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NATURES AND WARS: NEOLIBERAL DISCOURSE AND THE CONTESTED
FUTURE OF EAST KENTUCKY

By

Shelly Annette Biesel
B.A., University of Louisville, 2009

A Thesis
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A Thesis Approved on

April 15, 2014

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother

Mrs. Cheryl Burress

and my father

Mr. David Biesel

who have driven me to work and play in (mostly) equal measure.

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ABSTRACT

NATURES AND WARS: NEOLIBERAL DISCOURSE AND THE CONTESTED FUTURE OF EAST KENTUCKY

Shelly Annette Biesel

May 10, 2014

Coal mining has been Appalachian Kentucky's keystone industry for over a century. However, in 2012 and 2013 coal production plummeted, driving industry employment to historic lows. In the wake of production declines, the coal lobby attests that President Obama is waging a "war on coal." Drawing primarily from ethnographic data, this research offers a holistic and critical examination of the recent decline in coal production and concomitant narratives that have emerged in the wake of socio-economic uncertainty. I argue that "war on coal" discourses, informed by neoliberal philosophies, seek to conflate the region's mining heritage with the coal industry's desire to stay competitive in the market. Those who construct and promote war on coal narratives suggest that reducing regulations and taxes for the coal industry will lift the region from poverty. However, findings from this project demonstrate that unbridled extraction have exacerbated, not reduced, poverty in Appalachian Kentucky. Additionally, anti-regulatory practices have exposed the region to greater risks related to mining.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Six days after a coal-processing chemical spill left nine counties and 300,000 West Virginians without drinking water, Senator Joe Manchin condemned the federal government for suffocating the coal industry with overbearing regulations (Gabriel et al. 2014). Exerting the West Virginian state motto “mountaineers are always free,” Manchin promised to push against the affronts of overreaching regulatory bodies (Gabriel et al. 2014). He was later quoted saying, “coal and chemicals inevitably bring risk — but that doesn’t mean they should be shut down” (Gabriel et al. 2014). Not all West Virginians agreed with the Senator’s stance. In an op-ed titled “I’m from West Virginia and I Have Something to Say about the Chemical Spill,” Eric Waggoner wrote,

To hell with you all for continuing, as coal became chemical, to exploit the lax, poorly-enforced safety regulations here, so that you could do your business in the cheapest manner possible by shortcutting the health and quality of life not only of your workers, but of everybody who lives here. To hell with every operator who ever referred to West Virginians as "our neighbors."

To hell with every single screwjob elected official and politico under whose watch it all went on, who helped write those lax regulations and then turned away when even those weren't followed. To hell with you all, who were supposed to be stewards of the public interest, and who sold us out for money, for political power. To hell with every one of you who decided that making life convenient for business meant making life dangerous for us. To hell with you for making us the eggs you had to break in order to make breakfast. [Waggoner 2014]

At the heart of Waggoner and Manchin’s contrasting viewpoints is a divergence that characterizes much of Central Appalachia today. The coal industry that has dictated Central Appalachian economies for over a century is in a period of dramatic decline, and

has been hemorrhaging mining-sector jobs since 2011. The situation is especially dire for Appalachian Kentucky, which has lost over 6,000 coal industry jobs in the past two years (KyEEC 2012a; KyEEC 2013a; b). In light of the downturn, Kentucky (and other) state politicians have roused the public by proclaiming that the Obama Administration has waged a “war on coal.” To combat this war, policy makers have promised to “save jobs” by proposing bills weakening regulations for the coal industry (McConnell 2013a, b; Manchin 2013; Paul n.d.). They claim less regulation (and lower taxes) is the only way to put “hardworking” Americans “back to work.” In defense of their policy prescriptions politicians claim to speak on behalf of the wants and needs of their constituents. For example McConnell said, “what many Kentuckians really want are the good-paying jobs that *only coal* can provide” (McConnell 2013a, my emphasis). However as Waggoners’s (2014) testimony illustrates, many people living in close quarters with coal and coal-related industries see laws and regulations as critical for safeguarding Appalachian lives and livelihoods. Furthermore, many that have suffered from the industry’s social, political or environmental abuses see the present downturn as a chance to promote a safer, more equitable economy. And yet, in this moment of crisis and opportunity, those who are speaking for the state are largely speaking for King Coal.

Classic scholarship regarding the politics of Appalachian coal mining highlights how powerful elites (having access to means of production) have dominated and exploited subaltern mountain residents into “quiescence,” helping to sustain the industry’s overwhelming presence in the region (Caudill 1963; Gaventa 1978). However more recently scholars have moved beyond theories of Appalachian domination and inertia and have instead underlined the extensive ways Appalachians have resisted the

coal industry's various forms of oppression (Fisher 1993; Fisher and Smith 2012; Montrie 2003). Particularly, the relatively recent development of destructive mountaintop removal mining has contributed to a new phase of Appalachian activism and engagement, as well as a wider body of scholarship and literature on the subject (McNeil 2011). As a result, mountaintop removal mining (hereafter MTR), a pernicious practice that Fox (1999:163) once referred to as "one of the most egregious and little-known instances of environmental degradation taking place in the United States today," is now a highly politicized, nationally debated topic of interest. For example, national environmental groups like the Sierra Club are challenging coal-mining practices at the policy level, and have begun a campaign in attempt to move the nation "beyond coal." At the grassroots level, anti-MTR sentiment has led to a burgeoning network of environmental justice activists that includes organizations such as Appalachian Voices, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, Save Our Appalachian Mountains, Save Our Cumberland Mountains, the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition, among others. However, despite a growing body of scholarship, growing anti-MTR sentiment, and growing awareness of the connections between coal and climate change— many constituents of coal producing states continue to support the coal industry. Though much scholarship has detailed Appalachian coal mining's adverse impacts (Burns 2007; Eller 2008; Fox 1999; Reese 2006; Scott et al. 2012, among others), a smaller body of work has addressed why support for such a problematic industry persists.

There are, however, some important works that have brought light to the issue. For example, Scott (2010) argues that the "logic" of mining is derived from broader subjectivities relating to normative conceptions of gender, class, race and citizenship.

Bell and York (2010) and Bell and Braun's (2010) work ties support for coal to notions of masculinity, but also suggests that the coal lobby's vast public relations efforts have worked to promote a "community economic identity." While these studies are essential for unpacking the logic of support for coal, they existed before the recent advances in hydraulic fracturing technology that saturated the energy market with natural gas, causing a hard and fast bust for Central Appalachian coal production. In the face of massive coal industry layoffs, do coal-mining communities continue to support coal? This research examines Appalachian Kentucky's "support" for coal amidst the coal industry's lowest employment levels since 1927 (KyEEC 2013b: 4). It is a critical addition to both Appalachian and coal-extraction scholarship because in the wake of production declines, the coal lobby has doubled down their public-relations efforts, and invented a "war on coal." Coal lobby groups have deployed regional support for coal to circulate and reproduce of war on coal narratives. Consequently, though the war on coal began as political rhetoric, it has had many real, material consequences for coal producing communities.

Ellwood and Lawson point out that "how a crisis is named has deep implications for how policy is framed and blame meted out" (2013:103). As I write this, Kentucky's two Senators are in session battling "Obama's war on coal." Motivating this research is the basic question, why does the war on coal narrative persist? I use ethnographic and historical analyses to answer this question in three broad steps. First, I locate the war on coal within the context of the industry's historic entrenchment in Appalachian Kentucky, and broader Central Appalachia. Second, I draw from participant observation and interview data to assess how the pro-coal lobby groups and public relations efforts

“naturalize” war on coal narratives. Since the 2008 recession, the coal lobby has been amplifying its importance, and has increasingly become a source of identity in the absence of the United Mine Workers of America union. Finally, ethnographic data is also employed to assess the “hard outcomes” of the war on coal belief frame (Peck 2001). Particularly, I examine how the war on coal has infiltrated discussions and plans for alternative economic endeavors. Ultimately, I argue that the pro-coal lobby undermines east Kentucky livelihoods by promulgating war on coal discourses, which seek to fulfill industry objectives to the detriment of coal-producing communities.

During this critical moment in Appalachian history, it is important to understand how narratives of the region’s trials and tribulations are being constructed and understood. At present, Appalachian Kentucky faces an array of social, ecological and economic predicaments. Determining which of the region’s needs get met are competing wants, values and desires. Divergent conceptions of the region’s “problem” have led various actors and agencies to promote conflicting solutions. This study assesses how political forces, citizens, non-profits, and businesses engage with uncertainty and crisis, and in doing so—actively shape the future of the region. In east Kentucky, the global market shift from coal to cleaner burning natural gas has inspired both fear and fortitude. While some actively try to initiate economic transition, others remain convinced that the future should look a lot like the past. This thesis is a holistic and critical examination of the recent decline in coal production in Appalachian Kentucky, and the stories that have emerged in the wake of economic uncertainty. In it, I explore how a region deeply connected to a dominant industry is adjusting to the industry’s fall from grace.

Literature Review

The Political Ecology of East Kentucky Coal Mining

What's at stake in the war on coal? Environmental and social justice groups are increasingly targeting the coal industry as the source of east Kentucky (and Central Appalachia's) long-term political and ecological problems (McNeil 2010; Scott 2010). MTR has transformed over one million acres of predominately mixed-deciduous and mesophytic forest to active or reclaimed mine land (Perks 2010a). It involves blasting off 600-800 feet of rock from the mountain with military grade explosives in order to access tiny coal seams (Perks 2010a). Dislodged rock ("overburden") is dumped into nearby valleys, overwhelming land and streams. Of all coal producing states in Central Appalachia, Kentucky has suffered the most environmental damage (Burns 2007:141). Of the 502 Appalachian peaks leveled by surface mining, 295 (58%) are located in Kentucky (Perks 2010:2a). In Central Appalachia, 61% of land (51,775 acres) and 64% of watersheds (281,347 acres) impaired by valley fills are in the state of Kentucky (Burns 2007:141). Coal's impacts on socio-natural communities are both far-reaching and long-term. For example, though it only takes surface miners a decade to behead a mountain, soil productivity and hydrological processes altered by surface mining may take hundreds of years to recover (Simmons et al. 2008:114).

Environmental problems caused by surface mining have led some social scientists to identify the region as an "environmental sacrifice zone" (Fox 1999). However, labels like this do not fully describe the noxious linkages between environmental degradation and human health. Public health represents one dimension of coal-related externalities; or the cost of conditions created by mining, processing and burning coal, that are absorbed

by the public and state. Heavy metals, toxic chemicals and radionuclides present multiple dangers to air, water and soil quality in coal producing counties (Palmer et al. 2010). The severity of these dangers is evidenced in recent research linking surface mining to increased rates of pulmonary and cardiovascular disease, cancer, and birth defects (Ahern et al. 2011; Palmer et al. 2010). Communities located near mine-sites are also repeatedly endangered by flyrock from blasting, poisoned well water, and floods and mudslides intensified by hundreds of acres of compacted, impermeable mine-land (Baber 1990; Burns 2007, Perks 2010a; b). In the “coalfields” the possibility of disaster is ever present; many Appalachian communities have endured methane explosions, mine collapses, fires, and impoundment pond breaches and a whole host of environmental calamities (Scott et al. 2012). In less than 50 years, nearly 300 people have been killed by mine-related disasters, and thousands more have suffered injury or property losses (Scott et al. 2012:403). Additionally, though safety measures have improved since the early days of coal, on-the-job fatalities occur frequently.¹ Perhaps for these reasons, in a Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index of 436 congressional districts, east Kentucky’s coal producing district (KY-5) ranked 435 in overall well-being, and 436 (dead last) in emotional and physical health categories (Kaprowy 2011).

Herein lies the paradox: in Central Appalachia, the consequences of surface mining have not resulted in popular disdain for the coal industry (Bell and York 2010; Scott 2010). In east Kentucky and other parts of central Appalachia, the coal industry is considered a source of badly needed jobs, and largely supported by coal-producing communities. However, competition from natural gas and Western coal has resulted in a drastic decline in coal production, and with it the industry’s viability as a source of long-

¹ MSHA (2014) reports that there have been 196 coal-mining fatalities in the United States since 2010.

term employment. If east Kentuckians supported the coal industry based solely on its role as “provider-of-jobs,” it would seem likely that the downtrend in employment would ultimately lead to less support for the industry. Yet despite the reduction in employment, popular support for coal mining remains (Bell and York 2010; Cheves and Estep 2013; Scott 2010). Pro-coal attitudes have become increasingly vocal as a result of the coal lobby’s intensive media campaigns, which accuse Obama and the EPA of “job-killing” and waging a “war on coal.”

“Support” for the Coal Industry

Kentucky’s continuing support for the coal industry is surprising for several reasons. The first is that the industry has time and time again failed to provide widespread prosperity or even stability for coal-producing counties (Blee and Billings 2000; Gaventa 1980; Eller 1982; Eller 2008). East Kentucky is constantly caught amidst fluxes in the capitalist world system (Blee and Billings 2000; Dunaway 1995). Because coal has been the major industry for over a century, there has been little in the way of long-term economic diversification (Eller 2008). Like many places where a single industry dominates, when coal goes bust, so do coal-producing communities. The Appalachian Regional Commission consistently identifies these very places as “economically distressed,” and high unemployment rates require many people to utilize federal assistance programs (Anglin 2002). Second, support for coal is surprising because there are conflicting feelings about MTR, which oftentimes requires miners to damage the very places they call home (McNeil 2011; Scott 2010:13). Even those who claim to support the industry are often critical of surface mining practices, and acknowledge the environmental damage it entails. Mountaintop removal not only destroys complex

ecosystems, but it puts communities in a constant state of risk; just a few threats posed by the presence of large-scale mining operations are floods, landslides, fly-rock, poisoning, and “sinking” water wells, and possible bursting of toxic coal-slurry ponds (Burns 2007; Scott et al. 2012). The coal industry has not even been able to provide the jobs it once did. Since WWII, coal industry employment has dramatically declined in correspondence with increased mechanization of the mines (Lewis 2004; Eller 2004). Perhaps one reason eastern Kentuckians seemingly *like* coal is because of its (albeit flawed) endurance. Kentucky has managed to maintain its position as the third largest coal producing state in the nation (KyEEC 2011; 2012a). Even though the workforce has dwindled, coal has remained the dominant industry (KyEEC 2011; 2012a). Communities relish their coal-mining heritage and have tended to support coal companies, even while energy conglomerates quietly move toward natural gas extraction (Cheves and Estep 2013; see also Bell and York 2010 and Scott 2010 for West Virginia).

Support for coal is not absolute or unanimous, but it is far-reaching. As Chapters II, III and IV illustrate, the abuses of irresponsible surface mining have been challenged by radical activism. Miners and residents have organized and picketed to fight unfair wages, dangerous working conditions, and cuts to mining benefit and entitlement programs (Montrie 2003). There is a strong history and presence of grassroots and place-based resistance to coal’s economic dominance in the region (Fisher and Smith 2012). Still, the industry is consistently able to rally Kentuckians to promote its interests (Kirby 2013). Over fifty thousand Kentucky license plates are emblazoned with the “Friends of Coal” logo (WHAS-11 2012). East Kentuckians have historically supported political candidates who make promises for the coal industry, most recently Mitt Romney (Kirby

2013). Coal is taught in schools through coal education programs like CEDAR (coal education, development and resource) and field trips to coal mines. Pro-coal groups such as Coal Mining Our Future hold pro-coal rallies. Bumper stickers, shirts, billboards and yard signs state “Coal keeps the lights on!” “Coal Miner’s Daughter,” “Friends of Coal,” “If you don’t like coal, don’t use electricity!” and “God bless the coal miner.” The favored University of Kentucky basketball team is sponsored by coal companies (their campus residence is called the “Wildcat coal lodge”). Businesses pledge their allegiance to coal by putting coal supportive messages on their windows and doors. Hazard, Kentucky, even has a yearly “Black Gold Festival.” Recently, coal lobby propaganda has contributed to the emergence of signs stating: *STOP the War on Coal. FIRE OBAMA!* Environmentalism is often treated as a dirty word. Only the bravest self-identify as an “environmentalist” or “tree-hugger.” In an effort to understand why the risks of mining coal do not cause popular disdain for the industry, I will briefly tease out what other scholars have stated about Appalachian communities and regional support for coal mining.

Coal Mining Subjectivities

In her book, *Removing Mountains: Extracting Nature and Identity in the Appalachian Coalfields*, Rebecca Scott (2010) explores how mountaintop removal surface mining becomes normative in Appalachian West Virginia. Scott explains, “with MTR mining the improbable task for miners is to dismantle the mountains where they live” (2010:13). How could anyone logically participate in destroying the place they call home? Similar to McNeil (2012:2), Scott argues that the “logic” of capitalism normalizes

the “inevitability” of mining (2010:4). Competing versions of “nature” are evident in the debate over MTR, resulting in what Scott deems “incompatible versions of place,”

The politics of MTR make it clear...that the region is a crucial site in the ongoing construction of a particular definition of the American nation and American identity and in the making of a specific vision of the future. At the same time this identity is unsettled by the persistent traces of other ways of relating to the land. [Scott 2010:114].

Scott demonstrates how destructive forms of coal mining and hegemonic conceptions of nature-as-commodity shape subjectivities (2010:10). Discourses surrounding the politics of MTR reduce complex socio-natural relationships to the “jobs versus environment aphorism” (Scott 2010:7-10). However complicated the reality, dominant discourses illuminate a general divergence in conceptions of nature and by extension, constructions of place. According to Scott, pro-coal discourses emphasize Appalachia’s “abstract locality” in the economy: land and people are valued for their role in the market (2010: 7-8). In this valuing of place, land is “objectified as property and reflects that formative repudiation that casts nature as ‘Other’ to the reasoning, modern self” (2010:30). Scott argues that in the capitalist world-system, normalized wage-labor creates the illusion of separation between people and the environment, and “credits the free market with more productive power than Mother Nature” (2010:11). The logic of capitalism requires land to be commoditized as “property,” and thus becomes a place for capital accumulation (2010). However, “as capitalism expands, it destroys its own natural foundation” (2010:12). Direct conflicts with nature’s commodification have prompted forceful opposition to the industry (Montrie 2003, Scott 2010). The anti-MTR movement maintains an alternative view of nature, seeing its value for “usufruct rights to land and forest products, an assumption of a human right to health and subsistence, and other non-

hegemonic values” (Scott 2010:7). The environmental justice movement has wielded the latter conception of nature in attempt to further its cause.

Despite opposition, Scott argues that MTR persists because it embodies not only the destruction of nature, but also the “coproduction of meaning and the economy” (2010). Meanings embedded in the “deeply cultural act” of mining are as important as the material practice itself (2010: 17). Coded in the “cultural act” of MTR are hegemonic ideas about work and proper citizenship, which relate to notions of class, race, sex, sexual orientation, and gender (2010). Commonly held notions about economies are steeped in “gendered dualisms” that largely exclude women’s production (2010:17). For example, in her field site of Blair, West Virginia, coal jobs were coded masculine and service sector and education jobs were coded feminine (despite the fact that there are still some women coal miners, 2010:104). Scott points out that there are as many jobs in retail as there are in the coal industry; however they are not considered by the residents of Blair to be “real work” and therefore deemed “not even worth mentioning” in discussions about regional employment (2010:67).

Scott differentiates between three types of mining masculinities that are “hegemony building stories that help construct a cultural context in which the coal industry makes sense” (2010:71). The first is the “family man” that poses miner as “breadwinner... provider, with proper adult moral status” (2010:71). In other words, he is the ideal American citizen, “symbolically white,” and earner of a “family wage” (2010). A second figure is the “tough guy”: a narrative that “hides the real face of labor” (2010:77). All mining, but especially underground mining, is incredibly dangerous work that permanently alters bodies. In order to compensate for the class-coded nature of

physical labor, “working-class men’s bodies are disciplined by the idea that ‘heavy work proves [their] masculinity’” (Scott 2010:77, quoting Bahnisch 2000). Scott argues that the “tough guy” masculinity works to redeem coal miners from negative stereotypes of Appalachians and miners (2010:78). Finally, the “modern man” masculinity emphasizes the power of the coal miner to dominate (feminine coded) nature through technology, explosives, and machines (2010: 80-86). The process of MTR is justified because it is construed as an “exact science,” and the “flat land it provides is a benefit to West Virginia as a potential site for economic development” (2010:92). Those who oppose this logic are often considered “backward” and opposed to “progress” (2010:90, 94).

Gender dynamics cannot be understood outside subjective fields of class and race, which coalesce into conceptions of work and nature. Because for decades economists and media sources were referring to Central Appalachia as a “culture of dependency,” Scott claims there is a strong social hierarchy involving those who “have work” (i.e. a job in the coal industry), and those who receive government aid (2010). She sees this as a result of the Reagan administration’s “conservative backlash” on the War on Poverty, which “cod[ed] welfare dependency as black and female in an oblique discussion of race” (2010: 105). American national identity is highly associated with independent, “rational individuals operating in the free market,” a realm historically dominated by white men (2010: 97). By working in the coal mines, men are able to access “proper American citizenship,” through earning a “family-wage” (2010:96). However, the privilege of earning a “family wage” is not equally afforded to women or people of color, and white masculinity is therefore “dependent” on the “structure of the labor market” that maintains the white male status as wage-earner (2010:101). Social assistance programs such as

welfare challenge the masculinity and morality of men as independent, “good, taxpaying, (white) citizens” (2010: 105-106). Coal mining is an important source for proper citizenship that requires participation in “real work” (2010:67).

The politics of race are also articulated in national conceptions of Appalachians as hillbillies or “white trash,” which are consistently regurgitated by media (2010). Scott argues that because Appalachians are “not white enough” they represent “marked whiteness” (2010:109). While the privileged role of men in the labor structure of Central Appalachia gives them a certain status, “coal miners simultaneously represent a failure of the white labor aristocracy to eliminate the shame of abject laboring bodies” (2010:109). In this cultural context, the importance of moral citizenship and ideal masculinities that are embedded in MTR are essential identities needed to fight negative, class-coded stereotypes associated with the region (2010). Scott’s work is important for understanding the cultural logic behind “support for coal,” which cannot be separated from race, gender and class subjectivities. Intersecting subjectivities inform diverging conceptions of nature and what should be done with it. What Scott calls a “cultural logic,” McNeil calls a “moral process” (2012:4-5). Miners must decide “right from wrong,” when they are given the choice of having a job or destroying a mountain (McNeil 2011:4-5). Scott’s work is essential for understanding how “cultural act” of MTR may be interpreted as the “right” choice.

Others grappling with Appalachia’s puzzling support for coal mining emphasize more macro-structural forces at work. Shannon Elizabeth Bell and Richard York highlight the relationship between “support” for the industry and the West Virginia coal lobby’s public relations campaigns (2010). Recently, the coal lobby poured funds into the

public relations group Friends of Coal and coal education programs like CEDAR (2010). Both of these programs were later implemented in Kentucky. Bell and York argue that the marketing strategies were attempts at constructing “community economic identity”--a tactic geared toward maintaining regional political influence (2010:112). Part of the industry’s strategy has been to position themselves (ironically) as a social support and service provider (2010). The coal lobby accomplishes this feat through corporate scholarships, partnerships with community organizations and projects, and sponsorship of local sports teams (Bell and York 2010). Friends of Coal has worked to increase the coal industry’s visibility through the proliferation of free t-shirts, bumper stickers, signs, and hats (Bell and York 2010). These tactics leverage coal’s regional heritage in order to tie community identity to the industry’s powerful thread. Strategies for industry identity construction are deployed despite the fact that (as in Kentucky), the practice of MTR eliminated many West Virginian jobs and created a host of aforementioned environmental problems. Nonetheless, Bell and York argue that the public relations campaigns have muddied industry prerogatives with community identities, making denizens feel as though their livelihood is dependent upon the sustained presence of the coal industry (Bell and York 2010).

This study will build upon and deepen previous studies in important ways. First, I extend the discussion of coal mining beyond the scope of MTR to look at how the broader industry has been thrashing in the wake of massive production declines. While subjectivities inform the “cultural logic” of mining, I use historical analysis to demonstrate how “support” for coal largely became an “inevitable” outcome of a new “social order”: neoliberalism (Harvey 1996: 148). An important departure from the

aforementioned scholarship is that MTR is not the primary focus of this research. While critical analysis of MTR is important, emphasizing this particular mining method tends to marginalize the struggle of underground miners, who are just as affected by neoliberal political and economic projects. It is important to not leave out underground miners and mines as a key site for environmental risk and degradation. In Kentucky only 50 percent of mines are surface operations (KyEEC 2013a; b), and many underground miners struggle to retain their claims to retirement benefits and black lung compensations (Ross et al. 2013). In what follows I highlight how neoliberal strategies for economic development structured vulnerabilities for coal-miners and communities, contributing to the “cultural logic” of mining, and current war on coal discourses. Adding to Bell and York’s (2010) work, I will illustrate how similar pro-coal lobby groups have invented and dispelled a powerful narrative in order to create favorable market conditions for the industry, arguably to the detriment of coal mining communities.

Theoretical Orientations: The War on Coal as Neoliberal Discourse

Though mineral extraction is deeply connected to capitalism and the global market, anthropologists have emphasized the unique ways mining is woven into localized cultural practices and beliefs (Finn 1998, Nash 1979). Drawing largely from Bourdieu (1977) and Ortner’s (1984) “practice theory,” anthropologists such as June Nash (1979), Janet Finn (1998), and Bryan McNeil (2011) have used mining communities to examine dialectical relationships between structure and agency. For example, though mining corporations tend to exercise tremendous power over the communities where extraction occurs, Finn reminds us, “community is at once a negotiated reality in the making and an arena in which other forms of struggle and support play out” (1998:15). Similarly, the

recent bust in east Kentucky coal production has illuminated how communities constitute a “negotiated reality in the making.” Whether people look forward to coal’s resurgence or absence, everyone is asking the same question: what’s next? Because “reality, insofar as it is invested with meaning, is produced ‘discursively,’ through signifying practices,” the competing narratives of Appalachian, Kentucky’s latest hardships hold differing possibilities for the future (Biersack 2006:4). Biersack states that scholars should concern themselves with “what reality is being constructed, by whom, for whom, for what political purpose, and to what political effect” (2006:14). It is from this perspective that I analyze the discursive construction of divergent realities relating to coal’s current crisis. These realities draw from competing narratives of “place” (Scott 2010). While some see the region as a site for capital accumulation, others define place as something not reducible to market value (Scott 2010). The coal industry has helped the idea of “nature-as-commodity” become hegemonic in Appalachia (Scott 2010). However, the bottoming out of coal production has opened space for the possibility of change or the continuation of the status quo. Based on varying visions for the future, the coal lobby and grassroots organizations are engaging top-down and bottom-up discourses, which actively shape the reality of the crisis. Each narrative of place has a concomitant vision for the future.

In addition to applying practice theory to contexts of mineral extraction, anthropologists are beginning recognize how the cultural logic of mining is increasingly informed by neoliberal philosophies (Rolston 2013; 2010; McNeil 2012). The war on coal cannot be separated from a broader neoliberal political project to “naturalize” market relations in other realms of life (Harvey 2007; McNeil 2011; Peck 2001; Wacquant 2012). This is particularly troubling, because as Harvey states, the “tactics of

neoliberalism are wide-ranging, sophisticated, and frequently masked by ideological gambits, but devastating for the dignity and social well-being of vulnerable populations and territories” (2007: 39). Neoliberalism is a political, economic and social philosophy based on 1) ideological claims to “freedom” expressed as liberation from burdensome controls of the state; accessible through 2) the so called “free-market,” which is capable of self-regulation through the “invisible hand” (Peck 2001; Harvey 2007; Heynen et al. 2007). At times I use “war on coal” and “neoliberal discourse” interchangeably. This is because underpinning the war on coal is the ideological stance that the coal industry (and by extension the free market) is being attacked by burdensome federal regulations that encumber free trade. This discourse operates to “naturalize” the notion that in the absence of regulation the coal industry could revive itself and the “free” market could bring prosperity to all. “War on coal” discourses deploy classical liberalisms—Utopian ideas of individualism, freedom and citizenship of the John Locke variety—in order to give credence to the logic of the “free” market. Market logics center on “maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets and free trade” (Harvey 2007:22). Heynen et al. have pointed out that neoliberal discourses conflate individual and market liberties, “promis[ing] political emancipation through economic growth, increasing prosperity, and market mediated social relations” (2007:5-6). This point is essential for understanding the logic of the “war on coal,” which promises that if (and only if) the coal industry were less regulated, east Kentuckians could be emancipated from poverty (through having jobs).

The spillover effect of unquestionable classical and neoliberal ideology is that neoliberal market logics get “naturalized” (Peck 2001:447). The problem is that freedoms said to naturally emanate from neoliberal economic structures tend to be “false promises” (Heynen et al. 2007). For example the highly mechanized practice of MTR—what McNeil deems “the logical product of neoliberalism”—has contributed to both fewer mining jobs and greater environmental calamity in Appalachia (McNeil 2011:2-3; Eller 2004). More broadly, just a few of many named outcomes of instituted neoliberal economic, social and political philosophies are: 1) greater class disparity (which, Harvey believes, was the point); 2) the empowerment of financial institutions over the “well-being” of working classes; 3) an intensive neoliberal media presence, whereby the “gospel” of neoliberalism is dispelled through think-tanks seeking bite-sized government (Harvey 2007:29-32). Importantly, neoliberalism also is associated with the demise of the labor unions in the United States (Harvey 2007; Clawson and Clawson 1999). Reagan set a precedent when he broke an air traffic controller’s strike (PATCO) in 1981, a watershed moment in the history of organized labor (Clawson and Clawson 1999:104; McNeil 2011:9). All of these things illustrate what Harvey calls “the contradiction of the neoliberal agenda” or the “gap between rhetoric (for the benefit of all) and reality (for the benefit of a small ruling class)” (2007:42).

In short, neoliberalism contributed to the pervasiveness of political-economic policies that ensured the upper classes greater accumulation of capital at the expense of lower classes (Harvey 2007; Heynen et al 2007; Peck 2001). How was this achieved? Ironically, through government interventions including redistributing wealth to shareholders as opposed to workers (Peck 2001:133); privatizing the social welfare

services and “the commons” (Heynen et al. 2007); supply-side investments in businesses and/or economic development projects, as opposed to wages or social programs (Heynan et al 2007:6, Peck 2001:448); welfare reform, or implementing “workfare” (Peck 2001:449; Heynan et al. 2007:6); lifting barriers to investment and trade; financialization, or prioritizing stock values and the overall financial system (Harvey 2007:36). The list could go on. The point is that governments are not less involved, but are essential for structuring and maintaining markets (Harvey 2007: 31; Peck 2001:447). In other words, the state has assumed a new role of “market manager,” despite utopian claims of laissez-faire (2001:49). Harvey suggests that neoliberalism has become “a hegemonic mode of discourse...it has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in and understand the world” (2007:3). In other words, “commonsense” neoliberal theories are implicated in non-market policy domains (Peck 2001; Harvey 2007). Peck claims neoliberal philosophy is “a form of high politics which presents itself as completely non-political” (2001:448). “Non-politics” can let expressions of “neoliberal hegemony” slip by unnoticed (Peck 2001:451). After all, who doesn’t want freedom?

While much scholarship has centered on outcomes of neoliberal institutions, what is less known is exactly how neoliberal ideologies become “naturalized” or “commonsensical” (Heynen et al. 2007). Analyzing discourse is key to this effect. For example Harvey suggests understanding (and combatting) neoliberal hegemony requires “tearing aside the neoliberal mask and exposing its seductive rhetoric.” This body of work attempts to expose the “seductive rhetoric” of the “war on coal,” which in east Kentucky has become the hegemonic way of discussing coal’s latest production crisis.

Whether or not hegemonic discourses have “worked,” the war on coal narrative is *at work*, occupying the time of industry executives, journalists, and policy makers. In general, war on coal solutions for the current economic crisis attempt to apply neoliberal strategies to problems exacerbated by neoliberalism. This has come at a time when the struggling east Kentucky coalfields are looking toward leadership for answers. I argue that the “commonsense” neoliberal agenda (implicit within war on coal) will most likely hinder, not benefit the state. To support this perspective, I present ideological and material outcomes of local and national neoliberal policy reforms. In Chapter II, I describe the ways pro-market economic strategies have contributed to greater inequalities and vulnerability among east Kentucky communities. Like other neoliberal discourses, the war on coal is largely rendered “commonsensical” within communities that identify with coal mining. Why do east Kentuckians identify with the coal industry? Chapters II and III, and add to Rebecca Scott’s analysis of Appalachian West Virginia by arguing that institutionalized neoliberal doctrine simultaneously contributed to the demise of the union, the entrenchment of existing poverty, and amplification of environmental destruction. The combined affect was low job security, low-wages (outside of mining), and increased vulnerability, all of which helped to ensure the “social reproduction of neoliberal hegemony” (Peck 2001:451). Finally, Peck has argued that rather than assessing “outcomes” of neoliberal regimes, scholars should “excavat[e] the underlying parameters, ideological orientations, and conspicuous silences of the policy-making *process*” (2001: 449). To that effect, chapter four locates the “war on coal” within a broader political project that “naturalizes” market logic, and minimizes all else.

As a final theoretical consideration, this project is informed by political ecological theory, which is critical for examining how neoliberalism “reconfigures socio-nature” (Heynen et al. 2007). Anthropologists have contributed to and drawn from political ecology to examine how “power mediates human-environment relations” (Biersack 2006:3). Scholars have traditionally struggled to find meaningful ways of connecting labor and environmental histories (Peck 2006). However, political ecology’s focus on power and humanized or second-nature blurs divisions between people and environments (Biersack 2006; Heynen et al. 2007). A political ecological perspective allows for an analytical frame through which the reductionist scope of the “jobs” or “environment” discussion can be superseded by understandings of “reciprocal impacts of nature and culture” (Biersack 2006:4). A holistic, dialectic understanding of the nature/culture relationship allows for easy movement between environmental and labor struggles.

Methodology

Research Objectives

As mentioned elsewhere, my broad research question is why does the war on coal persist? Guiding this research are three main objectives:

- 1) To critically examine the war on coal’s historical context and ideological underpinnings. In other words, what is the war on coal’s message, and might it make sense?
- 2) To determine how the war on coal’s message is informing reactions to and understandings of the current economic crisis in coal production.

- 3) To assess the “hard outcomes” or material consequences of the war on coal discourse (Peck 2001).

Research Site

Kentucky is the third largest coal producing state in the nation, after Wyoming and West Virginia. This in part because Kentucky has two coalfields: one in the western part of the state (the “Illinois” basin) and one in the eastern part of the state (the “Central Appalachian” basin). In 2012 western Kentucky coal production remained stable, while eastern Kentucky production dramatically declined (KyEEC 2013a; b). This research involves the eastern or Central Appalachian part of the state, primarily coal producing areas of Harlan and Letcher counties. The geography of the study is somewhat difficult. Although the original intention was to do a community-specific study in Letcher County, I quickly found that a bounded study would be futile. People were crossing county and community lines to work, find work, play, or educate themselves at local community colleges. The result is a project that includes informants primarily living or working in coal camps and towns near the Letcher County seat Whitesburg, and Harlan County’s tri-city area of Benham, Cumberland and Lynch. However, I was often inspired to travel elsewhere in the region in order to attend important cultural events or relevant meetings. For example, I was able to interview Coal Mining Our Future’s President in Perry County’s city of Hazard. I toured surface mines in Knott and Floyd Counties, and attended an economic planning meeting in Pike County. At times, I even crossed state lines into adjacent southeast Virginia to speak with relevant organizations such as Save Our Appalachian Mountains (SAMS) and the Clinch River Valley Initiative (CRVI).

Though land had been speculated on in eastern Kentucky since the mid-18th century, it was not until the completion of the railroad (1910-1914) that Harlan and Letcher Counties dramatically industrialized (Eller 1982; Henever 1978). Railways and WWI contributed to the region's first great coal boom (Eller 1982). People began flooding southeast Kentucky's coalfields looking for wealth and work; by 1923 the United States Coal industry employed over 700,000 miners (Banks 1995: 337; KyEEC 2011:38). Companies such as US Steel, International Harvester, Elkhorn, Consolidated, and Southeast Coal rapidly built company towns to house miners (Cooper 2011; Portelli 2011). Many of these places retain names given by the company; Benham, Lynch, Premium, Carbon-Glow, Seco (Southeast Coal Operation) and Hot Spot are just a few examples. During the first great coal boom, both counties thrived from an influx of American, European and African American migrants (Cooper 2011; Portelli 2011). Though southeast Kentucky coal was of the highest quality, companies were in some ways disadvantaged by the topography of the region (Banks 1995). Freight rates were high in and out of the mountains (Banks 1995). In order to keep coal competitive, companies paid Kentucky miners lower wages than were earned elsewhere (Henever 1978:5; Banks 1995). Low wages and brutal working conditions inspired struggle for labor rights, especially in "bloody Harlan" county (Henever 1978). By the 1950s boom had led to bust; from 1940-1970, Harlan and Letcher County residents joined 3 million other Appalachians leaving the mountains for larger cities (Eller 2008:20). Outmigration, paired with poverty and reckless surface mining practices led Letcher County's most famous resident, Harry Caudill, to write his seminal book *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of A Depressed Region* (1963). Caudill's book inspired John

F. Kennedy to plan a visit to east Kentucky. Though Kennedy was never able to make the trip, eastern Kentucky was a famous stop on Lyndon Johnson's 1964 "poverty tour," and a strategic site for implementing Johnson's "War on Poverty."

Though Letcher and Harlan have historically been among the top coal-producing counties in the state, these counties were particularly disturbed by the industry's recent bust (Gish 2013). Between 2011 and 2013, east Kentucky coal production dropped from 65.5 million short tons to 39.9 million short tons (KyEEC 2012a; 2013a, b). Over 6,200 jobs were lost across twenty Appalachian Basin coal-producing counties (KyEEC 2012a; 2013a,b). However, around 2,000 of the total number of job losses occurred in Harlan and Letcher Counties (1381 and 633 respectively) (KyEEC 2012a; 2013a). Currently, Letcher and Harlan counties hold two of the highest unemployment rates in the state, at just above 16 percent (Gish 2013). Unemployment may be partially to blame for Harlan and Letcher County's struggle with population declines. While Appalachian Kentucky's population has risen 8.6 percent since 1990, the population of Letcher and Harlan has *declined* (by 9.4 and 21 percent respectively) since 1990 (ARC 2000; 2010). Despite unemployment and outmigration, both counties thrive on strong community ties, culture and heritage associated with a long history of Union and environmental organizing, regional art and musical traditions, and deep connections to place. A long, rich history of mining, paired with outmigration and the recent decline of the dominant industry makes this region an important site for examining adaptations to social and economic change.

Data Collection

This project took place over the course of a year between March of 2013 and February of 2014. During that time I made several visits to Harlan, Perry, Knott, and Pike

Counties (at times crossing state lines into southeastern Virginia). During the summer of 2013, I spent two months conducting fieldwork from a “creek” (a hollow along a creek) at the foot of Pine Mountain in Letcher County. Pine Mountain has been mined extensively; however the closest surface mine was furloughed during the time of this research. The summer was primarily spent engaging in participant observation. I went to great lengths to travel to as many coal camps and towns as possible, stopping at all coal related memorials and museums I could find. Because the coal industry seems visible in every nook and cranny of east Kentucky, I wanted to sense the weight of its infrastructural and material presence. During this time I captured over 1300 photos, which I organized daily in a photo diary.

Touring coal camps and towns provided the opportunity to stop at many small businesses along the way, where I informally spoke with clerks, business owners, and passersby. Many people (non-miners) were eager to talk about the recent plummet in coal production, as it seemed to be a source of tremendous anxiety. The layoffs were very fresh, and news of more layoffs seemed to occur every other week. Because of the uncertainty, the woe of the coal industry was a very sensitive topic to explore. I was denied interviews by several miners who did not want to make waves for fear of losing their jobs. With those people who were willing to speak with me, I was careful not to bring up hot button issues such as the “war on coal,” unless the other person mentioned it first. Despite my efforts, the war on coal was frequently raised. Part of my regimen was keeping a daily field notes journal where I extensively recorded these exchanges.

Another part of the participant observation process involved attending relevant meetings and events in Letcher, Harlan, and surrounding counties. The type of activities

varied. Some of them were “transition” or economic planning meetings, such as Kentuckians for the Commonwealth’s “Appalachia’s Bright Future Conference,” a scoping meeting for a proposed prison project, and the “Save Our Appalachian Region” (SOAR) Summit in Pikeville. I attended many cultural activities such as weekly farmers markets, the Carcassonne Square Dance, Appalachian Writer’s Workshop, the Appalachian Media Institute’s Summer Premiere, the Mountain Heritage Festival, Appalshop’s annual Seedtime on the Cumberland Festival, among others. I attended meetings of environmental groups such as the Clinch River Valley Initiative. Showing up at meetings and events was instrumental in helping connect me with important actors and agencies, and illuminated regional topics of interest and concern.

Interviews and Participants

After several weeks of casual conversation and attending relevant meetings and events, I began to orchestrate semi-structured, qualitative interviews. Most informants were purposefully selected. Because the emphasis of the project is on the impact of discourses of decline and transition, and due the sensitivity of the subject matter, I decided to focus my efforts on interviewing specialized informants. Specialized informants are stakeholders representing organized entities such as non-profit and government agencies. However, as I made more connections, I met many non-organized residents who seemed necessary to interview based on our informal discussions. The result was 21 semi-structured, qualitative interviews that range from 45 to 120 minutes in length. All but two interviews were audio recorded.

Of the 21 interviews, 13 represented relevant organized entities such as government agencies, businesses, environmental and social justice groups, non-profits,

and pro-coal groups. Because they represented organizations and did not share personal information, I have kept the names of 11 specialized informants intact. I have chosen not to disclose the identity of two environmental activists because as we shall see, pro-“environmental” attitudes have been targeted by the industry as the source of the region’s problems. Because of the current, highly politicized debate surrounding the coal industry, I wanted to protect my informants from possible criticism. Of the remaining 8 informants, five were wives (and often mothers) of miners, ranging in age from 41-82. Three were former or retired UMW minors between the ages of 50 and 82. In addition to the two activists, I have given the 8 non-specialized informants pseudonyms and changed identifying information in order to protect their identities. The University of Louisville’s Institutional Review Board approved protocols for protecting the identity of informants and acquiring informed consent (IRB No 13.0913, Reference No. 328633).

Data Analysis

Four months (October 2013-January of 2014) were spent transcribing interviews and analyzing data. I set about coding transcriptions from audio recordings, local and regional newspaper clippings, and participant observation data such as field notes and my photo journal. Because it allows for multi-media coding, NVivo 10 software was employed for all qualitative data analysis. Ultimately, I ended up with over 400 pages of data, organized into 85 codes. After the coding process was complete, I went back through the newly organized data and wrote memos in each code-set, noting connecting ideas or emerging themes. After doing this I was able to sort the codes into broader themes and concepts, and pull the data back together in order to begin the writing process.

Constraints and Limitations

Due to the freshness of the layoffs and the region's economic sensitivity, a major limitation of this project is that I was unable to formally interview any active or laid-off miners. Some miners expressed worry about finding or keeping their jobs, and were not willing to risk jeopardizing any current or future employment. For this reason, speaking to the wives and mothers of miners was the closest I could get to understanding how coal-mining households are impacted by production declines. Retired miners were helpful for their revealing insights about the industry; interestingly, a significant difference is that many retired miners seemed to be more critical of the company than active miners. I believe this is because many retired miners have strong memories of organizing with the United Mine Workers union, oftentimes against the company. However, in east Kentucky there are no longer mines represented by the UMWA; as a result, some people say today's mining culture is very different than it once was.

Significance

Many social phenomena traditionally of interest to anthropologists occur within the context of mining, however "the anthropology of mining remains largely under-researched and under-theorized" (Ballard & Banks 2003:187, Rolston 2013). Mining is a "cultural act" around which multi-faceted relationships emerge (Scott 2010; Ballard and Banks 2003: 287). Mine sites engender complex encounters between corporate actors, states, communities, laborers, legal bodies, and NGOs (Ballard and Banks 2003:289). These actors conceptualize the act of mining in different ways, emphasizing differing meanings. Therefore, locales of extraction are often places of engagement, conflict, social movements, and cultural exchange (Ballard and Banks 2003; Finn 1998, Godoy 1985).

Finally, mining connects rural communities directly to the global economy; therefore, places of extraction are made vulnerable by the booms and busts of the world market (Ballard and Banks 2003:287; Finn 1998). Eastern Kentucky, in particular, is a deeply cultural place; its 100-year relationship with King Coal has generated a rich history of both exploitation and social activism. These factors and many more make it a compelling and worthwhile site for anthropological research.

Appalachians have a long history of other people speaking on their behalf. Currently, the coal lobby has conjured a “war on coal,” vastly oversimplifying environmental and economic crises. This study will articulate and draw attention to particular challenges rural communities face when transitioning from a single-industry economy toward an uncertain future. As many coal-producing communities will be impacted by the impending decline of the coal industry, engaging in a dialogue about “change” could elicit more holistic discussion about Appalachia’s problems and possibilities. Research of this kind could be instrumental in the fight for a more equitable future for Appalachia.

CHAPTER II

COAL MINING IN EASTERN KENTUCKY

In defense of coal, pro-coal lobby groups, politicians and the industry itself have used the culture and history of coal mining as a foothold to assert their industrial relevance. In this way, pro-coal groups are able to conflate the industry desires (less federal regulation) with the needs of a region that has a tremendous amount of pride in its coal-mining heritage, a topic I take up in Chapter III. However, historic analysis reveals that the interests of the miners are not synonymous with the interests of the company. In fact, time and again, the coal industry has abused both the landscape and people of eastern Kentucky (and by extension, Central Appalachia), and eastern Kentuckians have fought back. The current claim that less burdensome regulations would cure the coal industry and lift the region from economic instability dismisses the history of coal mining in Appalachian Kentucky. What I demonstrate here is that such “burdensome regulations” are actually an outcome of the coal industry’s historic negligence and abuse. Existing laws have been hard won through decades of struggle for labor and environmental justice.

This chapter is not solely a history of coal mining in east Kentucky, but provides some ways that coal mining has uniquely structured the political economy and ecology of the region. Part of this involves the coal industry’s co-dependent relationship with the state, an essential for ensuring the continuation of coal mining. Importantly, this chapter looks at the ways in which various “economic development” projects have failed to

address the needs of the region: problems exacerbated by the presence of a dominant, extractive industry. The state's failure to divorce eastern Kentucky from King Coal has meant that alternative economic projects must swim upstream against a torrent of environmental degradation, political corruption, lack of developable land, and systemic poverty.

Chapter II has three main sections. The first addresses how coal became king and deeply structured the political economy and ecology of the region. This section spans from the late 18th century to 1980, and describes the various battles and activism that inspired reformations of mining practices. The second section describes how the national neoliberal political, social and economic philosophy changed the mountains of east Kentucky by increasing vulnerability among the working class, and promoting more damaging mining practices in name of efficiency. The final section debunks the “war on coal” belief frame by breaking down the market factors that contributed to the recent plummet in coal production.

Historical Development of Coal Mining in Eastern Kentucky

Some have argued that east Kentucky's notorious economic hardship is not due to cultural degeneracy or isolation, but has instead been historically produced. The beauty and bounty of the Appalachian Plateau's natural resources have lured Native Americans, explorers, capitalists, settlers, homesteaders, evangelicals, artists and activists into the region for centuries. The vast mesophytic forests and seemingly endless natural abundance have contributed to both a rich cultural heritage as well as a long history of exploitation. Though this cannot provide a complete account of Appalachian Kentucky's

history, I draw from Appalachian studies scholarship to highlight some key historical moments that help locate the region's current social, economic and environmental state.

(Re)Settlement, Commodification, and Early Agriculture: 1790-1890

While Central Appalachia was still formally Native American territory, European-Americans were actively settling and selling land as early as 1730. East Kentucky was among the last “extensive frontiers”, and frontier conditions extended well into the 1880s (Salstrom 1995:90). The majority of east Kentucky lands were sold to absentee speculators between 1790 and 1810 (Dunaway 1995). Challenging what she calls “the myth” of frontier life, Wilma Dunaway argues there was never such a thing as “free land” (1995). Even though the majority of arriving settlers were poor, Kentucky policymakers preferred selling land to outside capitalists and industrial enterprises, and marketed Kentucky acreage in European and Northeastern metropolises (ibid.). Squatting was a regular occurrence; by the turn of the century, a large portion of the population remained landless (ibid.). Lack of affordable land, paired with the “labyrinth” of “haphazard” titling practices, contributed to east Kentucky's very prolonged settlement period (Dunaway 1995; Salstrom 1995). The landed elite (often merchants, lawyers, and “petty bureaucrats”) controlled three-fourths of land area titled to actual inhabitants (as opposed to holding companies) (Dunaway 1995). These elite comprised only one fourth of the settler population (ibid.).

In the antebellum period, settlers who did manage to eke out a living in Appalachian Kentucky were primarily farmers, although some regions supported early salt and iron industries. Often farm families would have secondary occupations in logging, specialized skill and craft production (Pudup 1995:282). Some farmers even

engaged in small-scale coal mining (Pudup 1995). Families settled along bottoms and valleys and practiced “unspecialized domestic farming” (Pudup 1995; Salstrom 1995). Most arriving settlers desired to farm, resulting in a settlement pattern that was intentionally decentralized (Pudup 1995:281). “Sleepy” county seat towns housed the few necessary public posts (1995). Farmers were not solely subsistence-oriented, but traded surpluses at “proto-urban centers,” or strategic trading posts at stream convergences (Pudup 1995:283). Flatboats and steamboats carried goods to Northeastern cities. Diversified crops helped east Kentucky farmers’ protect against crop failures. However, this lack of specialization and commercial production would ultimately contribute to the demise of major farming practices in east Kentucky (Pudup 1995; Salstrom 1994).

In the postbellum period, land giveaways and the development of farm machinery and transportation helped Midwestern and Central Kentucky farmers out-compete Appalachian producers (Salstrom 1995: 89-90). Flat land in East Kentucky was limited, and burgeoning populations significantly reduced farm sizes (Salstrom 1995). By 1890, east Kentucky farmers were responding to the “subsistence crisis” by supplementing their income with wage-labor (Salstrom 1995:90). Men often earned extra income through off-season mining and logging (Salstrom 1995). Coal operators came to the region not simply because of the presence of coal, but because the subsistence crisis had made cheap labor readily available (Salstrom 1995:90). Wages were also needed to pay the incredible debts that Appalachian Plateau settlers owed to land owners (Salstrom 1995:94). Debt, lack of land, and flagging agricultural prospects all helped to shape east Kentucky’s industrial transformation (Pudup 1995; Salstrom 1995).

Speculation intensified in the post-bellum period, concretizing local class disparities (Eller 1982:45-85; Banks 1995). With the help of local elites, Kentucky politicians systematically handed over Appalachian Kentucky to outside capitalists and investors between 1880 and 1920 (Eller 1982; Banks 1995). This was all in the name of economic development, which the state of Kentucky promised would improve the overall welfare (Banks 1995). In the wake of abolition, policymakers worried that without a strong labor force, they could not would not be able to attract badly needed investors (Banks 1995) The Kentucky legislature passed a bill that launched intense recruiting campaigns to entice European laborers to the region (Banks 1995). In addition to being “propaganda machine[s]” for outside laborers, politicians also sought “outside capital as the preferred avenue to economic development” (Banks 1995:329). As a result, even before the railroads penetrated east Kentucky between 1890 and 1914, “new investors” were transforming sleepy county seats into cosmopolitan, commodity centers (1995:330). Corporate property ownership became a “new form of property,” and exacerbated the “virtual land monopoly” (Banks 1995:331). Land, mining, timber, and iron company interests had largely outbid the suffering farming sector, “destroy[ing] the conditions under which it was possible to carry on an independent mode of production” (Banks 1995:332). The building of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad (L&N) spurred the proliferation of coal camps and companies. After the first branch line was built in Bell County, Kentucky, the county seat of Middlesboro grew from 50 people in 1889 to more than 10,000 in 1892 (Banks 1995:333-337). Branch lines going into Harlan, Letcher and Perry counties would not be completed until 1914, but similar population explosions occurred (ibid.).

Coal Barons, Coal Camps and Union Wars: 1890-1940

Even in the 1920s and 30s, east Kentucky (and West Virginia) miners typically earned 15-30% lower wages than miners in other regions of the United States (Lewis 2004:67). Drawing from Andre Gunder Frank's "development of underdevelopment thesis," Paul Salstrom argues that low wages were sustained through "subsistence reproduction of labor power" (1994:65). In order to compensate for low wages, households would have to raise gardens to feed their families. The coal companies encouraged gardening, sometimes offering months of free rent in the coal camps or prizes for the best kept garden (Salstrom 1994). By the 1920s, gardens were worth 10-20% of miner salaries (Salstrom 1994:63). Salstrom argues that companies supported the gardens because they relied on labor-intensive mining; if they paid wages that would allow families to fully feed themselves outside of household subsistence production, mining in east Kentucky would not have been profitable (Salstrom 1994:73) Gardens subsidized the coal companies by feeding the miners and their families, ensuring a strong labor force. These subsidies allowed east Kentucky coal companies to sell coal cheaply (1994). The increased workload necessitated more helping hands; between 1880 and 1920, miners' wives had more children than wives to men of any other trade (Salstrom 1994:63). The Appalachian Plateau experienced a "faster natural increase of population than any other section of the United States" (Banks 1995:63). The enormous population needed to support the "wage earners" would be the same group to leave Appalachia in the "Great Migration" between 1940 and 1960 (Salstrom 1995:67).

Why did miners and their families tolerate such low wages? During the 1890s, the United Mine Workers began organizing in Midwestern mines, ensuring higher pay for

miners (Salstrom 1994:74). At the *same time*, operators in east Kentucky were strongly encouraging (some say coercing) families to live in company towns, also known as coal camps (Salstrom 1994:74-75; Banks 1995:337, Eller 1982). The first coal camp was finished in 1885, and nearly 70 percent of miners lived in company towns by 1910 (compared to 8.5 percent of Midwestern miners) (Salstrom 1994:75). Alan Banks argues that coal camps were the “infrastructural foundation for new class realities” (1995:337-343). As large landholders controlled much of the land (70% in Harlan County and 60% in Letcher County), through coal camps, investors ensured a steady transition toward commodity consumption (Banks 1995:337). Company towns varied in quality and style, and were marketed to attract laborers (*ibid.*). But coal camps also had a second, more lasting purpose: to stave off union organizers (Banks 1995; Salstrom 1994; Henever 1978). Coal camps quite literally served to control, repress and discipline the miners (Banks 1995). It is important to recall that east Kentucky mining operations practiced “labor-intensive mining,” and low wages ensured their profitability (Salstrom 1994:75). Companies tried to prevent the infiltration of an “oppositional culture” (whose members were considered “instigators,” “enemies of freedom,” etc.) that might lead to higher wages (Banks 1995:338). Control was wielded through several avenues. Wages were arbitrarily deducted from paychecks for things such as mining equipment, doctor bills, rent, but deductions also occurred for “insubordination, poor attendance, and UMWA sympathies” (Banks 1995:340-341). These sorts of practices ensured the mining family’s financial dependence on the company (Banks 1995:340).

Repression and discipline are two other avenues through which companies could control their work force (Banks 1995). Striking, picketing, organizing, or “annoying” the

company was expressly prohibited in worker contracts, and could be grounds for termination or even arrest (Banks 1995:339-340). Workers feared eviction from company owned houses (Banks 1995; Eller 1982; Henever 1978). Leases could be revoked for housing guests with questionable loyalty to the company (Banks 1995:340). The practice of “blacklisting” ensured company control over a miner’s future employment prospects (Henever 1978: 9). Fear of blacklisting, eviction, and termination, paired with repression of basic rights such as free speech and assembly, all characterized the day to day of company towns (Banks 1995; Henever 1978; Salstrom 1994). Organizing for wage increases would be a very slow and dangerous process in east Kentucky (Salstrom 1994; Henever 1978).

No place exemplifies east Kentucky’s struggle to unionize better than Harlan County. As part of the New Deal’s economic revitalization strategy, Roosevelt’s Wagner Act of 1935 gave laborers the right to legally join unions (Lewis 2004:67). Yet throughout the 1930s, mine wars waged on in east Kentucky, most famously in “bloody” Harlan County (Henever 1978). Early attempts were made to organize what the UMW labeled “District 19”; however it was not until draught and depression brought on waves of malnutrition, disease, and high infant mortality that citizens really pushed for the union (Henever 1978). Between 1931 and 1937, four attempts were made to unionize District 19 (Henever 1978:x). But coal companies, relying on low wages to stay competitive, refused to entertain union contracts. To make their position known, coal companies often paid county sheriffs and “private deputies” out of their own pockets (Eller 1982; Henever 1978). Coercive attempts to stifle organizing led to a nine-year “mine war” that left 11 people dead, and 20 wounded (Henever 1978:177). Deputy Sheriffs and National

Guardsmen committed the majority of the violence (Henever 1978:177). Fear of violence, eviction and unemployment managed to stave off the union (ibid.). Finally, in 1938 a civil liberties committee pleaded with the Governor of Kentucky, forcing him to outlaw Harlan County's brutal "mine-guard system" (Henever 1978: 176).

While Kentucky certainly has benefitted and continues to benefit from what is now the UMWA, organizing had some unintended negative impacts. Midwestern mining had become increasingly automated prior to 1933 (Salstrom 1994:75). However with the abundance of cheap labor, Appalachian plateau coal producers found it more cost effective to continue to use "pick and shovel," i.e. labor intensive methods (1994:74-75). For example, in 1933 only 1.2% of West Virginia mines were mechanized, whereas nearly 60% of Illinois mines were mechanized (1994:75). When unions demanded wage increases in the 1930s, many companies exploited "maximum mechanization" (ibid.). As a result, between 10 and 40 percent of the workforce became obsolete (ibid.). Much of this workforce was the African American population; many subsequently migrated from the region (ibid.).

Mechanization, Migration, and The War on Poverty: 1940-1965

The relative economic boom that certain parts of Central Appalachia experienced during WWII was short lived. By the 1950s, implementation of new machines such as "continuous miners," enormous shovels, upgraded drills and new surface mining techniques eliminated many underground mining jobs (Eller 2008:20). The rapid advancement of mining technology, paired with increased competition from other fossil fuels reduced the number of underground coal miners from 475,000 during WWII to 107,000 by 1970 (Eller 2008:20). During the 1950s and 60s, Appalachian residents left

the region in droves to find work in northern and midwestern cities (Obermiller 2004:94).² Many have labeled this moment in Appalachian History as the “Great Migration” (Obermiller 2004; Eller 2008). The Appalachian Plateau was particularly vulnerable; between 1940 and 1960, 1.2 million people migrated out of West Virginia and east Kentucky (Eller 2008:28). In the 1950s, Appalachian Kentucky’s population was reduced by as much as 35 percent (Eller 2008:28).

Coal production got a brief respite following WWII when a New Deal program, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), began building coal-fired generators to supply cheap energy to the southern Appalachian region (Lewis 1995: 68). The undertaking demanded cheap coal, encouraging low-overhead production (1995:68). The New Deal had left Appalachia with an imperfect but updated road system, and TVA’s demand for energy stimulated the birth of thousands of small truck mines (Lewis 1995; Weise 2009). Truck mines were smaller operations that used trucks instead of railways to transport coal. But TVA’s demand could not make up for two major recessions in the 1950s, which contributed to declining US steel production (Weise 2009:311). On top of that, diesel fuels increasingly powered trains, and home electricity generation began moving toward alternative sources (2009:311). The resultant flag in coal production exacerbated internal divisions between the UMWA, miners and the coal companies (2009:312). Non-union truck mines were competing with major companies while also not paying union fees (2009:317). This was a point of contention for both UMWA president John L. Lewis and the Bituminous Coal Operators Association (BCOA). In an effort to integrate the coal industry and secure long-term benefits for miners, members of the BCOA negotiated a

²But they often traveled home on the weekends, so much so that many interstates were dubbed “hillbilly highways.” See also Appalshop Film *Long Journey Home* (1987), directed by Elizabeth Barret.

UMWA contract that would specifically advantage large-scale coal operators and union miners (2009:2013). The 1950 contract determined that the coal companies would help finance a UMWA Welfare and Retirement Fund, if the union would “embrace new mechanized methods of production” (Weise 2009:312-313). Though the result of contract was higher wages for miners, increased mechanization in the 1950s translated into a significantly reduced work force (Lewis 2004; Weise 2009; Wolfe 2003).

The UMW Welfare and Retirement Fund was the basis for an unprecedented and extensive healthcare and retirement program at virtually no cost to mining families, for a time (Muncy 2009). Though the fund help set up ten state-of-the-art hospitals in the Kentucky coalfields, by the late 1950s the predominance of non-union truck mines and growing numbers of retirees had sucked the fund dry (Muncy 2009). Entitlements such as widow’s benefits and disability insurance were consistently slashed (Muncy 2009; Wolfe 2003). Another series of cuts in the 1960s defunded benefits to miners who were unemployed for over a year, or who worked for operators that owed money to the fund (Muncy 2009:88). During the same time, coal companies were regularly subcontracting to non-union operators in order to undermine the expense of the union (Muncy 2009:90). The threat of union hospital closures due to lack of funds was the final straw, igniting the “roving pickets” labor movement (Muncy 2009; Wolfe 2003). East Kentuckians organized, wrote letters to congress, picketed, and protested; they also resorted to violence and used dynamite to destroy non-union mines (Muncy 2009; Wolfe 2003). Muncy argues that the activism of miners (not their helplessness) contributed to subsequent antipoverty programs of the 1960s (2009). She writes, “only after coal miners engaged in violence and rhetorically linked their dissent with the black freedom struggle

did JFK move toward a massive federal response to Appalachian distress” (2009:92). In 1967 the Association of Disabled Miners and Widows organized and fought for greater access to the healthcare fund.

In the long run, the 1950 UMWA contract did not help the coal-dependent regions of east Kentucky (Weise 2009:313-314). In fact, underground mining employment would decrease by 70 percent over the next 15 years (Weise 2009 313-314; Wolfe 2003:32). In the 1940s, surface mining accounted for less than five percent of production; by 1960 that number had leapt to 33 percent (Wolfe 2003:32). Despite many attempts by 7th District representative Carl D. Perkins to permanently revive the coal industry in east Kentucky, boom-bust cycles were contingent upon the global marketplace and were in many ways uncontrollable (Weise 2009:324-325). Perkins embarked on a two decade-long dams project which he hoped would control floods, bring outside manufacturing to the region, and make waters more navigable for coal barges (2009:329-331) The six dams that came out of this project have provided some flood protection, but the promises of economic prosperity never materialized (Weise 2009). Furthermore, Perkins refused to acknowledge that industrial expansion via surface mining largely amplified the intensity of floods (ibid.). Treeless, compacted landscapes cause a great deal of runoff, and floods in the region are prevalent. In 1957, a disastrous flood devastated four Kentucky Counties, bringing swarms of journalists to the region (Eller 2008:40). The damage and publicity surrounding the flood spurred a renewed focus on regional poverty and contributed to the formation of the Eastern Kentucky Regional Planning Commission (EKRPC) in 1959 (Weise 2009). EKRPC began organizing *Program 60* (Weise 2009:334). In the style of the New Deal, Program 60 would implement flood-control

measures and infrastructural development (2009:335). At the same time, a trip to the West Virginia coalfields inspired John F. Kennedy to push the Area Redevelopment Act of 1961, which targeted regional specific poverty (Weise 2009: 334). The intended purpose of this act carried through Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty" (Economic Opportunity Act of 1964), part of his broader *Great Society* program. Johnson's goals for Appalachia were to be achieved through the establishment of a federal-state partnership program called the Appalachian Regional Commission (hereafter ARC). Comprehensive development plans were also conveyed in the Appalachian Regional Development Act (ARDA) of 1965.

Though media attention given to the flood generated an increased public interest in fixing the problem of poverty in Appalachia, discourse surrounding this topic continuously affirmed the supposedly inherent "problems" of the region. The first was "backwardness" as "a result of geographic isolation and insufficient development of modern patterns of transportation and industry," or in other words: place (Eller 2008:40-41). The second problem was Appalachians themselves, as bearers of a culture that "preserved anachronistic values" which "prevented people from lifting themselves out of poverty" (Eller 2008:40-41). Media images that problematized the people and place of Appalachia continued to circulate throughout the late fifties and early sixties. In his book on national poverty, Michael Harrington (1962) labeled Appalachia part of *The Other America* (Eller 2008:65). Similarly, in an article in *Land Economics*, economists David Grossman and Melvin Levin dubbed Appalachia a "national problem area", whose troubles are reducible to "the topography, tax policies, inadequate community facilities, 'unfavorable psychological attitudes,' and...a[n] unskilled workforce" (2008:65). While

Harry Caudill's *Night Comes to the Cumberland*s (1963) did question the impact of surface mining in the mountain region, he also recapitulated the notion of "cultural degeneracy" (Eller 2008:66). Caudill was even known to take journalists on "poverty tours" of his hometown, Whitesburg, Kentucky (Eller 2008:66).

Johnson's antipoverty programs took two major forms. Allied with the "War on Poverty" initiative was the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) which sought to develop human participatory governance in the form of grassroots programs and public services such as Volunteers in Service to American (VISTA), Head Start, and Job Corps programs (Eller 2004:209). The OEO accomplished this through Community Action Programs (hereafter CAPs). These programs were directed to ensure "maximum feasible participation" among marginalized and misrepresented populations (Eller 2004:209-210). They were designed to bypass local power structure and incorporate vulnerable groups into decision-making processes (Eller 2004; Wolfe 2003). However, local power brokers were threatened by the OEO and CAP initiatives, and even at times attempted to subvert or sabotage them (Eller 2004).³ In order to fulfill the War on Poverty's mission, Washington called upon Berea College's Council of Southern Mountains to recruit a faculty/student volunteer base (Wolfe 2003:39). Many progressive minded young people filed in from primarily eastern universities to put their idealism to use in poverty-stricken Appalachia. However, when college students realized that haphazard mining practices and powerful elite were maintaining the status quo, volunteerism turned to activism (Wolfe 2003:39-40). Conflicts between "Appalachian Volunteer" outsiders and local elites got so intense that one Appalachian Volunteer couple was arrested in Pike County,

³ See also Huey Perry's *They'll Cut off Your Project: A Mingo County Chronicle* (2011). Morgantown: West Virginia University Press.

and charged with “criminal syndicalism against the state” (ibid.). Pike County used “communist bugaboo” to rid the state of OEO programs and Appalachian Volunteers (ibid.). One way this was accomplished was through the formation of the Kentucky UnAmerican Activities Committee (ibid.). The OEO was ultimately not successful, and many programs that could not find alternative funding ended with the 1960s. However, the legacy of OEO and CAP continues to shape the fate of east Kentucky, which is still home to many grassroots organizations serving the needs of underrepresented populations.

The second major program was the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC): a program directed at fixing Appalachia through implementing strategies that would provide “measurable growth” as opposed to societal welfare or even economic stability (Eller 2008:179). The creation of ARC was largely influenced by “growth theory” economics of the early sixties, which advocated heavy-handed government intervention (while paradoxically advocating “free-enterprise”) in order to stimulate growth “through policies that maximized production, consumption, and full employment,” (Eller 2008:178). In 1965, a last minute amendment to the Appalachian Regional Development Act (ARDA) “mandat[ed] that public investments in the region under the act concentrated in areas where there was significant potential for future growth” (2008:180). The single sentence amendment would tie the fate of ARC to projects intended to benefit Appalachia’s “expanding metropolitan centers,” and largely exclude rural “hinterlands” (ibid.). The idea was that with limited funds from the government, priority should be given to a few places as opposed to distributed among the “thousands of tiny, dying mining camps and rural communities,” (ibid.). However, in the mid-1960s, only a sixth of

Central Appalachia's population lived in towns exceeding 2,500 people (Eller 2008:185). In the early years of the ARC program, larger cities (many that were not considered to be part of "Appalachia") such as Pittsburgh and Scranton each received over ten million dollars (Eller 2008:182). Politicians from Central Appalachia were infuriated by the growth-centered logic that funded only large cities. Through investment in cities and improved highway systems, the wealth of urban centers was supposed to trickle outward to reduce rural poverty (ibid.). Ultimately, governors from West Virginia and Kentucky were able to strike a compromise with ARC, and mid-size cities of 7,000 (and strategically located along major roadways), were able to qualify for funds supporting "modern enterprises" (Eller 2008:182). In eastern Kentucky this meant that Hazard, Pikeville and Prestonsburg qualified for ARC funds (ibid.) Some ARC money did filter into rural towns, but instead of funds going to improve living conditions, they were primarily targeted at "updating the labor force," or teaching rural people marketable skills that would be useful in a modern, urban setting (Eller 2008: 185). Eller highlights that in a 1969 lecture at Northwestern University, ARC senior committee member Ralph Widner explained that ARC funds were being used to "accelerate urbanization", and to "equip young people to leave the region for other parts of the country where economic opportunities were more attractive," (2008: 185). Because urban places were deemed more worthy of ARC funds, a 1975 report revealed that only 23% of ARC funds were going to Central Appalachia, the poorest and most rural area in the region (Eller 2008:190). Ironically, Central Appalachia was the very area that inspired Kennedy's antipoverty campaigns.

Though there were some positive outcomes of Johnson's War on Poverty, the ARC campaigns did not provide long-term economic stability for east Kentucky. However, poverty programs did draw national attention to the region. A strong labor history and the proliferation of college students and activists invigorated progressive movements afoot in the 1960s and 1970s. Shared experiences of hardship and exploitation fostered a sense of regional identity (Eller 2008). "Appalachia" was reclaimed from the pejorative and turned into a source of pride (ibid.). During this era Appalachia experienced a musical, literary art and craft "renaissance," and the field of Appalachian studies was born (Eller 2004:216).

Violence, Disaster, Resistance: 1965-1980

The 1960s and 70s would be violent decades for the Appalachian plateau, even as the coal industry recovered from the recessions of the 1950s. Simultaneously, labor and environmental movements engaged the region in protest against unregulated and non-union surface mining (Eller 2008). Activism and organizing occurred in step with the social and political climate of that era. I cannot here fully recount the activism that ensured environmental protections and labor rights. However, I will mention a few influential episodes from this politically charged period.

Poorly regulated surface mining of the 1950s and 1960s largely operated according to "ruin and run" logic (Baber 1990:158). The politically minded Appalachian Volunteers, familiar with systemic problems of the region, joined locals in protest. Kentucky's antiquated broad form deed (created by eastern Kentucky native John C.C. Mayo in the early days of coal). The broad form deed allowed for the separation of "mineral" and "surface" property rights. Appalachian court systems were supporting

claims that mineral owners could access minerals “by any means necessary,” practices that destroyed farms and homes (Reese 2006). During this time, the militant Appalachian Group to Save the Land and People (AGSLP) was formed (Eller 2008: 145). This environmental coalition was comprised both locals and antipoverty activists who banded together in several east Kentucky counties (Montrie 2000:83-84). Not only did they engage in direct action protests and appeals to Kentucky legislature, they attempted to abolish strip mining by using explosives to sabotage mining operations (Montrie 2000:84). The broad form deed was not outlawed in Kentucky until 1988.

In 1969, a methane and coal dust explosion killed 78 miners at the Consol No. 9 mine in Farmington, West Virginia. Upon hearing about the incident at Farmington, UMW president Tony Boyle made a public statement that shrugged off the explosion as just a risk of doing business (Montrie 2000:87). But many miners thought that tighter regulation could have prevented the explosion (Nyden 2007:39). Following the Farmington disaster, miners began organizing for stronger protections against coal dust caused by continuous miners, and calling for black lung compensation (Nyden 2007). The formation of the Black Lung Association ignited a series of wildcat strikes for safer miner conditions and black lung benefits (Muncy 2009:95). The Black Lung Association and the Association of Disabled Miners and Widows helped push the Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969, and by extension, the Occupational Health and Safety Act of 1970.

In 1969 Jock Yablonski ran for UMW President against Tony Boyle. Boyle, known for dirty election tactics, garnered twice as many votes as his opponent (Montrie 2000:87-88). When the Department of Labor suspected foul play, they called for a new

election in 1972 (Montrie 2000:88). Before all the votes were cast, Boyle orchestrated the brutal murder of Jock Yablonski and his family. The Yablonski murders inspired reform in the union. As a result, in 1972, Miners for Democracy organized to challenge Yablonski; they were victorious (ibid.).

Upon election as UMW president, Arch Miller, the Miners for Democracy candidate attempted to integrate the growing number of surface miners into the UMW, but with limited success. In the wake of growing environmentalism, and political pressure for an all-out ban on surface mining, the UMW ultimately supported federal regulation in lieu of abolishment (Montrie 2000). In 1977 the highly contested, and some say weak, Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA) was passed. This Act created a department that would regulate surface mining and reclamation practices (Office of Surface Mining-OSM), but was criticized for establishing mountaintop removal as a legitimate mining practice (Montrie 2000:93).

In 1977 the Federal Mine Safety and Health Act (Mine Act) was also passed. This act arrived on the heels of two devastating mine disasters. In 1972, a coal slurry impoundment dam collapsed, dumping millions of gallons of toxic sludge water on Logan County, a West Virginia community. The accident killed 125 citizens and destroyed over 4,000 homes (Nyden 2007:43). Responsible for the dam collapse was Pittston Coal Company, which referred to the disaster “an act of God” (Nyden 2007:43). Appalshop activist and filmmaker Mimi Pickering shortly thereafter made a film exposing the company’s negligence; she called it *The Buffalo Creek Flood: Act of Man*. Four years later, two coal dust explosions occurred in a poorly ventilated underground mine in the community of Oven Fork in Letcher County, Kentucky. Blue Diamond Coal

owned the “Scotia Mine,” and was notorious for safety violations, illegally dumping sludge, and abusing labor laws (Sinclair and Bishop 1980). The first explosion killed 15 men, and two days later a second explosion killed 11 mine inspectors. When in 1980 the company had not been fined and the widows not compensated, famed Letcher County author and lawyer Harry Caudill stated, “The Scotia situation reflects the complete inability of the United States to challenge culpable conduct...if I go out and run over someone with my car, I will be prosecuted, as I should be. If I negligently blow up a coal mine, nothing will be done” (Sinclair and Bishop 1980).

Neoliberal Transformations: 1980-2013

Neoliberal adjustments over the next two decades amplified global trade. A major outcome of the new economy was the intensification of competition among international and interstate companies (Kodras 1997; Hansen 2001). Businesses needed to become more efficient and productive, which often necessitated advances in technology (Peck 2002). States needed to compete to survive, which made wooing business an important function of government (Harvey 2007; Peck 2001). Maintaining “good business climate” rankings was key to attracting outside investors (Harvey 2007; Hansen 2001:232-233). One way states attract outside capital is through promises of providing cheap labor (Hansen 2001). This is especially prominent in the South (Hansen 2001). Conveniently, new conservative “think tanks” and the Reagan and Bush Sr. administrations were erstwhile blaming poverty on the poor (Harvey 2007; Kodras 1997). Cheap labor was a way for the impoverished to “forego the enticements of welfare and go to work” (Kodras 1997:74). “Thus,” Kodra writes, “there was little public outcry when 60 percent of 1981

budget cuts were levied on programs serving the poor” (1997:74). Cutting costs meant losing many of the gains the labor movement of previous decades had strived to ensure. As a result, states systematically went about undermining labor organizations, and slashing benefit and entitlement programs (Hansen 2001; Clawson and Clawson 1999). Part of the cruel twist of neoliberalism is that low-wages and low-benefits become naturalized as a necessary part of maintaining a “good business climate” in the new economy (Hansen 2001: 228). As I will demonstrate in Chapter III, this ethos continues today.

During this time the United States steel industry suffered, unable to compete with foreign prices (Eller 2008:224-225). The captive mines providing metallurgical coal for steel mills became obsolete, causing many Appalachian mines to permanently close (ibid.). New technologies in the eighties helped contribute to the energy oligopoly in Central Appalachia (ibid.). Large energy conglomerates like, Consol, Arch, and Massey had the capital for investments in large-scale mountaintop removal, causing smaller operators to suffer (ibid.). Even as production increased with new technologies, mining jobs became increasingly difficult to acquire (Eller 2008:224-228).

Welfare Reform in Economically Distressed Kentucky

The 1980s *also* marked the end of the “welfare state.” In eastern Kentucky, “welfare reform” was especially insulting. “Culture of poverty” theories of the day coagulated with a century of discriminatory stereotypes, making Appalachian Kentucky a key site for implementing the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act” (PRWOA). During the 1960s and 70s, the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) had worked to bring manufacturing jobs to distressed counties under Johnson’s War on

Poverty and Great Society initiatives (Eller 2008). However neoliberal economic restructuring enabled these manufacturing jobs to find cheaper means of production overseas (Anglin 2002; Eller 2008; Kodras 1997). If manufacturing facilities did open or reopen in east Kentucky, they often were non-union (Kodras 1997:85). At the same time, Kentucky tightened redistribution programs under welfare reform, and reduced the number of people receiving aid by 52 percent (Anglin 2002:572). A shift was made toward a workfare program still used today: the Kentucky Transitional Assistance Program (K-TAP) (Anglin 2002:572). K-Tap is a temporary aid program with strict eligibility requirements, and enables households to draw benefits only while income-earners are actively looking for work (Anglin 2002:573). This was a problem in east Kentucky for several interrelated reasons. First, the region was experiencing an exodus of manufacturing jobs (exacerbated by structural adjustments overseas), and was of course, perpetually impacted by notorious coal industry boom and bust (Eller 2008). Second, east Kentucky counties are plagued by un and underemployment, consistently deemed “economically distressed” by the ARC, and rely heavily on social service programs (Anglin 2002). Kentucky had attempted to combat persistent poverty problems by providing educational opportunities for women (Anglin 2002). However, many women found that under welfare reform, they had to leave school in order to “find work” (Anglin 2002:573). This is in part due to the fact that childcare-assistance programs that were established during the War on Poverty were increasingly dismantled under neoliberal regimes (ibid.). Finally, K-TAP saturated the labor pool with people who now had to settle for lower wages (ibid.). In other words, low-wage jobs, or “free labor,” “made available to businesses through K-TAP’s eligibility requirements,” became normalized in

congruence with a burgeoning labor pool (Anglin 2002; Kodras 1997). In essence, well-paying union jobs were being rapidly exchanged for temporary, low-wage employment options which people had to take based on the new welfare requirements (Anglin 2002; Kodras 1997). These changes were justified by what Peck would call “neoliberal conviction politics” (2001:445). States asserted that there was “no alternative”; adjustments were deemed necessary measures for states to remain competitive in the new global economy (Anglin 2002: 567; Hansen 2001:230-233; Kodras 1997:89).

“Good for Business,” Bad for Labor

As it turns out, neoliberal reforms have proved to be good for business, but bad for miners. First, de-regulation systematically undermined the solidarity and collective bargaining rights of U.S. unions, which depend on the regulation of labor markets (Clawson and Clawson 1999:101). Clawson and Clawson argue that organized workers are subjected to an international labor market, where they must compete with both peripheral and core workers (1999:101). Floating exchange rates and financialization have resulted in policies that emphasize financial flows over labor markets (ibid.). As previously mentioned, dismantling unions was one way that states could advertise low labor costs to outside capitalists; low-labor costs were increasingly justified as necessary means for maintaining a good business climate (Hanson 2001:233; Kodras 1997:27-28). Clawson and Clawson state:

Floating exchange rates, the increased power of the International Monetary Fund, and de-regulation were politically instituted, as was the current culturally dominant understanding that these are technologically mandated, beyond human control, exogenous to politics, and in effect the only rational way to organize almost any activity. Once instituted, however, these forms exercise a substantial independent effect, constantly reinforced by a pervasive effort to maintain extended neoliberal interpretations. [1999:102]

What sorts of efforts maintain neoliberal interpretations? Neoliberal “think-tanks” and corporatized media (the “business-media complex”) contribute to the naturalizing effect of neoliberal rhetoric (Harvey 2007; Peck 2002:132). For example, under the ethos of the Reagan era, unions were often problematized as vestiges of the welfare state and blamed for the recession of the early 1980s (Clawson and Clawson 1999; Kodras 1997). One example of this worldview came out of the Pittston Coal strike of 1989 (Anglin 2002; Nyden 2007). During the 1980s and 90s, companies like A.T. Massey and Pittston Coal began slashing health and retirement programs, while simultaneously demanding longer hours for miners (Nyden 2007:48). UMW president Richard Trumka attempted to appease the “pro-business” attitude of the Reagan administration by restricting miners’ rights to strike (Eller 2008:226). A critical mass unfurled when in 1988 Pittston Coal Company, following in Massey’s footsteps, slashed retirement benefits for disabled miners and widows of miners (Anglin 2002: 568). Unionized operations began closing and re-opening with (nonunion) temporary and subcontracted workers during a series of “employer offensives” (Clawson and Clawson 1999: 101-103; Nyden 2007). Pittston Coal and A. T. Massey were famous for “union busting,” whereby they would layoff thousands of employees and reopen using “scabs” or nonunion workers (Nyden 2007; Scott 2010). While the UMW took legal action with Pittston Coal, corporate funded media campaigns were actively coloring the woes of disgruntled workers. Labeled “greedy employees”, UMW members were blamed for clogging the pipes of productivity by making outrageous demands from employers (Anglin 2002:568). In what Harvey would call a process of “justification and legitimization,” Massey and Pittston claimed restructurings were necessary to compete globally (Anglin 2002:567; Harvey 2007).

By 1989 UMW member (and current UMW president) Cecil Roberts resisted Trumka's "selective strike" rules and orchestrated a 1200 person walk-out (Nyden 2007). While thousands of men and women subsequently took to the streets in peaceful protest, the UMW took Trumka's "soft" approach of litigation (Anglin 2002:568). The courts, however, supported Pittston's actions and issued "injunctions and fines of more than \$64 million—the largest in U.S. history—against the union" (Anglin 2002:568). The court decision unveiled the role of corporate power in the newly neoliberal state. After further highly publicized protest, the UMW was able to negotiate a contract with Pittston. However, Pittston was able to continue to employ non-Union workers, and continue a work regime of "twenty-four-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week work schedules[s]," ultimately setting a precedent for other organized mining operations to dismantle their union contracts (Eller: 2008:226). The relative success of the Pittston coal strike was short lived. In 1999 Pittston dissolved, "citing 'coal legacy liabilities' and declining profitability" (Anglin 2001:568). In Harlan County the last union mine closed in 1997, while retired miners carry on the legacy of the union, there are no longer active mines represented by the UMW in eastern Kentucky.

"Good for Business," Bad for the Environment

"Culture of poverty" theories, anti-unionism, and regulatory rollbacks all helped "naturalize" mountaintop removal mining practices in Central Appalachia (McNeil 2011; Scott 2010). Mining practices quickly followed suit in the nation's efforts to compete globally through maximizing efficiency and productivity (McNeil 2011). A complex fleet of giant augers, draglines and other technologically advanced machinery increasingly made the workforce obsolete (Eller 2008; Scott 2010). In Kentucky, increased

mechanization began after WWII, but the scale of mechanization was amplified in the 1980s and 1990s (Eller 2008). Many scholars have discussed the specific social, political, environmental and health impacts of MTR (Burns 2007; Davis and Duffy 2009; Reece 2006; Scott 2010). Some of these discussions are taken up in Chapter I; for the purposes of this section I will provide a general summary of the neoliberalism's influence on surface mining practices and policies.

Often called “strip mining on steroids,” mountaintop removal came into effect in Appalachia in the 1990s. Miners suffered as jobs were increasingly made obsolete by advances in technology (Eller 2008; Scott 2010). Before we begin discussing that, it is important to take a step back and look at how neoliberalism was pervading mining policy nationwide. Following simultaneous labor and environmental movements in the 1970s, the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act was passed in 1977. This was intended to regulate the “ruin and run” practices of surface mine operators, which were becoming increasingly destructive as new technologies became available. Out of SMCRA came the Office of Surface Mining (OSM), which was charged to work with the states to enforce stricter surface mining practices and impose rules for reclamation. However, when Reagan took office, the role of OSM changed (Menzel 1983). Reagan appointed James G. Watt as Secretary of the Interior, after which the administration “systematically set about redirecting the implementation of the federal surface mining law” (Menzel 1983:412). Under the directive of what he called the “new” OSM, Watt eliminated, modified and/or added hundreds of SMCRA's provisions (Menzel 1983:412). This was justified by the Reagan administration, which issued a 1981 executive order “requiring federal agencies to review, revise, and if necessary, eliminate all burdensome or counterproductive

regulations” (Menzel 1983:414). OSM did just that. Under SMCRA, OSM could use “notices of violation”, and “cessation orders” as a way to ensure environmental and occupational safety. In 1980, Kentucky regulators issued 2,308 notices of violations; under the reorganization of OSM in 1981, the number of violation notices was reduced to 594 (Menzel 1983:418). Accordingly, between 1980 and 1981 cessation orders issued in Kentucky were reduced from 538 to 231 (ibid.).

The “justification and legitimation” of MTR arises from the aforementioned “neoliberal conviction politics,” or the idea that the destructive mining practice is necessary for the industry to remain competitive (Harvey 2007; Peck 2001:445). Such discourses naturalize seemingly “nonpolitical” issues, such as the fact that neoliberal social, political and economic philosophies are not “natural,” but made (Peck 2001). However, the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideologies intersects with other hegemonic discourses, producing tangible results in real time and space. Like Reagan’s, the George W. Bush administration prioritized the mass-production of domestic coal to ensure the nation’s “energy security” through indirect orchestration of SMCRA and the OSM (Davis and Duffy 2009). Bush exercised his power through support for policies giving tax breaks to energy exploration enterprises, and the appointment of “pro-industry” officials to positions within the DOI and OSM (Davis and Duffy 2009: 681-682). Because the Bush administration pushed for exploration and development of domestic energy initiatives, his ethos of “energy security” encouraged DOI appointee Stephen Griles to shift the focus of OSM from protection of the environment to streamlining of permitting processes (Davis and Duffy 2009:683-687). For example, “waste” produced by surface mining was renamed to “fill material,” so companies could bypass the Clean Water Act and

contaminate streams (2009:684). The ambiguities and “blind spots” of SMCRA may be wielded and exploited according to the policy agenda of a President in office (ibid.). The Obama administration has since attempted to reverse some of the Bush administrations interpretations of SMCRA, and develop more rigid rules for surface mine permitting. It is largely for this reason that the Obama administration has been accused of waging a “war on coal.”

Current Market Trends: 2011-2013

Environmental Regulation and Obama’s Climate Action Plan

On June 25, 2013, at Georgetown University, the Obama Administration announced its bullet pointed “Climate Action Plan” to combat climate change. The Action Plan reiterated the EPA’s 2009 ruling that greenhouse gases (GHG) pose a threat to human health (EPA 2013a: 5) and called for the mitigation of CO₂ emissions. The primary target for emissions reductions was in power generation; power plants are the single largest emitter of CO₂, accounting for over one-third of atmospheric GHGs (EPA 2013b). Not surprisingly, the worst emitters are coal-fired power plants. President Obama declared that he would place new emissions standards on power plants as well as implement strategies to retrofit or even retire older power plants (EPA 2013b).

As promised, on September 20th of 2013, the Obama administration released a proposal for power plant emissions standards. The proposal calls for *new* coal fired power plants to restrict emissions to 1,100 pounds CO₂ per megawatt-hour of power generated (EPA 2013a). This would mean that coal-fired power plants would have to use carbon capture and storage (CCS) technologies to sequester 20-40% of carbon emissions

(Bernstein and Eilperin 2013). Currently, average carbon emissions of coal-fired plants are around 1700 pounds of CO₂ per megawatt-hour (EPAa 2013:4-9). Under this proposal, new, larger natural gas plants will be allowed to emit only 1,000 pounds CO₂ per megawatt-hour, (1,100 for smaller plants). According to the Washington Post, this is easily accomplished: current emissions from combined cycle (gas) plants average between 800 and 900 pounds of CO₂ per megawatt-hour (Bernstein and Eilperin 2013).

In the age of climate change, natural gas's market advantage is clear. Not only is natural gas cleaner burning, but carbon capture and storage technologies that would be necessary for new coal-fired power plants to meet comparable emission standards are only in nascent stages of development (EPAc 2013: 1/4-1/5; Nykvist 2013). New technologies are oftentimes expensive and risky (Drajem, 2013; Nykvist 2013). Currently no viable example of CCS technologies operates (Drajem 2013; Nykvist 2013). One reason CCS technology is underdeveloped is because emissions standards for *existing* power plants are not being proposed until June 1, 2014, and will not be implemented until 2015 (EPA 2013c; Nykvist 2013).

Trends in Power Generation

Following the release of the EPA's proposed emissions standards, Bloomberg Financial reported:

The fall in gas prices and regulatory efforts by the EPA have depressed investor enthusiasm for coal companies. The stock of Peabody Energy Corp. (BTU), the biggest U.S. producer, fell from more than \$70 a share in April 2011 to less than \$19 a share today. Arch Coal Inc. (ACI)'s stock fell from \$35 a share in April 2011 to less than \$5 a share today. Meanwhile, utilities are shuttering old coal plants, and switching to gas for baseload power production. [Drajem 2013]

In Central Appalachia, plans for closing older power plants were already in the works as early as 2011 (Ward Jr. 2011). Both American Electric and Power (AEP) and Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) issued plans to close older fleet, coal-fired units and switch to natural gas (Ward Jr. 2011). AEP's Big Sandy plant in Louisa, Kentucky has powered East Kentucky for half a century. The Big Sandy plant management has opted to shut down coal-fired generation units rather than spend over 800 million to retrofit for to the new standards (Fecteau 2013). The Big Sandy is slated close in 2015, and energy it once supplied to east Kentucky will be generated from a power plant in Moundsville, West Virginia (Sierra Club 2013).

The Big Sandy plant is only one example of what appears to be a national trend. Since 2009, coal-fired generators are being decommissioned at unprecedented rates (EIA 2013). While only 14 coal-fired plants retired in 2009, 57 plants were scheduled to close in 2012 (EIA 2012). The Energy Information Administration (EIA) expects even more plants to be decommissioned in the next five years (2012). In 2011, there were over 1300 coal-fired power generators that supplied the United States with more than 300 gigawatts of energy (EIA 2012). The EIA reports that plant owners and operators will retire “almost 27 gigawatts (GW) of capacity from 175 coal-fired generators between 2012 and 2016” (2012). The vast majority plants closures are in the north and southeastern regions of the United States, which comprise the primary domestic export market for Central Appalachian coal (EIA 2012, KyEEC 2012).

Environmental regulation is not the reason coal-fired plants are going out of commission. The EIA estimates that many of these plants are simply aging, and “slowing electricity demand” makes older, inefficient plants increasingly unnecessary (EIA 2012).

Perhaps the largest contributor to coal-fired generator retirements may simply be competition in the energy market. While coal remains the largest single energy source in the United States, it increasingly must compete with cheaper, cleaner, and more efficient natural gas (EIA 2013). In the past two decades, technological innovations such as hydraulic fracturing (fracking) and horizontal drilling have made gas reserves far more accessible (EIA 2013). These new technologies (especially fracking) have helped gas companies exploit the Marcellus shale--the largest reserve of natural gas in the country, which stretches throughout the Northeastern and Appalachian region of the United States. Concomitantly, the natural gas pipeline network has been expanded to accommodate increased gas production (EIA 2013). New combined-cycle (natural gas) plants are highly efficient, readily available and not yet used to capacity (EIA 2012). The EIA's Energy Outlook reported that "from 1990 to 2011, natural gas-fired plants accounted for 77 percent of all generating capacity additions, and many of the plants added were very efficient combined-cycle plants," (EIA 2013). However, high natural gas prices between 2005 and 2008 left many of these plants underutilized (EIA 2012). It was not until gas prices plummeted in 2009 that combined-cycle generation was able to compete with coal-fired generation (EIA 2012). And so it did, especially in the Southeast region of the United States, where retiring coal-fired fleets opened up energy markets (EIA 2012). In the spring of 2012, natural gas and coal shares were on par for the first time in United States history (EIA 2012).

Natural gas prices climbed at the beginning of 2013, helping coal regain some of its market losses (Loiseau 2013). However, even as natural gas prices rise, power companies continue to make steps toward combined-cycle generation (EIA 2013). For

example, on October 9th, 2013, Louisville Gas and Electric (LG&E) and Kentucky Utilities unveiled plans to build a new plant that utilizes natural gas and solar technologies that will make up for the production losses of retiring, coal-fired plants (Reuters 2013a). This is following LG&E's 2011 announcement that they would retire parts of their coal-fired units in Louisville's Cane Run facility (Reuters 2013a). The 2013 EIA Energy Outlook predicts that even as natural gas prices rise, new combined-cycle power plants will contribute to more electricity coming from gas in the future (2013). They offer a range of possible outcomes, but assert that "in all five cases, coal-fired generating capacity in 2025 is below the 2011 total and remains lower through 2040, as retirements outpace new additions of coal-fired capacity" (EIA 2013).

Implications for Eastern Kentucky and Central Appalachian Coal

Eastern Kentucky coal is particularly vulnerable to market shifts that favor natural gas. Eastern Kentucky has been mined for over a century. The once-rich coal deposits bursting from the hills of Central Appalachia have largely already been depleted. Remaining seams are thinner and harder to access (Goodell 2009; Mufson 2012; Roberts 2009). Extraction requires expensive technologies and labor. Therefore, bituminous coal from Eastern Kentucky is the most expensive coal mined in the United States (KyEEC 2012:5). And it is vastly more expensive; for example, in 2011, coal from the Powder River Basin (PRB) cost approximately 13 dollars per short ton (2,000 lbs), while Central Appalachian coal ranged from 70-80 dollars per short ton (EIA 2011). Even Western Kentucky coal is cheaper to mine (EIA 2011). The Western Kentucky coalfield is part of the Illinois Basin coal deposit that stretches into Illinois and Indiana. Western Kentucky coal was once unfavorable due to high sulfur content, which made it difficult for power

plants to comply with sulfur emissions regulations under the revised Clean Air Act of 1990, and the Mercury and Air Toxins Standards (MATS) issued in 2011 (EPA 2011; Epps 2013). Now, plants with scrubbers that filter sulfur dioxide are able to utilize Western Kentucky coal in compliance with environmental regulations (Epps 2013). Sulfur scrubbers and accessibility afford Western Kentucky a competitive edge; in 2012, production increased by 2.5 percent, and employment remained stable (KyEEC 2012a).

Eastern Kentucky coal is largely bituminous, steam (or thermal) coal. Steam coal is used primarily for electric generation in coal-fired power plants, as opposed the metallurgical coal (coking coal) that is used primarily in steel production. Therefore, the fate of East Kentucky thermal coal is indelibly linked to the fate of power generation (KyEECb 2012:6). As previously mentioned, the energy sector is experimenting with more cost-effective fuels (Lowry 2013; Cox 2013). Not only is coal more expensive to mine, the operational costs associated with processing and transporting coal have become more expensive (Foster, Briggs & Glustrom 2012: 7). Quoting an interview with the International Energy Agency (IEA), the Washington Post reports “with rapid depletion of existing deposits, new mines have tended to move farther away from export infrastructure and thus incur higher inland transport costs.” (Mufson 2012). A report from Clean Energy Action uses EIA data to compare “delivered cost”—cost that includes the added-value of transportation. Clean Energy Action’s study shows that delivered costs have dramatically increased since 2004. For example, between 2004 and 2011 the delivered price of Kentucky coal increased by an average of 9.8% per year (Foster, Briggs & Glustrom 2012: 10). This is largely on par with other coal exporting states. Clean Energy Action attributes this trend to rising diesel costs that power coal trucks and trains,

increased production costs related to depleting reserves, and export pressures intensified by “supply constraints” in South America, Europe and Asia (Foster, Briggs & Glustrom 2012:7).

The vast majority of Eastern Kentucky coal goes to energy utilities in Southeastern states, the top two consumers being Georgia and Florida (KyEEC 2012b: 6-8). However, the Kentucky Coal Production Outlook, a report compiled by the Kentucky Energy and Environment Cabinet, shows that these states have been consuming more natural gas and less coal since 2007 (2012:8). As these states transition toward natural gas, Eastern Kentucky coal is becoming less a part of their energy mix (ibid.). This trend is evidenced by a recent announcement made by the Georgia Power Company, a subsidiary of Southern Co. Services Inc., that it would retire three coal-fired power plants fueled largely by Central Appalachian basin coal. Southern Co. predicts that Central Appalachian coal will represent only 1% of their coal mix in 2016, while 64% will come from the Powder River Basin, and 29% will come from the Illinois Basin. (Epps 2013). The remaining 6% has not been determined (Epps 2013). This is a drastic reduction from as recently as 2012, when Central Appalachian coal represented 22% of Southern’s coal mix (Epps 2013). Southern claimed to have “already made bids” for Illinois Basin coal, claiming that “the market is driving us in that direction” (Epps 2013). Illinois basin coal is approximately 20 dollars cheaper per short ton than Central Appalachian coal, and Southern estimates the switch will save them “hundreds of millions of dollars” (Epps 2013).

SNL Financial noted that “Southern Co.'s plan to all but remove Central Appalachian coal from its fuel mix in favor of cheaper coal options highlights the trend

of utilities shifting away from the challenged Central Appalachian coal market” (Cox 2013). For Eastern Kentucky, losing a giant customer like Southern equates to mine closures, idled mines, and massive layoffs (Cox 2013). For example, James River Coal Company supplied the most Central Appalachian coal to Southern in 2012, approximately 1.7 million short-tons (Cox 2013). In September of 2013, James River announced that it would be laying off 525 employees in Eastern Kentucky (Associated Press 2013). Citing “continued weak coal markets,” James River indefinitely shut down three mines in four eastern Kentucky counties (Associated Press 2013). Prior to James River Coal’s announcement, Alpha Resources laid off 218 employees in 2012, and another 200 in 2013 (Peterson 2013a). In September of 2013, Excel Mining LLC., a subsidiary of Alliance Resource Partners, L.P., issued layoff notices to 142 employees at the Pontiki Mine in Martin County, Kentucky. These are only a few examples of layoffs that contributed to the overall loss of over 6,000 Eastern Kentucky coal industry positions since 2012 (Lowry 2013). This figure is nearly doubles the number of West Virginia coal industry job losses, which amounted to 3,426 in 2012 (Lowry 2013).

The coal lobby and Kentucky policy makers have been looking at foreign exports as a glimmer of hope for the flagging coal industry (KyEEC 2012b; Peterson 2013c). However, as Louisville journalist Erica Peterson reports, this hope may be misguided (Peterson 2013b, c). Though exports have increased since 2001 (Peterson 2013b), in 2011 foreign exports accounted for only 6% of east Kentucky coal sales (KyEEC 2012a). Additionally, a 7 billion dollar deal with an Indian company that signed an agreement to purchase 6-9 million tons of Kentucky coal, has become embroiled in scandal (Peterson 2013c). So far, none of the coal has been exported (Peterson 2013c). Finally, after

Obama's Climate Action plan promised that the United States would very rarely fund the construction of new coal-fired plants, the WTO followed suit and restricted funding for new coal-fired generators (Rueters 2013b). Given the aforementioned considerations, the export potential of eastern Kentucky coal remains uncertain.

Whether or not there is a "war on coal," Central Appalachian coal is not doing well, and eastern Kentucky is suffering the most losses (Lowry 2013). Eastern Kentucky coal—primarily thermal coal used for electricity—is particularly vulnerable to market trends in the power generation sector. Currently, national trends are leaning toward cleaner, more efficient combined-cycle (gas) plants (EIA 2013). This is in part due to emissions regulations from the EPA, but primarily due to the development of extraction technologies that have dramatically increased recoverable gas reserves (EIA 2013).

Conclusions

This Chapter has addressed three facets of the war on coal belief frame. Contrary to the coal lobby's attempt to conflate coal-mining heritage with the interests of the industry, the first section points out that the needs of the company have rarely been synonymous with the needs of coal-producing communities. Current mine safety and environmental regulation has been hard won through decades of violent struggle, instigated by the industry's negligence and abuse. Furthermore, attempts at alternative economies have historically been undermined by the coal industry's entrenchment in the political economy and ecology of the region. The second section suggests that neoliberal economic philosophies have historically *hindered*, not *benefitted* coal-producing communities. Roll-backs allowed for unprecedented risk associated with MTR. At the same time, welfare reform and workfare forced people to accept lower wages, making

mining wages more attractive. Pro-business attitudes became increasingly “commonsensical,” ultimately leading to the demise of the union. Finally, the final section debunks the myth of Obama’s “war on coal,” pointing out that eastern Kentucky coal’s market disadvantage cannot be reduced to environmental regulations.

Despite the strong case that the war on coal is a myth, this narrative is still at work: used by politicians, and circulated through pro-coal lobby groups. The next section will discuss why and how people are willing to entertain this idea. I will demonstrate that neoliberal philosophies underpinning pro-coal discourses actually work to make communities more vulnerable to mining related risks.

CHAPTER III

DISCOURSES AT WORK

The summer of 2013 was a critical moment to be in eastern Kentucky. The loss of thousands of jobs the year prior and frequent announcement of more layoffs had everyone on edge. Even environmental activists—who wanted nothing more than to see the end of mountaintop removal mining—were distraught by the fact that many people they knew and cared about were scared, out of work, and facing the possibility of having to leave town. Also troubling was a narrative that had taken on new life with the recent downturn in coal production. The coal lobby, industry officials and politicians were naming the source of the region’s woes as Obama’s “war on coal.” Though war on coal discourse was in use as early as 2010, in 2012 rhetoric seemed to become reality as more and more people began losing their jobs. In a desperate attempt to make sense of all that had happened, many people that were impacted by production declines began subscribing to war on coal narratives. In an op-ed for the *Daily Yonder*, Letcher County resident Rich Kirby explained,

Wave after wave of layoffs brought real pain, and real anger. The community turned tense and polarized, and the whole place felt like a fortress that was indeed besieged by a vast army of shadowy enemies. Public hearings became public theater, as hundreds of coal workers (transportation provided by their employers) swore fealty to coal and vowed vengeance to its enemies. [Kirby 2013]

The war on coal is a convenient catchphrase used by the industry, the coal lobby, and politicians to explain coal’s waning significance in United States energy production. In some ways this is nothing new; the coal industry has been propagating catchy slogans

for a long time. Kirby (2013) recalls in the 1960s, when environmental activists complained that unregulated strip mining was ruining the natural beauty of the mountains, the industry retaliated with the saying “beauty is a biscuit.” In other words, beauty is having a job that keeps food on the table. However, underpinning *current* narratives are neoliberal economic philosophies that are portrayed as necessary in order to save the industry, and by extension: eastern Kentucky. For example, Kentucky Senators Rand Paul and Mitch McConnell have both prescribed policies to combat the war on coal. McConnell proposed the “Saving Our Coal Jobs” Act, which would “streamline permitting processes” by revising the Clean Water Act, limiting the EPA’s ability to regulate industrial discharge (Govtrack 2013). The bill would also revoke the EPA’s power to set carbon emission standards without prior congressional approval (Govtrack 2013). McConnell uses Kentucky’s need for jobs as justification for weaker regulations, asserting, “what many Kentuckians really want are good paying jobs that only coal can provide... coal is what keeps the lights on, the kids clothed and the family fed” (2013a). He claims to not understand “why anyone would oppose such as commonsense bill” (McConnell 2013a). Similarly, in 2013 Rand Paul Proposed the “Economic Freedom Zones Act.” Citing high taxes, “EPA regulations” and the “war on coal” as the sources of eastern Kentucky’s problems, Paul proposed a stimulus that would “allow blighted and bankrupt areas to remove the shackles of big government by reducing taxes, regulations and burdensome union work requirements” (Paul, n.d.). Paul claims that his proposal “simply leaves more money in the hands of those who’ve earned it,” and “encourage[s] businesses and individuals, which the market has already

selected” (Paul n.d.). Underlying this discourse is the neoliberal “false” promise: if only the federal government would step aside, the coal industry could put people back to work.

In other words, in the war on coal, the “enemy” is big government and organized labor, which are inhibiting the so-called free market from bringing prosperity to all. Poising laws and policies as “government overreach,” war on coal discourses cast regulatory bodies as antagonists “waging war.” However, implicitly, the enemy is also anyone who believes that regulations are necessary to protect miners and communities from the many dangers of coal mining. War on coal discourse not only construes “jobs” and “environment” as incompatible (it must be one or the other), it also establishes a hierarchy of values where “jobs” (necessarily anti-“environment”, and often referred to more poetically as “feeding families”) is more important than so-called “environmental” concerns-such as health and clean water. The jobs/environment dichotomy disregards the fact that regulations also pertain to the miner’s work environment: conditions within the mine itself. What the war on coal obscures from view is that the very regulations it attempts to dismantle are products of a century of labor struggle, environmental activism, and devastating mine-related disasters. I argue that the anti-regulation philosophies that inform these discourses actually work to make eastern Kentucky communities more vulnerable to mining-related risks.

Everyday Risk

By promoting the idea that freeing the industry from overbearing regulations will lift the region from poverty, war on coal narratives are negligent of the many perils of mining. In fact, groups that proffer war on coal narratives seem to minimize mining’s role

in causing environmental degradation. For example, the coal lobby group Coal Mining Our Future (hereafter CMOF) recently gave Senator Rand Paul a tour of an eastern Kentucky surface mining site. CMOF Founder and President Haven King recalls the Senator's visit:

I showed him before (surface mining), I showed him during (surface mining), I showed him after (surface mining/reclamation). I said *Senator, it's like going in for open heart surgery. You go in for open heart surgery, you see the blood, you see the water, it's just terrible! It's terrible! It's a mess.* I said, *when they get through with it you just see a small scar.* And that's the way that I explained surface mining to him. So, he wanted to know about the water. So I took him down to a hollow fill that's been in existence and they still dumping in it for 20 years. So, I pull down in this, what we call a "creek" (generally a neighborhood organized alongside a creek), and over here is what they call a grapevine creek. And I pull right down in there and this water's coming down. And I've got one of these bottles with me (points to bottled water) and I dump it out, and go over, get this water coming out of this hollow fill. He says "you're not going to drink that are you?" I said *sure.* He said let me get my camera man out here. I said now over here, Senator (referring to another creek), I wouldn't even let my family get into that over there because it has *open pipes*, strait pipes Do you know what a straight pipe is? [SB: Yeah.] So you're well aware of what a straight pipe is? You'd be surprised how many people don't know. That's what we've argued and argued. They have taken so many millions, hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars and put into mitigation, when they *should* have put that into sewage treatment plants, okay? *That's* the problem. That's the problem with our water is these straight pipes. And we've got thousands and thousands of those. So when I drank that water, and I took him and we were able to show him everything, we got him in a helicopter, up. So he came to one of our rallies. And what I admired about him, is after he was elected Senator, he came to our rally, and we had 25,000 people there, on a mountaintop ("development site") over at the Sportsplex in Knott County. But he understands us.¹

Despite King's optimism; there is no argument that coal mining has a profound impact on environments; both surface and underground mining transforms regional ecosystems, hydrology, topography and geography. As a result, risk is an inescapable reality of everyday life (Bell 2014; Burns 2007; Montrie 2003). For example, Hazel, who

¹ King, Haven (founder and President of Coal Mining Our Future). Interview by author. Hazard, November 9, 2013.

has lived in a coal camp for over 50 years, explained that while she supports mining as an industry (“it’s what paid the bills”), mountaintop removal mining has created a whole new world of problems:

It’s been going on ten or fifteen years. People tried to fight it right at first...but you have to give them permission to go over your property...we didn’t want em to. And uh, they would offer you so much money to buy the rights to go over your property. [SB: did a lot of people let them do that?] They did. But they’re sorry. Because they turned the whole mountain wrongside up. [SB: Is the mine still active?] Oh yes! When they blast, it shakes the house. But we don’t see any rock. We see dust all over our cars and on our houses. They’re stripping this way (pointing) and that way (pointing)...where they blast, we’ve been lucky about the monument and the community center (not getting damaged).²

As other scholars have outlined, there are many dangers associated with living near both surface and underground mines. (Burns 2007; McNeil 2010; Reece 2006; Scott 2010). For my purposes, I will only discuss a few ways mining creates everyday risk for east Kentucky communities through contaminating and impairing watersheds. Both surface and underground mining profoundly alter regional water systems. Even *post*-surface mining landscapes pose dangers to nearby residents, as thousands of acres of compacted mine land dramatically transform the “structure and function” of hydrological processes (Simmons et al. 2008). Steve Sanders, a public interest lawyer in at the Appalachian Citizens Law Center explains:

They say it’s a “cookbook approach” to surface mining. You know, if you are following a cookbook you have the recipe, you do all these steps, you get the cake or whatever that you’re making. Mining is somewhat like this cookbook, you put in all these things are you are supposed to be able to mine, mine safely and in an environmentally sound manner. And we’re supposed to end up with an area that’s reclaimed and vegetated, and you know-not encountering these kinds of problems- damage to water wells, water coming off the mountain and flooding people. It just doesn’t work that way.³

² Hazel [pseud.]. Interview by author. August 14, 2013.

³ Sanders, Stephen (lawyer, Appalachian Citizens Law Center). Interview by author. August 13, 2013.

The Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA) of 1977 established post-mining procedures intended to protect communities from impacts of surface mining. Under SMCRA, companies must mitigate any damage caused to watersheds during the mining process through “reclamation.” However it is commonly known that reclaimed mine sites become flood prone nightmares during a heavy rain. Sanders has represented many families whose homes have been destroyed by runoff. He remembers,

A few years ago in Pike County... there had been pretty heavy rain in July, rain was coming off of a area that had been mined, a huge area. Reclamation was partly done, partly not done. So the hillside was really...lacked vegetation that might slow down the flow of water. I mean people’s homes were destroyed. Flooding just knocked homes into the creeks. And the roads were destroyed; we were lucky no one got killed there. That’s a terrible problem. That’s probably happened I think, in Eastern Kentucky, 3-4 times in the last 10 years.⁴

Damaging, persistent floods have prompted some organizations to try to mitigate runoff even after a mine site is “reclaimed.” In southeast Kentucky, Green Forests Work is one organization that attempts to minimize runoff and erosion through forestry. But these organizations can only do so much in the face of tremendous hydrologic transformations caused by mining. For example, Nathan Hall of Green Forests Work explained that while his program has had successes, funding restrictions limit its ability to remediate all the land degraded by mining.⁵ Typically they are able to plant trees on 15-30 acres of a surface mine site that spans tens of thousands of acres (interview, August 17, 2013).

As in other parts of Central Appalachia, east Kentucky’s prevalence of mine-related dangers has resulted in a strong tradition of environmental justice advocacy and

⁴ Sanders, Stephen. Interview by author. Whitesburg, August 13, 2013.

⁵ Hall, Nathan (forester and representative of Green Forests Work). Interview by author. Redfox, August 28, 2013.

organizing (Bell 2014; McNeil 2010; Scott 2010). In east Kentucky, it seems that many people inadvertently became activists after the industry destroyed their water supply. Frida, a Letcher County resident-turned-activist, provides one example.⁶ Mining has a tendency to “sink wells,” in other words, deplete or contaminate water-wells. The geography of east Kentucky is largely rural, and many residents rely on wells to provide water for their homes. Frida resides in a small, Pine Mountain hollow surrounded by several surface and underground mines. The most recent mountaintop removal operation began enveloping her little valley with dust eight years ago, at which point Frida and her teenage son began experiencing symptoms of adult onset asthma (interview, July 17, 2013). On the day of our interview, Frida and I ate lunch together at her picturesque mountain home, which was brightly decorated with her collection of local artwork. But it did not take long to notice that something about Frida’s house was not quite right. All of her sinks, tubs or toilets were stained yellow-brown and reeked of rotting eggs. Frida attempted to control the odor by rigging a secondary, pool-filtration system to her regular well filter. Though she will use well water to wash dishes and clothes; Frida is scared her water is unsafe to drink. Matt Hepler of the environmental justice group Save our Appalachian Mountains (SAMS) explained that Frida’s concerns are not off-base (personal communication, July 18, 2013). Underground mines may cause acid mine drainage, or water saturated with chemicals and heavy metals that have seeped from abandoned mine shafts. According to Hepler, acid mine drainage leaches high concentrations of hydrogen sulfide, which is then taken up by wells and gets carried into homes through well-water (personal communication, July 18, 2013). Hydrogen sulfide can cause conditions like Frida’s: brown water that smells of rotten eggs. Prolonged

⁶ Frida [pseud.]. Interview by author. July 17, 2013.

exposure to hydrogen sulfide can cause an array of health problems including respiratory ailments, strokes, migraines and even death.

In an effort to combat coal mining's ruinous effect of on rural watersheds, Frida began organizing with KFTC to push for a proposed "Stream Saver Bill." The bill addressed the hotly debated issue of surface mining "waste disposal" impacts on Kentucky waterways. Recall that in 2002 the Bush Administration had "rolled back" permitting procedures; by giving mine waste a new name, companies could bypass the Clean Water Act and pollute streams with "fill material" (Davis and Duffy 2009). Valley or "hollow fills" are enormous piles of dirt and rock that get dumped into mountain hollows, ultimately burying and contaminating streams. The Stream Saver Bill attempted to put an end to valley fills in Kentucky, however coal lobby groups thwarted this attempt by circulating a petition (that acquired over a million signatures) opposing the bill. Coal Mining Our Future was one coal lobby organization that helped facilitate opposition.

CMOF President Haven King, recalls:

And so we went to Frankfort, they had a Stream Saver Bill. The bill would have virtually eliminated all of mining. [SB: Why is that?] Because with what they proposed, you could do-- *nothing* could come into the streams, ok? And they classified the streams as two drops of rain... We ran copiers (printing petitions) from Somerset, to Corbin, to London, to Paintsville, to Pikeville, Hazard, Hyden... we had em running everywhere... then we had a rally in Frankfort. We had 3800 coal miners, supporters and families that went to that rally in Frankfort... when we got there the bill had the numbers to win... we won it by two votes.⁷

Though King argues the Stream Saver Bill would have ended mining, water pollution is a serious problem in eastern Kentucky. Letcher County houses headwaters of three major water sources: the Cumberland, Big Sandy and Kentucky Rivers. And yet, one of the first things I learned during my stay was that even those that are able to access

⁷ King, Haven. Interview by author. Hazard, November 3, 2013.

“city” water oftentimes continue to purchase drinking water. Mining activity and “straight pipes” (dated pipes that go “straight” from coal camp houses into the creeks) have dramatically diminished water quality (AMI 2012). This is partly due to the illegal use of valley fills, which Hall suggests happens “all the time” (interview, July 28, 2013). One day Hall agreed to take me on a tour of different mountaintop removal mine sites that his organization works to reforest. As we passed his hometown of Allen, Kentucky, Hall recalled a night he was visiting his parents when suddenly the house began to tremble. Hall and his parents were shaken by the blasts from MTR explosions occurring miles away. When he had the opportunity to check out the damage, literal tons of “overburden” had cascaded down the valley and into the Big Sandy River: “where we all get our drinking water.”⁸

Valley fills not only destroy streams, but disperse metals such as manganese and selenium (dislodged from the rock during the surface mining process) that run off into remaining waterways. Technically valley fills are supposed to be regulated under the Clean Water Act. Sanders explains,

The core of engineers has the authority to regulate the waters of the United States. And legislation of the United States says that no fill or debris should be put into the waters of the United States without permission from the Corps. And there are some exceptions to that, but what we were seeing in Eastern Kentucky and West Virginia was when they do these large scale mining operations, they couldn't put all the material back on the mountain, there's a, what they call a swell factor. So if you take out the dirt and rock, and then it's loosened up and there's air, you can't put back, I mean-I guess you can put back more than 50% of it, but there's still a huge amount of spoil, rock, debris, whatever you want to call it. And you (mining companies) have to do something with it, so they created this mining plan with the idea that this excess rock and dirt would be placed in hollow fills, and that is the areas between the hills would be filled up in an engineering plan. But to do you that they fill in streams, you know. These are--arguably then, that's contrary to the Clean Water Act, right?⁹

⁸ Hall, Nathan. Interview by author. Redfox, July 28, 2013.

⁹ Sanders, Stephen. Interview by author. Whitesburg, August 13, 2013.

However, valley fills remain one of the many ways coal companies pollute water sources. Coal lobby groups like CMOF and pro-coal politicians have contested the Core of Engineers on valley fill permitting and regulation.¹⁰ Hall explained that this is because “without hollow fills, MTR is not economical” (interview, July 28, 2013). Or at least, this is the company’s claim. Daren, an environmental activist, joined his neighbors in organizing after a mining company made plans to create a valley fill that would have devastating impacts for their hollow.¹¹ He explains, “one of the arguments that they (the company) had made was that it would put people out of work and cost a lot of extra money.”¹² King stressed that because of the topography of the region, hollow fills are necessary for Appalachian coal to stay competitive in the market (interview, November 3, 2013).

...whenever they did away with the use of the hollow fills then they added about 20 dollars per ton to that mining, ok? In other words...if you were mining coal at 63 dollars a ton on a surface mine, and you had a hollow fill you could mine it for 43 dollars a ton. So that’s a disadvantage. It’s a disadvantage for us. [SB: So it’s more expensive.] Yes.¹³

However Daren is skeptical as to how much money hollow fills actually save.¹⁴ His organizing efforts ultimately forced the coal company to move the hollow fill to land “that was already devastated.” He points out that “they were trying to say it was going to make it unprofitable for them to do... [but] it was costing them like a nickel more on the ton.” Daren’s story reveals that the impulse to take environmental and safety shortcuts is driven by the urge to produce maximum amounts of coal at minimal cost. The perception

¹⁰ King, Haven. Interview by author. Hazard, November 14, 2013. See also McConnell 2013a,b.

¹¹ Daren [pseud.]. Interview by author. August 17, 2013.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ King, Haven. Interview by author. Hazard, November 3, 2013.

¹⁴ Daren [pseud.]. Interview by author. August 17, 2013.

that communities are “disadvantaged” when regulating toxic hollow fills makes mining more expensive is informed by pro-business, neoliberal assumptions. The assumption is that the risk, embodied by the creation of hollow fills, is simply a part of staying competitive in the market. The notion that what is good for business is good for the communities is implicit in this construction of value (Harvey 2007). However Sanders shared an anecdote revealing one of the many reasons why this logic is flawed:

We had this case going on for a few years here at the office where some of the groups that we were working for had investigated the discharge monitoring reports that coal companies filed with the state, that they’re required to file under the Clean Water Act. The party that is discharging into streams is required to collect data on what they are discharging and file reports on that data with the enforcement agency. In this state it is the Division of Water. They call those DMRs and DOW, DMRs are discharge monitoring reports, and they’re supposed to report on essentially, analyzing the water, if you will, that they’re discharging from they’re ponds from their operations. [S: They’re self-reporting?] Self-reporting. One of the groups we had worked with, it’s called Appalachian Voices, did some investigation and discovered that the state wasn’t catching but that these DMRs filed by two of the largest strip mining companies in eastern Kentucky, appeared to be, they just were reporting the same thing month after month. It’s as if they took a photocopy and just kept changing the days. And it was highly unlikely that those could be accurate.¹⁵

When it comes to safeguarding the region’s water supply, as one KFTC activist described it, “the fox has been left to guard the henhouse.” The industry has repeatedly proven that they cannot be trusted to comply with the Clean Water Act (Duffy 2003; see also Kroh 2014; Gabriel et al. 2014). Ironically, McConnell’s latest policy attempt aimed at combatting the war on coal would further restrict the EPA’s power to regulate industrial discharge (Govtrack 2013), conceivably creating more risk for east Kentucky communities.

¹⁵ Sanders, Steve. Interview by author. Whitesburg, August 13, 2013.

The Legacy and Influence of Coal

If anti-regulation discourse, such as the war on coal belief frame, makes communities more vulnerable to risk, why do people continue to support the coal industry? This section looks at *some* of the ways support for coal becomes normative. I should say that “support” is never absolute. For example, many people who want the coal industry to come back simultaneously want to see economic diversity. Others who strongly identify with coal mining culture are appalled by the devastation caused by mountaintop removal surface mining. One woman who referred to the Sierra Club as a troublesome “bandwagon group” that “doesn’t ask the natives questions” also participated in anti-MTR organizing in the region. Still, many people strongly identify with the coal industry, even as it is (currently) the source of economic insecurity.

One plausible reason “support” continues is because of the rich heritage and cultural identity that has historically evolved around coal mining. Everyone seems to know a miner, or is related to a current or former coal industry employee. There is a sense that coal producing communities have sacrificed a lot, including the lives and livelihoods of loved ones, in order to provide energy for the country. In nearly every community, coal miner’s memorials and museums can be found, where signs, monuments and statues honor those who have died in the name of mining coal.

Much of the actual infrastructure of eastern Kentucky was directly created or heavily influenced by the coal industry. The visual, material presence of coal is evident in the dozens of coal camps that dot the hills and bottoms. Camp houses still provide homes for families; some are in seemingly perfect condition, others fall into disrepair. Churches and community centers have repurposed elegant old commissaries. Coal tipples hang

over roads like enormous rusting monkey bars. For many older residents, coal camps are bases for tender memories of falling in love or raising families. Residents can recall better times when coal was booming, the camps and towns were in good condition, full of life and excitement, and most of all, young people. Despite all this, is important not to romanticize coal camp life. As Hazel suggested, “They *owned* you. You worked for them, but they *owned* you.”¹⁶ And yet she (and others) fondly remembers days when Santa Claus used to visit their towns, and the streets were lit up for Christmas and filled with children. Hazel recalls using scrip to buy popcorn and soda after school. She remembers buildings, now empty and dormant, that used to house department stores, soda fountains, florists and restaurants.¹⁷ Life was by no means easy, but for many people, there was more life to be had.

In some places, support for coal is more overt. Similar to Bell and York’s (2010) portrayal of West Virginia, the material presence of coal is also evident in the countless signs, license plates and stickers that pledge allegiance to the coal industry with a simple logo that reads: Friends of Coal. For example, a sign on the edge of the town of Neon, matter-of-factly imparts: “Come back soon. Coal Keeps the Lights On.” Below the statement is a shadowy silhouette of a miner crouched on his hands and knees, with a bright yellow light on his helmet. Similarly, on every floor of the Perry County Courthouse is a large depiction of a giant, masculine miner that also reads “Coal Keeps the Lights On (above) Perry County Fiscal Court.” The miner towers over a small, dark city, upon which he directs the enormous beam of light emanating from his helmet, as if he were the sun shining down upon earth. But *also* as Bell and York describe in West

¹⁶ Hazel [pseud.]. Interview by author. August 14, 2013.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Virginia (2010), a lot of eastern Kentucky's recent fervor with respect to coal-mining culture and heritage is related to the deliberate public relations campaigns orchestrated by pro-coal lobby groups. Such groups attempt to spread the gospel of coal's cultural value, despite the industry's declining significance as a major employer (Bell and York 2010).

As Mimi Pickering, Appalshop Filmmaker and director of the Community Media Initiative (CMI), states:

They've been really successful at co-opting the culture and heritage of coal miners, and really saying that it's synonymous with the history of the industry and the intent of the industry. So, you know they give away t-shirts, I know that they're free t-shirts, you see people wearing things like that all the time that say, "coal miner's granddaughter," or you know, "proud granddaughter". You know heritage this, culture that. So it has really just become one and the same. And it's a heritage to be proud of, and a culture that's really significant.¹⁸

Pickering believes the coal lobby has worked very hard to appropriate the cultural identity of miners in order to conflate community and industry interests (interview, August 1, 2013). For example, pro-coal discourses work to counterbalance criticisms that have emerged in step with the nation's growing environmental consciousness and mounting anti-MTR sentiment (Scott 2010). Broadly, the environmental movement faults the industry for destructive extraction methods and blames coal-fired power plants for contributing one-third of the nation's greenhouse gas emissions. Coal public relations efforts thwart criticisms by redefining the problems coal-producing communities face. They emphasize coal's importance for the regional culture and economy, which they interpret as more significant than so-called "environmental" concerns (see also Bell and York 2010, Scott 2010). In this version of the story, the coal industry is not the problem, but the solution. In eastern Kentucky, CMOF is a very active, pro-coal lobbying group

¹⁸ Pickering, Mimi (Appalshop Filmmaker, director of the Community Media Initiative). Interview by author. Whitesburg, August 1, 2013.

based out of Hazard, Kentucky. CMOF began in 2008, in direct response to anti-MTR sentiment. King describes the moment in which the idea for CMOF was born,

So I pick up a Lexington-Herald (newspaper) one Sunday. And I couldn't believe it! Terrible! Devastation, looked like a bomb went off! And this was (surface mine) sites that I had mined. They didn't show the five thousand foot runway. They didn't show Trust Joyce. They didn't show anything but negatives, somewhere, maybe an active mine... they didn't tell the truth, okay? So we had a meeting. I just called a meeting down at City Hall. And I told, I said you know we, it's time for the coal companies to **stand**. So we took off with Coal Mining Our Future, with Pine Branch Coal, ICG, Teco Coal, James River, Kentucky River, Wayne Supply; that was our main people.¹⁹

As the former Vice President of a surface mining operation, King provides valuable insight into the coal industry's perspective. King believes anti-MTR media do not accurately portray what he suggests are benefits of surface mining. What "they (anti-MTR groups) call mountaintop removal," King calls "mountaintop development," because he believes mining provide flat land important for economic development projects.²⁰

After launching in 2008, CMOF has set about educating people of "the facts concerning coal mining" (CMOF 2011:2). This task is accomplished through "outreach and involvement through volunteering and sponsorship" (CMOF 2011:2). Coal education perpetuates the naturalization of coal mining in eastern Kentucky. Many coal education programs are actually sponsored by the state. Similar to West Virginia, Kentucky utilizes CEDAR (coal education, development and resource), a program that provides grants to educators who creatively incorporate coal education into their curricula. The state also sponsors a program called Junior Coal Academy, a branch of the local Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College's "Kentucky Coal Academy." The Junior

¹⁹ King, Haven. Interview by Author. Hazard, November 3, 2013.

²⁰ Ibid.

Coal Academy is a training program in 11 different counties, which prepares high school students for careers in mining. Private coal lobby groups like CMOF head other programs, one of them “Coal for Kids” which not only educates children about coal-mining, but also provides food for low-income students to take home on the weekends. Aside from backpack and educational programs, CMOF asserts the coal industry’s role as caretaker by sponsoring various other charities. For example, during the holiday season they sponsor “Shop with a Coal Miner,” where miners take needy children to buy Christmas gifts for their relatives. CMOF arranges Boy Scout retreats to former mine sites, sponsors annual basketball tournaments, and awards scholarships to graduating high school students. Through these sorts of educational and child support programs, the coal industry is able to assert its relevance as caretaker and patriarch, even if its role as jobs-provider has diminished. Outside of the classroom, coal education manifests in the “shows” and “performances” that weave coal into community life. King’s organization sponsors floats in local parades, coal shoveling contests, and booths in festivals. They have brought famous and influential people to the region including entertainers like Tim McGraw, various ministers, Senator Rand Paul, and admired basketball heroes. CMOF has even made donations to local drug courts and sponsored breast cancer awareness events. The message of CMOF and other coal lobby groups is clear: coal companies are important, if not vital to life in east Kentucky.

Pickering claims that the cultural co-optation brought about by the proliferation of coal corporate interest groups is “distressing” (interview, August 1, 2013). Outside of charities, fundraisers and displays of importance, groups like CMOF are explicit about

their disapproval of environmental regulations, President Obama, and the EPA.²¹ In fact, one of the major goals of their program is to be an oppositional force to national and local pressures for more extensive mining regulation (CMOF 2011). Dispelling the “war on coal” narrative is a big part of this effort, King explains:

We had another rally, we went to Washington D.C.... Friends of Coal sponsored that. We took 2500 coal miners out of here to that rally. And we had a lot of support from a lot of Senators. [SB: was that in regards to any specific policy?] That was just the policies that we felt like was policies, and we can, we can make it with the *law*, the laws we can operate with. We can make *money* with! But we *can't* with the policies. And we just feel like, we call it a “War on Coal” and the reason we call it a “War on Coal” is like the (water) conductivity thing (rule). It doesn't bother anybody but eastern Kentucky.²²

Support for anti-regulation philosophies is drummed up through pro-coal rallies, the most famous being the annual Coal Rally at the Knott County Sportsplex. The Sportsplex is a mega center that, to King, embodies the potential of “mountaintop development” (interview, November 3, 2013). During rallies and lobby days, numerous anti-EPA and anti “War on Coal” materials in the form of signs, posters and t-shirts are distributed. King himself famously led a crowd of thousands to chant, “Damn the EPA!” during a recent coal rally (Kirby 2013). To Pickering, Hall and Sanders, the war on coal narrative proffered by coal lobby groups is a tactic (what Harvey might call an “ideological gambit”) to free businesses from burdensome safety and environmental laws. King was very honest about his position on mine inspections and regulations, which he sees as inefficient and onerous,

And, they'll send-one day there may be 8 federal inspectors there, 6 state inspectors there, EPA there. *Every* day! Just to give you a little example, we have an elevator at TECO (coal co.) where they take their people down. This elevator has to be tested, you have to shut this elevator down. So they were working four days a week, so they [coal company] asked the inspectors, *what about, can you*

²¹ King, Haven. Interview by author. Hazard, November 3, 2013.

²² Ibid.

come in and inspect it on Friday? “No, we’ll inspect it on Thursday.” So-they [company] lose all that production. And then when they go in, they’ll send what we call a blitz, I call it a SWAT team, they may send 15 inspectors, they may send 15 inspectors to one mine.²³

King asserts that regulations and regulators slow productivity, which is important for businesses to remain efficient and profitable. A primary concern with the claim that less regulation will revive the industry is that lax enforcement of *existing* laws has time and again proved catastrophic for the region. This is evidenced by the numerous coal-related fatalities and disasters in east Kentucky and broader Appalachia. One of the most prominent mine disasters in eastern Kentucky history occurred in the community of Oven Fork in the spring of 1976. Rock dust and gas accumulated in Blue Diamond Coal’s Scotia Mine, ultimately causing an explosion that killed 15 miners. As the community grieved, two days later a second explosion killed an additional 11 inspectors who had gone *back* into the mine. Scotia was notorious for being poorly ventilated, and for mine safety and labor law violations (Sinclair and Bishop 1980). When in 1980 the widows of the miners were still awaiting the trial and Blue Diamond had not paid a single fine, journalists Ward Sinclair and Bill Bishop dug into Blue Diamond’s track record (1980). Citing official investigations into the company, they noted “it was a mine which... placed production and profit before the safety and health of its miners...it was a mine which essentially ignored the law” (1980). Sinclair and Bishop pointed out “federal inspectors shut it (the Scotia mine) down 110 times between 1970 and 1976. Between 1974 and 1976, they cited it for 420 safety violations. The citations showed a long pattern of ventilation and methane-gas problems of the sort that led to the explosions...” (1980). Scotia illuminates why Pickering and many social justice organizations insist that

²³ King, Haven. Interview by Author. Hazard, November 3, 2013.

antiregulatory discourses may work *against* the region's best interest, what they generally define as safety, health and emotional well-being.

Mine disasters and fatalities often create a traumatic legacy for coal-mining communities (Scott et al. 2012). Gary, a Letcher County resident, was a UMW miner in a nearby mine when the Scotia explosion occurred. Because Gary knew “the guys” in the mines, he began to experience post-traumatic stress (what he called “survivor guilt”) after the incident.²⁴ Gary struggled to come to terms with the fact that the company was only given a monetary punishment, what he considered a “slap on the wrist...without any real consequences.”²⁵ Having lost friends in the explosion, Gary believes that disasters are an enormous “stress on the community” and that the “permanent damage to families is irrefutable.”²⁶ For him, the disaster at Scotia clarified the company's priorities. In 1991, Arch Minerals bought Blue Diamond Coal's Scotia property and began surface mining above the disaster site, what Gary referred to as “double devastation.” Today a small sign marks the spot where the miners and inspectors lost their lives. Gary expressed sorrow over the loss of the miners in an incident that he feels could have been avoided had the mine been better managed, or the miners represented by the union (interview, July 13, 2013). But as Sinclair and Bishop noted, Blue Diamond Coal “vigorously fought organizing efforts by the United Mine Workers” (1980).

Though Scotia led to the passage of the Federal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1977, Pickering argues that “now a disaster is not even bringing policy change... and I think that just shows how completely dysfunctional a lot of our governments have

²⁴ Gary [pseud.]. Interview by author. July 13, 2013.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

become and how captured they are by corporate interests.”²⁷ For example, in the wake of Upper Big Branch, a 2010 explosion that killed 29 miners in West Virginia, Pickering points out, “...there’s been no legislative response. And that’s just shocking. There has been safety rule tightening proposed and congress has done nothing. So that’s a new kind of low, I think, in what I’ve seen in 40 years.”²⁸

Vulnerability and the Loss of the UMWA

As described in Chapter II, in eastern Kentucky a major outcome of increasingly naturalized neoliberal economic philosophies has been the demise of organized labor. Pickering believes that part of the reason the coal lobby has been able to capture the heritage and identity of miners in recent years is because the UMWA no longer represents (active) coal miners in eastern Kentucky. Pickering explains, “the union embodied that proud heritage, but also was very clear that the *interests of the workers were not the same as the interests of the company*...and a good union educates its members to that fact” (my emphasis).²⁹ Harvey attributes the demise of organized labor in the United States to increasingly naturalized and instituted neoliberal ideals in the 1980s and 1990s (Harvey 2007:32, Nyden 2007). As mentioned in Chapter II, labor unions were often associated with the United States’ flagging economy in the 1970s, after which anti-union attitudes prevailed (Harvey 2007). As Blue Diamond Coal typifies, this was also true in eastern Kentucky (Nyden 2007). In Harlan County, the fate of the UMWA was sealed when Arch Minerals purchased US Steel in 1984. Though US Steel was imperfect, miners respected the company because it had a good relationship with the

²⁷ Pickering, Mimi. Interview by author. Whitesburg, August 1, 2013.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Pickering, Mimi. Interview by author. Whitesburg, August 1, 2013.

union and had prided itself on maintaining one of the best coalfield communities in the nation: the city of Lynch. Their business model was to provide a decent standard of living for coal miners and their families in order to ensure a stable, steady supply of anthracite coal to fuel steel mills. However, after steel production plummeted in the United States Arch Minerals acquired many of US Steel's assets in eastern Kentucky. Following Arch Minerals acquisition of many mines in Harlan County, the UMWA began to lose ground. Martin, a retired US Steel-Arch Minerals miner, explains that,

Arch was not that receptive, or the CEO at the time was not that receptive toward United Mine Workers as an organization...so it was a rocky relationship from start to finish. One of the reasons why we're not mining coal on *this side* of the (Black) mountain, is that it was a UMW *area*. As opposed to this mountain here (pointing), where Arch still has coal mines, it's-it's non-union.

Arch undermined the UMWA by closing down union mines and re-opening with non-union or subcontracted workers (colloquially referred to as "scabs"). Benny Massey, a retired UMWA miner and current city councilman in Lynch, recalls going on strike in an effort to pressure Arch to negotiate a contract with the UMWA.³⁰ But Massey claims that Arch ultimately undermined organizing efforts by bribing UMWA higher-ups with "sweetheart contracts," or under the table negotiations. For example, he suspects that the District 19 president had negotiated at "sweetheart contract" with Arch, because when miners were striking (or "shutting down the mines") the union president called to inform strikers that if they were caught on Arch's property they would not be eligible for unemployment benefits (interview, July 15, 2013). Coal companies would also bribe miners with higher wages if they would agree to mine non-union (Nyden 2007, Portelli 2011). Though Harlan County once was a union stronghold, the last UMWA mine

³⁰ Massey, Benny. Interview by Author. Lynch, July 15, 2013.

ultimately closed in 1997. Massey lamented, “we’re (now) in a day of international corporations.”³¹

Arch made it clear that their business model was very different from US Steel’s. Lloyd, a retired US Steel and Arch Minerals employee recalls,

You knew right away that there was gonna be changes, when they told you to throw all the calendars away, pencils, nameplates that had US Steel on them. (chuckles) *Throw them away!*³²

The UMWA was a driving force for safety in the mines. Numerous reasons suggest that, without the representation of the union, miners are more vulnerable to occupational hazards. Martin, another retired US Steel and Arch Minerals supervisor echoed Lloyd’s sentiment that Arch was a different kind of company, and alluded to the safety implications of the new business model:

First thing they did was they called all the supervisors together... had a meeting. And corporate told all us present that they were a different company than what we were used to.. and that they would be getting-they would be mining *more* coal with *fewer* people. You know, working more hours. And safety would uh, lax, as a result.³³

Part of the safety concern is the work regime that non-union mines tend to require. For example, Massey claims that “Salary (non-union) workers are on duty full time, you have to do what they tell you. The union made sure you got eight hours of sleep. Now salary workers have to go where you are told to go.”³⁴ Milly is a 70 year old woman whose late husband worked as a salary miner after Arch had “done away with the union.”³⁵ She recalls her husband having an irregular schedule, sometimes working seven days a week, sometimes 2nd and 3rd shifts (interview, July 15, 2013). Milly related that

³¹ Ibid.

³² Lloyd [pseud.]. Interview by author. July 18, 2013.

³³ Martin [pseud.]. Interview by author. July 18, 2013.

³⁴ Massey, Benny. Interview by author. Lynch, July 15, 2013.

³⁵ Milly [pseud.]. Interview by author. July 15, 2013.

her husband had to go check water levels in the mines nearly every time it rained, even if it meant going in on weekends. But Milly also said that her husband, Gerald, felt pressured by the company to work in questionable conditions (interview, July 15, 2013). In the mine where Gerald worked, the air was often heavy with rock dust and “did not have ventilation.”³⁶ Milly admitted that Gerald felt pressured to falsify air-quality reports, at one point revealing to her: “every shift I lie.”³⁷ Ultimately, Gerald contracted black lung (pneumoconiosis) and silicosis from exposure to rock dust.

Regardless of the union’s occasional corruption, it still served the purpose of ensuring occupational safety. Represented by a union, miners could voice their safety concerns without fear of being fired or singled out. Pickering makes the point that,

When there was a union... the union could say, you know, we’re not going to going to work in that section until you fix the ventilation, or, you know, there were grievance procedures through unions if the company tried to fire somebody, it went through the union, and the union could fight it. But that whole layer is gone, so the miners have to count on the state, various state agencies and laws, but you know those have been decimated by budget cuts too. There are far fewer mine inspectors, strip mining inspectors. Or they (miners) end up with a lawyer. So people are vulnerable.³⁸

Without the union, what protects miners from occupation dangers is the law, and those charged with enforcing laws are increasingly stretched thin. The aforementioned Appalachian Citizens Law Center (ACLC) represents miners that have been fired for being “whistleblowers.” Steve Sanders has been a long-time attorney for victims of mining- related health and safety problems. Sanders shared an anecdote affirming Mimi’s above point, that without the Union, and without adequate enforcement of mine safety, miners *themselves* have to be the ones to advocate for safety. Sanders explains:

³⁶Milly [pseud.]. Interview by author. July 15, 2013.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Pickering, Mimi. Interview by author. Whitesburg, August 1, 2013.

We represented a miner several years ago, who was working in a mine--it was a little mine over in Harlan County--and the mine was underground, cutting coal in an area where there had been other mines worked out years and years before. So these old works had been mapped, but no one really knew how accurate these old maps were. And one of the legal requirements is if you're working in the vicinity of known, old mining works, you have to have what they call a *test drill*, and you drill a hole in the face... as you advance your mine you keep drilling these test holes. Because you don't want to cut into the old mine. The old mine might be full of water, it might have oxygen deficient air, it might have gases and be explosive, so you have three very, very serious risks. So our client, he's a fairly young guy, he had been mining for a while but not a whole long time, but he knew that they were in the vicinity of old works, and he wanted the safety of this test hole. His section boss hurt his back and was off work, so these guys were working without a certified mine foreman, ok? So he was telling, my client was telling the fella that worked outside that they needed to order this test drill, so they could drill these holes so they could be safe. And the outside guy said "I told the owner", but it [test drill] never arrived on the property. So our fella eventually *quit*. And he later saw the owner and he complained to the owner and the owner was pretty crude and flip with him about that. And our guy sued the owner under the Mine Safety Act, claiming that, essentially he had been *forced* to quit for his safety.

SB: was he successful?

Sanders: He was. He was. And you know that exposed all of those miners to that danger. And they all wanted to work. You know, that's the thing, they all wanted to work. They don't want to make too many waves, so you know, you sort of say "Well, I guess it's okay, I guess it's safe". You know we take a lot of risks to mine coal, right? So, this is just one more. But you know since then we've seen this disaster in Quecreek, Pennsylvania where they cut into old works that were full of water and those men nearly *died*. So you see the risks are real. And so you follow these regulations so we minimize these risks.³⁹

Sanders points to the fact that people endure risk because they "want to work" and therefore, don't want to make waves. Whereas, as Pickering stated, union miners could go through a series of grievance procedures, they could even go on strike. Sanders relates, "the union contract requires companies to give the union some say in the safe operations of the mines. So the idea is that you have these safety representatives and

³⁹ Sanders, Stephen. Interview by author. Whitesburg, August 13, 2013.

committee members and you also have a process where you can claim job protection.”⁴⁰

Without the union, the law is supposed to provide assurances of workplace safety, which is enforced through *policies* and *regulations*. However, Sanders explains that there is a fundamental difference between being protected by the union and being protected by the law:

The Federal Act tries to provide some of those (protections); so a miner can't be discharged or discriminated against if he complains about unsafe working conditions. And it's his reasonable perception of unsafe working conditions. We're talking about if he refuses to work and what he perceives to be unsafe working conditions. Miners also have the right to designate someone to be their safety representative. And if the federal mine inspector-probably the state inspector too-comes to the property to do an inspection, the designated miners' rep can go and talk with them. Can go with them as they make their inspection. Very few miners in eastern Kentucky have **ever** used either of those protections. [Really?] And I think it's, when you have *a sense of a union*, if it's a true union, then you have a sense that there's a lot of people that are standing behind you, that are going to support you, right? But if you're an individual and you say, well I'd like to be a miners' representative, you're still more an individual. If you're the one-like the fella I was talking about that was complaining about the test auger, I'd say, I could probably guarantee ya that probably 90% of the guys on that crew wanted that test auger, but only one could speak up. And when they see he loses his job, they're not going to speak up for him.⁴¹

Despite the fact that the law is supposed to ensure miners rights to safety precautions, the protections under the Federal Act are rarely utilized in eastern Kentucky. Without the collective body of the union, miners do not want to speak up against the company. Sanders believes that the unfortunate reality is that “people don't call out the issues,” especially with the recent plummet in coal production and related political tension.⁴² He explains:

Right now, this is a terrible economy for miners... and so they just put up with things. You know, a few years ago when coal was booming, so to speak, and there

⁴⁰ Sanders, Stephen. Interview by author. Whitesburg, August 13, 2013.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

were lots of jobs, then they didn't put up with things, they just went to different mine to work. But as far as calling out issues, I think that doesn't happen that often.⁴³

In addition to pointing out questionable work environments, Massey and Gary also stated that non-union miners receive fewer benefits and entitlements. Massey says that without a union contract, companies can “gut retirement.”⁴⁴ Retirement was an especially sore subject during the summer of 2013, because in the wake of the recent bust, companies had sent out letters to non-union retirees recommending that they look for other forms of insurance.⁴⁵ Massey stated, “So the miners’ options are to go out and get new insurance or spend money and fight them (the companies) in court...because there’s no (union) contract.”⁴⁶ Because of the physical nature of the labor, benefits and entitlements are absolutely essential. Sheryl, a Letcher County native, is the daughter and wife of a miner. I asked her about the health of her father, who worked in the mines all of his adult life. Sheryl said, “If he walks for ten minutes, he has to sit down for ten...he has *so much* spinal damage and hurts constantly.”⁴⁷ She goes on to explain, “it usually happens around forty, you start to see the decline in the physique of men. Mike (her husband) still has a few more years before that (he is 33).”⁴⁸ For Sheryl’s father, it “got to be more than he could bear” and he recently had to quit his job and apply for disability insurance.⁴⁹ Massey is grateful for his retirement package earned through the UMWA, because he says that his medical bills cost more than he ever made in the mines (interview, July 15, 2013). Massey also receives about three times more in retirement

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Massey, Benny. Interview by author. Lynch, July 15, 2013.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Sheryl [pseud.]. Interview by author. August 7, 2013.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

than non-union retirees. Similarly, because Hazel's husband belonged to the UMWA, she has been able to get insurance through the union in the twenty years since his death (interview, August 14, 2013). However Milly, whose husband was non-union, lost her insurance two weeks after her husband Gerald died of black lung (interview, July 15, 2013).

In addition to mine risk related to mine disasters and black lung, there are a whole host of unpredictable dangers in the mines. While the Kentucky Coal Association attempts to attract young miners by claiming "it's not pick and shovel anymore," high tech machines do not necessarily guarantee safety on the job. Rib rolls (collapsing supports); kettle bottom (heavy, fossilized plant matter that falls from the walls in deadly chunks); getting pinned by continuous miners (claw like machines that dig out mine shafts) are just a few of many dangers. When I asked Hazel if she ever worried about her husband, she said

Oh my goodness (yes)! You know why? I lost three brothers in the coal mines. We were already married when I lost two at one time under the *same rock*. They were working on the *same machine*. See, they go back in this hole, and there's rock over top of them, and the roof give way, came down over top of them. And they were both working on the same machine, and it got both of them. AND, before THAT, I lost another brother. He was working in a smaller mine, and he didn't make much money at all. My other two brothers was making better money. And his thing (equipment) got muddy, like, he was electrocuted. He got into some water and, I think-I want to tell you this, his shoes were worn and he tried to fix em, and they say a lot of that is what caused the accident... and that's not all. We had one son; we lost him in the coal mines, that's him, right there with the overalls on (points to picture). He left three little boys.⁵⁰

Hazel's story is a testament to how dangerous mining actually is, and it also points to the need for decent compensation in the instance of injury or fatality. With so much possibility for accidents, benefits and entitlements are incredibly important. Hazel's

⁵⁰ Hazel [pseud.]. Interview by author. August 14, 2013.

anecdote also reveals the tendency of companies to skirt responsibility for accidents and disasters. Pickering explains that “the companies often try to blame the workers, you know, some worker did something wrong, rather than getting to what the corporate policies were.”⁵¹ Hazel’s memory of the company telling her that her brother’s worn shoes caused the accident illustrates the disheartening reality of corporate scape-goating. Coal companies are notorious for evading responsibility and compensation to injured and disabled miners (see Ross et al. 2013, and Kroh 2014 for recent examples). For example, recently the Center for Public Integrity found that coal companies spent an enormous sum of money to John’s Hopkins University for “medical opinions that have been used to deny hundreds of ailing mine workers meager black lung benefits” (Ross et al. 2013). Labor organizations have pushed back against the company in order to secure both safety precautions and benefits. Without the union, Pickering believes miners believe “the only entity representing their interest is the company, so I think they are vulnerable. And they don’t have any rights with the company, or protection from anyone. It’s a hard place for them as well.”⁵²

No Alternative

Regardless of the fact that current benefit packages are meager compared to union benefits, mining offers high salary jobs that at least *have* benefits. High salaries lured people into the mines without union contracts, and they have kept miners in the mines despite demanding working conditions and long hours. In what local sociology professor and activist Roy Silver called a “one-dimensional economy,” mining is one of the very

⁵¹ Pickering, Mimi. Interview by author. Whitesburg, August 1, 2013.

⁵² Pickering, Mimi. Interview by author. Whitesburg, August 1, 2013.

few ways miners and their families avoid the seemingly ubiquitous poverty of eastern Kentucky.⁵³ Consonant with Scott's (2010) observations in West Virginia, mining is justified as a way to "provide for families" in a place where many must resort to public assistance programs, even though such programs are disdained. People express the notion that they "want to work," meaning they do not want endure the stigma of being on welfare. Contemporary miners earn very good wages, typically between 50,000 and 100,000 dollars a year. Most miners facing unemployment in the recent downturn have no more than high school educations. When a similar bust occurred in the early 1960s, Appalachians left the region to find factory work in Northern and Midwestern plants. But Pickering makes the point that manufacturing is not really the force it once was in the United States, and given the recession wonders "where would they go?"⁵⁴ With a miner's particular work experience and education, there is a perception that outside of mining, miners have little option.

Cultural support for the coal industry has a lot to do with the sense that beyond mining, there is no alternative. Hope is a middle-aged woman married to a miner, who is also a mother to a son and son-in-law that worked in the mines. After he was laid-off from a Harlan County "strip job," Hope's son had to make difficult decisions regarding his future. Ultimately, he decided to go into the military. Hope explains, "these young guys can go join the military, or they can go to college. But when they come out, there's not going to be anything here for them."⁵⁵ She believes that beyond the coal industry, it is difficult for people to find employment that offers similar wages without requiring higher

⁵³ Silver, Roy (Sociology Professor at the Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College, and activist with the Central Appalachian Regional Network-CARN). Interview by Author. Cumberland, August 8, 2013.

⁵⁴ Pickering, Mimi. Interview by author. Whitesburg, August 1, 2013.

⁵⁵ Hope [Pseud.]. Interview by author. July 18, 2013.

education. She says, “a lot of these young guys come out of school making-he (her son) started right out making about 70,000 dollars a year...when he was 21 he probably had 40 or 50 thousand in his 401k.”⁵⁶ One plausible reason *women* may support coal mining is because of the lack of comparable opportunities. For example Gene, a coal camp resident, educator, and wife to a miner relayed,

I have a Master’s degree, and I have probably as good a job, certainly the best job I’ve ever had, but as good a job as most women ever have in the mountains. Because my income is about 38,000 dollars a year. When I was a little girl I used to aspire to make a coal miners wage. Cause a coal miner back at that time would make about 32,000 dollars a year... so, I know what a dire struggle that I stay in to just keep my head above water on 38,000.⁵⁷

Roy Silver elaborated:

I think historically there’s been more opportunities for men for relatively decent wage employment, without a college degree...a guy with a high school diploma could go and work in the mines, you know, and if they could get the job, they could make sixty to eighty thousand a year. Women haven’t usually been allowed in that, so to make the equivalent type of money you’d have to get into a nursing program.⁵⁸

Though Silver points out that woman must get higher educations to earn a livable wage, college completion rates in southeastern Kentucky range from 3.7 and 12.4 percent (ARC 2013). As mentioned in Chapter II, a critical outcome of neoliberal reforms was “workfare” requirements that contributed to the proliferation of low-wage jobs (Anglin 2002). Combining two low-wage jobs into a 65 hour workweek, Hope makes a fraction of the wages her son earned working in the mines (interview, July 18, 2013). She feels stuck working low-wage positions: part-time for a multi-national retail chain and full-time elsewhere. Hope says, “Everybody’s doing part time jobs now. The forty hour work

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Gene [pseud.]. Interview by author. August 7, 2013.

⁵⁸ Silver, Roy. Interview by author. Cumberland, August 8, 2013.

week is over...you work two jobs.”⁵⁹ Hope must rely on her husband’s mining job for health insurance, and his wages are essential for their family’s income. She worries for her husband, who has been a miner for 33 years, “What’s he going to do now? He doesn’t have any interest in going to college at *this* point.”⁶⁰ But many miners who have spent their entire careers in the mines are not exactly eligible for retirement, and must find work in another mine in order to get benefits. To her, the lack of other opportunities is infuriating. She explains that so many people have “...worked so hard to get what they’ve got, and where they’ve got. And now [they] have nothing.”⁶¹ Sheryl, whose husband owns a small mining company, echoes Hope’s anxiety: “What are these people supposed to do? Pack up and leave what has been their home for their entire lives? It’s one thing if you want to; it’s another if you’re forced to feed your family.”⁶²

Interestingly, though Hope and Sheryl both explicitly professed their support for the coal industry (both also damned Obama’s “war on coal”); they also recognized the need for economic diversity *because* of the dangers associated with mining. The coal lobby’s position that mining is a “way of life” that should be sustained at all costs is negligent because as Pickering suggests (similar to June Nash’s (1978) observations of Boliviano miners):

Miners do not want their children to go in the mines. They want them to get an education, they want them to get a safer, cleaner job. It’s not that they’re not proud of being miners and their heritage, but that’s not what they want. So suddenly, what’s so ironic, is this frame that everyone wants their child to follow them into the mines. And a lot have, of course.⁶³

⁵⁹ Hope [pseud.]. Interview by author. August 18, 2013.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² Sheryl [pseud.]. Interview by author. August 7, 2013.

⁶³ Pickering, Mimi. Interview by author. Whitesburg, August 1, 2013.

As long as the coal industry is the primary avenue through which people can escape poverty, environmental and occupational risks will likely continue to be “normalized” in the name of “jobs.” But closer examination reveals that support for coal jobs is porous in the sense that, supporters *also* seemed to believe that if there *were* more options, if there was *something else* available, people would not be as protective of the industry. Hope’s testimony illustrates this argument:

Well, me personally, as of being comfortable with and everything, I would love to see the coal industry come back, because it’s the only thing I see happenin’ here. But, I am not so closed minded to not accept change and accept something else. But we need to see something. We need to know, yes, there is something else for our area. We do have jobs for you. I guess that’s, you know, if we were reassured, thing like that, it would probably be-people would take a different attitude. I mean, because, I’m sure a lot of these men don’t like to go in these mines and work every day. You know, I worry daily about my son-my husband’s on the outside now, so I don’t worry about him, but my son-in-law, that was a big stress. I used to pass him every morning because he was on third shift-he’d be going down and I’d be going up. And if I didn’t see him, my heart would (gestures as if her heart was pumping out of her chest, laughs), and I’d be calling him, “*where you at?*”⁶⁴

Even though Hope is a self-proclaimed “advocate for coal,” she reveals that because of the many dangers of mining, she would be open to the idea of safer jobs. She admits that many people probably do not want to mine, but she supports mining because it is one of the few opportunities east Kentuckians have for good wages. Similarly, Sheryl suggests that mining is something people do out of necessity, not to a commitment to maintaining the region’s economic heritage. Sheryl says, “four thousand men (referring to the number of miners laid off), that’s 4,000 families. Because that’s why they’re there. Nobody does it because they want to. My daddy never wanted to crawl under that mountain.”⁶⁵ Sheryl’s statement points to the fact that coal is considered the only way for

⁶⁴ Hope [pseud.]. Interview by author. August 18, 2013.

⁶⁵ Sheryl [pseud.]. Interview by author. August 7, 2013.

many people to support their families, it is not something people necessarily *want* to do.

Finally, Hazel echoes Pickering's point perfectly:

We had one son, we lost him in the coal mines...he left three little boys. And his daddy (also a coal miner) didn't want him to go in the mines. He said *once he sticks his head in the mines he'll never be satisfied nowhere else.* [S: Why is that?] Because he made better money, he made good money where he was workin. *And*, he seen the rock falling, and he pushed this boy out the way, but it got him.⁶⁶

As long as mining is the best gig in town in terms of wages, people will likely continue to choose mining, despite the dangers. While there is not economic diversity, other ways or opportunities to earn a middle-class income with benefits, people will continue to "support" the industry because they see it as their only option. Mine-related work provides a career path for young people who wish to stay in eastern Kentucky and avoid poverty. Why doesn't everyone leave? Joe DePriest, the Director of Economic Development in Letcher County explains:

Our culture here, a lot of people ask me, they say "why don't everybody move away and get em a job somewhere?" But a lot of people here, I don't know if they feel stronger, I wouldn't say it's stronger family ties than anywhere else, but for some reason, it seems like they have more of a desire to *stay* here. You know, to live here and raise their family here. So, so a lot of their motivation is to stay in eastern Kentucky. And a lot of em do. And a lot of em, I guess it's a really traumatic thing when they are forced to move away. And some of them do, of course. But...their number one goal is to stay here, and live here, and work here, and raise their family here.⁶⁷

Ironically, when the coal industry goes bust (as in the present moment), coal mining also becomes a reason people must leave their communities to find work elsewhere. Outmigration has been a problem in east Kentucky since World War II. However in the 1960s when mining dramatically mechanized, hundreds of thousands of east Kentuckians left the region in what some people call the Great Migration. Though

⁶⁶ Hazel [pseud.]. Interview by author. August 14, 2013.

⁶⁷ DePriest, Joe (Letcher County Economic Development Director). Interview by author. Whitesburg, August 2, 2013.

some residents have returned, the 1960s marked the beginning of a period of decline for many coalfield communities that were booming only a decade prior. As discussed in Chapter II, the recent drive for more efficient means of coal production and the invention of mountaintop removal mining has led to consistently fewer mining jobs. Dee Davis, founder of the Center for Rural Strategies in Whitesburg explains,

We've lost two-thirds of mining jobs since Clinton left office. So there are a lot of people that are still *here* that were involved in it. And in east Kentucky that's 9500 mining jobs. That's a lot, and it's certainly-those are good, high paying jobs. But at this point, it doesn't take a Marshal Plan to re-engage that many people. And so you're going to have a slow, steady decline from this point forward. You know, you may have a few hiccups, but the likelihood is these numbers will continually reduce. And so, what we need to do is figure out what's next.⁶⁸

Silver explains that outmigration is particularly bad in Harlan County, he says "at end of World War II-it was (the population) over 75,000. Today it's about 28,000."⁶⁹ The situation is especially bad in the former coal camp of Lynch. Lynch once boasted the title of world's largest coal camp with a population of 10,000; the current population is just above 700. When I asked people about their primary concerns with the recent layoffs and dwindling coal production, fear of having to leave, or loved ones having to leave was typically one of the first things mentioned. Many people have memories of friends and relatives leaving during previous recessions; for example Gene intimated, "I don't want our people to have to migrate out of these mountains again."⁷⁰ But Frida explained, "people who have dependency on the industry, don't have a whole lot of options."⁷¹ According to Depriest, many miners are making plans to move to Alabama, and even Western Kentucky, where coal production has remained stable (interview, August 2,

⁶⁸ Davis, Dee (cofounder of the Center for Rural Strategies), Interview by author. Whitesburg, July 30, 2013.

⁶⁹ Silver, Roy. Interview by author. Cumberland, August 8, 2013.

⁷⁰ Gene [pseud.]. Interview by author. August 7, 2013.

⁷¹ Frida [pseud.]. Interview by author. July 17, 2014.

2013). He believes that some miners have moved to Fayette County to work at the Toyota Plant (interview, August 2, 2013). Hope mentioned that some have stayed and choose to commute several hours to work, holding out hope that a closer position will become available (interview, July 18, 2014).

Conclusions

From her coal camp house in Letcher County, Gene explained to me that there is a “love/hate relationship between the families and the companies.”⁷² Similarly, Milly stated, “whether it’s good or bad-it’s how we made a living.”⁷³ This chapter has highlighted some of the complexity surrounding the politics of “support” for mining. It is no secret that the industry has caused a tremendous amount of environmental degradation, putting human lives at risk both in and out of the mines. In the neoliberal economic era, the coal industry takes shortcuts to stay competitive in the global energy market. The drive toward maximum production and efficiency has contributed to the creation of mountaintop removal mining practices, valley fills, and the extermination of protections and benefits afforded by the UMWA (McNeil 2011). To the coal industry and coal-interest groups, regulation hinders efficiency. A major outcome of anti-regulatory philosophies has been increased vulnerability to the hazards of environmental degradation and mining itself. Despite these consequences, there is far-reaching support for coal mining in eastern Kentucky. While support for coal is partly about heritage, it is also the result the coal lobby’s efforts to assert itself within the community, and in doing so, acquire backing for the needs of the industry, such as less regulation. Many people are willing to entertain the coal lobby’s claims because they feel as though they have little

⁷² Gene [pseud.]. Interview by author. August 7, 2013

⁷³ Milly [pseud.]. Interview by author. July 15, 2013.

opportunity to earn comparable wages; coal mining provides a way for them to stay in the region and escape poverty. Unfortunately, because mining has been one of the few options for middle class employment, it *also* contributes to outmigration. The next chapter details some of the important ways pro-coal discourses shape non-coal economies and possible futures.

CHAPTER IV

THE CHALLENGES OF A POST-COAL ECONOMY

Despite the dangers of mining, the coal industry gets “supported” as one of the few ways to make a decent wage in eastern Kentucky. Though coal mining has provided a good income for some, its many dangers have given people considerable reason to move elsewhere. For example, Daren tells the story of a relative, who is deciding whether or not to stay in her hometown while she is pregnant:

Now she has to make the choice, is it- can she stay here and have a family? Knowing that if you live close in proximity to mountaintop removal, your child's 42 percent more likely to have birth defect? So, how do you make that choice? And that's just wrong. It shouldn't have to be on our radar.¹

Environmental degradation combined with a dearth of economic alternatives has also motivated young people to move to other places. While Appalachian, Kentucky's overall population has grown by eight percent since 1990; the populations of Harlan and Letcher counties have declined by 21 percent and 9.4 percent respectively (ARC 2000, 2010). For this reason, Silver and Massey (both Harlan County residents) believe that economic diversity is key to keeping people in the region. Silver states,

The outmigration here tends to be in the 18-25 (age range). Of course, they are less rooted and have more mobility, although they are also a very central, critical group for the community too. So we have... it's going to take ways to economic[ally] diversify, you're gonna (have to) try to build up some other industries that *can* keep people here. I think there would be a number of them (young people) that would stay if they *could make* a relatively decent living, and they'd like to take advantage of the other things we have here.²

¹ Daren [pseud.]. Interview by author. August 17, 2013.

² Silver, Roy. Interview by author. Cumberland, August 8, 2013.

Massey trusts that, “people would move back if we get our act together.”³ These testimonies suggest that finding alternative economic projects is critical for the longevity and livelihood of southeast Kentucky. As I began to spell out in Chapter II, the coal industry has a way of asserting its influence in realms of life that are seemingly unrelated to coal. Chapter III built on this notion by exploring how the coal industry has worked to assert its role in community life, while at the same time exacerbating risk, and increasing vulnerability. Chapter IV builds upon previous chapters by examining how the coal industry and war on coal narratives structure non-coal political and economic endeavors. In the wake of production declines, communities are confronting a unique set of challenges. The last chapter discussed how wars on coal narratives seek to fulfill industry objectives that exacerbate vulnerability and risk. Here I argue that pro-coal lobby groups and war on coal discourses create challenges by exacerbating polarization within eastern Kentucky communities. Polarization has emerged as a result of both differing definitions of the problem, and conflicting ideas about the solution. The second half of the chapter will examine how the war on coal and broader neoliberal “political projects” infiltrate understandings of both the current economic reality and effectively overshadow alternative visions for the future.

“Cryin’ on Coal”: the Polarizing Effect of Tree Huggers versus Friends of Coal

In his analysis of the “War on Terror,” Adam Hodges points out that discourse “infuses events with meaning, establishes widespread social understandings, and constitutes social reality...discourse effectively brings into existence a “truth” with real world consequences” (2011:5). This section highlights the real, material outcomes of the

³ Massey, Benny. Interview by author. July 15, 2013.

war on coal narrative. Narrative, what Hodges calls a “discursive formation,” can “name protagonists, ascribe motivations and provide explanations” (2011:3-5). Similarly, the war on coal has served an important function of defining the region’s problems: Obama, environmentalists, regulators, and “tree-huggers.” When given the explanation (as one coal lobby official stated) “Obama just *hates* coal,” people looking for answers may get angry, nervous or scared. Though I made an effort to not bring up the “war on coal” (unless it was mentioned first), it nonetheless pervaded understandings of the current economic downturn. For example, Hope felt that Obama’s war on coal disavows the tremendous sacrifice miners have made to provide energy for the country:

I always likened that (mining) to the military thing. They were going in and risking their lives every day so we could be comfortable and have electricity. And its like, *now*, they’re being treated like the veterans are. It’s like a slap in the face. We don’t need you, we don’t need your jobs. You know. And you can’t help but feel that way when your livelihood and your homes are being attacked. You know, what you do is being attacked.⁴

Similarly, Gene’s testimony indicates that she considers the war on coal to be an intentional assault:

I just think the whole “war on coal” thing that is going on presently, and it can’t be called anything BUT a war on coal-I just think it’s something to set us back again. Because you know, we don’t want food stamps. We don’t want medical cards. Because the food stamps and the medical cards, well we already see where *that’s* got us...we want to work for a *living*.⁵

Dee Davis of Center for Rural Strategies explains, “When people are desperate and worried about their future, they may be more inclined to fall for a simple explanation that demonizes certain people (Obama and “environmentalists”) and explains why they aren’t luckier.”⁶ Gary expressed Dee’s sentiment more bluntly, “it’s easier when you

⁴ Hope [pseud.]. Interview by author. July 18, 2013.

⁵ Gene [pseud.]. Interview by author. August 7, 2013.

⁶ Davis, Dee. Interview by author. Whitesburg, July 30, 2013.

have a whipping boy.”⁷ As Hope and Gene’s testimony illustrate, war on coal discourses seem to have created a lot of stress, uncertainty, and divisiveness. In their effort to rally the issue, pro-coal lobby groups aggravate acrimony by distributing anti-Obama (and anti-Gina McCarthy) stickers, t-shirts and paraphernalia at rallies and community events. Kentuckians for the Commonwealth activists Sharman and Jeff Chapman-Crane co-wrote a poem called “Day in the Life,” parts of which illuminate what it’s like to live in a world of pro-coal and war on coal discourse and propaganda:

Would you like a *Friends of Coal* tag? Or maybe a *Friends of Coal* t-shirt? No . Next stop, the bank, where the tellers are all wearing Coal Mining Our Future t-shirts. You muse for a moment about the unintended irony, but keep it to yourself. As you head to food city, you read the sticker on the truck in front of you: *Save a Nation, Kill a President*. In the parking lot a dozen cars with “Friends of Coal,” “Coal keeps the lights on,” “Coal Mining Our Future” tags and stickers. Then the pickup with the fully equipped gun-rack, and you hope the owner is not crazy enough to enact the message on his bumper: Save A Coal Miner, Shoot a Tree-Hugger.

...miners working the only jobs available. Putting their lives on the line to provide for their families. Told by the bosses that the *tree-huggers* want to put them out of work and don’t care if their children starve. Miners going to and from work. One way in. One way out. They know who you are. They know where you stand. They know where you live. You try not to think about it. But you do. You think about those miners. Desperate. Misinformed. Scared. Angry. You think about the threats. Veiled or explicit. Real or Perceived. About the poison water and contaminated air. Your family’s health. [personal communication, July 12, 2013]

In the war on coal belief frame, so-called environmentalists (“tree-huggers”) get cast as enemies, people implicated in the “attack” on the coal industry. The Obama administration and those who wish for “green energy” are often construed as a homogenous entity that is “taking” jobs. Because “environmentalists” are often blamed for the region’s problems, Frida admits that recently, being an activist has strained her relationships (interview, July 17, 2013). She says, “I call it the slicing and dicing of the

⁷ Gary [pseud.]. Interview by author. July 13, 2013.

community, because we're set against each other. I mean, even if you don't want to be."⁸

Contrary to the industry's allegations, activists I spoke with considered the notion that they want to "take jobs" from miners is an enormous distortion of their intentions, Daren explains:

Well, they call us tree huggers, we don't-we really, KFTC is really more social justice...because like we've said, we've talked about the miners, and we *care* about them. I mean, we've been here 29 years, we know a lot of these miners and their families. We don't want our neighbors *hurting*, we don't want them losing their jobs, being without healthcare, not having food on their table for their kids. And I think in some ways, even though we may get blamed, I think in some ways some people *appreciate* it. Because they can't voice what they believe and feel. We don't have the-we're not *bound* by the coal companies in the same way they are.⁹

As a result of the "war on coal," polarization has also occurred because businesses and organizations that are not singing the coal industry's praises (or putting "Friends of Coal" stickers in their shop windows) often get regarded as "anti-coal." Appalshop, an organization that makes tremendous effort to capture multiple worldviews in their various media programs and projects, even gets labeled as being against industry (Kirby 2013). Pickering describes how the dominant discourse affects Appalshop and the community radio station WMMT:

I think this whole war on coal rhetoric has really ramped up in the last 4 or 5 years and become a much more polarized discussion. The industry decided when Obama got elected, and maybe a little bit before, I think there was a lot of public opinion moving against them in terms of curbing greenhouse gases and carbon trading, and you know, more safety, etc. etc. And they [the industry] made a real effort to spend a lot of money to change that messaging and that frame. And we've been sort of in the middle of that. And you know it has been really disheartening I think, and we particularly in WMMT (the community radio station) which is the most public part of Appalshop, we really see that as a place for community discussion and dialogue and a place that should be open and welcoming to all points of view, and we say that repeatedly on air, and encourage different points of view. And it's sort of a comment on the sad state of things that

⁸ Frida [pseud.]. Interview by author. August 17, 2013.

⁹ Daren [pseud.]. Interview by author. July 17, 2013.

people don't use those opportunities to present their point of view, but instead stick with their Friends of Coal group and put their point of view *there*, instead of engaging in a public dialogue about these issues. We will go and cover a pro-coal, Friends of Coal rally, or we'll cover an Appalachian Rising March on Washington, sometimes, or something, I Love Mountains in the state capital. We basically are reporting those, but we get flack also because people can't separate reporting from partisanship or advocacy. Like the Coal Report, which we've been doing for years and years, which is just news of the coal industry and how it affects communities locally, that comes out of the newspapers, comes out of the AP and various things. We're just saying things like: *Massey Energy reported a rise in prices, or a loss in bla bla*, and people call up and get mad and say, "Why do you hate the coal industry?" And that's just straight reporting.¹⁰

Aside from creating general disharmony, how does pro-coal political rhetoric affect possible future alternatives? One basic problem is that some people are scared to consider the implications of harsh economic realities. Pickering points out,

There are some people who are really threatened by change and a loss of a way of life that's maybe not been the greatest, but it's always hard to lose something, and change is hard. And they really want to stay and they want their children to stay. And nobody, well I shouldn't say nobody, but none of the industry campaigns or the politicians are providing any alternatives.¹¹

Similarly, when I asked Roy Silver about the challenges of economic transition, he asserted:

One of the big obstacles has been that people-and I'm talking more about those led by people at the head of the coal industry, coal barons, to use an old phrase-have gotten people riled up and created a false target as to the *cause* of the demise of the industry... creat[ing] a false hope, maybe that once we could change the laws in D.C., you know-get rid of Obama, that everything would be back to normal.¹²

As these accounts illustrate, war on coal narratives have given some people reason to not fully accept the fact that the industry may not bounce back. In the wake of massive layoffs, lack of straightforward leadership is partly to blame for the persistence of "false hope." Thus far, leadership has largely failed to put to bed the war on coal belief

¹⁰ Pickering, Mimi. Interview by author. Whitesburg, August 1, 2013.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Silver, Roy. Interview by author. Cumberland, August 8, 2013.

frame, despite the polarization and uncertainty the narrative has caused. Pickering suggests that one reason local and state leadership may avoid confronting the war on coal myth head-on because local and state governments have co-evolved with coal interests, what she calls the “power structure,” she says:

Historically, that’s the same power structure that has really been built up in direct relationship with the coal industry, and has seen their role as promoting the status quo, promoting the interests of the industry, promoting the interests of the merchants in town, and not promoting the interests of the poor people or sharing power with poor people.¹³

Pickering, Silver, and Hall of Green Forests Work all communicated that local leadership was failing to stick their neck out for economic alternatives, and was instead largely maintaining “business as usual.” Pickering describes how war on coal discourses can effectively overshadow alternative economic endeavors,

I think that, it’s an obstacle when the only message that is getting through is coal mining is our future and that there’s a War on Coal... people here are sort of left with that (“war on coal” discourse)...there’s no leadership from our politicians...I mean ultimately people have to be willing to be part of their own solution...you can’t count on coal companies, or government officials, or any other company to do that for you. So people are having a hard time moving to *that* place, because they’re still being fed this line that that there’s just a war on coal... if Obama’s gone everything will be back. I don’t think that people really believe that. So they’re just not getting support for moving to the future from any place. And also, there’s just no easy solution. There’s not an industry that’s going to move in here that will replace these high paying jobs. People are going to have to be creative and inventive, and innovative, and those are not things that have been encouraged by the dominant coal industry, or our rather poor educational system.¹⁴

Importantly, the war on coal belief frame has vast implications for possible futures. As discussed in Chapter III, integral to what Silver calls the war on coal’s “false hope” is the neoliberal assumption that fewer regulations will ultimately revive the industry and bring greater prosperity to the region. However, the deregulation policies

¹³ Pickering, Mimi. Interview by author. Whitesburg, August 1, 2013.

¹⁴ Ibid.

that have been prescribed by Paul and McConnell would likely have disastrous consequences for Kentucky watersheds (also discussed in Chapter III). People like Gary and Massey believe that allowing the continuation of destructive mining practices will impair alternative economies by destroying the land and the water. For example, Gary hopes to see tourism developed as a non-coal economic endeavor (interview, July 13, 2013). But he says he is concerned that mountaintop removal will “put a damper on tourism in the future... a lot of people (tourists), they’re looking for pristine.”¹⁵ Though east Kentucky’s beauty is bountiful, mountaintop removal mines jut out from the verdant landscape like massive wounds. Gary says, “in the long run, coal might be a finite resource, we know that. The future might be tourism, there’s a lot of people who think that. But if they destroy the mountains there’s concern what impact that would have on tourism, besides the water issues that go with it (MTR).”¹⁶

Massey echoes Gary’s sentiment that mining is “short term, a short term investment, a short term profit.”¹⁷ Massey has spent the past several years fighting Arch Mineral’s attempt to mountaintop removal mine Black Mountain in his hometown of Lynch. As a former UMWA miner, Massey is not “anti-coal.” But he would like to see other resources take coal’s place; his argument is “there’s probably more coal, but why risk endangering your life when you can hook solar panels on to the grid and you got water running into the creek?”¹⁸ Because Lynch has suffered immensely from population declines, Massey believes the key to bringing those people back is “leaving something for

¹⁵ Gary [pseud.]. Interview by author. July 13, 2013.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Massey, Benny. Interview by author. Lynch, July 15, 2013.

¹⁸ Ibid.

the kids.”¹⁹ The legacy Massey wants to leave is clean water and renewable energy. He hopes that “if we could fix the place up-kids will come back...this is a good community, I’ve been everywhere else, but I love this community.”²⁰ According to Massey, coal companies like Arch do not have the area’s best interest at heart, he says “they’re not looking to town, what they’re bringing to town, they’re just getting what they want and leaving.”²¹ Understanding that water will be the finite resource in coming years, Massey worries that “if we take the mountain off, we [will] destroy other resources. Coal is good, but our main resource is water, and I don’t care who it is, everybody needs water.”²² For this reason, he is tireless in his attempt to explore non-coal economic endeavors. He believes the water in Lynch, which he says is “90 percent clean coming off the mountain,” could be bottled or used to distribute to communities struggling with water contamination.²³ Pointing to the inherently flawed logic of MTR, Massey asks:

Why blow it up (the mountain)? Ruin it (water) and then you have to buy it and bring it in. They don’t realize that water flowing through the mountains purifies it...they destroying their own resources. God gave it (water) to them. And then look back and say: *well, we had the resource, but we didn’t take care of it.*²⁴

Massey has been researching ways to get grant support for developing infrastructure for bottling plants and updating water pipes. But Massey complains, “Politicians don’t want to talk about other resources-they want to blame Obama.”²⁵ He believes these efforts are not taken seriously because, in his words-“they (city council) still cryin’ on coal.” Meanwhile, Massey points out, “they got all these resources running

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Massey, Benny. Interview by author. Lynch, July 15, 2013.

²⁵ Ibid.

down the creek.”²⁶ For people like Massey that *are* trying to promote alternative economies and remediate environmental damage, it is frustrating that the “power structure” cannot seem to quit “cryin’ on coal.”

If You Build It, They Will Come? Deconstructing the Logic of Good Business

Climates

McConnell’s recent policy prescriptions to “put Americans back to work” touted “our approach is simple: let’s give free enterprise and private initiative a chance” (Press Release 2014). He went on to say:

And I personally plan to file an amendment that would give Congress the ability to stop EPA's back door national energy tax – and would also keep unelected bureaucrats from blocking desperately needed jobs in Kentucky by sitting on surface mining permits. Remember: this Administration’s anti-Kentucky policies have helped bring about a depression – depression with a capital D – in many Kentucky coal counties. It’s about time they started having a little compassion for the coal families who just want to put food on the table. And that’s just what my amendment aims to force them to do. [Press Release 2014]

According to this logic, the cure to Kentucky’s depression with a capital D involves reducing taxes for energy companies and deregulating the mining industry. Geographer Jamie Peck has argued that neoliberal “policy medicines” are often “thin” policies informed by “neoliberal conviction politics” (2001: 445). These policies “assert the fiercely competitive economic environment abroad, coupled with deep-seated social problems at home, leave ‘no alternative’ to a course of deregulation, marketization, privatization, and public asset stripping” (Peck 2001:445). Policy prescriptions are often “naturalized” as “imperatives of globalization” (Peck 2001:448). However Peck urges that neoliberal policy mandates are not “naturally occurring, inevitable consequences of

²⁶ Ibid.

‘the way the world works’,” but part of a “sustained political process” (2001:447). The “sustained political process” of neoliberalism involves the state’s role in market maintenance or sustaining “good business environments” (Harvey 2007; Peck 2001; Wacquant 2012). Ironically, though McConnell blames the “bureaucrats in Washington”²⁷ for inhibiting the free enterprise, he himself serves the important role of managing the so-called “free” market with policy prescriptions (Harvey 2007; Peck 2001; Wacquant 2012). The war on coal discourse therefore is part of a broader “political project” to maintain favorable market conditions for Kentucky industry (Wacquant 2012). Peck goes on to assert “policy discourse[s] should not blind us, of course, to their often far-reaching political economic and social consequences;” what he calls “hard outcomes” (Peck 2001: 448). Denaturalizing neoliberal solutions to economic failures requires “excavating the macro logic’s and illogics of the policy making process-to get beneath the skin of the neoliberal offensive” (2001:448). In what follows I attempt to unpack the some of the “illogics and logics” of policy prescriptions and political projects that deploy the war on coal narratives to justify their cause.

Harvey suggests that in the United States, neoliberal reforms “hammered home the view that the role of government was to create a good business climate rather than look to the needs and well-being of the populations at large” (2007:31). In Kentucky, politicians dispelling war on coal narratives highlight the coal industry’s role in providing “good business climates” for alternative industries (McConnell 2013a, b; Paul 2013, n.d.). This argument is usually made in one of three ways: through asserting coal’s importance for providing “cheap energy,” its necessity for creating flat land, or its value

²⁷ Press Release 2014.

in providing the state with coal severance tax revenues. These assertions are “naturalized” as necessary for “good-paying jobs” (Press Release 2014).

Part of the reason the coal lobby and Senators Mitch McConnell and Rand Paul publicly justify the continuation of coal mining in Kentucky is to prolong the availability of “affordable energy.” The Senators’ justifications often involve, to borrow Heynen et al.’s phrasing, “championing abstract constructions of yeoman entrepreneurial capitalists and small businesses (as opposed to powerful, footloose multinationals) struggling under the oppressive weight of an overbearing state” (2007:5). Kentucky has the fifth least expensive energy in the nation, and accordingly, the tenth highest energy usage (EIA 2011, IER 2013). Forty-two percent of Kentucky’s energy use occurs in heavy industry, which has helped Kentucky become one of the nation’s top polluters (IER 2013). For McConnell and pro-coal groups, industry takes precedent over the need for clean air (McConnell 2013a, 2013b). McConnell argues “coal lights our homes, it powers manufacturing, and it creates good jobs for Kentuckians” (2013a). His logic is that Obama’s proposed carbon dioxide emissions standards will increase energy costs, causing higher utility bills for manufacturing plants. He says, “the president may as well call his war on coal what it is: a war on jobs in this country, and a plan to ship jobs overseas” (McLaughlin 2013). In this way, McConnell “naturalizes” the need for cheap energy as an “imperative of globalization”: it keeps jobs in America by maintaining favorable business climates (in the format of low utility bills) for heavy industry. Haven King echoed McConnell’s philosophy:

I’ll give you an example, like, like in Western Kentucky. We are the number one (producer) of aluminum, okay? The number one producer of aluminum is Kentucky. And so, man, this power plant, they’re going to go ahead, and they’re going to go ahead and charge these aluminum (companies) so much money for

power, so they (aluminum companies) will say no, *we'll just go ahead and move*. I mean they're not going to move to Indiana, they're going to move to *India*.²⁸

King and McConnell are well aware that when it comes to retaining multinational corporations, Kentucky is competing with other parts of the globe. Ironically, increased global competition was an outcome of neoliberal economic policies that “freed” global trade (Harvey 2007; Peck 2001). The “free enterprise” that McConnell wishes to “give a chance” is the very thing that makes jobs disappear in lieu of cheaper labor costs “overseas.” In order to retain corporations, McConnell has to be what Peck has called a “market manager,” and deploy his political power to “maintain a good business climate” (Harvey 2007:31; Peck 2001). As King and McConnell’s sentiments reveal, in Kentucky maintaining a good business climate often involves ensuring the continued availability of cheap energy: an “imperative” of staying competitive in the globalized economy.

While McConnell deploys the war on coal to push for pro-business policies, local war on coal narratives are predicated on the notion that beyond mining jobs, coal is needed to provide flat land for economic development projects and “essential” coal severance tax revenues (Perks 2010a; 2010b). Scott (2010) and McNeil (2012) have noted similar justifications in mining regions of West Virginia. For example, coal-lobby group CMOF deploys public relations campaigns promoting the benefits of “mountaintop development” (in defiance of the negative sounding phrase “mountaintop removal”).²⁹ King mentions that flat land raises property values, and has allowed for eastern Kentucky to build important infrastructure such as schools (interview, November 3, 2013). He says without the flat land, there would be “nowhere to put the school.”³⁰ Post-MTR economic

²⁸ King, Haven. Interview by author. Hazard, November 3, 2013.

²⁹ King, Haven. Interview by author. Hazard, November 3, 2013.

³⁰ Ibid.

development projects often include small airports, industrial parks, high-end golf courses, high-income residences, and prisons. Because of these projects, CMOF's position is that coal has facilitated economic diversity, despite the long-standing argument that coal has contributed to the region's persistent poverty (Billings and Blee 2000; Eller 2008; Gaventa 1978; Fox 1999). King illustrates,

And then we went out and we built a twenty-two hundred foot runway on a mountaintop. THEN, right now we have a 5500 foot runway. A state of the art, state of the art runway, in the lower end of the county. On a mountaintop development site. We have a, one of the busiest airports in eastern Kentucky is the eastern Kentucky regional airport, and we have on that also we're going to have a housing development down there of probably 200+ houses. We built an industrial park just across the highway from it. And at that time we had Trus Joist employing about 450 people. We had the cabinet factory, and then we have Saks (these are companies occupying the industrial park).³¹

As mentioned elsewhere, the development of MTR in east Kentucky contributed to vast outmigration and unemployment; in the coal lobby's version of the story, mountaintop "development" sites are places where jobs are *created*, not lost.³² Part of the coal lobby's claim that coal provides opportunity for economic diversity relates to the fact that coal severance tax revenues fund non-coal economic development projects. Silver explains that severance taxes are "applied generally to extractive industries with the basic assumption that those resources are not infinite, and you have to prepare for a day when it's gone. In this case: coal."³³ King suggests that maintaining coal's competitiveness is an essential part of ensuring severance tax monies that communities "depend on." Cheap production costs are vital to generating coal severance revenues; he says, "coal severance money is based on what the selling price is, and when the selling price is down, coal severance is down." To King, ending the war on coal (freeing the

³¹ King, Haven. Interview by author. Hazard, November 3, 2013.

³² Ibid., see also Perks 2010a, 2010b.

³³ Silver, Roy. Interview by author. Cumberland, August 8, 2013.

industry from onerous regulation) is a way to keep production costs down and the severance tax up. Can communities survive without coal severance taxes?

Despite the pro-coal lobby's claim that coal severance taxes are essential for economic diversity, many people I spoke with questioned the way these revenues are expended. In Kentucky, only a fraction of coal severance goes back to coal-producing communities. Half of the revenue goes into Kentucky's general fund, and non-coal producing "impact counties" receive portions of the fund (for example in 2013 it was announced that 3 million dollars of coal severance tax money would go toward remodeling the University of Kentucky's Rupp Arena- a disturbing notion to many coal county residents). However coal severance taxes that *have* gone toward economic development have largely gone toward road building and "bricks and mortar" projects based on what Hall called "*if you build it they will come*" philosophies that "will supposedly recruit industrial companies."³⁴ Hall's skepticism is evident. Silver explains, "the way the (severance tax) law is written...you can build a factory, and roads, and infrastructure to get to that factory."³⁵ This has essentially meant that alternative economic projects that utilize coal severance money (and often the aforementioned "flat land" created by surface mining) have largely been industrial parks. One example is the Gateway Industrial Park in Letcher County. Joe Depriest, Letcher County Economic Director explains:

I think they spent in the neighborhood of 7 million dollars over there to put an industrial park in, the state did. And that money, by the way...was what they call

³⁴ Hall, Nathan. Interview by author. Redfox, July 28, 2013.

³⁵ Silver, Roy. Interview by author. Cumberland, August 8, 2013. Silver also explains that some severance tax money goes toward county governments and small grants for community projects. However as far as economic development goes, severance taxes are primarily used for "bricks and mortar" and industrial park style endeavors.

multi-county coal severance money. So it came from this area to start with, it was just re-directed back into the park.³⁶

DePriest explains that recruiting outside businesses for the industrial parks accounts for between 60 and 80 percent of his job (interview, August 2, 2013). Part of this endeavor involves offering tax breaks and incentives for outside corporations.³⁷ The basic assumption behind “bricks and mortar” economic development projects is that recruiting outside capital is the best way to plan for east Kentucky’s future. However, Dee Davis of the Center for Rural Strategies is critical of this logic. He relates, “we often think that we have to bring a lot of outside capital into an area, like with mining, for these communities to survive...but it’s also possible to nurture the other sectors of the economy and retain more business, locally.”³⁸ Critical to the industrial recruitment model for economic development is the neoliberal logic that what’s “good for business” is “good for America” (Harvey 2007:30). But as Ronald Eller (2008) has argued, outside industries that have filled industrial parks have largely taken advantage of tax breaks and incentives, and left without instilling lasting economic diversity. Davis confirms Eller’s suppositions:

One time we were told that highways will bring prosperity to places like this. We were told that coal mining will bring prosperity. We’ve been told that creating industrial parks for metal fabrication or, in some parts of Appalachia, for cut and sow centers, would bring prosperity. These ideas seem to come and go without the prosperity connected.³⁹

Still, industrial recruitment and road-building remain ways that local and state planners attempt economic development. Davis discloses, “often times when we talk of

³⁶ DePriest, Joe. Interview by author. Whitesburg, August 2, 2013.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Davis, Dee. Interview by author. Whitesburg, July 30 2013.

³⁹ Davis, Dee. Interview by author. Whitesburg, July 30 2013.

economic development, we're still stuck using models that worked in a different era."⁴⁰

Part of the reason prior efforts to keep industrial plants in eastern Kentucky failed was because structural adjustments made overseas production more profitable for large manufacturers (Eller 2008:203-223). In the neoliberal era, the "free market" has allowed for company's increasing "spatial mobility" (Harvey 1996). For example DePriest lamented that many industrial park businesses left after the latest recession:

With the economic downturn, some of them companies had to close. The biggest single employer was a company called BJ Services...and they closed down...at that time they had 60 employees, but at one time they had 150 employees there in Jenkins. And they closed completely down and they're still closed. Now there is rumors right now...they're hoping in the near medium future that they can come back, I don't know if they will or not. But we've took a big hit over the last two years.⁴¹

In the eyes of many people I spoke with, coal severance tax projects of the "bricks and mortar" and road-building variety have failed to deliver on their intended purpose; Silver asserts "in terms of preparing for the day like we're experiencing *now*, when coal's in serious decline and diversifying the economy (is needed)-that really hasn't happened to any degree."⁴² Since 1992, Silver has organized with various efforts to push Frankfort to reimagine coal severance tax policies. Silver and the Central Appalachian Regional Network (CARN) lobbied for a trust or "futures fund" that would set aside part of severance revenues to accumulate interest over time. He envisioned this money ultimately going toward community development efforts with a "broader definition than the standard bricks and mortar definition."⁴³ To Silver, a smarter tax policy would allow for arts and culture based community revitalization projects and energy conservation

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ DePriest, Joe. Interview by author. Whitesburg, August 2, 2013.

⁴² Silver, Roy. Interview by author. Cumberland, August 8, 2013.

⁴³ Ibid.

through retrofitting the region's "old housing stock" (interview, August 8, 2013). Despite these efforts, legislators have failed to reform coal severance tax policies. Silver and Hall both conveyed that part of the problem is leadership, Silver explains, "it seems that those who are in positions to do things aren't willing to step outside the box, you know, and try other things. Or *look* at other options."⁴⁴

Part of the unwillingness to look at other options may be related to the coal lobby's insistence that surfacing mining fosters alternative economic projects through creating flat land. For example, CMOF has a series of giant signs they use for rallies and lobbying that depicts a mountain being surface mined with the subtitle "Progress starts here." Next to the picture of the active mine is a larger picture of a "mountaintop development" project (there are various types, typically a neighborhood or prairie scene) with the accompanying subtitle "and leads to this!" This visual text trumpets the idea that surface mining enhances land; surface mines are depicted as synonymous with "progress." McNeil points out that such claims rely on a "naturalized" neoliberal construction of value that assumes that land is "improved" when it is "flat for future development" (McNeil 2011:11). He writes, "Coal argues, creating new flat land is *needed* for economic development" (McNeil 2011:11, my emphasis). This is the same logic that gets used in support of combatting the war on coal. However Hall believes the idea that coal adds value to land by leveling it "bullshit."⁴⁵ He contends that there is plenty of fertile bottomland where less destructive forms of economic activity could potentially occur (interview, July 28, 2013). Similarly, Massey wonders, "Why tear down

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Hall, Nathan. Interview by author. Redfox, July 28, 2013.

the mountains when you *have* flat lands?”⁴⁶ Despite the industry’s assertions that flat land provides space for economic development projects, in Kentucky roughly 4 percent of nearly 500,000 acres of surface mine land has been permitted for economic development projects (Perks 2010b). Most of it becomes what Hall referred to as “vast savannahs of exotic species.”⁴⁷ In light of this fact, Davis points out:

We have millions of acres of sacrifice zones for mining, we have not done a good job in thinking of how that could be part of a robust economy. A few shopping centers, fabrication plants. We’ve been told they (mined lands) are future industrial or recreational sites. It is hard without flying over it to understand the amount of land that’s there...let’s think about fixing broken parts.⁴⁸

Through coal severance tax revenues, the state has instituted neoliberal political projects based on the logic that what is good for business is good for communities. This is evidenced by a coal severance tax law, which assumes that the best way to plan for the region’s future is to promote business interests and recruit outside capital through building industrial parks and “bricks and mortar” projects. Ironically, because of the spatial mobility of large corporations, local governments have to put energy and resources into what DePriest called “industrial expansion and retention.” Part of this effort involves offering tax breaks and incentives for outside capital. In other words, local and state governments must become “market managers” in the sense that they must promote “good business climates” through supplying infrastructure and incentives. The coal industry facilitates this endeavor by providing “flat land” and coal severance revenues that can be used to build industrial parks. Wars on coal narratives often claim the industry’s importance for economic diversity *because* coal mining creates flat land

⁴⁶ Massey, Benny. Interview by author. Lynch, July 15, 2013.

⁴⁷ Hall, Nathan. Interview by author. Redfox, July 28, 2013.

⁴⁸ Davis, Dee. Interview by author. Whitesburg, July 30, 2013.

and severance tax revenues. However as Harvey predicted, the state's role in fostering pro-business environments has come at the expense of "the needs and well-being of the populations at large," as industrial recruitment has failed to lift the region from poverty or provide broad economic diversity (2007:31). As Davis stated,

What seems to work best in rural communities now is that they do better when people want to live there. Particularly when young people want to live there. And in time when it's hard to get large industrial intervention, it's hard to get a plant to move into your community, what has had some success is the creative capital that comes when young, bright, educated people move back into an area. Similarly, when retired people with decent, fixed incomes, choose your community. Then, it's easier to create strategies that hold on to resources and keep them from leaving.⁴⁹

Conclusions

McConnell, Paul, and other policy makers (such as Senator Manchin in West Virginia) have used the war on coal as an "ideological gambit" disguising the broader neoliberal "political project" of maintaining favorable business climates for the coal industry (Harvey 2007; Wacquant 2012). This is accomplished through "thin policy" prescriptions that reduce regulations for the coal industry and taxes for energy companies (Peck 2001). These policies get "naturalized" as necessary mechanisms for "saving jobs" (McConnell 2013a; Press Release 2013; Press Release 2014; Peck 2001). The claim is that Washington bureaucrats are burdening free enterprise with overbearing regulations, preventing the coal industry from bringing prosperity for all (Press Release 2014). Paradoxically, McConnell uses his political position to intervene in the "free" market and institute policies that will keep coal competitive. The trouble is, as Peck asserts, these "thin" political processes often have "hard outcomes" (2001). To drum up support for deregulation, McConnell and the pro-coal lobby have propagated the "war on coal"

⁴⁹ Davis, Dee. Interview by author. Whitesburg, July 30, 2013.

narrative, which argues that deregulation is a “market mandate” necessary for Kentucky jobs (Peck 2001). Because so many have suffered abuses from the industry, this narrative has contributed to considerable polarization in east Kentucky. Those who dispel the “war on coal” claim that coal is needed to not only provide jobs, but “flat land” and coal severance taxes necessary for recruiting industrial parks and outside capital. However, others believe that the key to economic diversity is not prioritizing outside businesses, but embracing economic endeavors that encourage young people to want to live and stay in eastern Kentucky. To this effect, Hall asks, “what resources do we have here naturally, and how do we utilize them in a way that helps and not harms people?”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Hall, Nathan. Interview by author. Redfox, July 28, 2013.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

Hope for the Future

If I have painted a bleak picture here it is to emphasize the complexity of coal's entrenchment in southeast Kentucky, despite the fact that the industry's role as jobs-provider is diminishing. However, it is important to point out that as one Letcher County resident asserted: people are not "sitting around cryin' in our beers." Despite the overwhelming presence of a dominant industry, there is tremendous fight, hope, and effort to affect change. And many of these attempts have been successful. For example, Frida, Daren, and Nathan Hall have all had victories in stopping destructive valley fills. Appalshop and Kentuckians for the Commonwealth were instrumental in putting an end to the abuses of the broad form deed in the 1980s. There are even cases of progressive political leadership, such as Carroll Smith in Letcher County, who many considered to be a "maverick" for upholding the interests of the people.

Appalshop has particularly inspired a lot of community engagement. Pickering believes that part of Appalshop's work is to countermand war on coal and similar rhetoric by using media to voice narratives untold by the powers that be. She says, "I think film and probably in a lot of respects, radio too, are really best at telling the human story."¹ In response to growing polarization and the industry's "co-opting the history and culture and

¹ Pickering, Mimi. Interview by Author. Whitesburg, August 1, 2013.

heritage of mining,” Appalshop’s radio station WMMT started featuring a program called Making Connections. Pickering explains,

We’re not about engaging in a discussion about whether coal is good or bad, but we’re trying to say, here are people in this region who are starting businesses, revitalizing towns, using culture, music, the internet, whatever, to create some jobs in the region, and opportunities. Just hoping and believing that if people hear those stories, which they should on WMMT, that it will give some hope that there *are* alternatives, there are some things that can be done.²

Though Appalshop media campaigns attempt to fairly represent the region’s varying viewpoints, Pickering suggests, “I think our bias is toward the people, rather than the powerful, because that’s the story that gets told less frequently-or not at all.”³

There has also been a great push for community building that has little to do with leadership’s efforts to promote “good business climates.” Daren believes, “there’s a counter-cultural movement afoot.”⁴ Part of this is related to young people who are increasingly asserting their role in eastern Kentucky. For example, young people have been involved in starting a new farmer’s market, and pushing for amendments to county liquor laws. For example Whitesburg’s “wet” designation spawned the opening of “Summit City,” a bar, coffee, shop and music venue that tries to promote local art and music. But the part of the counter-cultural movement also has to do with Appalshop’s efforts to engage young people with opportunities beyond coal mining, moving, or going into the military. One example is their summer “Appalachian Media Institute,” where 12 to 15 young people from the region collaborate on film and video projects. Pickering explains:

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Daren. [Pseud.]. Interview by author. July 17, 2013.

And a lot of what that really is about is providing young people with an opportunity to think about the real possibilities of staying here. You know, since many are geared up to leave, and to think the region doesn't have anything for them. You know, there's still a lot of negative stereotypes about the region that people grow up with, and you only have to go as far as Lexington to feel them. So, and then they've also with some other organization formed a thing called STAY and there's an emerging leaders thing. So there are people who are wanting to stay in the region and are articulating what it would take to be a good place and a safe place for them. It includes tolerance of difference in all kinds of ways, as well as jobs.⁵

The STAY Project is a network of young leaders across many Appalachian states that work together to influence change in their communities. As Pickering said, part of the STAY Project's work is about promoting tolerance for diverse races, genders, sexual orientations and identities. In Harlan County, a community theater project called "Higher Ground" is in its fourth generation of using theater to speak to the systemic problems and spiritual tolls that grasp many Appalachian residents. Silver says, "the metaphor there is that when it floods here, people go to higher ground, and it brings people together of various classes and communities, cause we're all suffering from the *same* problem."⁶ All of the aforementioned projects suggest that there is much more than coal keeping the lights on in Appalachian Kentucky.

Conclusions

Because state supported power assemblages are "telling the story" of Appalachian Kentucky, it seemed necessary to deconstruct the "hidden positionalities" and "power plays" at work (Harvey 1996:77). Discourses can instantiate "regimes of truth," setting the terms for how particular circumstances are discussed and understood (Hodges 2011:5). As discourses are "infuse[d] with meaning...they constitute social reality,"

⁵ Pickering, Mimi. Interview by author. Whitesburg, August 1, 2013.

⁶ Silver, Roy. Interview by author. Cumberland, August 8, 2013.

(Hodges 2011:5). In this particular instance, the potential consequences of discursively produced social reality are great. The instigators of Kentucky's war on coal are key political decision makers, charged with delivering matters of concern to the federal government. They are also pro-coal lobby groups and industry officials, who draw from the region's rich history of mining in order to assert the needs of the industry. War on coal discourses are predicated on neoliberal philosophies that thus far have proven detrimental to communities of east Kentucky. In fact, deregulation, privatization and welfare reform have all undermined progress gained through prior decades of social programs, and the presence of strong labor unions. Yet, Senators Mitch McConnell and Rand Paul continue to push for "thin" policies such as the "Saving Coal Jobs Act," which leverage jobless Kentuckians in order to limit the EPA's power to regulate industry (Govtrack 2013). McConnell and others repeatedly claim that federal regulations are inhibiting the dying coal industry from making a market comeback (McConnell 2013a; b). Implicit in this logic is the doctrine of "laissez-faire," the notion that the market can naturally cure itself if only the government would step aside. However, the Senators' claims are dismissive of their own role in maintaining favorable market conditions for coal and other industries. In this way, the war on coal is part of a broader neoliberal political project of "market maintenance" (Harvey 2007; Peck 2001). However as Harvey states, promoting good business climates often comes at the expense of "the needs and well-being of the population at large" (2007:31). Sustaining the coal industry's market competence has not provided lasting stability for the region but it has had devastating ecological and social impacts on coal-producing communities. Still, the war on coal narrative persists because of politicians and the coal lobby's work to "naturalize"

neoliberal “policy medicines.” They do this through conflating community needs (jobs) with industry desires (lowered taxes, less regulation).

Naturalized neoliberal discourses not only constitute the present reality but also have wider implications for future potentialities (Peck 2002). What their rhetoric obscures from view is the coal industry’s failure to provide long-term stability and safety for miners, or the communities in which they reside (McNeil 2011). In this narrative of war, if the “free” market is the protagonist, victims of market injustices become antagonists. Because the “stories we tell about people and place, sow the seeds of alliance and division,” war on coal rhetoric has pushed entangled communities of miners, companies, non-profits, and citizens to choose sides (Ellwood and Lawson 2013:107). By demonizing so-called environmental prerogatives, the war on coal brings the economic crisis to the foreground while forcing environmental crises to the background. The polarizing effect of the war on coal has operated to minimize legitimate concerns to health and safety that may be construed as “anti-coal.” The hegemonic presence of naturalized neoliberal discourses can minimize alternative visions for the future. It is safe to say that the current neoliberal “social order” is highly uneven (Harvey 2007).

And yet, in the absence of effective federal regulation, many socio-environmental advocacy groups have organized to support victims of deleterious mining practices. Engaging in civil, direct, and legal actions, these groups fight for citizens who suffer from selenium-orange water, or wells bubbling with methane. They represent whistle-blowers who are fired for drawing attention to mine-safety concerns. They offer support to property owners facing damages cause by acid mine drainage, clogged streams, sunk wells, landslides, fly-rock and a whole host of outrageous mine-related occurrences. They

report on stories untold by local media sources. These groups also have their own version of coal's latest crisis, one that does not accept the implications of an alleged war on coal. While the purposes of environmental and social advocacy organizations vary, common among many of them is a desire for an alternative future, one without irresponsible mining practices. As Rich Kirby stated, "if there's a moral here, it's about the power of a narrative and the need for a new one" (2013).

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Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship (8 Semesters)
2004-2009

PROFESSIONAL

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2013-present

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NATIONAL MEETING PRESENTATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS

- Biesel, S. (2014) Hope and Uncertainty in East Kentucky: Imagining a Future With and Without Coal. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Appalachian Studies Association (ASA), Huntington, West Virginia.
- Biesel, S. (2014) Natures and Wars: Neoliberal Discourse and the Contested Future of East Kentucky. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology (SFAA), Albuquerque, New Mexico.
- Biesel, S. (2013) "No Profit in Reclamation": A Multiscale Analysis of SMCRA's Environmental Impact. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the the Political Ecology Working Group (DOPE), Lexington, KY.
- Biesel, S. & Sims, C. (2013) Gardening With Neighbors: Community Gardening and Food Security in West Louisville. Paper presented at annual meeting of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) annual conference. Nashville, Tennessee.
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