The longevity of Sheldon Currie’s 1977 short story “The Glace Bay Miner’s Museum”—adapted to radio and stage play (by Wendy Lill), film (Margaret’s Museum, directed by Mort Ransen), and novel (by Sheldon Currie)—lies with narrator Margaret’s grotesque response to coal mining deaths: she claims and preserves with formaldehyde selected body parts of her husband, brother, and grandfather to display as museum exhibits. Margaret’s narration and her museum, I suggest here, are forms of “dirty mourning.” Margaret’s dissection of the bodies is “dirty” because it transgresses social taboos, just like her “dirty” thoughts and “dirty” body—the runny nose and sexual activity that earn her the labels “snot face” and “snot nosed whore” from her peers (Currie 8). Snotty and slutty, Margaret’s body is grotesque in the way Bakhtin defines it—open, degraded, porous, and pleasurable, with exaggerated orifices and leaking fluids (317–18), a symbolic inversion of the closed, symmetrical classical body. This carnivalesque dimension of Currie’s story is situated within another iconography of dirt: the trope of the dirty miner’s face and the social ritual of cleaning the bodies of the dead. These remind us of the social,

1 See Urquhart for discussion of the “lineage” of adaptations of this story (148).
symbolic, affective, and physical work involved in sustaining a way of life. In the case of “The Glace Bay Miner’s Museum,” explicitly addressed to “you” (Currie 22), the reader as museum visitor and regional tourist, the way of life sustained through the “dirty” work of coal mining is mostly located elsewhere, in the modern conveniences powered by a fossil-fuel economy. Literary critics Patricia Yaeger, Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, Stephanie LeMenager, and Sheena Wilson are crafting a new cultural criticism focused on the relationship between energy systems and cultural practices—a line of inquiry that insists on re-imagining the role of criticism in the context of global climate change. Sheldon Currie’s depiction of dirt as a social relation, linking individuals to place, to work, to family, to community, and to national economy, and hence open to acts of resistance and re-organization, is a useful beginning.

Cleaning the bodies of the injured and dead is a ritual practice that recurs in Currie’s mining stories, often as part of a coming-of-age experience in which sons and daughters come to terms with the actual or eventual loss of their parents through bodily intimacy. In The Company Store, Ian is shaped by his father’s pit accident and his intimate washing of his father’s body—naked with erect penis—at the hospital afterwards. He takes on familial responsibilities for a neighbour, Madeline, after helping her wash her husband, whom he found dead in the sewer. In the story “The Glace Bay Miner’s Museum,” Neil courts Margaret by writing a song elegizing her eldest brother Charlie Dave, dead in the pits at age sixteen, alongside her father. The song becomes the rite of passage that enables Margaret to agree to marry. In Glace Bay the novel, Margaret’s first impulse on seeing the bodies of her father and brother is to ask to clean their faces: “I pulled the sheet down off their faces. Their faces were black with coal dust and didn’t look like anything was wrong with them except they were dirty” (38). Although Margaret is comforted by the help of a nun in this task, the narrative troubles how the ritual normalizes their deaths: “she talked to me and made it all seem normal, the two of us standing over a dead face and cleaning the dirt off of it” (39).

The dirty miner’s face is a trope used extensively in the novel and the film Margaret’s Museum, appearing at times of trauma or to signify solidarity, such as when Peggy, daughter of the mine manager, re-emerges from hiding in the coal bin from her father, her face “all over black,” showing her allegiance with Ian, Neil, and Margaret (Currie, Glace Bay 85). Angus’s blackened face amidst the clean miners at the mine washhouse—which hosts the only showers in the community—is used in both the film and the source text for the scene, The Company Store, to indicate a hopeless...
emasculating with Angus in debt to the company store regardless of how much he works; to be clean would have indicated some degree of freedom from the company. Similarly, in the film, Neil’s gift to Margaret is to sneak her into the showers. Margaret’s cunning claim that she wants the bodies of her husband and younger brother in order to clean them—and that being put in the back of a truck degrades them—clearly places her taboo act in the context of these ritual practices of cleaning as individual and communal restoration, with dirt the symbol of communal suffering.

The role that conventional, “clean” mourning practices play in community cohesion is undermined in *Glace Bay* the novel and the play by the acerbic, scatological wit of Margaret’s mother, Catherine, who claims the neighbours came to the wake of her husband and son to get a look at the kitchens and toilets of those who live in “the shacks” (42)—the hand-built houses not owned by the company. Catherine’s occasional work as a housecleaner in the MacDougall home, where “everything is so shiny” because it is “upwind from the pit” (Lill 24), underlines the role cleanliness symbolically plays in their differential status, as do the many toilet allusions throughout the play and film. Catherine, for example, recounts how she met her husband at a similarly carnivalesque wake a generation before, while she was “sneaking a smoke behind the outhouse” (Lill 67). The association of the wake with overflowing outhouses and a carnival atmosphere—“ours turned half into a picnic” (Currie, *Glace Bay* 49)—is thus a symbolic inversion of this class structure and a refusal to allow sentiments of piety naturalize miners’ deaths.

Similarly, Margaret’s carnivalesque approach to the corpse as an *open body* is what disturbs the social order. Rejecting the pretence of closure that comes with the “clean” casket and funeral, Margaret ensures her dead are left open, broken into parts, and kept physically visible, even if not necessarily preserved. (“Things are not keeping as well as we would like,” Margaret concedes at the end of Currie’s story [22].) Margaret refuses to privatize her grief, end her mourning, or respect the bodies of the dead, thereby calling into question funeral and medical practices that fetishize the body as a contained and discrete self, when coal miners’ bodies and families are socially and materially violated by the long-term, “slow violence” of hazardous living and working conditions (Nixon 2). “Slow violence” describes forms of violence that are gradual, such as the pneumoconiosis or “black lung” respiratory illnesses of coal miners like Margaret’s grandfather. Literary critic Rob Nixon argues that when destruction manifests in bodies and ecologies slowly and over long periods of time, it
“is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2) but simply as the inevitable cost of progress or the pathology of an individual body.

Margaret’s pickled display of her grandfather’s wizened lungs is a politicized response to the professionally sanctioned medical doctors who claimed her grandfather was fit to work, thereby denying him a pension and compensation. To enclose her grief in an interiorized and private experience is too much like the property relations of Glace Bay where the company owns the mine, the houses, and the store. As Tina Chanter points out, Margaret’s profane approach to the dead mirrors the mining company’s attitude toward the living men who work in the mines, showing “how far capitalism requires the working class to play the role of a dispensable subhuman category of workers whose disposability is necessary for the maintenance of capitalism” (98). Displaying the miners’ body parts is a reminder that the men were treated as commodities all along. The line drawn between appropriate and inappropriate ways to claim, use, and represent the miners is class- and gender-specific; whereas the company is permitted to appropriate the men’s bodies for itself, the wives, as they frequently complain, have no entitlements except in death, when they receive the body for a wake and funeral.

Chanter argues that by refusing to mourn in a culturally sanctioned way, Margaret refuses to perform the uncompensated women’s work of reproducing labour for capitalist exploitation. The women contribute to company profits not only by providing unpaid domestic and child-rearing labour for the underpaid waged men but also by managing grief and loss. Their grief is part of the economic cycle of worker disposability: “Their job is to clean up the psychic and economic mess that their lives become when the mine takes its inevitable toll” (Chanter 94). Margaret’s public exposure of mining’s private pain by way of a museum—a public institution of memory—disrupts the cycle of disposability, showing, as Judith Butler argues, how grief is always a public and not only a private act, in that mourning foregrounds ties to others and, in so doing, plays a role in constituting a social order and political community. Lingering, clinging, “tarrying with grief” (30), Butler suggests, refuses the re-entrenchment of the status quo—the already constituted order—and makes it vulnerable to acknowledging the lives of excluded others. Margaret’s museum for “dirty mourning” is a refusal of national and regional narratives of commemoration that would contain the toxic work, resource exhaustion, and climate effects of coal-mining to a localized past. As a story, novel, film, and play, “Glace Bay” makes the collective tasks of remembering and mourning a national and continental project, calling on its audiences—“you”—to share
the burden of grief “work,” as Peter Sacks describes the genre of elegy (1), instead of remaining naive and leisurely tourists to their own industrial landscapes.

Works Cited


Wilson, Sheena, and Andrew Pendakis, eds. *Imaginations* “Sighting Oil” 3–2 (2012).