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Complicating the Constructed Narrative of Minnesota's Iron Range

Sara Rukavina

Positionality and Iron Range Pride

Though I grew up in Boston, I have always had an affinity for the Iron Range of northern Minnesota. My dad grew up there, and my childhood was full of visits to our extended family on the Range. It has always been a place of love, family stories, fresh air, and beauty for me. It is the place where my great-grandparents immigrated to from poor and rural areas of Italy and Croatia, where they got jobs in the mining industry, and where they were able to make a new life for themselves. The sacrifices and hard work of my great-grandparents and grandparents enabled all of the generations to come — my dad and his siblings, me and my cousins, our kids — to have the lives we do. This is how my family history has been told to me, as a true American Dream success story, and it is not unique to my family. Many families on the Range have very similar ones, and with them come a pride and gratitude for mining and for the life the Range was able to provide them. Many Rangers' express these sentiments with signs in their yards that read "We Support Mining," and are sometimes alongside "Make America Great Again" and other signs endorsing conservative politicians.

When I decided to come to Macalester for school, my uncle warned me that they were going to teach me to hate mining and told me not to forget that my family comes from the Range and that I come from generations of miners. He was right in many ways. I do not support mining like he did. But I also have to admit that I still share a sense of this pride and gratitude for the Range, for my ancestors, and for the unions they belonged to that fought for

working people. This project has been an opportunity for me to further my understanding of and grapple with my own feelings about mining, the Iron Range, and my family history. I sought to understand how an area that has such a strong and radical history of progressive politics and labor movements came to be so conservative. I wanted to understand more deeply the relationship among the region, its people, and the mining industry and how that has changed overtime. Through my research and my reflections, I have come to think of the simplified story of my great-grandparents' immigration and lives as part of a larger narrative of the Iron Range that has been crafted for over a century to defend and serve exploitative capitalism.

I identify the larger "Iron Range Narrative" that I refer to throughout my paper as one that puts the miners at the center of the story. It emphasizes the nostalgic valorization of immigrant workers and boasts of their heroic role in the mining industry that built the United States. I aim to complicate this Narrative by discussing what has been conveniently and intentionally left out — harm against Indigenous people and land, worker exploitation, violent conflict. How different would the story of the Iron Range, and of the United States, be if we considered these parts of their history, if we took seriously the legacies of violence and harm caused by the mining industry?

Occupation of Stolen Land

The Iron Range Narrative *begins* with the arrival of the immigrant workforce and does not acknowledge either the presence of the Anishinaabe people or the theft of their land that

allowed for the mining industry to take place. Learning about how Indigenous people were forcibly removed from the region of the Iron Range is an important part of deconstructing this Narrative. Though Minnesota is the homeland of the Dakota people who have lived here for many, many generations, Anishinaabe people were also living in Minnesota, including in the northeastern region, which is now the Iron Range, at the time that white people began to violently settle this part of the US.

After a survey that found copper on the north shore of Lake Superior in 1848, people and companies with mining interests began to pressure the federal government to obtain the land and open it for mining.¹ In 1854, Chief Buffalo of the Anishinaabe people had negotiated and signed a treaty with the United States government that ceded land in the northeastern part of Minnesota along Lake Superior to the federal government, and placed Anishinaabe people in reservations in both Minnesota and Wisconsin. Chief Buffalo is an honored figure in Anishinaabe history and is “best known for ensuring that the Anishinaabe would stay on their lands, even if those lands were significantly reduced in size, rather than move west of the Mississippi River.”² Though the treaty was signed by Chief Buffalo with input and mediation from other chiefs, I still refer to the land as stolen because it was not a consensual agreement between two equal parties. The land cession of 1854 was the only option the Anishinaabe had to avoid war and further violence and to remain on their land. By the time the mining industry was fully established, and white people were coming to settle the region, Indigenous people had already been forced into reservations decades prior. This is what made this Narrative such an easy

and convenient one; European immigrants and white Americans coming to the region for the mining opportunities were not *themselves* agents of removal though were certainly benefactors of it.

This is vastly different from many other instances of developing mining towns in US history. For example, a gold rush in Colorado in 1858 brought thousands of white settlers to an area where Americans only had “right of way access,” that allowed them to simply pass through to get to California. Settlers “demanded new treaties be made with local Indian groups to secure land rights in the newly created Colorado Territory,” and ultimately waged a violent war and killed hundreds of Cheyenne people who were hoping to arrange peace talks.³ This terrible and disturbing piece of US history is known as the Sand Creek Massacre. The miners and settlers of the Iron Range never inflicted such bloody violence on such a large scale against Anishinaabe people simply because the treaty established decades before meant my ancestors and others arrived onto land that had already been taken from Indigenous people. This is a convenient and necessary place for the collective memory and Narrative to begin because it does not have to include the displacement of Indigenous people that the mining industry necessitated and can ignore Indigenous people’s existence and the continuation of harmful acts committed against them.

The Italian side of my family, the Mordinis, immigrated in 1920 to an area in Koochiching County which was not included in the 1854 treaty but was ceded to the government through the Treaty of 1866. Though they came half a century later, they are very much still direct benefactors of the theft of

¹ “1854 Ojibwe Land Cession Treaty.”

² Kirchner, Margo. “Unsung Hero: Anishinaabe Chief Buffalo, Who Negotiated Rights for His People.”

³ “The West,” The American YAWP, June 7, 2013.

Indigenous land. They received land from the Homestead Act of 1862, which gave citizens or future citizens up to 160 acres of “public” land to homestead. My family has the documents, both the approved application and the map of their land, which I have included here:

4-270

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
UNITED STATES LAND OFFICE

Duluth, Minnesota
November 6, 1920
(Date)

NOTICE OF ALLOWANCE.

Ricardo Mordini
Greaney Minnesota

Sir:

Your Homestead Application, SERIAL No. 013248,
(Kind of application or entry.)
Receipt No. 2497149, for
SW $\frac{1}{4}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$ and NW $\frac{1}{4}$ SW $\frac{1}{4}$, Section 15
Township 64 N., Range 22 W., 4th Principal Meridian,
containing 80 acres, has been this day allowed, subject to
your further compliance with law and regulations applicable thereto.
In correspondence relating to this entry, always refer to the
serial number.
Act Jan. 14, 1862 (25 Stat., 642)

Very respectfully,

J. H. ...
Register or Receiver.

Figure 1: Scanned copy of family historical documents

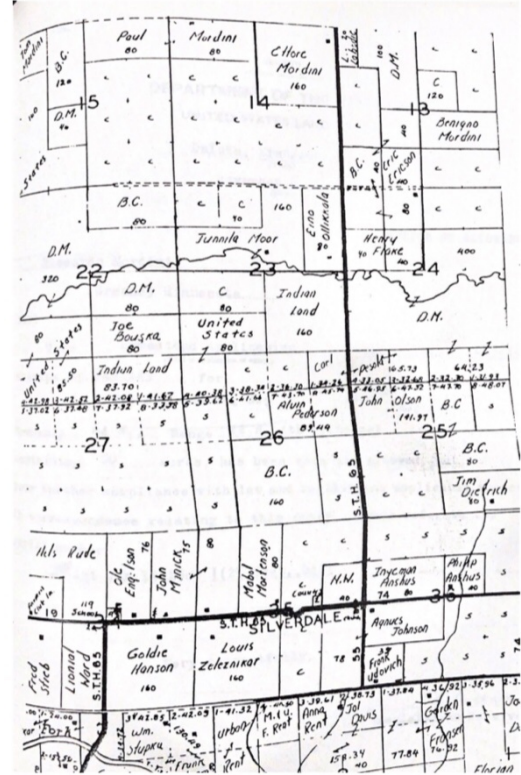


Figure 2: Scanned copies of family historical documents

Occupation of Stolen Land

Seeing the Mordini land plots on the map along with “Indian Lands” made this part of my family history so much more concrete and brought up a lot in me. Having received land through the Homestead Act is inherently an act of settler colonialism. How did my great grandparents feel about their own occupation of Indigenous land? Were they familiar with the history of how it came to be that they could live there? Did they interact with the Indigenous people that lived near them? What did their Indigenous neighbors think of them? I can never truly know the answers to these questions but from my research it seems like interactions between Indigenous people and white settlers were fairly limited on the Range at this time.

David LaVigne in his article, “The ‘Black Fellows’ of the Mesabi Iron Range” describes a couple documented examples of interactions,

like the son of Finnish immigrants recalling how they would pass by Indigenous people while going into town or accounts of Indigenous people coming to Mesabi communities to sell things like blueberries. These few examples LaVigne brings up are from the white viewpoint and hardly offer much of substance. Missing from many of the sources I was able to find, like this one, is the Indigenous perspective; what were the interactions and relationships like from Indigenous people's perspectives? LaVigne writes, "Aside from these scattered examples, there are few descriptions of contact with American Indians, and the northern regions remained socially and economically distinct."⁴ It is unclear whether LaVigne asserts that the lack of documented descriptions of contact means that such contact was uncommon or just that it simply was not documented well, but his general point stands. It seems that there existed a separation between the communities, which allowed the development of a narrative in which Indigenous people and their experiences were not visible or included.

In part because of this separation, white settlers on the Range thought of Indigenous people as something of the past and were susceptible to racist cultural depictions of them. LaVigne describes how local newspapers "reinforced color differences and showed the influence of mass media. Newspaper editors and other local writers stigmatized American Indians as 'savages' and 'Redskin Sioux'"⁵ He writes that even people "sympathetic of the modern-day plight of Indians assumed their orientation in the past."⁶ For example, he brings up how an old history of Eveleth, a town within the Range, described "Indians as living in 'the

world of yesterday.' It continued that 'in these centuries things have changed. Tepees have become modern residences, canoe factories have been replaced by excellent buildings, and well-laid-out streets.'"⁷

The (un)Naturalization of Mines

In his piece "Monumental Mines: Mine Tourism, Settler Colonialism, and the Creation of an Extractive Landscape on Minnesota's Iron Range," American Studies scholar, Joseph Whitson, argues that the way that the mines are commemorated now and the way that the mined landscape of the Iron Range has become naturalized, creates a narrative that "erases Ojibwe presence in the region, ignoring both the role mining played in past environmental injustices as well as how it continues to threaten Ojibwe political and resource sovereignty."⁸ He talks about how the name itself, the Iron Range, contributes to this narrative. It reduces this region of Minnesota down to the resource it extracts. Whitson ties in historian Traci Voyles' idea of "wastelanding" and argues that "it is through tools of representation that indigenous landscapes—rich, livable, and complex ecosystems like the Ojibwe country of northeastern Minnesota—are reduced to single resource environments suitable only for extractive industry," almost naturalizing the extraction of the resource.⁹ I have heard the mines of the Iron Range often referred to as Minnesota's Grand Canyon, and now I realize the implications of this comparison. It indicates that the mine pits are just as natural as the Grand Canyon, which was formed by erosion of

⁴ David LaVigne, "The 'Black Fellows' of the Mesabi Iron Range: European Immigrants and Racial Differentiation during the Early Twentieth Century," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 36, no. 2 (2017), 16.

⁵ LaVigne, 27.

⁶ See note 5 above.

⁷ See note 5 above.

⁸ Joseph Whitson, "Monumental Mines: Mine Tourism, Settler Colonialism, and the Creation of an Extractive Landscape on Minnesota's Iron Range." *Public Historian* 41, no. 3 (2019), 49.

⁹ Whitson, 53.

the Colorado River not by a destructive extraction industry.

Whitson also discusses the tourism industry of the Range and its focus on mining and its continuation. There are three mines that are open to the public, Hull-Rust, Soudan, and Rouchleau, and Whitson describes the tours and visits to each of them. The tour of the Hull-Rust mine, for example, begins at the Minnesota Discovery Center, where the iron industry is centered. Right outside the museum is an 81 foot tall statue called, "The Emergence of Man Through Steel," which is a tribute to the miners of the Iron Range. Whitson describes the tour of the actual mine as an "otherworldly" experience and explains how the tour guide describes the mining process and history. He writes, "for the mining company, tourism money is not the goal. Hibbing Taconite claims its objective is education and the lesson is far from subtle. At the Hull-Rust Mine, both the past and the future of the Iron Range is mining."¹⁰

The ability of the mining companies to sell this narrative of the Iron Range as a single source, extractive region, rests on the exclusion of the Ojibwe from the history and present. Whitson writes, "their presence as the region's Indigenous people challenges both the harmonious white past and exclusivity of mining as a historical industry."¹¹ To truly face, center, and respect the presence of Indigenous people of the area would likely mean an end to the mining industry. The Anishinaabe people retain the right to use the land that they have ceded to the government; including hunting, fishing, and gathering rights, and the right to make a modest living on the land.¹² These rights have been

absolutely ignored by the mining industry; "Literally stripping away the land's surface, the mines make treaty-guaranteed uses impossible to practice even if the Ojibwe were allowed on the privately held, tightly controlled company land."¹³

The Range's Mining Industry Today

I have always perceived the Range's support for mining as a nostalgia and longing, formed within the Iron Range Narrative, for the "good old days," when the local economy was booming and when the American Dream was attainable for Rangers. To more fully understand this support, I thought it was important to outline the relationship between the mining industry and the Range now, because it is far different from the early twentieth century, when tens of thousands of migrants flocked to the region for mining work. In 2018, the state's mining industry employed around 5,200 people, accounting for around 4% of the jobs in northeastern Minnesota.¹⁴ According to Cameron Macht, regional analysis and outreach manager at the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, "Employment in mining has been dropping in the long-term, thanks to automation and outsourcing," which have changed the industry itself.¹⁵ A huge workforce is no longer required because, "now one miner can move the whole day's labor of one of those old mines with the push of a button."¹⁶ Employment in mining also took a hit in the early 2000's recession, 2008 recession, and in 2015/2016 due to low foreign

¹⁰ Whitson, 59.

¹¹ Whitson, 52.

¹² "1854 Ojibwe Land Cession Treaty." & Whitson, 65.

¹³ Whitson, 65.

¹⁴ Greta Kaul, "Mining Is a Small Part of Minnesota's Economy. So Why Is It Such a Big Political Issue?," MinnPost, October 17, 2018.

¹⁵ Kaul.

¹⁶ Aaron Brown, "What the Rest of Minnesota Can Learn from the Iron Range's Desperate, Decades-Long Search for Jobs," Minnesota Reformer, August 5, 2020.

steel prices.¹⁷ Though it is now an unreliable boom and bust industry, the appeal is clear on an income level. The average income for someone employed in mining is \$90,000, while the average for the region is \$43,000.¹⁸

In a struggling local economy, in a region that at one time relied on and was defined by a booming mining industry, I can understand the intense support for mining, as people are desperate for jobs and their imaginations are limited by their attachment to the history of mining in the region. Local commentary writer, Aaron Brown, seems to put the Iron Rangers' view of things into a few sentences, "our mining economy is strong but enemies from other places seek to destroy us in some infuriating, shape-shifting way. Something about plastic bags and gender-neutral pronouns. 'Enviros' and big city liberals muster around our castle walls ready to take our guns and shovels. New nonferrous mining projects like PolyMet or Twin Metals become our only hope in restoring the thousands of jobs lost over the past several decades. Opposition to those projects is a cruel, personal affront by people who couldn't possibly understand us."¹⁹ This viewpoint, though certainly not representative of all Rangers, feels very familiar to me from my time on the Range. There is certainly a whole lot more to unpack in this excerpt, but I think it shows how a viewpoint like this positions Iron Rangers against the world. It leaves no room to criticize anything about the Iron Range Narrative. There is only room for pride and support for the new proposed mining projects, PolyMet and Twin Metals.

The mining companies behind the new projects rely on this and try to blend their projects into the Iron Range's iron ore mining background, when in fact they would be the first of their kind in Minnesota.²⁰ Whitson describes the proposed mining projects as "a highly environmentally disruptive process used to mine copper, nickel, and precious metals, sulfide mining produces sulfuric acid as a waste product and has a poor track record with waste containment and reclamation."²¹ The Twin Metals project is getting particular attention from environmentalists because it is in the watershed of the Boundary Waters and poses a risk to "America's most visited Wilderness area."²² Whitson, rightfully so, critiques this opposition to the Twin Metals projects because it relies on settler colonialist ideas of the area as a place of tourism and outdoor recreation and does not mention how it is the home to Anishinaabe people whose treaty rights and well-being are at risk. The National Congress of American Indians opposes the PolyMet project and calls upon the "United States' obligation to protect Tribal Treaty rights from loss, damage or harm, and its trust responsibility to protect the health and welfare of Indian people who depend on such lands, waters and natural resources to meet their most basic subsistence, cultural and religious needs."²³ An Anishinaabe group, Protect Our Manoomin, also warns of the dangers of the PolyMet project. On their website they write, "Minnesota legislators are seeking to amend environmental laws that protect our ecosystems. Should these bills become law, extractive resource projects like PolyMet Mining Company's NorthMet Project near Hoyt Lakes,

¹⁷ Kaul.

¹⁸ Kaul.

¹⁹ Aaron Brown, "The Dueling Realities of the Iron Range," *Minnesota Reformer*, February 14, 2020.

²⁰ "Protecting Chippewa Lands and Resources from the Threats Posed by PolyMet Mine," *The National Congress of American Indians - NCAI*.

²¹ Whitson, 66.

²² "The Threat," *Save the Boundary Waters*.

²³ "Protecting Chippewa Lands and Resources from the Threats Posed by PolyMet Mine."

Minnesota, would be able to discharge levels of sulfate pollution that are currently not allowed – and that will damage wild rice... This pollution will impact the ecosystem and cultural practices for the long-term.”²⁴

For Iron Rangers the economic impact they anticipate these mining projects would have outweigh the negative environmental impacts. As Aaron Brown put it, these projects are the “only hope” in creating mining jobs that have been lost over the years. However, the projects would not even come close to recovering all the lost jobs as PolyMet would only employ 360 people and Twin Metals, 650.²⁵ The reality is that the jobs lost in the mining industry will never be restored because mining companies will always put profit over people, and a large workforce is now economically disadvantageous. Instead of being angry at environmentalists and disregarding the Anishinaabe people who are both trying to protect the land that I know Iron Rangers love, I wish they would be angry with the mining industry that has never cared for them and with the vicious system of capitalism that is more concerned with profit than maintaining people’s livelihoods and jobs.

20th Century Iron Range: Ethnic Division as a Tool of Exploitation

Another big part of deconstructing the Iron Range Narrative is examining the relationship between the immigrant workers and the mining industry of the twentieth century. Through my research I came to understand that a big part of what determined that relationship was the ethnicity of the immigrant workers, as ethnic division and hierarchy were used as a

tool of control and exploitation by mining companies, which is certainly not emphasized in the Narrative. In “The ‘Black Fellows’ of the Mesabi Iron Range: European Immigrants and Racial Differentiation during the Early Twentieth Century,” David LaVigne examines the racial hierarchy that was established among the European-American population of workers on the Iron Range.²⁶ It positioned those born in the US and immigrants from northwestern European countries at the top of the hierarchy. More recent immigrants from primarily southeastern European countries were placed at the bottom and, “constituted the so-called ‘black fellows,’ and their physicality, cultural norms, and standards of living allegedly provided evidence of their racial inferiority.”²⁷ It is important to say that while these groups experienced varying degrees of racial or ethnic othering at different times in Mesabi history, their skin color and European heritage made it far different from racism experienced by Black, Indigenous, and other people of color who were *unambiguously* considered non-white based on “early twentieth-century racial taxonomies.”²⁸

LaVigne explains how the racial hierarchy of the Range determined the occupational classifications, wages, and living conditions for different immigrant groups in the mining industry. The groups of people at the top of the hierarchy were the skilled workers like engineers and mining captains and the people at the bottom were working in unskilled positions doing menial work. While Swedish and Norwegian workers were described as “ambitious, progressive and efficient in every undertaking,” the superintendent of the Oliver Iron Mining Company said “the ‘black’ races (meaning the Montenegrins, Serbians, South Italians, Greeks, etc., etc.) can’t do the work in

²⁴ “Who We Are,” Protect Our Manoomin.

²⁵ Kaul.

²⁶ In this context, ethnicity worked as a proxy that defined white vs non-white status. Therefore, as I discuss this in

my paper, I will use the words racial and ethnic interchangeably.

²⁷ LaVigne, 13.

²⁸ LaVigne, 16.

three days that a white man can do in one when working man to man.” The rationale was that Southern Europeans were too weak, too lazy, healed from injuries too slowly, worked too inefficiently, and thus were not suited to do any work besides menial labor. They also “lived in company-owned shacks in settlements referred to as ‘camps’ or in unorganized groupings of shabbily built dwellings called ‘squatters’ locations.”²⁹ These camps were described as horrendously filthy. A journalist in 1908 “stated that company officials failed to improve living conditions because the foreign-born population was too ignorant to appreciate any better.”³⁰ The racial hierarchy was developed by the mining companies precisely to allow and justify this mistreatment, so that they could retain the maximum profit rather than have to provide fair living and working conditions.

20th Century Iron Range: Ethnic Division as a Tool of Suppression

The racial hierarchy was also used as a tool to control the workforce and try to suppress labor organizing. This was done by justifying violent responses to strikes or movements by exaggerated racial othering of organizers and strikers. The strike of 1916 offers a clear example of how this suppression was done. In the summer of 1916, between ten and twenty thousand miners walked off the job protesting poor work conditions. Though the strikers were mostly Southern Europeans, the Finnish “provided much of the organizational leadership, opening their Finn Halls for strikers to use as meeting places and infusing their radical sentiment into the rhetoric and ideology of the

1916 strike.”³¹ The response coming from the mining companies with support from the Minnesota government was brutal and seemed almost like an occupation. Guards were stationed all around the Range, on roads, hills, even at miners’ cottages. The sheriff of Duluth “boasted that he deliberately did not look too deeply into the backgrounds of these recruits” who were described by most local and national newspapers as representing the “worst elements of society” from the gutters of Duluth, Minneapolis, and St. Paul, “any place where men could be found willing to go to the Range, strap on guns, grasp riot sticks, pin deputy sheriffs badges on their shirts, and go forth to attack picket lines, menace strikers’ parades, and brow-beat strikers wherever they should be met, singly or alone.”³² Initiating violence and bloodshed was part of the strikebreaking plan. One day, the gunmen opened fire against strikers parading through Virginia, a town of the Iron Range, killing a Croatian miner on strike. At his funeral, a group of strikers and organizers carried a banner that said, “murdered by Oliver gunmen,” referring of course to guards hired to protect the interests of the Oliver Mining Company.³³ Two Industrial Workers of the World organizers carrying that banner were arrested for “criminal libel.” While general labor movement history is known and honored on the Range, as miners today still reap the benefits the unions fought for, the level of aggressive policing that the strikers were met with is widely excluded from the Iron Range Narrative.

Gerald Ronning in his piece, “Jackpine Savages,” argues that the violent and bloody police response was justified by “characterizing the strikers as savages deserving of the treatment,” with a particular focus on the

²⁹ LaVigne, 27.

³⁰ LaVigne, 29.

³¹ Gerald Ronning, “Jackpine Savages: Discourses of Conquest in the 1916 Mesabi Iron Range Strike.” *Labor History* 44, no. 3 (2003), 365.

³² Ronning, 366.

³³ Janet Raye, “We Never Forget: The Martyrs of the Mesabi Iron Range Strike of 1916.” *Mother Jones*, October 5, 2016.

Finnish.³⁴ The utilization of this justification called upon pre-existing anti-Indigenous rhetoric and narratives. All across the United States, the dehumanization of Indigenous people and the creation of them as “savages” were used as justification for genocide, oppression, violence, and land theft. Linking the striking miners with Indigenous people allowed for that justification to be extended to the strikers. Ronning writes that one of the most compelling links between the groups was the stereotyped use and abuse of alcohol. All recent immigrants but specifically the Finns had a reputation of heavy drinking, and alcoholism has been a long stereotype of Indigenous people. At this time, there were federal agents who patrolled towns with the said purpose of preventing alcohol from reaching reservations. In 1916, they also used their authority to, “break up blind pigs [illegal bars] frequented by miners and used as meeting-houses and impromptu union halls, hauling suspects to Duluth to face federal charges for introducing liquor onto Indian territory.”³⁵ This link established between immigrants and Indigenous people allowed for oppressive forces to police both of them at once. Another link created and used was the ability to survive and thrive in harsh Minnesotan woods. Many Finns resided in the woods and adopted “their own version of the Anishinaabe seasonal rounds—hunting, fishing, and gathering—to glean a comfortable living from the forests.”³⁶ This was incomprehensible to others. Ronning wrote that, “turn-of-the-century Americans, according to cultural historian Kerwin Lee Klein, associated wild nature with ‘wild people.’”³⁷ These ‘wild people’ of course also happened to have great political influence over the miners of the Iron Range and thus posed a threat to the

status quo that mining companies sought to protect.

While the Finns were more intensely racially “othered” and vilified during the strike of 1916, the other immigrants who were considered to be at the bottom of the hierarchy like the Slavs and the Italians and who made up the majority of the striking population were in many ways victimized. Donald Sofchalk in his piece “Organized Labor and the Iron Ore Miners of Northern Minnesota” explains this as a strategy of de-radicalization. While it was clear that the strikers were actually victims of poor living and working conditions and of violent and brutal strikebreaking methods, mining companies worked to establish the radical Finns as the enemy rather than themselves. They depicted the strikers as “unwitting victims of radical agitation, led astray by glowing promises of ‘soapbox orators.’”³⁸ Americanization efforts worked to aid this as they took on the role of combating radicalism on the Range and assimilating the poor victimized immigrant strikers into “American culture.” By 1917, the immigrant miners were “amenable to the Safety Commission’s Americanization program which sought to make them loyal Americans and docile workers.”³⁹ As these immigrants assimilated into American culture, whiteness was afforded to them and the next generations, and thus marked the end of the strict racial hierarchy, and also the end of a radical labor organizing era.

As a result of both the violent suppression of the 1916 strike and these Americanization efforts, “the immigrant miners were convinced that trade union activity of any kind would bring down the wrath of the government as well as the mining companies on

³⁴ Ronning, 367.

³⁵ Ronning, 369.

³⁶ Ronning, 372.

³⁷ Ronning, 373.

³⁸ Donald G. Sofchalk, “Organized Labor and the Iron Ore Miners of Northern Minnesota, 1907–1936.” *Labor History* 12, no. 2 (1971), 230.

³⁹ Sofchalk, 239.

their heads.”⁴⁰ Sofchalk explains how working conditions did end up improving and thus “most of the miners, disillusioned or apathetic about organization, resigned themselves to the industry’s labor policies.”⁴¹ I do not wish to understate the successes of the labor movements. The next generation of miners, like my grandfather, were able to enjoy many of the benefits the strikers fought for. My grandfather earned a living wage and was able to retire comfortably because of the protections afforded to workers through union contracts. But I do believe there is something to be said for Sofchalk’s point and the Rangers’ abandonment of radical politics that seriously called into question and fought exploitative capitalism, and that imagined a world outside of that.

Whereas the Iron Range Narrative tells a simplistic story of mining heroes and pioneers who were able to achieve the American dream, a deeper dive into the history of the labor movement nuances the Narrative by revealing the oppositional violent and oppressive forces they faced. Whitson, author of “Monumental Mines,” describes the way this history is told and remembered; “these miners’ hardships do not make them victims, but instead make them heroes, pioneers of an industry that would come to define the region.”⁴² How different would it be if these immigrant miners were thought of as victims of a capitalist system that harmed them (and Indigenous people and land) rather than just being eulogized and praised as pioneers of an industry that environmentalist liberals are opposed to?

Iron Range Racism of the 21st Century

Just as the erasure of the violence against Indigenous people within the Iron Range Narrative enables the mining industry to

continue that harm, the erasure of the history of this 20th century racial hierarchy enables the mistreatment of the racial other to continue today. The historical racial hierarchy, occupational divisions, socioeconomic status differences mean nothing now to the descendants of those immigrants, like my father and me, who are now completely assimilated into whiteness. However, the descendants of those who occupied all different levels of the racial hierarchy in the twentieth century, use the same “logical” justifications of the twentieth century to justify their own racism against people of color and immigrants today. The intense xenophobia on the Iron Range is only a google search away. In an upsetting article detailing the public comments that came from a 2020 Saint Louis County Board meeting about refugee relocation to the county, the xenophobia was clear. One constituent said “It’s very difficult to be acceptive to bringing immigrants here... It’s not like when my great-grandparents came here from Norway and Sweden ... Today’s immigrants are hostile, angry. A lot of them don’t come from good, moral cultures... We can’t have people that come here with a greedy attitude, and not a contributory attitude. We gotta have people in this country that love it, and will serve it.”⁴³ This horrible comment reveals the explicitly racist justification for the exclusion of immigrants that feels reminiscent of the “logic” used against European immigrants more than a century ago. Another common thread that I saw throughout the comments was the fear of immigrants stealing jobs from Rangers. One constituent put it, “We should be putting OUR people from OUR country first. Americans come first.”⁴⁴

Reading through these comments revealed to me how insidiously capitalism and white supremacy function on the Range. As the

⁴⁰ See note 40 above.

⁴¹ Sofchalk, 240.

⁴² Whitson, 60.

⁴³ John Ramos, “Xenophobic Iron Rangers Trash-Talk Refugees,” Duluth Monitor, May 29, 2020.

⁴⁴ Ramos.

Range economy is such that jobs are limited and people experience a need to compete for them, the blame for this gets projected onto immigrants of color, who Rangers see as 'other,' using old racist stereotypes that were likely once used about members of their own families. This can be connected to the legacy of Bacon's Rebellion of 1676, which was a cross race rebellion, of poor and indentured white people and indentured or enslaved black people, which threatened the ruling elite. Dale Tatum, in his piece "Donald Trump and the Legacy of Bacon's Rebellion" explains this legacy as "the system of racial stratification that emerged after the rebellion, which prevented the rise of a coalition between Black and White workers capable of mounting an effective challenge to the political system and yielding a more equitable society."⁴⁵ We see this at play on the Range, and how in the contexts of the Range's labor movement history and of the raging racism against people of color that exists in present day, racial division has been used as a tool to divide people with the goal of suppressing social movements. A few years ago, my uncle wrote a letter to the editor of a local newspaper where he said, "It's puzzling to me that some of my friends and their children have forgotten that they are the children and grandchildren of immigrants. That they came to America for the same dream, to make life better for themselves and their families. And they were treated as badly as today's immigrants."⁴⁶ I am thankful for my uncle's words to his fellow Rangers and think that realizing the truth of his message is an important step in working towards building solidarity rather than hate and is also a step towards the deconstruction of the Iron Range Narrative.

Conclusion

Our history textbooks, our museums, and our culture as a whole offer so many one-sided, fabricated narratives and the Iron Range Narrative is one of them. Often what is left out or misremembered in these versions of history is the real harm that has been done to people, like minimizing the evils of the enslavement of black people for four hundred years or framing those who enacted genocide against the Indigenous peoples of the US as heroes. This misremembering enables the continuation of the original harm which is why it is so important to acknowledge the past and honestly reckon with it. In this paper, I looked at the theft of land from the Anishinaabe people, the harm the mining industry has caused and continues to cause, and the way ethnicity and race were and still are used as weapons to maintain capitalism. Through delving more deeply into these parts of the history, the cracks of the Iron Range Narrative were exposed and I came to better understand the place where my family comes from. I believe bringing greater complexity and honesty to the way we remember history is part of the work of repairing the harm caused, and I hope my paper can be a part of that.

⁴⁵Dale Craig Tatum, "Donald Trump and the Legacy of Bacon's Rebellion," *Journal of Black Studies* 48, no. 7 (February 2017), 652.

⁴⁶Tom Rukavina, "Hate Helps No One, Love Solves Everything: A Letter from Tom Rukavina," *The Timberjay* (The Timberjay, January 9, 2019).

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