in the minds of miners’ children. It is unclear how much of this lack of segregation felt by miners’ children was a result of their community shielding them from the oppressive segregation that often colors the narrative of the south; from minorities “pushing back against the boundaries” and “challeng[ing] segregation itself,”; or individual perception of the community (Chafe 2006: 79). Whatever the reason behind the lack of feeling oppressed may be, my interviewees all stated they did not feel like they were living in a segregated town despite living in separate housing, attending separate schools, and living in the Jim Crow south.

Community and identity in Lynch resulted from intersecting educational, kinship-like and racial ties. Education was something to aspire towards and was a marker of shared values between African American members. Through these strong educational values, connections to people were created through informal familial ties. Race also was an unspoken, yet key element of community. Members used Lynch’s segregated conditions to create a strong group identity. Together these three elements illustrate how African Americans overcame imagined and real limitations to create community.
The decline of coal caused outmigration for many Appalachians. Due to economic changes that caused a “bust in the coal industry,” coal towns and mining communities could not sustain themselves or their workers. According to Crandall Shifflett, “the rise of alternative fuel sources [like gas and electricity], the Great Depression, the automobile, mechanization of the mines, unionization and World War II” all caused changes to collieries and ultimately coal towns that lead to their closing beginning in the 1930s and that continued for the decades following (Shifflett 1991: 199). The decline of coal mining led to the closing and/or dismantling of coal towns, which meant that workers and their families were often displaced. Appalachian coal miners migrated out the region in search of economic gain. Appalachians became internal migrants—migrants within their own country—in search of other economic opportunities (Borman et. al. 1994: xviii). Because coal mining was the primary source of work available, when the mines closed, workers were forced to leave.

As work became more inconsistent, African Americans left Harlan in search of more stable work and steady pay. In the documentary film *East Kentucky Social Club Reunion*, one community member recalls families leaving in the middle of the night. He recalls that fathers would leave families to go find work, then come back, gather what little goods they could, along with their family. “Sometimes they would leave,” he stated, “and wouldn’t no one know they was gone” (Turner 1983). Members recall waking up to find “Lynch friends and neighbors simply gone, having abandoned their debts for the promise of jobs in the urban north” (Wagner et al. 2004: 49). The reasons for mining families leaving unannounced is unclear; it may be because miners and their families
were sometimes indebted to the company stores, and workers leaving without repaying a
debt could lead to them being blacklisted with other mines (Wagner et al. 2004: 25-26).
Company-owned coal towns owned everything, and workers were only beneficial to the
ccoal companies if there was work. With mines closing and no ability to work, mining
families could leave because they had no economic ties. They did not own their houses
and they were not earning income, so leaving was an easy task, but a difficult choice.
Leaving was difficult because the community was so interconnected. The effects of
leaving were difficult on those left behind as well as the families who left.

Migration is a part of the journey for migrant workers, and migration stories help
us understand why “coming home” to a place they have been removed from for decades
is important to this community. African Americans in Lynch had a strong sense of
belonging. Belonging is linked closely to place and “is socially constructed and
negotiated” as a way for community members to gauge their sense of inclusion in relation
to others (Shutika 2011: 15). In Beyond the Borderland, Debra Shutika examines
Mexican migrant workers in the U.S. and she “highlights the precarious situation of these
men and women as they maintain their connections in two places” (Shutika 2011: 20).
She seeks to answer how place is linked to belonging and identity in the migrant Mexican
community. Additionally, the text discusses the importance of returning to a homeplace,
and how it allows members who no longer live in the community to return and reaffirm
their connection to the community for their stay (Shutika 2011: 120). Similarly, I am
trying to answer how my informants maintain connections to two places: their current
home and Lynch through the practice of “homecoming” and extend the conversation on
its importance to community members. Using migration stories of community members
leaving Lynch, I attempt to illustrate variation in migration stories and why African American miners’ children continue to return to Lynch after years of outmigration.

*Migration*

Understanding migration out of company-owned coal towns requires one to understand the coal industry and the nature of migratory families. Coal is not a sustainable industry. Therefore, its peak window of opportunity was limited. Coal mining communities were comprised of Appalachian natives, immigrants, and migrant workers. The nature of migrant workers is to move as work increases or decreases. By the mid-century, migration out of Appalachia had already been happening for several decades. Also, many Blacks in Appalachia were children of migrant workers. All of my informants, including Lorene Brown-Clark who was born in Lynch, were children of migrant workers, so it is not surprising that these families migrated out of Lynch as jobs became scarce.

Most families who left Harlan County talk about how the inconsistency of the mining industry forced men to leave in search of better work and then return for their families. As mines shifted toward automation, African Americans, who primarily worked as coal loaders, left in search of better jobs since they often could not get trained to work automated machinery (Wagner et al. 2004: 18-19, 46-47). African Americans could not work as anything other than coal loaders in Lynch until the 1970s when the Lynch Mine 31 integrated the supervisor position (Austin 2017). Jim Crow’s structural racism crept into mining operations, and racism helped to create oppression in the community, which
may have led to outmigration. Community member Gean Austin states in *African American Migrant Workers*, “the coal mine was good as long as they were working, but when they were not working it was pretty rough, so they all looked for better jobs” (Wagner et al. 2004: 48). (When Austin references “they” he means male coal miners, as women did not work in the mines until the 1970s). Austin’s statement illustrates the two issues in coal mining communities: the instability of the industry and the migratory nature of the workers. Without a demand for coal, jobs decreased, and without job security, migrant families left.

As early as the 1920s, Black youth migrated out of Lynch in search of better jobs and this outward migration increased further after World War II (Borman et al. 1994: xviii; Wagner et al. 2004: 47-49). Interestingly, my informants grew up when coal was on the decline, so their fond attachment to Lynch is unique because outmigration had been happening for decades before they called Lynch home. Members’ fond attachment to the community in the declining region makes analyzing family migrations more interesting because it shows the interconnectedness of the members and reveals that members still return to Lynch because of the people. Their stories express connections to Lynch that run deeper than coal mining and allude to the importance of homecoming as an opportunity to gather with peers.

According to Zeitlin et al., “the family migration story has three parts: a reason for departure, a journey, and a struggle for survival in a new home.” A dramatic narrative may be a part of one of the three elements of a family’s migration story, but all three are often discussed by the teller (Zeitlin et al. 1982: 62). Zeitlin et al.’s model for family migrations stories identifies patterns of migration and may help explain why families
continue to participate in homecoming by uncovering non-work-related factors that drive migration like starting a new life, reuniting a family and/or pursuing interests. Looking at the differences in stories about migration for work and migration for other factors helps explain that migration can be linked to several factors and is a key component of migrant families’ journeys (lifestyle). In many migration stories from Lynch, fathers left in search of better, more stable work and returned to gather his family once it was found. My family’s migration story, however, does not follow this pattern. Instead, my family left Lynch in four stages: my great-grandmother Leila Johnson left with her oldest son, Chuck; my great-grandmother returned to collect the youngest four children; the last three children left; and my great grandfather, Charlie, left.

*The Start of my Family’s Exodus: Pat’s Story*

My great-grandmother, Leila, was the first in my family to leave Lynch. According to my grandmother, Patsy “Pat” Johnson, her mother and father were in marital turmoil. Leila left behind her youngest seven children, and she and her oldest son Chuck started a new life for the family in Indianapolis, IN in 1955. They purchased a home and furniture. During the time Patsy’s mother was away, Patsy and her mother talked on the phone every day. Patsy told me that she was “10 or 11, but Ima say 10 [so] 1956” when her mother and oldest brother returned to move the youngest four children to Indianapolis. Patsy said, “[Mama] came back to get us. I was the oldest. She took me, Larry, Babyman [Willie], and Ronnie.” Leila “didn’t take anything, just our clothes. She had bought all new furniture and everything…The ride to [Indiana] seemed so long. I was
happy to be going…because I missed my mama. She had left me down there [in Lynch] almost a year” (Johnson, Patsy 2018).

Patsy’s story illustrates the three parts of Zeitlin et al.’s migration story model. The reason for departure for Leila was marital turmoil. For the children, the reason for departure was to reunite the family. The journey was described as a year-long separation of mother and children and the long trip from Kentucky to Indiana. The journey also highlights that migration is necessary for migrant families. Migrant families move from place to place (often, but not always for work), with little intention of creating permanent roots. Patsy’s migration story shows that it was in the family’s nature to move by explaining the various phases of the family separating and reuniting, highlighting the family’s lack of permanent roots in Lynch. The family’s struggle to survive is evident in Leila and Chuck working hard to purchase a new home and reuniting the youngest children with their mother. This migration story model explains a cause of migration, why migration was necessary for this migrant family, and the effects it had on the family.

Patsy’s story tells about a migrant family leaving for reasons not related to coal mining. Her story does two things: it illustrates variance in reasons for leaving coal mining towns during this era and addresses the habits of migrant workers. By clearly stating that leaving was related to family issues and not coal mining, Patsy presents a new perspective on migration stories. Most stories about leaving are about the need to find work in scarce times. Patsy’s migration stories explicitly states the need of a mother (my great-grandmother, Leila) to leave the area to start a new life. Most women in mining communities during the 1950s and 1960s stayed home while their husbands worked (Austin 2017; Brown-Clark 2017; Portelli 2011: 157). For a woman to leave the
community by moving out of state to work was uncommon but illustrates that leaving was traditional solution available to everyone in migrant families.

*The Last Members of my Family Leave Lynch*

Several years passed before the entire family migrated from Lynch to Indianapolis. The last three children moved to Indianapolis in 1961. According to my uncle Ceasar, he and his younger brother Calvin stayed in Lynch because they were in a band. This band was comprised of Ceasar, Calvin (West), two schoolmates, and a teacher. The band toured the region and occasionally played on Ted Mack’s *Original Amateur Hour* television show. Ceasar stated, “I left because I was playing in a band called ‘The Jivedeers’ but the band broke up to move to New York. I went to Indianapolis to finish school.” Ceasar moved to Indianapolis in 1961 shortly before moving to New York City (Johnson, Ceasar 2018). However, Ceasar and Patsy’s father, Charlie, moved to Indianapolis after the last three children had already left Lynch. Ceasar stated that his father had retired and had begun to develop black lung. According to Patsy, her parents reconciled. Her father was laid off and moved to Indianapolis in 1962 or 1963 after Patsy got married (Johnson, Ceasar 2018; Johnson, Patsy 2018).

In Ceasar’s migration story, his reason for departure was the dismantling of the band. His journey (Zeitlin et al.’s second phase of migration stories) was the move from Lynch to Indianapolis, and his struggle to survive (Zeitlin et al’s third phase of migration stories) was his brief stay in Indianapolis before moving to New York City. Though he does not go into detail about any parts of his journey, he makes it clear that his reasons for leaving were related to educational opportunities (moving to Indianapolis to finish
school) and his interests (moving to New York City as he and his band members had
planned). My uncle’s migration story also touches on another reason for leaving that is
not related to work: he had no reason to stay. Ceasar made it very clear that his reason for
staying in Lynch was to pursue music with his band. When the band dismantled to take
on other endeavors, there was no reason to stay.

My great-grandfather’s migration story is more cut and dried than the previous
examples, but he still included Zeitlin’s three elements of migration stories. Charlie’s
reason for leaving is unclear; it could have been retirement, or it could have been job
scarcity. His journey included leaving Lynch to move to Indianapolis where his wife and
children lived. His struggle to adapt to a new place included him dealing with black lung.
Charlie’s migration story was simple but still illustrated a need and desire for migration
among migrant workers. As a migrant worker when mining jobs were scarce, Charlie left.
Charlie’s was the only migration story in my family directly related to mining making it
different from my family’s other migration stories but presenting the option of leaving for
both work and family.

In my family, some people stayed in Lynch longer than others. Ceasar stayed
because of his music. My great-grandfather, Charlie, stayed because of his connection to
the coal mine. Leila and Chuck migrated early on to create a new home for the family.
The youngest children migrated to be reunited with their mother in their new home.
Ceasar eventually migrated to continue his education and pursue his interests in a new
place. Charlie eventually migrated for reasons related to coal mining and perhaps to
reconnect with family. Collectively, my family’s migration stories express reasons for
leaving coal communities and the nature of migrant workers and their families, which is
to migrate. They offer a variety of reasons that migrant workers and their families leave, including non-work-related issues, and illustrate reasons that are not homogenous.

Migration encourages a person to leave a place. Homecoming encourages them to return to the place they left. Migration and homecoming are related because both encourage members to connect their past and present relationships with a place by interacting with the people and the place to show their connection to both. Homecoming in Lynch becomes important because members are returning home to people and place. Returning home allows members to reaffirm the bonds built in childhood, gather with community members, and show their interconnectedness to Appalachia. Migration does not mean that members ex-communicate themselves from the community, nor does it mean that leaving disconnects them from other community members. Instead, migration allows people to live in two spaces with roots in both. For Lynch community members, no matter where they actually lived, many people felt like Harlan was still home; it was the place that raised them, nurtured them, and taught them what community was.

This longing for home led to the establishment of the Eastern Kentucky Social Club (EKSC) in 1969. The Eastern Kentucky Social Club is a social organization founded by former eastern Kentucky members from Lynch and Benham. Talk about establishing the social club began in 1967. By 1969, a small group of people who missed Lynch and Benham decided to create an organization that allowed community members to come together. Membership formed around a “collective identity and community formed around remembrance of a time and place.” The intention of the social club was to “maintain long-standing friendship and celebrate heritage rooted in coalfields of southeastern Kentucky” (Wagner et. al 2004: 102). In 1970 the EKSC held its first
reunion in Columbus, OH, and reunions have been held annually for over forty years 
(Hogg 2014; University of North Carolina, n.d.).

The EKSC has sixteen chapters in fourteen different states. Local chapters hold 
monthly meetings and fundraisers to prepare for the upcoming year’s events. Each 
chapter participates in local philanthropy, too, donating to various organizations 
throughout the year (Wagner et al. 2004: 109). The EKSC holds two annual celebrations: 
a Labor Day celebration hosted by a local chapter in various places around the country 
and a Memorial Day celebration held in Lynch. Every year, members travel to the host 
city for the annual Labor Day reunion and to Lynch for the Memorial Day celebration.

According to one community member, Andrea Massey, the purpose of the 
reunions is to “keep families together and keep them coming together.” The reunions are 
centered around bonds built in childhood through church and high school sports in 
addition to coal mining (Wagner et al. 2004: 106-107). The Lynch chapter owns and 
operates out of the former Lynch Colored Public 
School, where the monthly meetings are 
held. During the Memorial Day weekend reunion, the building is used as a social 
gathering place (Wagner et al. 2004: 83-84). The Eastern Kentucky Social Club strives to 
unite Harlan’s past and present members through the two annual celebrations. The two 
celebrations show the importance of community within this group. For them it is more 
than just seeing friends; it is being with family.

Homecoming

Community members see the EKSC’s annual celebrations as family reunions. 
Wagner and Obermiller discuss the importance of the celebrations in the minds of 
community members in their book *African American Migrant Workers* (Wagner et al.
This book documents the importance of the EKSC’s Labor Day celebration as a way for members to continue connections to eastern Kentucky roots and peers (Wagner et al. 2004: 106-107). Dr. Bill Turner also discusses the importance of the Labor Day celebration in his documentary film, *East Kentucky Social Club Reunion*. For Black Appalachians, the Labor Day celebration allows them to continue social ties through hugs, kisses, networking and catching up with peers—it is similar to a family reunion. As one participant of the Labor Day celebration notes, “[the] moving celebration,” works to show “the comradery of Black mountain people” (Turner, 1983). Another member points out that the purpose of the reunion is to “get together and exchange the good times” and members spend “this time having a jolly good time talking about the good times we had in the hills of Kentucky” (Turner 1983). Countless stories told by current and former members speak of life in eastern Kentucky with a reverent love and respect. One theme that does not waver is the importance of reunion for Harlan community members (Turner 1983). These stories tell about this group’s interdependence on one another. It is safe to infer that members gather out of love. There is no obligation to travel, yet for more than forty years Black mountain people from eastern Kentucky have been gathering as an act of dedication to peers and to fulfill their need for reinvigorating the kinship-like ties that keeps this informal family together.

In addition to the annual Labor Day celebration, the EKSC also holds an annual Memorial Day celebration in Lynch. In comparison to the Labor Day celebration, the Memorial Day celebration holds a deeper meaning in Lynch because members are physically coming home to a place. Memorial Day Weekend in Lynch is the one time a year the EKSC comes “home” to Harlan. All members of the EKSC and their families are
welcome to the Memorial Day celebration, even if they don’t have roots in Lynch. It is intended to be a place for families to continue the tradition of coming together to celebrate one another at home.

Nationally, Memorial Day homecoming celebrations have several functions including being a “focal point for gathering community,” “an occasion for community members to return to a homeplace,” and “an act of respect for the dead that reaffirms one’s bond with those who have gone before” according to Alan and Karen Singer Jabbour (Jabbour et al. 2010: vii). Jabbour and Jabbour’s work, Decoration Day in the Mountains, deals specifically with decorating graves in Appalachia. Jabbour and Jabbour’s participants gather during Decoration Day weekend to come home to a place, participate in religious services, and commemorate community members who have passed by cleaning and decorating their graves. A major part of Decoration Day is returning to a homeplace or “homecoming.” “Homecoming” as stated in the Dictionary of Smoky Mountain English is “an annual event when former community members of a church group gather for a reunion including special worship services and to decorate graves of a church’s cemetery. The term has largely been replaced with decoration day” (Jabbour et al. 2009: 46-47).

According to Jabbour and Jabbour, Decoration Day takes on two meanings. In the north, Decoration Day is a type of homecoming largely associated with Memorial Day where community members honor those fallen in battle and may include a parade (Jabbour et al. 2010: 116-120). This holiday occurs in late May. In the south, Decoration Day is a type of homecoming that allows community members to clean away debris and old decorations from the previous year and hold religious ceremonies in the newly
decorated cemeteries. Unlike northern Decoration Day, southern Decoration Day has no date. Communities instead follow the change of seasons (winter to spring) or cemetery schedules (Jabbour et al. 2010: 116, 123). Decoration Day can also be linked to family reunions and church homecomings as both involve pilgrimage home, but these descriptions do not accurately describe what Decoration Day is. Family reunions are described as having a strong outdoor component including cemetery visits, and church homecomings are described as events to celebrate the founding and development of a church that may be focused on indoor events and may include an outside component (Jabbour et al. 2010: 46-48, 178).

Lynch’s present homecoming celebration is one that does not neatly fit into the category of Memorial Day, Decoration Day, family reunion or church homecoming definitions. In Lynch community members return home during Memorial Day weekend to participate in community activities and honor the dead. Unlike Jabbour and Jabbour’s participants, the need to clean and decorate the graves as a way to commemorate the dead is no longer a part of the present celebration, although it was a key component of past EKSC Memorial Day weekend celebrations. Lynch’s Memorial Day weekend is not like the northern celebration that honors those fallen in battle, nor is it a day spent cleaning and decorating cemeteries with a religious service held in the cemetery. It’s not a family reunion nor is it a day that members come to celebrate a church. What it is, then, is a hybrid of these four celebrations. Like the northern Memorial Day celebration, homecoming in Lynch is held during Memorial Day weekend where a key element of the present celebration is to honor the dead. Like the southern Decoration Day, homecoming in Lynch is centered around religious activities. It is like a family reunion in that
members who feel like family gather to celebrate the dead and it is like a church homecoming in that it allows members to engage with and celebrate the church’s role (the organization and development of the current homecoming activities) in orchestrating homecoming. Using the themes outlined above, I analyze Lynch’s Memorial Day celebration and its connection to homecoming to express the importance of looking back at the past and into the present to show the interconnectedness of the community and the important dynamic of migration and homecoming.

Memorial Day weekend

Two carloads of Johnsons caravanned from Indianapolis to Lynch, Kentucky for Memorial Day weekend in May 2016. Two carloads of additional Johnsons were already there. This was the first time any child or grandchild had been to Lynch since my family migrated north in the 1950s and 1960s. I was excited to finally see the “infamous” Lynch of the family’s childhood stories. When I arrived in Lynch for my first Memorial Day weekend, I was not sure what to expect. The town was small with a single, narrow road called Main Street that ran through its heart. We had arrived about midday on a Saturday, several hours after the day’s activities had begun. My family’s first stop was the Mt. Sinai Missionary Baptist Church. We were greeted with loving embraces by the first lady of the church, Deborah Hampton. She ushered us into the small building adjacent to the church. Someone had prepared food. My grandmother, Patsy, quickly found her brothers, who were excited to see that we all arrived safely. My Uncle Ceasar tuned up his bass and my Uncle Calvin tuned up his guitar. A family friend of my Uncle Calvin, Johnny, introduced himself as the “family’s” drummer for the weekend. We grasped hands to
pray. The children and grandchildren went to make plates of food. My grandmother and her brothers began to rehearse, as they were the musical act for Saturday and Sunday’s religious activities. The brief moments we spent in the small building adjacent to the church would set the tone for the weekend; we had come home.

According to an interview with Rev. Ronnie Hampton, pastor of Mt. Sinai Missionary Baptist Church, Memorial Day weekend in Lynch originally began as “graduation day” in the community. Members would return to Lynch to see family members graduate from the Lynch Colored Public School. It was a time of rejoicing and a time of sorrow. New graduates would transition out of Lynch into new lives with relatives in cities or attend college with the hopes of creating a better life outside the collieries. One of the primary functions of the original graduation day celebration was to provide youth with opportunities to leave Lynch, and pursue education or careers in bigger, more marketable cities. Those members who had “made it” outside of Lynch came back to get relatives and help them find employment to get their foot in the door at factories in the north. Memorial Day acted as a recruitment ground for youth and family members to leave Lynch and build their success with the underlying assumption they would reach back and help other members. Also, the celebration provided former members opportunities to share their successes and inspire the new generation (Hampton 2018). In this sense, Memorial Day expanded the opportunities of children beyond the coal fields.

Memorial Day or “graduation day” weekend was also a time for families to gather, clean, and decorate the graves of members who had passed on, and to remember the dead. Like Jabbour and Jabbour’s participants, members came together to clean and
remove old debris and decorate the graves of loved one who had passed on. This “act of respect for the dead that reaffirms one’s bond with those who have gone before” afforded families the opportunity to commemorate deceased loved ones while celebrating the recent graduates without making two trips home. Graduation day allowed the community to focus on the successes of the students’ and provided a reason for members to return home. While home, community members went from house to house socializing and visiting with one another for the weekend. Children listened to stories of their elders about life before the coal mines, life in new cities and childhood. The emphasis was on gathering with community members to maintain the kinship-like bonds of the community.

However, the integration of schools ended the Black school’s graduation day and the exodus of coal miners depopulated the community, transforming graduation day into “homecoming.” When the school was closed, the community refused to let the tradition die out, so the EKSC’s Lynch chapter took on the role of providing community members a reason to continue to “come home.” They coordinated a weekend of activities. Friday was a meet and greet. Saturday was a party in the Lynch Colored Public School, which had become the home of the EKSC’s Lynch chapter. Sunday the church was there and open for the community. Since graduation day had ended and the graves were now maintained, Memorial Day’s focus became more on families. Homecoming became a time for families and fictive kin to spend together. The need for a concrete focal point drives the celebration and works because community members want it to work. Members commit to returning home to participate in the weekends’ activities and they anticipate members returning home. Without these functions, Memorial Day as a celebration would
not work because it requires the community’s desires to be met and the commitment of the community to continue (Neustadt 1992: 162-163). Coming home allowed members to return to catch up between the spells when former members weren’t in Lynch. Former members could come into the community as accepted individuals and also bring in their new families—who were as accepted community members—and introduce them to life in their former home.

For my family, returning with the next generations allows those who are geographically outsiders to connect to a place that is important to the family historically. Furthermore, it connects family stories to tangible places, making those stories come alive. In my family, stories about growing up in Lynch were often told at family functions held throughout the year. These stories were told to teach moral lessons, for entertainment, or to inform the children about how growing up has changed over the generations. One of my favorite stories is about a cat. When my grandmother and her brothers were young children growing up in Lynch they found a cat, took it home and washed it. According to family legend, once the children had washed the cat, they were looking for a way to dry it. Instead of towel-drying the cat, they placed the cat in the oven and turned it on. The cat began to scream and claw at the oven door, but the children were afraid to let the cat out, so they waited patiently for the cat to stop moving. When their mother got home they told her what they did. She opened the oven to find a dead, burnt cat. She was so tickled about their failed attempt at a good deed that she could not punish them then. In many ways, this family legend parallels many classic and contemporary urban legends about people drying pets but to me, it connects my family’s stories to Lynch specifically.
As a child I tried to imagine what their home looked like, and to make the images in this story come more alive in my mind. I wanted to place myself in the community to see what the houses looked like. I wanted to see Lynch to make my family’s stories come alive. As an adult, the current owners of our family home granted my family access to see it, so we were able to tour my family’s childhood home. My grandmother and her brothers showed us the four-room house. They pointed to places throughout, connecting our family’s stories with their former home.

The ability to come home allows members to physically connect to place and remember their past while fellowshipping; it also allows family members who have never been to Lynch the opportunity to connect family stories with place. The connection between place and community illustrates how homecoming celebrations reinforce communal ties. Homecoming allows members to “[return] to the place that was once home and return to familiarity and comfort.” When members return, they must confront how they remember a place and recognize what it is (Shutika 2011: 127). The community may have changed drastically, or the changes may be small. For my grandmother and her brothers, coming home to Lynch and showing the next generation their hometown was exciting, but it also forced them to acknowledge the town’s changes. As my family toured the town, we could see that Lynch was once much larger. The mountain showed evidence of paved streets, houses, and manmade plateaus left unkempt and hidden beneath where nature had grown over the structures. Many of the town’s buildings were dilapidated, boarded up, or repurposed, but the town showed signs of a formerly prosperous place. Returning home required my family members to come to terms with how places change
while they are away and provided opportunities for them to use the landscape to tell the
next generation about a community in which they are still active.

Memorial Day as a jubilant weekend family celebration and homecoming carried on for many years. But as members passed on, the social club’s members became fewer, and there were fewer people left to return “home.” With fewer members to carry out the tradition of homecoming, the church stepped in. For the past five or more years, Mt. Sinai Missionary Baptist Church has stepped up to continue Lynch’s long tradition of homecoming by centering its Memorial Day weekend activities around God. For those people who still do “come home,” the church orchestrates a weekend of activities to give them something to do. On Friday night the club may or may not be open so that members can gather together for a meet and greet of peers. Saturday morning there is a walk to commemorate a former community member (who loved Lynch and has passed on). T-shirts are given away and members walk around the park in her honor. Breakfast is served afterwards. Around noon, Nickie Jefferson, a former college basketball player with roots in Lynch, hosts basketball in the park. Children and young adults can play a few games before a BBQ lunch is held. Saturday evening a church service is held at the Mt. Sinai Missionary Baptist Church. Sunday morning Mt. Sinai opens its doors for Sunday school and service.

Sunday is the last official day of the Memorial Day Weekend activities. During Sunday’s church service the community members gather to participate in a worship service and reaffirm their connection with members who passed on (Jabour et al. 2010: vii). In the service, time is taken to remember members who have transitioned on from the previous year. Homecoming in Lynch honors them by taking a few moments in the
Sunday religious service to remember them. This is not an overwhelmingly long part of the service, but it is important. Names of known community members who have passed in the previous year are printed in Sunday’s program. For a few minutes, Rev. Ronnie Hampton, pastor of Mt. Sinai Missionary Baptist Church, asks living community members to come forward and stand in honor of deceased community members. Then, a moment of silence coupled with lighting of candles is taken for community members to reflect on shared memories and contributions the recently deceased made during their life. Traditionally, Memorial Day commemorates those who have fallen in battle. It is a time for loved ones to reflect on and honor their memory. Though not literal soldiers, deceased community members are soldiers in Lynch. At one point they were a part of the Lynch community and often continued to show their connection through the social club; they were instrumental catalysts of change in the community. Rather than passively succumbing to the weight of systemic oppression, the closing of mines or the exodus of miners that comes with closed circuit mining towns, these members pressed on to ensure better lives for themselves while remembering their community and creating opportunity for others along the way. Therefore, their connection to the community was vital and deserved commemoration.

The interlude in the service provides a space for community members, both dead and alive, to connect by creating space for the dead’s memories to be honored and remembered. A key theme within the Lynch community is that no one is ex-communicated. Whether they move out the community or move on, it is important that members “keep coming together” because this community feels like they are a family. This is not to suggest that religious ceremonies in Lynch attempt to reconnect the living
and dead through a mythical exchange; however, it suggests that allowing members to reflect and engage with memories of the deceased acknowledges their importance to the community. This activity reaffirms living community members bonds with the dead as an act of remembrance. Members relax after service as they fellowship with peers and prepare to say their goodbyes until the next Memorial Day homecoming.

Concern for the community and the future of the community is present throughout Memorial Day activities. Homecoming swings between the past and the future. Homecoming allows various generations to connect with the place community members call home while allowing newer generations to engage with the community. For the migrants who return home, homecoming allows exiled members of the community enjoy fictive kin and family and partake in homecoming activities that tie together traditions of the past to continue them in Lynch. It is a symbolic reuniting of community members that allows them to recreate a sense of belonging (Shutika 2011: 129-130, 139). Homecoming specifically relates to migration because it encourages return migration—migration back to community. The idea of return migration is important because it shows the need for exiled community members to continue engaging with the community they left. Return migration also allows out-migrants to claim roots and symbolic connections with two places at once. However, with fewer members to connect the past and the present the tradition of homecoming in Lynch may soon reach its end. One issue the social club and the community faces is the lack of African American miners’ families returning to Appalachia because many families are disconnected from their Appalachian roots. For the mining community, there is no one to care for homes, generate income, or bring new life into the community; when elders die, so does the community. Similarly, when
younger generations are no longer invested in continuing the social ties shared by the generation before them, the organization that is valued by elders in the community dies out. The need to gather among peers encourages members to stay connected while they still can, showing why it is important of them to continue coming home to Harlan.
CONCLUSION

Harlan’s legacy extends beyond the image of native white Appalachians and into a rich, ethnically diverse region. The region benefits from individuals who sought after better lives for themselves and their families. Though clouded by the image of poor whites, there is a glimmer of light that shines out of Harlan, which are African Americans, their identity and community. African Americans’ use of identity illuminates the how eastern Kentuckians used informal families to form community. Members who were often the children of migrant workers seeking a better life and decent wages found strong connections to carry them as they moved in and out the region. Harlan’s African Americans show diversity of Appalachian mountain people, the importance of community and the fruit of homecoming. To neatly put it, African Americans from Harlan County express what it means to extend communal bonds beyond blood kinship ties and into informal families that operate like formal ones.

The community perpetuated among miners’ families illustrates how African Americans dealt with segregation in small towns and learned to navigate within their place. Learning to navigate through imagined spaces may contribute to why members continue to return to a physical location to go home and to a shared imagined space that stands in for home with those they love. Studying minority groups like African Americans allows the diversity of this region to be emphasized. It also displays the importance of community among African Americans. Community has a common denominator of education. Fictive kinship and racial bonds bind this group. With the coal bust and the migratory nature of families, many families left the region to pursue personal interests, like mine, or economic advancement. This exodus illustrates the need for
migratory families to leave while illuminating that leaving a space does not disconnect them from a community. Depopulation of the community encourages homecoming as a time for families to return home. Homecoming allows community to manifest in the present and shows the importance of people and place to Lynch’s African Americans. These elements of community, migration and homecoming work together to show how Black mountain people use community to further their desire to stay connected to childhood peers while reinforcing values taught in childhood as seen in homecoming.

“Home to Harlan” illustrates how African American miners’ children created a strong shared identity among themselves to overcome segregated spaces in an isolated region. By finding commonalities with peers, building comradery and developing fictive kinship bonds, this group created a sense of normality to endure the pressures of the Jim Crow south. When various personal and economic reasons encouraged many members to leave the region, this group continued to express their interconnectedness by creating a social club. This social club allowed them to continue strong bonds rooted in coal mining, church and school independent from geographical location. This desire allowed them space to create opportunities to continuously gather. Through homecoming members can return to homeplace to engage with fictive kin while introducing families not from Lynch to the region. Homecoming allows members who have migrated out of the community to create roots and symbolic connections to both their current and past homes. For families without direct connections to Lynch, they are taken in as a part of the larger informal family. Homecoming provides the opportunity for all to establish or reinvigorate connections to Appalachia. Most importantly, coming to Lynch means coming home.


*Harlan County USA*. 1977. Directed by Barbara Kopple. Film.


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