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BEYOND THE COAL DIVIDE: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF NATURAL RESOURCE EXTRACTION IN CENTRAL APPALACHIA

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BEYOND THE COAL DIVIDE:
THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF NATURAL RESOURCE EXTRACTION IN
CENTRAL APPALACHIA

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky

By
Julie Shepherd-Powell

Lexington, Kentucky

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Lexington, Kentucky

2017

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Beyond the Coal Divide:
The Cultural Politics of Natural Resource Extraction in Central Appalachia

During the last several years far southwest Virginia, like elsewhere in the central Appalachian region, has faced a decline in all coal mining activity and a subsequent loss of coal mining jobs, meaning that local economies are suffering and the unemployment line is long. In addition, this area continues to face environmental pollution from surface coal mines that are still in operation or have not been reclaimed. Drawing upon anthropological literature on natural resource extraction and economic and environmental inequality, this dissertation highlights the lives of members of a local grassroots environmental organization, as well as other local residents, in a small coal mining community in Appalachia.

Complicating and contradicting the “jobs versus environment” dichotomy used by industries, politicians, and academics to position people in “black and white” categories, this dissertation demonstrates that people living within an area where a controversial resource extraction method was used did not take a “hard line” stance on coal mining, but rather took into account the economic, environmental, and cultural risks and benefits associated with the industry’s practices. This dissertation offers a textured account of how local and regional politicians and coal industry executives use their authority—or abuse their power—to garner support for controversial resource extraction practices.

Furthermore, this dissertation also demonstrates that support for, or opposition to, surface mining practices (such as mountaintop removal) was also influenced by the different perceptions of the environment held by participants. All respondents expressed a love of the mountains; however their perceptions of pollution and proper use of the land varied greatly. Despite disagreements over coal, all residents expressed a concern over the economy and articulated the need for new economic opportunities beyond coal in order for the region to remain a viable place to live and work.
KEYWORDS: Natural resource extraction, Appalachia, Coal, Environmental movements

Julie Shepherd-Powell

January 30, 2017

Date
BEYOND THE COAL DIVIDE:
THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF NATURAL RESOURCE EXTRACTION IN
CENTRAL APPALACHIA

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January 30, 2017
Date
For my dad, David Wayne Shepherd,
who taught me at an early age to care for the earth
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Chapter 1: Introduction-
Wise County: A Community Divided or a Community United?

The short three-mile drive from Big Stone Gap to Appalachia in the mountains of far Southwest Virginia might arguably be the most beautiful drive in all of Wise County. The route winds through hardwood forests, with rocky bluffs jutting out from the mountains above and the Powell River rushing alongside the shaded two-lane road. The railroad track that crosses the road on an overpass half way between the two towns is the only visible reminder on this short scenic route that coal mining was a part of this area’s history and continues to be a part of its present-day reality. But it is the beauty of this place that people are drawn to-- those who make Wise County their home and those who come to visit. A graveled pull-off on the side of the road marks a steep rocky trailhead that winds up the mountain through the woods along side Roaring Branch through the Jefferson National Forest. Along this trail, orange salamanders hiding underneath rocks, fresh deer tracks resting in the mud, and a copperhead sunning in the middle of the trail, provide a reminder that this was once, and still is, a wilderness area. Three miles up this steep trail, a rocky bluff allows hikers to view Wise and neighboring Lee Counties in three directions. It is here that the barren, brown dusty landscapes of mountaintop removal coal mining first come into view along the Roaring Branch trail, but it is certainly not the only place in Wise County that the effects of this type of surface mining are visible on the landscape.

Living in the Shadow of Surface Mining

According to local residents who oppose the practice of mountaintop removal, or strip coal mining, over 25% of the land in Wise County has been surface mined for coal. Wise County consists of 262,848 acres of mountainous land and valleys in the far
southwest part of the state of Virginia. Since the 1960s, two types of surface coal mining, mountaintop removal mining (MTR) and strip mining, have become a common practice in central Appalachia. These more mechanized forms of coal mining, as opposed to underground mining, have decreased the number of jobs in the region while maximizing the amount of coal that can be extracted within a period of time.

MTR is a type of strip mining in which companies use large amounts of explosives to blast off the tops of mountains to expose the seams of coal lying underneath the surface. Additionally, the current type of strip mining that takes place in central Appalachia looks much like mountaintop removal, with the exception that a small portion of land, the very top of the mountain, remains in tact, so as to adhere to federal surface mining law that requires companies to keep the “approximate contour” of the land the same. Both MTR and strip mining are detrimental to local ecology, and throughout the dissertation I refer to both of these forms of surface mining interchangeably, echoing the language of local activists and other residents to describe this type of resource extraction.

Environmentalists are quick to point out that the debris that is left over from the explosions on mountaintop removal sites (soil and rock called overburden) is pushed over the side of the ridge and down into the valleys to form valley-fills, which bury streams and other important vegetation (Montrie 2003). According to historian Ron Eller, “Mountaintop removal [has] leveled thousands of acres, filling the hollows between the hills and creating vast, inaccessible stretches of barren land…surface mining altered water tables, polluted nearby creeks, killing fish and most plant life” (2008: 37). Indeed, residents of Wise County often echoed these critiques of surface mining in talking about their own community. Photo One depicts a recently mined surface mine visible from
another strip mine site (accessed by a four wheeler one sunny July day) in the southwestern part of Wise County.

Additionally, of the 260,000 acres of land that make up Wise County, about 27,000 acres of abandoned mine lands (10%) have not been reclaimed (McIlmoil et al. 2012). This means that this land remains in a post-mining state, without the return of vegetation, trees, or other improvements for post-mine land use. Un-reclaimed land is another concern voiced by many local residents, as environmental issues such as increased flooding and acid mine drainage present real threats to residents who live nearby.

Figure 1.1 A Strip Mine Site Near Appalachia, Virginia, July 2013

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s 2011 report on the effects of mountaintop removal mining noted several environmental consequences of this extractive practice on waterways in central Appalachia. The report concluded that mountaintop
removal mining and its subsequent valley fills negatively affected aquatic life in waterways near mine sites in five particular ways: the permanent loss of streams, elevated levels of major chemical ions downstream, degraded water quality lethal to organisms, elevated selenium levels toxic to fish and birds, and degraded macroinvertebrate and fish populations (U.S. EPA 2011). The EPA also estimates a loss of 1.4 million acres of forest by mountaintop removal mines in Appalachia. Other environmental impacts on land include a loss of large tracts of forested areas; the fragmentation of forests; and the loss of plant and animal species that result from a conversion of habitat (forested mountain to reclaimed grasslands). Numerous studies and oral histories (Bell 2014, 2016, House and Howard 2009, McNeil 2012) document the concerns of citizens who live in areas with this type of resource extraction that go beyond ecological consequences. Residents living close to MTR sites report cracks in the walls and foundations of their homes from blasting at mine sites, excess dust levels from blasting at mine sites, and speeding coal trucks on community roadways. Scholars have conducted numerous studies linking higher mortality and morbidity rates in communities where mountaintop removal sites are nearby (Ahern 2011, Hendryx and Zullig 2011). Additionally scholars have shown higher rates of cancer, female reproductive problems, and childhood asthma in these same areas. The concerns for the environment and human health are numerous in areas with surface coal mining, including the area of this study.

Despite these documented environmental consequences and human health externalities related to surface coal mining, communities in the coalfields of Appalachia often remained divided over the practice. Some residents argued that surface mining provided good-paying and much-needed jobs while providing a cheap source of energy
for the U.S., while others argued that the consequences of surface mining to the
environment and human health was too high of a cost to pay. However, in this research, I
found that residents in Wise County often placed themselves somewhere on the spectrum
of the coal divide rather than in a hard-line “pro-coal” or “anti-surface mining” stance. It
is here that I begin my inquiry into a community that often remained divided over surface
mining, but found common ground in a love of place and concern for an economically
sustainable future.

Wise County, Far Southwest Virginia

Wise County is located in what is colloquially referred to, in both formal and
informal settings, as far southwest Virginia. Local residents used it, politicians used it,
and media used it. Located three hours south and west of Roanoke, the city that is most
often referenced as the hub of southwest Virginia, far southwest Virginia by contrast

![Figure 1.2 A County Map of Virginia, Wise County Shaded](image)

encompassed a corner of Virginia that was so far from the capital city of Richmond, that
it would not fit on the same page as the rest of the state in an atlas of the United States,
requiring a small portion on an additional page to show far southwest Virginia. While this may seem like a moot point, it is an important starting place for understanding how far southwest Virginians thought about themselves in relation to the rest of the state and how the rest of Virginia thought about far southwest Virginia. In many ways, this small “cut off” portion of the state on the map was also “cut off” from the rest of the state. It was an area that has been and continues to be impoverished. It was distinct culturally in part because of its industrial history of resource extraction and in part because of its mountains. Additionally, because of its location almost 400 miles away from the state capital, it was often seemingly (and actually) forgotten by lawmakers.

In 2013, Wise County had a population of 40,620 people, with 20% of the population under 18, and an additional 15% 65 years old or older. The racial and ethnic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Per Capita Income</th>
<th>Wise County</th>
<th>Virginia</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Wise County % of US</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>$32,605</td>
<td>$48,377</td>
<td>$43,735</td>
<td>74.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>$30,973</td>
<td>$48,838</td>
<td>$44,765</td>
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<td>Unemployment</td>
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<td>2012</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>108.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>134.8%</td>
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<td>Percentage of Persons Below Poverty Rate</td>
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<td>2010-2014</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
<td>140.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Persons with a High School Diploma or More</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2010-2014</td>
<td>74.1%</td>
<td>87.9%</td>
<td>86.3%</td>
<td>85.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Persons with a Bachelors Degree or More</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010-2014</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
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Table 1.1: Demographic Information for Wise County, VA 2012-2013
Source: Appalachian Regional Commission
make-up of Wise County was primarily white (93%), with 5% African American, 1% Latino/a, and another 1% mixed race, Asian, and American Indian. Wise County consistently fell below federal and state poverty rates, unemployment rates, and education rates during the two years of my research. Table 1.1 depicts demographic information on Wise County in 2012 and 2013 that demonstrated that those in far southwest Virginia continued to face economic and educational disparities that created hardships for living in the coalfields of Virginia.

As Table 1.1 shows, the unemployment rate and poverty rate in Wise County were higher than rates in the state of Virginia and in the United States. Furthermore, Wise County consistently ranked lower on high school and college graduation and degree rates than Virginia or the United States. Like many Appalachian communities, the young people that did tend to leave for college did not return, as job opportunities were scarce. And like many Appalachian communities, the economic realities were harsh. While coal mining once provided a decent living for many members of the community, mechanization in underground mines and the advent of surface mining meant fewer and fewer jobs every year. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), Wise County was considered At-Risk in 2012, Transitional in 2013, and the most recent data shows predictions that in 2017 Wise County will be considered Distressed for the first time since 2004 (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d.). The ARC uses a county economic classification system to identify the economic status of counties within Appalachia as compared to counties across the United States. Three factors are used to determine the rankings: three-year average unemployment rate, per capita market income, and poverty rate. Distressed counties are among the worst 10% of counties in the U.S.,
while At-Risk counties rank between the worst 10% to 25%, and Transitional counties rank between the worst 25% and best 25%. The data from 2012 and 2013 paints an interesting picture, as the mine lay-offs that began in 2012 did not seem to immediately affect the county’s economic status in national reports. A closer look at employment in and on top of the mines from the Department of Mines, Minerals, and Energy provides a closer look at mining employment in the county.

In 2012, underground mining employed 693 workers, while surface employees totaled 537 employees (with 47 at preparation plants, and 2 on reclamation jobs), with 37 office workers, for a grand total of 1,267 workers in the coal industry in Wise County. Coal production for 2012 was 5.2 million tons of coal in Wise County, with 16.4 million tons for the entire state (6.4 million from surface mines), encompassing the six coal mining counties of Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Tazewell, and Wise. The coal industry in these six counties employed a total of 4,713 workers. A year later, in 2013, Wise County coal mining employees totaled 437 surface workers (including 30 at preparation plants, and 4 on reclamation jobs) and 589 underground workers, with 27 office workers, for a total of 1,053 employees. The total amount of coal mined was 3.28 million tons. In the state of Virginia, a total of 1,507 surface workers, 3,357 underground workers, and 52 office workers were employed. Total coal tonnage was 13.5 million, with 5 million from surface mines. These statistics point to the dwindling amount of coal mined, as well as the dwindling number of coal jobs in an already economically depressed area. Figure 1.3 presented in a report by Downstream Strategies, an organization committed to sustainable economic development, utilized data from the Mine Safety and Health Administration to demonstrate the decline of coal mining
employment in contrast to the amount of coal mined on surface mine sites in Virginia over the past 25+ years.

As the graph in Figure 1.3 demonstrates, underground coal mining employment has been in continuous decline since the 1980s, while surface mining employment, which began at a much lower level than underground employment, has remained steady. In contrast, the amount of coal mined on surface mines has increased. However, overall coal mining production employment continues to decrease. According to an article from the *Washington Post*, Wise County lost 55% of its coal production jobs between 1996 and 2014, leaving only a little over 900 jobs in the sector (Portnoy 2015). Numerous scholars
(Eller 2008, Lewis 2004, McNeil 2010) have noted that the greatest decline in coal mining jobs in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries was due in large part to the increase in surface mined coal, which requires fewer workers. However, with the recent layoffs related to cheap natural gas prices, increased regulations on new coal-fired power plants, and the lack of an international market for coal (Krauss 2015), these various reasons for the decline of coal production and subsequent loss of coal jobs provided much debate in my research about the economic and environmental function of coal in the region.

Outside of the coal industry, other employment in Wise County included jobs in the service sector, education, (including K-12 schools, one community college, and one four year university), and healthcare (including three hospitals). According to the City-Data website, in 2013, Wise County’s top industries include mining, quarrying and gas extraction at 23%, professional, scientific, and technical services at 11%, accommodation and food serves at 10%, other services, except public administration at 10%, public administration at 9%, educational services at 8%, and construction at 6%. In contrast to the average income of around $30,000 a year, miners made between $60,000 and $100,000 a year. This is significant to note, as it further demonstrates the interest of miners and their families to keep such a good paying jobs in the community.

Of the three hospitals in Wise County, the Lonesome Pine Hospital serving the southern part of the county, where the communities of Big Stone Gap and Appalachia were located, closed its Intensive Care Unit in 2012, leaving people in those communities without quick access to a hospital equipped to handle serious health emergencies. The drive to the closest hospital in Norton would take residents from communities in the far
southwestern end of the county anywhere from 20 to 45 minutes to reach an Intensive Care Unit. In addition to high poverty rates and high unemployment rates, residents of Wise County were also faced with a lack of vital social services and businesses that make a community a safe and healthy place to live.

The Anatomy of Two Towns

Two towns provided the main backdrop for both my own everyday experiences as a researcher, as well as for a majority of my informants—these two towns were Big Stone Gap and Appalachia, located only 3 miles apart in the southwestern part of Wise County. Both towns were built around the same time and for the same reason—the impending exploration and expansion of the coal industry in central Appalachia in the late nineteenth century. As such, many of the buildings were built in a similar architectural style, however, in 2012-2013 the towns represented two drastically different economic situations. From its inception, Appalachia lacked the agricultural roots of wealthy farmers in the Powell Valley that helped the town of Big Stone Gap maintain better infrastructure and sustain the economy through cycles of boom and bust. While the town of Appalachia suffered more in terms of businesses shuttering windows and impoverished citizens (indeed, it was much cheaper to live in Appalachian than anywhere else in Wise County), it would be farcical to state the Big Stone Gap was economically thriving. Indeed, throughout Wise County and across the coalfields, during the course of this research, unemployment rates were rising and local commerce was suffering from a decline in clientele. A description of both towns helps provide a better understanding Big Stone Gap and Appalachia in 2012-2013.
Big Stone Gap is located off of U.S. Highway 23-- the “four lane” as local residents called it-- in far southwest Virginia. Located north of the Kingsport, Tennessee and south of Pikeville, KY, two exits off of U.S. 23 lead to town. Exit 2 takes motorists through the Powell Valley, where a turn east meanders through rolling farmland with expansive views of the mountains, and a turn west leads past the new consolidated high school and small neighborhoods filled with ranch style houses and mobile homes, before ending up downtown. Exit 1 takes motorists past a run-down shopping center that includes an old, small brown-colored Wal-Mart, a dollar store, a Mexican restaurant, a thrift store; and two gas stations and a Burger King. Beyond this small development, a half mile descent down the lush green “country boy hill,” dotted sparsely with houses, and across a bridge over the Powell River, leads right to the heart of Big Stone Gap. A local motel, a bank, the local tourism office located in a former train “caboose,” an All Terrain Vehicle (ATV) shop, the town’s municipal complex, and a small convenience store with a produce stand are the first businesses that residents and visitors alike encounter in downtown. A right hand turn from “country boy hill” on to 5th Ave. leads to Wood Avenue, the main downtown thoroughfare. While some storefronts were empty, a surprising number of businesses were open in the red bricked downtown. At the corner of 5th Ave. and Wood Ave. is Miner’s Park, which includes a small green space, a statue of a miner, and a wooden stage for occasional musical performances in warmer months. Next to the park is a stone built post office and courthouse, built between 1911 and 1913. Other businesses within a five block radius of this heart of downtown included two car dealerships, a video rental store, two insurance agencies, an accounting office, a women’s clothing boutique, a Chinese restaurant, two antique stores, two hairdressers, two drug
stores (including the iconic Mutual Drug that included a small diner), a dollar store, a
dairy bar, an auto parts store, four fast food restaurants, a jewelry store, a hunting supply
store, a liquor store, numerous Christian churches (including Baptist, Episcopal,
Presbyterian, and Methodist), several doctors’ offices, a small locally owned gym, a
library, a bed and breakfast, and a regional grocery store chain. Additionally, a green
space for the local farmer’s market is located between businesses on the main street. A
few historic sites are notable and marked in Big Stone- this includes the outdoor theater
for the local drama, “The Trail of the Lonesome Pine,” the John Fox, Jr. House, the Harry
W. Meador Coal Heritage Museum, and the Southwest Virginia Museum, which is
located in the 1888 home of former Virginia Attorney General Rufus Ayers. The
neighborhoods surrounding the town include a range of houses from large Victorian era
homes through more modern 1950s ranches and mobile homes. Additionally, a large park,
Bullit Park, is located a few blocks from the heart of downtown and includes picnic
shelters, a playground, a baseball field, a basketball court, and the track and field stadium
for local schools’ sporting events. A 3-mile walking trail that winds through Big Stone
Gap along the Powell River also begins at Bullit park and takes users by a soccer field, an
RV park, through neighborhoods, and behind the municipal center, before ending up back
in downtown. Big Stone Gap is also home to the local community college, Mountain
Empire, which is located off of U.S. Highway 23 south of town.

Incorporated in 1888, Big Stone Gap had formerly been known as Three Forks
(because of the confluence of the three forks of the Powell River), and later Mineral City
(because of the rich iron and core deposits), but gained its current name upon receiving
its charter. Originally some of the founders with interests in natural resources expected
Big Stone Gap to be the “Pittsburg of the South,” but soon discovered that its iron deposits were not vast enough to garner such wealth. While the iron smelters shut down, many coal mines continued to operate. Beginning in the 1890s, coal companies built nine company towns near Appalachia, Virginia and attracted workers not only from the native Appalachian population, but also from recently freed African-Americans, and other recent immigrants to the United States -- Irish, Polish, Italians, and Hungarians (Southwest Virginia Museum, n.d.). Many mines in Wise County unionized in the 1930s through efforts of the United Mine Workers of America. Coal employment, like elsewhere in central Appalachia began declining after the Second World War with the mechanization of mining. Appalachia, like Big Stone, was also built through mineral wealth in the late nineteenth century.

During my research, Appalachia, in contrast to Big Stone Gap, was a smaller and more economically depressed town. The town itself is only accessible by curvy two-lane roads. Motorists can travel U.S. Highway 58 north from Big Stone Gap, or south from Norton to reach the town. Additionally, U.S. Highway 160 runs from Harlan County, Kentucky, up and over Black Mountain, which boasts an elevation of 4345 feet, down in to Appalachia. Main Street in Appalachia runs along the railroad track, which still operates regularly to haul coal out of mines located in the nearby coal camps. Downtown Appalachia includes public housing called “The Towers,” a diner operated by a former strip miner, the local UMWA office, Town Hall, a dollar store, an independent grocery store, a hair salon, a health clinic, a tire store, an odds and ends shop, a thrift/close-out shop, the Louis E. Henegar Miner’s Memorial Park, a train museum, a free mason lodge, the Appalachian Cultural Arts Center, and numerous Christian churches. The downtown
area additionally included many empty storefronts in 2012 and 2013, and it was commonly stated that people in Appalachia did much of their shopping in Big Stone Gap, Wise, and Norton. Despite the empty storefronts, the infrastructure of Appalachia is primarily in tact, with many brick buildings dating back to the earliest boom time in the 1880s. The town of Appalachia is also home to the office of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards (SAMS), a grassroots non-profit whose active members consisted primarily of local residents who aimed to address environmental and economic injustice in coalfield communities. While the original office of SAMS was located in Big Stone Gap, it was no coincidence that members decided to move locations to Appalachia where members could be closer to the coal camp communities that were often closest in proximity to mountaintop removal mining.

**The Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards: A Grassroots Environmental Justice Organization**

Founded in 2006 by two women who wanted to stop the excessive late-night noise from a surface mine site located near their homes, SAMS quickly grew as an organization--both in its membership and in the scope of its work-- to address many other issues related to surface mining and coal pollution in Wise County. Specifically, in 2007, SAMS began to actively fight against the location of a new 585-mega watt coal fired power plant in the western part of the county. While the campaign to stop the plant from being located in Wise County was ultimately unsuccessful, activists with SAMS were successful in gaining more stringent water and air pollution requirements for the plant through the state’s permitting process. After the fight against the power plant, SAMS began to expand its movement activities to fight proposed strip mine permits, as well as
to bring lawsuits against coal companies violating various water and air pollution regulations. In addition to working on environmental issues in Wise County, SAMS was also dedicated to finding solutions for a struggling local economy. With dwindling jobs and businesses shutting their doors almost weekly, SAMS provided programming to help enhance self-sufficiency through skills such as gardening and home weatherization and provide support and training for new entrepreneurs. While SAMS’ membership includes over 150 members from all over the United States, a core group of 10 to 15 local residents were the primary “movers and shakers” of the organization. With only one paid staff member (whose salary was almost fully provided by the Sierra Club), and the occasional summer intern or two, most residents volunteered countless hours to work on anti-MTR campaigns, economic workshops, and community events.

**The Decline of Coal in Wise County and Appalachia**

Mainstream media and fictional accounts of economic woes of Appalachia (and the resulting stereotypes about poverty in the mountains) are not new in this era of dwindling coal jobs. John Fox, Jr. (coincidentally who resided in Wise County) and Mary Noailles Murfree were among the first local writers in the nineteenth century who wrote about the poverty and destitution of mountain people (Hsiung 2004). Later, Presbyterian Minister Jack E. Weller (1965) reported on a people he considered to be backwards, fatalistic, and prone to violence. In 2009, a report by Diane Sawyer on 20/20 minutes entitled, “A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains” outraged Appalachian scholars, while its stories and reporting on the conditions in Eastern Kentucky rang with truth, she largely ignored the structural issues of systemic poverty and industrial exploitation that had plagued the mountains for years before she stepped foot in the hills with her video
crew. As Mary Anglin suggests, this documentary approach, while tinged with truth, neglects the complexities of the issue with “their erasure of social heterogeneity, neglect of political economic context, and disregard for health inequities” (2016: 140).

The massive layoffs of coal miners in Appalachia in 2012 and 2013 once again brought more national and local media attention to the coalfields. In 2015, the *New York Times* reported that coal production in the U.S. had plummeted 15% since 2008, with no end to the recession in sight (Krauss 2015b). In part this regression was related to the increase in other energy sources, including cheaper natural gas. Further, as the *NYT* reports, this plummet in coal production meant job loss across the Appalachian region and the U.S. Between 2012 and 2015 Alpha Natural Resources laid off a quarter of its coal mining workforce, or 4000 workers (Krauss 2015b). The *NYT* further noted the collapse of the coal industry with the filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy by major coal companies, including Walter Energy and Alpha Natural Resources (Krauss 2015a). Additionally, these bankruptcies have large banks rethinking their financing of coal mining projects, creating tension and problems for coal companies who want to continue to operate in the Appalachian coalfields, which tend to have more expensive operating costs than their Western U.S. counterparts (Corkery and Krauss 2016a).

The economic situation in Wise County, and many coalfield communities, is certainly bleak. But despite the reality of the current economic and jobs situation in their community, many residents were not only hopeful for the future, but also actively engaged in creating a community where new jobs would flourish, as well as a place where the local young people would stay, or come home to stay after college. Unlike media accounts such as Diane Sawyers “A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains,”
I do not wish to paint a picture of a community without hope, a community of drug addicted young people, or a community of fatalistic and utterly hopeless elders. Certainly drugs, mental illness, and other problems do plague Appalachia (Young and Havens 2012), but overwhelmingly the residents I talked to during my research were invested in their communities and willing to put in the work it would take to stabilize and grow the population, rather than continuing to see a “brain drain” lure young college age students away, never to return home. My aim in this dissertation is to shed light on the ways that people in a central Appalachian community envisioned their communities and their homes, and how, despite disagreements about the role of coal mining in Wise County, residents felt the same love for their community and ultimately held the same concerns for the future of the community. It is here that I believe a bright future for Wise County begins.

**A Love of Community**

In investigating this community and residents’ experiences in economic peril and environmental liminality, I explore both the lived experiences of residents, as well as what they *said* about those experiences. Participants own understandings of their community were key to understanding how their own perceptions, as well as those of the power elite, framed the ways that residents talked about, thought about, and envisioned the past, present, and future of their community.

Regardless of their stance on coal mining, or the coal industry more generally, all residents expressed love for their community, as well as hope for the future. “Community,” for participants, varied in its meaning. For most interviewees, community
was placed-based and referred the entire county, although sometimes residents would use it to refer to their specific town or coal camp community.

Historically, coal camp communities were established in the nineteenth century by coal companies to provide housing, schools, churches, stores, and medical care for miners and their families. Coal companies sold off the houses to private individuals during the 1950s as technological advances in mining equipment began to replace the need for large numbers of miners. Many of these houses are still occupied today and older residents recall the days of attending school in their “coal camp” community.

Respondents also talked about the larger community of the coalfield region-- an area that shares physical, cultural, and economic characteristics and faces similar issues. For the purpose of this study, I refer to community as both Wise County and the small towns (or former coal camp communities) that participants lived or grew up in.

For many residents a common bond was felt between people living in the coalfields, as the concept of “community” encompassed a region that was connected through shared geography, history, economic activities, kinship, and cultural characteristics (such as food and music). Interviews showed that “community” was something everyone loved and wanted to protect for future generations, but views on how to best protect and preserve community varied greatly-- some citizens held tight to the heritage and future of the coal industry, while others looked to new economic ventures in hope that tourism and the beauty of the mountains would save their home from continued economic decline.

Community, then, for residents was a very place-based concept-- regardless of whether they were referring to their coal camp, the entire county, or the whole coalfield
region. Because of this, I often discuss the current conditions or the future of the
coalfields. While recently some regional scholars have critiqued the use of the term
“coalfields” to describe this region (Taylor and Reid 2009), I use it in this dissertation for
two reasons. First, residents themselves referred to the place they lived as the coalfields.
Second, despite efforts to move this area past coal as its primary economic driver, as well
as the reality that coal will continue to decline over the coming years, the history and
heritage (music, stories, family histories) remained steeped in its industrial past.
Additionally, many of the local residents who were against mountaintop removal mining
were adamant that they were not against coal entirely-- in fact many had immediate
family members who had been employed in underground mines. Thus I begin the
exploration of a coalfield community that found itself in a period of environmental and
economic transition.

Overview of the Dissertation

In Chapter 2, I discuss theoretical traditions in Appalachian Studies and
anthropology to provide a basis for the analysis of my data set. Specifically, I explore the
ways that scholars of Appalachia have examined the importance of place and history in
relation to the current marginalized conditions of the region, as well as the various
movements that Appalachian people have participated in to protest social, economic, and
environmental injustice. I further examine anthropological theories about place-based
movements, environmental justice, and mining activism to understand how powerful
corporations intersect with lived experiences to influence the way that people think and
talk about their lives in the coalfields. I also provide an overview of the research methods
employed and consider my own position as a researcher. In Chapter 3, I utilize data
gathered through participant observation at public hearings and meetings to examine the ways that corporations utilize science, technology, and self-regulation to control and influence environmental management. In Chapter 4, I explore the ways that people in Wise County envisioned the economy, arguing that various understandings of local, national, and global economy across scales were formed through power relations and class processes. In Chapter 5, I briefly examine the ways that local residents talked about and understood the environment of Wise County and argue that SAMS members utilized an environmental justice perspective in their understanding of a healthy environment, while environmental imaginaries influenced the various ways community members envisioned appropriate land and resource use. In Chapter 6, I explore the place-based narratives of residents as they envisioned different economic alternatives and futures for their community. I explore how ideas about new industry, as well as non-capitalist enterprises, were both a part of the ways that residents expressed their love of place and willingness to work towards a sustainable future in Wise County and beyond. In the conclusion, I consider the impending post-coal moment that Appalachian communities are quickly approaching. While coal remains a small part of local economies throughout the region, it is becoming less and less economically viable (both for companies and communities). I consider the ways that residents in Wise County and other places in the coalfields are creating new economic possibilities, and also consider how these place-based ideas of new sustainable economies can scale up and scale across- that is, how economic development ideas can address inequalities on a global scale, as well as how Appalachian communities can reach out to other communities across the U.S. and the
globe to create connections and networks of support to other communities who also face the need for a new economy and better environment.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Research Methods

The lived experiences of members of communities that are affected by mountaintop removal coal mining in Central Appalachia are diverse and complex. As such, there is no one theory that can explain the various ways residents think and react to the social, economic, and environmental effects of this type of resource extraction. Therefore, this dissertation utilizes multiple scholarly literatures and theoretical traditions within Appalachian Studies and Anthropology to gain insight into a region and a people who remain on the economic margins of the United States. As a discipline that draws upon multiple methods and sites of investigation, anthropology is particularly well suited to investigate communities in economic and environmental peril (Milton 2002). Anthropology places these communities firmly within social, political, economic, and historical contexts, allowing the researcher to explore how various geographic scales (local, national, and global) affect the ways that the material and social realities of environmental problems are perceived and experienced (Kirsch 2014, Li 2015). In this chapter, I examine the scholarly literatures on coal mining and activism in Appalachia, environmental anthropology, and political economy to consider first, how the experiences in the coalfields are shaped by the material realities, ideologies, and histories of living an area with an environmentally devastating extractive industry; second, how political processes advantage hegemonic points of view on energy production (while silencing others); and third, the ways that place-based activism and environmental justice movements link understandings of economic, social, and environmental problems locally and globally.

A Regional Approach: Appalachian Studies, Coal, and Activism
This dissertation takes into account the numerous studies, both historical and current, that document the ways that the Appalachian region has played an important role in energy production in the United States, as well as the ways that the people of Appalachia have historically resisted exploitation of land, labor, and their communities. Destructive environmental practices related to coal extraction in central Appalachia have been the focus of social movements in the region since the 1960s. However, the history of the region has been ripe with activism since well before this era of social change in the United States. With the discovery of coal in the central Appalachian Mountains in the nineteenth century, speculators and developers both within and from outside the region began to tap into the industrial potential of this natural resource (Williams 2002). With the development of this valuable commodity through mining technology, transportation improvements, and the employment of large numbers of people in the mines, strife soon followed. As many scholars of the region have noted, mining strikes, especially those related the fight for unionization or better working conditions, have a long history in Appalachia (Williams 1999, Eller 1982). In particular, the early twentieth century was wrought with conflict between mine owners and miners, and violent consequences were often part and parcel to struggles during this time period. Perhaps the most well-known example of these “mine wars” was the Battle of Blair Mountain in 1921, in which a coal company convinced the U.S. government to bring in the armed forces to squelch rebellion led by striking miners in southern West Virginia (Savage 1990).

While various strikes over union representation, union contract agreements with coal companies, better wages, and safer working conditions remained part of the mining landscape in Appalachia throughout the twentieth century, the 1960s and 70s brought in
new activism around mining. In particular, local citizens, alongside VISTA workers who came to the region to participate in various poverty alleviation programs, began protesting strip mining— the newest form of coal mining that not only required fewer jobs, but also destroyed the environment (Kiffmeyer 2008, Montrie 2003).

Much of the scholarly work on social movements in the coalfields reveals the ways in which resistance, activism, and organizing intersect with complex historical, economic, social, and political processes (Fisher 1999, Fisher and Smith 2012). These processes have often disadvantaged people in the region, creating what activists and others sometimes refer to as the “national sacrifice zone” of the United States because of the various disparities that continue to plague Appalachia, despite its role as a provider of a cheap source of energy in the form of coal (Berry 2008, H. Lewis 2012). Often social movements brought together a combination of local people and people from outside the region, sometimes creating an insider/outsider conflict within and outside of social movements and social movement organizations (Foster 1987, Kiffmeyer 2008, Newfont 2012). Other scholars have noted the need for social movements within Appalachia to scale up to a global context, reaching out to communities across the globe with similar environmental and economic problems caused by the same neoliberal economic policies (Reid and Taylor 2002, 2010, Fisher 1999). In this dissertation, I draw upon several bodies of work within Appalachian Studies to explore activism against mountaintop removal coal mining in both an historical and present-day context: the exploitation of Appalachia by the coal industry, the early anti-strip mining movement, understandings of place in Appalachia, and the movement against mountaintop removal mining.

Resisting Coal: The Exploitation of the Land and People
Many scholars in Appalachian Studies have detailed the history of the exploitation of the people and the land in Appalachia by the coal industry. Helen Lewis (1978), Dwight Billings and Kathleen Blee (2000), John Gaventa (1983), Ronald L. Lewis (1989), David Whisnant (1983), Ron Eller (1982) document the ways that outside capitalists from large urban areas came to Appalachia after the Civil War to access the large wealth of natural resources available in the region—especially in the form of timber and coal. In addition to accessing natural resources, they were also able to access human resources in the form of cheap labor. The Civil War afforded union soldiers from northern cities the opportunity to observe the largely untouched timber of the region. In her book *Feud*, Altina Waller (2012) demonstrates how the infamous historical events of violence between the Hatfield and McCoy families in West Virginia were actually fueled by conflicts over land, timber rights, and a changing way of life in Appalachia post-Civil War. An increasing population combined with decreased farm sizes meant that many young men and their families found themselves without a way to become economically independent. Timber and coal companies made lucrative deals during this period, cheaply buying up large tracts of land, timber, and/or mineral rights in order to extract these natural resources that were in high demand fueling reconstruction and industrialization in the United States. Local people in need of income to supplement their dwindling subsistence economies were often willing to sell their land, timber, or mineral rights to speculators (Williams 2002).

As Lewis (1993), Eller (1982), and Gaventa (1983) note, coal companies were also responsible for bringing in eastern European immigrants and former African slaves to work in the mines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hiring various
ethnic and racial groups to work in the mines worked to the advantage of coal companies, as they provided a cheap source of labor, and also allowed coal companies to use language, culture, and physical barriers to try to keep miners from forming unions.

During this same period of time, many coal companies created company towns called coal camps. Coal camps were controlled and owned by the companies and provided housing, schools, churches, stores, and medical care for all of its miners and their families (Corbin 1981, Eller 2008, Williams 2002). This created a type of dependency on the coal industry, as miners were paid in company script and could only spend this currency at the company store. When the advent of new machinery (specifically the continuous miner) significantly decreased the need for underground coal miners in the early 1950s, coal companies stopped using the coal camp model, sold houses and buildings to private parties, and stopped offering services in these towns (Eller 1982, 2008, Williams 2002). Many residents of Wise County, like elsewhere in the coalfields, remained in company houses, buying them from the coal company, and several of the houses in these former coal camp communities are still in existence in the twenty-first century (Lalone 2006).

In his seminal work *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*, John Gaventa (1983) described the power that coal companies wielded in these coal company towns. He suggested that the people in power (i.e. coal company heads) influenced, shaped, and changed the way the powerless (i.e. coal miners) understood themselves and their issues through hegemony: “Through the invocation of myths or symbols, the use of threat or rumors, or other mechanisms of power, the powerful may be able to ensure that certain beliefs and actions emerge in one context while apparently contradictory grievances may be expressed in others” (1980:19). While
this analysis provided an important contribution to understanding how coal companies held a certain amount of power in coalfield communities both historically and today, he failed to account for the agency and creativity of coalfield residents to both explicitly and implicitly resist the power of coal and other powerful corporations. While this dissertation takes into account the influence and dominance of the coal industry—both in past and present moments—in a coalfield community, perhaps more importantly, it seeks to understand the agency of Appalachian people to stand up to environmentally and economically destructive practices and to envision new futures.

Following Immanuel Wallerstien’s (1974) theories of the capitalist world system, the history and continued exploitation of Appalachian resources and labor led Appalachian scholars to envision the region as an “internal colony” or “internal periphery” (Lewis 1978, Walls 1978). This framework allowed scholars to understand the role of capitalist accumulation in the region’s poverty that had been the focus of many social and governmental programs during the 1960s, including the Appalachian Volunteers, the creation of the Appalachian Regional Commission, and the War on Poverty’s Office of Economic Opportunity (Eller 2008). Rather than blaming the cultural traits of Appalachian people for the poverty of the region as Jack Weller (1965) and others had previously done, the “internal colony model” was an important turning point in studies of the region, as it created a space for critique of extractive industries and their economic and political power. As Mary K. Anglin noted in a 2015 panel discussion at the Appalachian Studies Association annual conference in Johnson City, Tennessee, the colonialism model was appealing because it offered “an explicitly political response to a dominant narrative about Appalachia promulgated for more than a century through
popular media and policymaking circles alike” (Anglin 2016: 51). However, as Anglin argued, moving past the view of Appalachia as an internal colony is an important step in understanding connections between places, rather than perpetuating the myth of an isolated and different Appalachia. Unfettered capitalist accumulation certainly has serious social and economic consequences for places like Appalachia, but other impoverished regions in the U.S. and across the globe are also the recipients of consequences from similar processes. Furthermore, as Barbara Ellen Smith and Steve Fisher noted in the same panel discussion, the view of Appalachia as an internal colony also obscures the power relationships and hierarchies that happen *within* the region (Fisher and Smith 2016). As they argue in the conclusion of their 2012 edited volume, *Transforming Places: Lessons from Appalachia*, “every place, even the beloved homeplace of Appalachia, is marked by and implicated in the exploitation and injustice that are produced beyond, but also within, its boundaries” (Fisher and Smith 2012: 269). This analysis seeks to understand the ways that the lived experiences of people in central Appalachia were both place-based and also connected to larger national and global processes. As anthropologist Ann Kingsolver suggests, “People all around the world participate in multiple communities, wherever they happen to live” (2011: 9). These multiple communities become apparent as residents in Wise County struggled against localized environmental and economic problems that were connected to larger national and global processes. This understanding of the local, national, and global scales of MTR was apparent in the narratives of residents and was a critical part of local ideas about community and the place of Wise County in a larger world. However, before the modern movement against mountaintop removal mining, in which many activists have made
connections to larger global processes of neoliberal economic policies (McNeil 2011), residents in Appalachia struggled against the beginnings of surface coal mining.

The Early Anti-Strip Mining Movement

During the 1960s, activists from all over the United States flocked to the region in the form Appalachian Volunteers and VISTAs to join local residents who “challenged the power of the coal industry over the economy, health, and lives of coal country people and struck at the heart of the systemic problems such as land use, taxation, and the hidden human costs of an extractive, single-industry economy” (Eller 2008:144). Historian Thomas Kiffmeyer examined the history of the Appalachian Volunteers, tracing their beginnings as an organization comprised of local youth to their later days as radical activists against strip mining. In his work alone, it is evident that people outside the region have been interested in regional identities and place-based struggles for over 40 years.

Often joining with local forces, the Volunteers began to challenge existing political and economic structures that they saw as the root of the poverty, environmental disaster and other social problems in Appalachia. This influx of volunteers from outside the region, many of whom stayed in the region to raise families and establish non-profits, created uncertainty as to who is and is not “Appalachian”- a topic that remains salient for activists in the anti-mountaintop removal movement today (McNeil 2011, R. Scott 2012).

Historian Ron Eller suggests that is was during the 1960s that Appalachian identity came to be associated with these regional battles. He asserts that,

Even those areas of Appalachia that had never experienced coal mining came to identify with the loss of independence, devastation to the land, and threat to cultural traditions dramatized by events in the coalfields. (Eller 2008:144)
This identity crossed the regional border of the coalfields to encompass non-coal areas of Appalachia as well. This regional identity continues to be fluid and dynamic with increased activism in the twenty-first century. Indeed as more and more activists outside the region take up the fight against the coal industry, communities in central Appalachia are making more conscious connections with communities outside of the coalfields (Bell 2016). For example, Eller discusses the 2007 action at the Bank of America in Asheville, North Carolina, where 50 demonstrators protested the bank’s financial investment and backing of Massey Energy and Arch Coal. Both companies produce coal through strip mining and mountaintop removal mining. Eller asserts,

The event in Asheville, however, symbolized an important change in the way American understood Appalachia. Asheville was an unlikely place to find demonstrations against the coal industry. That no coal was mined within a hundred miles of the old Blue Ridge town, which had become a prosperous cultural and recreational icon of the new southern highlands, signified both the acceptance of a broader regional identity since the 1960s and a shift in popular perceptions about regional distinctiveness. (Eller 2008: 258)

Certainly this protest in Asheville (and those that have since taken place in cities like Charlotte, North Carolina; Knoxville, Tennessee; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) illustrates a shift in ideology that suggests coal is no longer seen as a problem only to be dealt with in the coalfields, but rather a problem of a larger scale, one that involves multinational corporations, banks, and governments. Alongside historians Kiffmeyer and Eller, this work examines the broad context and scale of the devastating practice of mountaintop removal mining. Not only do college students continue to filter in to the region to help local organizations (including the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards) in their attempts to stop mountaintop removal mining, but local activists have noticed the importance of connecting with national and global organizations whose fight
goes beyond the localized effects of surface mining to encompass larger problems of
global warming and climate change (McNeil 2011). Additionally, many of the members
of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards, like other similar organizations in the
region, were former VISTAs or Appalachian Volunteers who were instrumental in the
early days of the anti-strip mining movement.

Regionalism and Place in Appalachian Studies

Appalachian scholars have also turned to the concept of place, and more
specifically region, in order to highlight how some of the problems discussed above are
part of larger national and global processes (Powell 2010, Reid and Taylor 2002, 2010, H.
Lewis 2012). A number of these works provide a framework for understanding the ways
that activism is both created and complicated by processes across various scales.

Douglas Powell (2010) employs the concept of critical regionalism in order to
understand the local-global connections of Appalachian problems. He argues that regions
are not places themselves as much as they are relationships among places that connect
together diverse actors and locales through the linking “moments of cultural struggle to
larger patterns of history, politics, and culture, by understanding how they are
linked…through relationships of power that can be material and cultural” (2007:20-21).
In Appalachia, the struggle over mountaintop removal mining in certainly liked to history,
politics, and culture regionally, nationally, and globally. Furthermore, Powell argues that
while regions are certainly distinctive in their specific localized problems, there are also
many commonalities that link them with other places across the globe. In an era of
multinational coal corporations, this is certainly evident in communities all over the
world experiencing environmental problems created by similar destructive mining practices.

Similarly, Herbert Reid and Betsy Taylor (2002) suggest that the academic work of Appalachian studies is stuck in the nation-region problematic. They argue that because scholars of Appalachia have been so concerned with refuting stereotypes, much of regional scholarship has created an identity politics of Appalachia that is uncritical of global processes that affect the socio-economic status of the region. They suggest that, “While various historical developments have prefigured ‘Appalachia as a global region’ today this analytical perspective is fundamental because of emerging new landscape(s) of power, resistance, and reconstruction” (Reid and Taylor 2002:12). For Reid and Taylor, that global capitalism and transnational corporations continue to hold Appalachia in a marginal status as a “throwaway region” demonstrates the importance of looking at Appalachia as a global region (2002:27). They argue that local and global scales are interconnected, and while place or region remains an important starting point, regional studies of Appalachia need to pursue a critique of these global processes that create and maintain inequitable processes at the local level. This analysis seeks to lie bare some of these local, state, national and global connections that demonstrate how power is wielded across scales to the disadvantage of many people living in Appalachia.

Like Powell and Reid and Taylor, John Gaventa suggests that Appalachia can connect to regions in other parts of the world that experience similar injustices: “Appalachia has knowledge and experience that could help us understand and speak to these problems of inequality and identity that are so much a part of the issues of globalization and conflict in the rest of the world” (2002:89-90). The potential for
Appalachia to connect to other places and broader patterns of inequality is important as global capitalism and neo-liberal policies continue to disadvantage communities across the nation and the world.

Scholars of Appalachia have moved beyond the pendulum swing response to culture of poverty models to look at more complex ideas about identity politics and place-making. Rather than just asserting a new and different Appalachia from the one that is portrayed in stereotypes and media representation, scholars are now exploring connections of the region to larger scales, as well as diversity within the region. These new studies demonstrate the importance of place, place-making, and region in Appalachian Studies, as grassroots movements continue to be place-based, although not place-bound, and connected to larger scales. This analysis builds upon these theories of place and region in Appalachia and maintains that place-making is not only central to understanding various regional identities, but also to investigating the different ways that national and global processes affect how Appalachian people experience and understand the social, economic, and environmental problems of their communities.

Opponents of MTR recognize the connection of the local practice of strip mining to the nation’s insatiable appetite for cheap energy, as well as the global problem of climate change. Environmental groups are constantly calling for the retirement of coal as one of America’s main energy sources to be replaced with solar, wind, and other renewable energy sources. Discussions of global warming are often brought up by opponents of mountaintop removal who claim that if the harmful gasses emitted by burning coal in power plants are not drastically cut back, the earth’s oceans will begin to take over land mass (McNeil 2011). Furthermore, some activists are often quick to note
the connection of mountaintop removal to global capitalism. The protest at a Bank of America location in Asheville that Ron Eller documents suggests that many mountaintop removal activists have taken notice of broader capitalist practices that fund and procure large profits from the practice.

**Mountaintop Removal and Activism in Appalachian Communities**

As noted above, historical accounts of social movements surrounding opposition to mountaintop removal mining and/or strip mining in Appalachia have often focused on the courageous actions of individuals or groups who are fighting these environmentally destructive practices (Bingman 1993, Burns 2007, Cable 1993, Davis 2006, Montrie 2005, Szakos 1993). An edited volume of oral histories recounts the stories of numerous individuals who have been fighting against mountaintop removal and strip mining for many years (House and Howard 2009). While at least one scholar blamed the failure of the movement to end mountaintop removal on the apathy and internalization of stereotypes (House 2008), others have offered a more complex view of the problem, citing power hierarchies as a stumbling block in the struggle against mountaintop removal (Bell 2016, Billings 2008, R. Scott 2010). Following this trajectory, I aim to provide an anthropological view of the ways that everyday experiences intersect with power hierarchies creating different understandings of and views on the issue of mountaintop removal mining.

In her work in West Virginia, Rebecca Scott (2010) examines the ways that mountaintop removal mining is supported in the coalfields in relation to the national culture of the United States. She argues that the cultural politics of MTR respond to the connections between the region and the broader United States. For example, she argues
that coal miners play a two-fold role— they provide national energy security while also participating in a job that is favored for its normative masculine place in the American imaginary. She contends that the intersection between Appalachia as a marginalized “sacrifice zone” for the United States and the national identity making of Appalachian people provides insight into the cultural politics of MTR. Specifically she seeks to understand how coalfield residents are constructed and construct themselves as coalfield residents, including gender, race, class, regional and national identities as key parts of their subjectivities (R. Scott 2010: 17-18). In her exploration of the different ways that people feel about MTR and the coal industry, Scott seeks to understand the cultural context of this extractive practice, including the stereotyping or “othering” of the Appalachian region, the construction of mining as a masculine (and more specifically white, heterosexual, family-wage earning) job, divergent ideas about land use, differing versions of coalfield history, and ideas about Appalachia within the context of American citizenship.

In his investigation in to heritage tourism in southwest Virginia, anthropologist Ryan Chaney describes heritage as something immaterial that is passed from generation to generation: “It belongs to certain people and not to others. It is hereditary. For those people, their heritage might be thought of as an inalienable possession, something that is part of them or belongs to them by virtue of who they are” (2012:7). In this sense, coal heritage is something that is passed down from generations, and feels very personal. In considering coal heritage in southwest Virginia, it becomes apparent that there was not a single coal heritage narrative among residents, rather it varied based on experience with coal corporations, family and personal experiences in the mines (including in some
instances, fatalities), and union membership. While the heritage of coal was different because of different histories, the coal industry itself often sought to play off of a single narrative of coal’s importance in regional and national history and economy.

In her study of coal heritage and history in West Virginia, Rebecca Scott notes that, “Heritage shapes history into a conventional narrative marked by a compelling simplicity; the ‘coal heritage story’ substitutes a national allegory of development for the messy regional history of coal” (2010: 142). Indeed, in southwest Virginia, as elsewhere in the coalfields, the coal industry exploited feelings of local pride in coal heritage to their advantage, suggesting that a single coal history can be told, one that is full of the hard work and sacrifice of miners to help power the development and progress of the United States. However, Scott suggests that residents’ actual experiences and histories with their coal mining past are much more complicated: “cultural memory is an object of struggle in competing efforts to define the place and terms of action” (2010: 146).

Among residents in Wise County, while a shared knowledge of the community’s coal mining history was a common thread through narratives, personal and familial experiences with coal mining determined what coal heritage meant. For example, among former UMWA miners or their family members, an affinity was held towards the union, not coal companies. Other residents with family members who had been in an accident or died in the mines further held a more complicated understanding of coal heritage that went against the rosy portrait of hard working miners powering the electrical grid of the United States. Some residents did express a kinship with certain coal companies that they felt had been good corporate neighbors and employers. Despite these varying coal heritages, the coal industry continued to draw upon a sanitized notion of a single coal
heritage, one that erased the egregious health and safety violations of the past and present, the bloody struggle for unionization, and the recent economic and environmental problems of the region that were tied to mountaintop removal mining. This coal heritage discourse was evident in public conversations about coal’s role in the economy—past, present, and future. However among residents, the varying coal heritages contributed to the complex nature of life in the coalfields and the difficulty in finding one clear, linear path that would provide answers to the region’s economic and environmental problems.

This dissertation further seeks to understand some of the nuanced ways that both communities and politicians create ideas of place that contradict and compliment various perceptions of natural resource extraction. In his work on mountaintop removal in West Virginia, anthropologist Bryan T. McNeil (2011) examines this extractive practice as a logical outgrowth of the global project of neoliberalism. In particular, McNeil examines the ways that social processes are a part of the justification of the practice of mountaintop removal mining, and further, examines how communities and organizations mobilize resources to fight these practices. Like other anthropologists (Jacka 2015, Kirsch 2014, Li 2015, Nash 1970, Taussig 1980) working with communities who benefit very little economically from resource extraction, he takes a skeptical approach to the claims of the coal industry, such as those that suggest MTR improves land for development and the topsoil that is trucked in for reclaiming mine sites is superior to the native topsoil.

Working with a local organization in West Virginia, Coal River Mountain Watch, McNeil identifies the ways that activism in the mountains changed from the days of unionization, which was primarily male-led, to anti-MTR activism that is collaboratively led by women. Other scholars have also noted the importance of women in the anti-strip

McNeil further argues that CRMW in particular was able to transcend common problems in environmental activism in four ways. First, the organization’s work was based on community needs, rather than those of one labor group (such as the UMWA); second, the focus on lived experience in the coalfields moved away from common tropes in U.S. environmentalism about industrial progress and wilderness preservation; third, the activism moved away from zero-sum ideas about economy and environment, rather suggesting that both a healthy economy and environment were possible simultaneously; and fourth, they connected with organizations and communities across the nation that face similar struggles from the same organizations or power hierarchies that block progress. This analysis also examines the ways that activists in Wise County sought to move away from a strictly middle-class American view of environmentalism (Kempton et al 1999, Satterfield and Gregory 1998) to include other issues of social and economic justice that are an important part of 21st century environmental justice organizing in the United States. Activists and other local community members in Wise County envisioned a community that could be healthy both economically and environmentally.

Shannon Bell’s (2016) work on micromobilization in West Virginia coal communities also provides important insights into the reasons that some community members who were deeply and directly affected by the environmental and economic consequences of mountaintop removal mining chose not to participate in local organizations or movements against the practice. Bell discusses how even when participants in her Photovoice Project in southern West Virginia noticed and documented
coal-related problems, they often felt stifled in their ability to move their critiques of the coal industry to activism because of local elite and/or a lack of identification with other movement activists. Bell also documents the ways that the coal industry utilized media commercials, other advertisements (including billboards on West Virginia’s major thoroughfares), sponsorship of local sports teams, and support of political candidates to get their statements across that supporting coal meant supporting jobs, and ultimately communities. Specifically, Bell documents how the coal industry created stories that first, made the coal industry seem to be synonymous with coal miners; second, connected the production of coal to patriotism; and third, asserted that reclaimed strip mined land was an improved place for local residents to participate in numerous outdoor activities (Bell 2016: 99-102). Indeed as the contention in Wise County played out during my research, many of these same issues arose that suggested coal miners and other supporters of coal saw themselves as protectors of the coal industry in order to not just protect local and regional coal jobs, but also to be patriotic in support of the local and national economy. Further, some of these same residents saw strip mining as a viable way to create new recreation opportunities through the use of reclaimed land for golf courses, four wheeling trails, and experimental sites for the reintroduction of wildlife, such as Elk, into the mountains. Bell’s work provides important insights into the barriers that individuals in coalfield communities faced in their mobilization against the coal industry. This dissertation seeks to contribute to the growing body of scholarly work on mountaintop removal in Appalachia by demonstrating the ways that place-based environmental movements are dynamic and ever-changing to meet the most pressing needs of the community, as well as how these efforts are often thwarted or overshadowed by the
political and industrial elite who have the money and power to create discourses that can be extremely convincing to a population that continues to watch their coal mining jobs dwindle, their towns disappear as businesses shutter doors and windows, and their young people leave because of lack of employment opportunities.

**Environmental Movements in Anthropological Thought**

In addition to the work of Appalachian Studies scholars, many anthropologists and other social scientists have addressed the environmental consequences of global capitalism and neoliberalism around the globe. Examining the scholarly works of anthropologists and other social scientists that examine place-based movements, mining and activism, and environmental justice movements highlights some of the theoretical traditions that provide useful analytical tools for this dissertation.

**Place-Based Social Movements**

Within the field of anthropology, place-based environmental social movements have been the object of inquiry, demonstrating how connection to a specific local place provides an important entry into activism for residents who experience degradation of their environment, as well as loss of access to land, livelihoods, and cultural traditions (Escobar 2001, Escobar and Harcourt 2005, Kothari 2005, Rocheleau 2005, Gibson-Graham 2005). Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2000) noted the importance of viewing place not as a series of traits, but rather as a series of dynamic, ever-changing processes by which scholars can understand the complexities of a place/region connected across scales. Still other anthropologists have noted that the lived experiences of people in a certain place can change based on material and ideological realities (Rodman 2003, Filer
and Macintyre 2006), as well as by the highly politicized boundaries of inclusion and exclusion created by people within and outside a place (Perez 2004).

Anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992) and Anglin (2002a) call for an understanding of place in more complex terms—as the construction of an area that may have more variation than similarities within it. While it is certainly true that people may have more in common across scales than within a scale, place still remains an important category for analysis, as place-based struggles for environmental, social, and economic justice demonstrate that place is indeed an important and meaningful concept to many people with whom anthropologists work. Following this important understanding of place-making as a process, this work seeks to understand the ways that residents in Appalachia understand place as it is constructed not just through ideas, but also through lived experiences. In this analysis, place is seen as something that is dynamic, changing, and constantly constructed by political, social, and economic processes.

Attention to scale has become an increasingly important part of understanding place, as anthropologists have become more deliberate in revealing connections between local, national, and global scales. Although as Escobar (2001) and others warn, it is important not to lose site of the local in the global. Anthropologist Ann Kingsolver (2011) notes while grassroots movements are most often rooted in a specific place, place is a concept that is constantly evolving, changing, and morphing into something new and different for different people. In Appalachian coal communities, material conditions, politics, economics, and the environment are in constant flux, creating a space where it is
common for place to have a constantly changing meaning for various community members at any given moment.

The importance of place in environmental movements is further exemplified in the understanding of local knowledge, a concept that has been increasingly prioritized in anthropological work. For Escobar, local knowledge is linked to specific places: “Local knowledge is a mode of place-based consciousness, a place-specific (even if not place-bound or place-determined) way of endowing the world with meaning” (2001: 153). This type of knowledge allows anthropologists to see outside what is often viewed as “science based” or “Western” knowledge in order to understand how different people conceptualize things such as the environment in different ways. In environmental movements this idea of “indigenous knowledge” or local knowledge has become a central concern among anthropologists who wish to validate local concerns that may or may not follow into scientific models from the Global North (Agrawal 1995, Brosius 1997, Dove 2006, Kirsch 2006). In particular, this issue arises in mining communities across the globe, which is where I turn my focus to next.

Mining, Activism, and Corporate Control in Anthropological Literature

Resource extraction and mining in rural areas is often done at the economic and environmental expense of local people, and while some movements have been successful fighting these unjust practices, others have been hindered by the ability of corporations to quell opposition (Baviskar 2003, Nash 1993). Some scholars have dealt with the interplay between economy and environment in relation to the employment opportunities that are provided by industry, arguing that maintaining or gaining jobs often takes precedence over the sometimes invisible effects of environmental pollution (Heyman 1995, Gould
Mining and resource extraction in many areas across the world have created and/or exacerbated social, political, economic, and environmental problems in local communities. The environmental pollution caused by the operation of various types of mines by large multinational corporations has spurred protests in many communities, but as many scholars have noted, these protests are often as much about social, economic, and cultural resources and their meanings as they are about the environment itself (Banks 2002, Filer and Macintyre 2006, Trigger 1999). In many cases, indigenous rights to the land and autonomy in resource control are important engines of protests and movements against corporations working in local communities (Conklin and Graham 1995). Human rights violations can result from the egregious practices of resource extraction by multinational corporations. These abuses are able to occur because it is socially, culturally, and legally acceptable to put certain groups of people, such as communities of color, at risk (Faber 2008, Johnston 1995).

Some anthropologists have discussed mining in terms of a “resource curse,” meaning that resource extraction often disadvantages the local communities where the natural resources are located, while the corporations who own the means and modes of production reap large profits (Ballard and Banks 2003, Filer and Macintyre 2006). These disadvantages to local communities often include a lack of other development, internal political tensions, human rights abuses, and cultural loss. Additionally, in some places like Papua New Guinea, the inception of gold mining operations meant funding for roads, schools, and other infrastructure support came almost exclusively from the mining industry, as the state could not provide similar funds (Golub 2014). Some anthropologists
(Filer and Macintyre 2006, Imbun 2007, Lahiri-Dutt 2011, Macintyre 2011) have also noted that this “overreliance” on resource extraction makes reactions to the environmental pollution caused by mining more complicated, as communities do not have one uniform view of or experience with mining.

Scholars studying mining conflicts around the world have noted how corporations use “audit culture” to shift the focus from the environmental and social consequences that are a result of destructive practices of natural resource extraction to instead highlight the ways that their companies, or the industry in general, has complied with regulations and are doing the “right thing” (Strathern 2000, Li 2015, Kirsch 2014). Audit culture lays bare the practices and procedures for monitoring environmental performance by companies, but it further defines what is deemed acceptable practice. As these scholars have shown, audit culture “promotes the view that markets and corporations provide more efficient solutions to environmental problems than regulations” (Kirsch 2015: 226). This idea that the market can best take care of environmental problems is a concept that is echoed by the power elite, including politicians, coal company heads, and other governmental officials.

Beyond the literature on mining, other social scientists have focused on the ability of corporations to control information about pollution, creating barriers for community members trying to obtain environmental justice. June Nash and Max Kirsch (1988) explore the ways in which the development of discourse about health issues and related environmental pollution is controlled by corporate polluters. Emphasizing power hierarchies among different groups affected by toxic pollutants, they argue that corporations are able to not only select and edit scientific data, but also many times they
are involved in the hiring of specialists (some of whom formerly worked for state or federal agencies) who can influence decision-making processes at the legal level. They additionally note that community members have a different position in the development of these discourses, as they are often discouraged from confronting the corporate polluters, especially in economically dependent areas where the corporation may be the only reliable source for jobs and tax base. Additionally, scientific studies are often inconclusive in regards to epidemiological studies in heavily polluted areas. This combined with the corporation’s control of the environmental and health discourse, as well as the arena in which pollution can be discussed, creates an atmosphere where workers and community members are responsible for their own health problems. The ambiguity of scientific studies about linkages between pollution and health problems alongside the corporation’s ability to control discourses create an unfavorable arena for people to achieve environmental justice.

Similarly, sociologist Kenneth A. Gould (1993) examines the ways in which “key actors in local natural resource conflicts manipulate the primary and secondary social visibility of pollutants in order to promote or prevent the emergence of a local constituency supporting remediation and regulation” (1993: 159). Whereas primary visibility refers to the environmental impacts that have physical implications (things that can be seen, smelled, or felt), secondary visibility refers to the information provided to the community by an institution (i.e.- government, non-governmental organization, or the media) about an environmental pollutant. Specifically, Gould examines how despite the level of visibility, various communities react to environmental pollutants in different ways, dependent upon how “industry, environmental organizations, and the various levels
of government attempt to manipulate public perception of local environmental conditions to promote their political/and or economic interests” (1993:175). Utilizing case studies from six environmentally contaminated communities in the United States and Canada, he demonstrates that private capital and government attempt to minimize the primary social visibility of pollution, and instead emphasize the positive (economic) contributions to the community.

Anthropologist Mark Moberg explores how corporate polluters are able to preempt collective environmental action through discourse of corporate social and environmental responsibility. Specifically utilizing ethnographic material from research in Mobile County, Alabama, Moberg examines how through the adoption of a “Responsible Care” policy, the local polluting industry was able to maintain a positive image of their role in the community as an environmentally responsible corporate neighbor, stifling opposition to its polluting practices. Additionally, the economic dependence on the local chemical plants created mixed reactions for community members who felt that this was the only option for jobs in the community. Economy, alongside the ability of the corporation to preemptively promote themselves as an ideal corporate neighbor, made it extremely hard for residents to challenge the pollution and its resulting health effects. Other scholars (Checker 2002, Li 2015) have also noted the ways that corporations promote social responsibility in order to gain community (and national and international) support. This analysis follows the scholarly work on the promotion of social (and environmental) responsibility by corporations to demonstrate the ways that these polluting industries are able to gain and maintain support for their practices among local residents, politicians, and regulatory agencies. It further examines how the
participation of corporations in the environmental regulatory process allows these power
holders to decide best practices and control conversations about industry, environment,
economics, and health.

In addition to the ways that corporations control discourses about their polluting
practices, varying ideas of pollution and environment are commonplace in communities
around the world and are often not necessarily based on scientific standards from the
Global North. For example, Li (2015) documents how local residents in a Peruvian
community had drastically different ideas about pollution from the scientific experts
hired by the mining company. While scientific experts deemed the local canal water used
by local residents as not potable, and therefore already polluted, local residents
considered it to be the natural, and thus superior source of water. Differing ideas about
land/environment and resource use between local people and outside economic
developers, as well as differing internal understandings of who should be able to utilize
which aspects of nature, also create tensions in communities and social movements
around these issues (Darlington 2003). The construction of environmental imaginaries, or
differing conceptions of land and resource use, remains an important issue in
understanding contestation around the environment (Nesbitt and Weiner 2001, Nevas-
Graces 2004, McGregor 2004, Peet and Watts 1996). This analysis also considers the
ways that residents understand the environment- the air, water, land, and even
atmosphere- as an important point of entry for examining how local people position
themselves in the debate over mountaintop removal mining.

Environmental Justice Organizing
Like the anthropological literature on mining, social scientists concerned with environmental justice activism have examined the connections between poverty, environmental devastation, and polluting industries, focusing on the ecological, economic, political, and human health consequences created by bad corporate practices (Agyeman and Evans 2004, Allen 2003, Banks 2002, Bullard 1990, Harvey 1996, Ferguson 2005, Freudenburg 1992, Godoy 1985, Hayter, et. al. 2003, Naples 1992, Powell 2007, Rangan 1996, Rocheleau 2005, Trigger 1999). In the global North these scholars have paid particular attention to the location of polluting industries, such as power plants and waste disposal sites, and their close physical proximity to socially and economically marginalized communities, especially those with populations consisting mostly of African Americans, Latino/as, and other people of color (Brodkin 2009, Bullard 1990, Powell 2007). These practices allow corporate profits to be maximized with little concern of the outcry that might emerge over the environmental and health affects of industrial processes on certain populations. Research on the “jobs versus the environment” debate (Checker 2007, Gulbrandsen and Holland 2001, White 1996) demonstrates the controversial ways that environmental issues are connected to social, economic, and political processes in local communities, as well as how economic ties to industry create potential barriers to organizing against corporate polluters. Polluting industries promise major economic development and financial incentives to often already impoverished communities, but in actuality these corporations often receive large tax incentives from local and state government, and in return offer very few jobs that community members can occupy (Allen 2003, Fortun 2001). Residents living in close proximity to pollution are often divided in their views on polluting industries, as some residents believe in or
benefit from economic incentives from industries, while others understand that the economic benefits do not outweigh the environmental, and in many cases human health, consequences of these industries (Allen 2003, Moberg 2002). Additionally, underhanded dealings by corporations, such as the close dealings between corporations and government officials, exacerbate the kinds of barriers that community members face who want to achieve environmental justice (Button 2010, Faber 2008, Fortun 2001, Gedicks 2011, Phillips 2011, Sponsel 2011). This dissertation highlights a community whose population is primarily white (97%), but as scholars have noted and was outlined above, Appalachia has been a marginalized region in the United States and contains many (although not all) of the same structural inequalities (income, educational, etc.) that communities of color experience, creating a favorable political and economic climate for polluting industries to operate in. Therefore, this analysis uses an environmental justice framework to examine the work of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards. As SAMS members and other local residents fought against mountaintop removal mining and its environmental destruction, they were also instrumental in the creation of and participation in other community programs, especially those concerned with economic justice. For these activists, the issue of the coal industry was not just an environmental one, but one that also affected the social, economic, and health of their communities. Local organizers were keenly aware of the ways that the economic and environmental devastation tied to the coal industry was closely tied to social problems (young people moving away, lack of programs for youth, lack of funding for schools), as well as both physical and mental health issues (which included physical injuries to miners, rampant prescription drug abuse, and depression). Much of the environmental work undertaken by
SAMS members addressed community problems as a whole, rather than treating each one as a separate entity. As such, this dissertation considers the environmental justice approach of SAMS’ work in the coalfields as an attempt to create a better community in multiple ways—economically, environmentally, and socially.

**Economic Considerations in an American Region**

Growing out of the Marxist tradition in Anthropology, the fields of political economy and political ecology have largely taken into consideration that ways that global capitalism (and neoliberalism specifically, since the early 1980s) have played a role in the lives and experiences of peoples all over the world. Anthropologist William Roseberry suggests that one aspect of political economy that has emerged within anthropology over the last few decades is “its attempt to understand the emergence of particular peoples at the conjunction of local and global histories, to place local populations in the larger currents of world history” (1989:49). For example, anthropologist Eric R. Wolf (1980) documented an alternative view of peasant societies in Europe and across the globe, allowing subaltern imaginings and telling of history to take the place of the typical Eurocentric view of history, revealing alternate views of history as well as the power relationships and class considerations that informed these histories. Wolf’s work is both historical and comparative—it asks what forces were at work across the world as history was being made. Furthermore, Wolf’s use and reimagining of Marx’s theories included giving agency to working classes, as well as revealing power and hierarchy. This analysis also seeks to allow people to tell their own stories and account for their own histories rather than suggesting one hegemonic view. It further takes into account the ways that ideology, not just material conditions, affect economic (and other forms of) decision-
making in the coalfields. While classical economists such as Adam Smith would consider some decisions made by local residents in Appalachia (such as those to protest coal mining) as “irrational” because of the economic benefits to employees as well as the local government, an anthropological examination reveals the various factors at play (such as history and cultural heritage) that influence how people place themselves in the debate over mountaintop removal mining.

Economist David Ruccio takes seriously the ways that citizens envision economy, calling these differing conceptions and portrayals “everyday economic representations” (2008:7). Put another way, they are the understandings about the economy that are created in everyday life and are connected to specific experiences and histories. Other scholars (David Harvey 1996, S. Scott 1995) have examined how class provides an important analytical category for understanding how people view their local, state, national, and global economies. Alongside Shaunna Scott (1995) and Dwight Billings (2016), this analysis maintains that class is a fluid identity category among many. Class is not all-encompassing, rather it intersects with gender, religion, political affiliation, employment, and other social locations to create identity. In particular, this dissertation considers how retirees and members of the United Mine Workers of America envisioned themselves as part of a global working class, and how this in turn, effected their own views on economy and industry-- locally, nationally, and globally. Additionally, this dissertation follows the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006) in examining the ways that non-capitalist economies exist within the dominant capitalist economy, and how members of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards envisioned alternative economies for their community.
As economy and environment are inextricably linked all across the globe, and poignantly so in places where resource extraction is one of the only viable economic options for making a living, the fields of political economy and ecological anthropology intersect in a way that provides an important way of looking at and understanding the complex realities of people living in these community. In their article, “Locating the Political in Political Ecology,” Lisa Gezon, Susan Paulson, and Michael Watts argue that political ecology shares a set of concepts that include “A refined concept of marginality, in which political, economic, and ecological expressions may be mutually reinforcing… [and] the recognition of a plurality of positions, perceptions, interests, and rationalities in relation to the environment” (2003: 205-206, my emphasis). The confluence of politics, economy, and environment runs through the daily lives of residents in Appalachia in ways that affect not only the materiality of daily life in the coalfields, but also the ways that people think about their lives, their communities, and their futures.

Much attention within political ecology has been focused on the global South, but like Peter Walker (2003), I utilize concepts from political ecology to demonstrate the ways that the same forces and power structures can be at work both in the global South and the global North. Political ecologists, like Appalachian Studies scholars, have increasingly called for a focus on the ways that global forces affect local lives. This dissertation draws parallels between Appalachia and places across the globe that are affected not only by similar (and sometimes the same) corporations, but similar types of corruption, political dealings, and other transactions that benefit an elite few and disadvantage whole communities.
Political ecologist Paul Robbins’ (2000) theory of corruption in natural resource development is especially instructive in understanding the ways that politics and economics intersect in areas with natural resource extraction. Similar to Li (2015) and Kirsch’s (2014) understandings of corporate green washing and audit culture, Robbins argues that corruption is an important analytical category that provides an explanation as to why natural resource management can be ecologically unsustainable (Robbins 2000:424). Alongside Robbins, I maintain that corruption can also provide insights into hidden modes of power within natural resource management. In the coalfields of Appalachia, corruption is known to be commonplace among politicians and the coal industry (Billings and Blee 2000, Morton 1982), but the ways in which this corruption occurs is sometimes within the legal system (such as the use of consensus building in audit culture), not transformed from legal authority as Robbins’ definition suggests, demonstrating alternative ways that power is wielded.

Alongside anthropologist James Scott, I view power as a system of domination in which the main goal is to “define what is realistic and what is not realistic and to drive certain goals and aspirations into the realm of impossible” (Scott 1987:326). Seen in this way, power can be both overt (i.e.- actual threats of violence) and/or covert (i.e.-positions of authority used to gain trust or loyalty). In Southwest Virginia, while a few incidents of violence speckled my informant’s narratives about life in the coalfields, most of the ways in which power was observed happened in more covert ways—who was privileged to speak first at public meetings, whose voices were covered in local media of events, meetings, and other coal related events, and the ways in which local authority figures set the terms of conversations taking place about coal and the future of the coalfields. Power
seen in this way is based in social relationships (Wolf 1990) and is enacted by those whom Sociologist Daniel Faber (2008) terms the “power elite”—a concept borrowed from C. Wright Mills (2000 [1956]) that describes the members of the capitalist class who hold positions of authority in both the public (government) and private (corporate) sectors. “Power elites” assert control over environmental issues through relationships with foundations, public-policy organizations, non-profits, research groups, and others that shape public opinion about environmental problems. These relationships form what Faber (2008) calls “the polluter-industrial complex.” Perhaps most explicitly these relationships became obvious during several political campaigns that took place during my research— the U.S. Presidential race, the U.S. House of Representatives District 9 race, and the U.S. Senate race in 2012; and the Virginia Governor’s race in 2013. In all of these races, in addition to the politicians and their campaigns, other foundations and Super-Pac groups also wielded power in setting the content of local debates and conversations that took place in each election. Specifically this research shows the ways that the “power elite” of the coal industry, alongside local politicians with a financial, social, or cultural stake in the industry, were able to influence public discourse about coal. David Harvey (1996) and Alf Hornborg (2001) argue that in order for concerns of environmental justice to be addressed, activists are forced to make arguments based on economic valuations and speak in a way that is convincing to those in power (i.e. those with money).

This power often happened through political means or processes. Here I use “political” to indicate “the practices and processes through which power, in its multiple forms, is wielded and negotiated” (Paulson et al. 2005, 28). Specifically, I saw the
“political” taking place at mine permit hearings with the state regulatory agency and public meetings with local or state governmental officials involving economic and environmental issues. At these meetings local, regional, and state leaders and corporate officials were almost always prioritized to speak first before “ordinary” citizens were afforded the opportunity. In these situations, power was wielded through their ability to speak and *be heard* first, when the largest number of people (including media) was in attendance to hear (and report on) their views, perhaps dissuading some attendees from sharing an alternate view. While the ability of the “power elite” to control the discourse about environment was clearly evident in this research, environmental justice activists and community members often attempted to overcome these limitations and create counter-hegemonic discourses opposing mainstream ideas about economy or environment (Anglin 2002a, Billings 2016, R. Scott 2010).

**Conclusion**

Everybody and every community, place, and region needs stories, narratives, tales, and theories to serve as moral and intellectual frameworks. Without a “story,” a framework, we don’t know what things mean…Occasionally people rise and try to tell, construct a new story for a changing world. We need a new story for the problems we face today. (H. Lewis 2012: 183)

This dissertation is an attempt to follow the works of many great scholars who have examined and theorized marginalized populations all over the world. It is an attempt to allow people to tell their own stories of a certain place in a certain time. As Helen Lewis reminds us, in order to understand what things mean, and also to address the problems of the world we live in today, we need a new story. We need stories to reveal the ways that inequalities in coalfield communities continue to exist, and we need stories to demonstrate how residents continue to resist and fight for their future despite living in
a community plagued by economic and environmental devastation. Many residents in Wise County told these stories, and throughout this dissertation I attempt to highlight their voices and respectfully emphasize the larger regional and global contexts of their lives, experiences, and thoughts.

Taken together, the theoretical foundations of this research draw attention to the ways that residents who live in an economically and environmentally marginalized community in the United States understand their lives at multiple scales, and the powerful forces that help construct these understandings. Drawing upon work in Appalachian Studies, this analysis considers the importance of place-making in understanding community responses to environmental issues, the historical and current ways that coal companies and other powerful corporations have exploited the region, and the anti-MTR movement’s legacy of challenging coal corporations and envisioning alternative economic and environmental futures for their communities (Anglin 2016, Bell 2016, Fisher and Smith 2012, McNeil 2011, Reid and Taylor 2002). Within anthropology and other social sciences, the work on environmental justice and place-based movements (Checker 2007, Escobar 2001, Moberg 2002) and their connections to global processes, corporate control of environmental resources and management (Harvey 1996, Kirsch 2014, Li 2015), and environmental and economic imaginaries (Gibson-Graham 2006, Peet and Watts 1996, Nesbitt and Weiner 2001, Ruccio 2008, S. Scott 1996, Billings 2016) that are created through material conditions and ideology provide insight into understanding an Appalachian coalfield community that is, like other coalfield communities, heading towards a post-coal future. While the economy and environment are intimately connected at local, national, and global scales, residents often varied in
their experiences and understandings of the ecological devastation of mountaintop removal mining, as well as how they understood their present and the future economic condition in the county. Of particular importance is the ways that political influence, experience, and imaginings of environment and economy intersected for residents as they envisioned the future of their community and their region.

**Methodological Considerations**

This dissertation draws upon 18 months of fieldwork conducted in Wise County, Virginia in 2012 and 2013, and utilizes data gathered from interviews, archival research at the Department of Mines, Minerals, and Energy (DMME), informal activities, and participant observation. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with residents in Wise County. Specifically I used an “active-listening” approach to these semi-structured interviews, allowing the direction of the interview to be co-constructed by the researcher and the participant (Reinharz 1992, Schensul et.al. 1999:149, Wolcott 2005). This approach allowed new topics of importance to enter the interview schedule (such as economic transition) and further reinforced a locally informed context for ethnographic research. Additionally, all semi-structured interviews engaged residents in oral histories, asking questions in relation to growing up and/or living in a coalfield community. These life histories provided additional understandings of political change, highlighting how a particular place or heritage affects conceptions of “environment” and the stances that residents take vis-à-vis mountaintop removal mining and coal more generally (Checker 2005, Reinharz 1992). Interviews further demonstrated the ways that citizen narratives about pollution have been an important part of the evolution of
environmental movements, negotiating the divisions between “hard” science and everyday experience (Allen 2003, Checker 2007).

Participant observation at a wide variety of community events and provided important context for what people said in their interviews, creating a locally informed and grounded perspective that allowed for a deeper understanding of the constraints and pressures that people faced in making important decisions related to community issues, such as mountaintop removal (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002). This research utilized participant observation as an ongoing and fluid process that addressed how people participate in many different social networks and how they grapple with uncertainty and confusion within and across these networks (Emerson et. al. 1995). For example, public hearings about strip mining were very different sites of exchange between community members than when community members were within a peer group that held the same views on mountaintop removal. Participant observation at various events further exposed cultural patterns (such as hierarchies, political organization and leadership, social cooperation) that might not have otherwise been discernable to the researcher (Schensul et. al. 1999).

**Interviews**

I interviewed 29 residents of Wise County, one resident of neighboring Lee County and two residents of neighboring Harlan County, Kentucky (24 male, 8 female) who positioned themselves all along the spectrum of debate over coal related issues. However, my initial 10 interviews were with members of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards, with whom I had conducted preliminary research in 2009. My reasoning for these ten initial interviews was to reconnect and reestablish relationships
with community members I had previously worked with, while also allowing myself some time to get to know other members of the community when I initially returned to Wise County. At the end of each of these interviews, I asked participants if they had suggestions for other community or family members to interview. In some cases when an interviewee was particularly knowledgeable about a certain subject that piqued my interest (such as the United Mine Workers of America struggle against Patriot Coal), I would ask for specific suggestions for other community members who could speak to similar issues. An interview with a SAMS member who was also a former UMWA miner was what led me to several other interviews with UMWA members. In addition to asking interviewees for suggestions, I also asked friends from my mountain music community with ties to the county or region for suggestions or introductions to potential informants. At least one of these connections led to one of my interviews with a current underground miner. While I attempted to use all avenues of my life (familial, social, and professional) to gain access to a wide variety of informants, the contentious nature of the topic of coal and mountaintop removal mining, as well as my former associations (discussed further at the end of this chapter) limited my ability to gain a wide cross section of the community.

All interviews focused briefly on interviewees’ experiences growing up in coalfield communities, but more specifically focused on their understanding of how the community and the coal industry had changed over their lifetime. These interviews explored respondents’ views about coal mining in general, as well as each of the following: underground coal mining, surface mining, and the power plant located in Wise county. Interviewees ranged in their viewpoints on coal mining and the environmental consequences of strip mining, with the majority supporting coal mining, as well as strip
mining— as long as it is “done right” (n=17). Additionally, the local economy, both in the present and in the future, became an important topic of conversation in every interview, while the power plant was not something that was heavily or eagerly discussed. Interview participants were located all across Wise County (and the two other counties mentioned) and were referred by other interviewees or friends from other parts of southwest Virginia. Of the primary interviews, 13 were members of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards, 3 were current underground coal miners, 1 was a representative from a regulatory agency, 2 were representatives from the energy industry, 2 were retired underground coal miners, 2 were retired strip miners, 4 were UMWA retirees, 1 was a current UMWA international organizer, 3 were current or retired town officials, and 5 were other community members (see Appendix A). In order to protect the privacy of my informants, I use pseudonyms for all of my interviewees, as well as any community members I had contact with at public events or in public places. In a few cases, I change details of the informant’s life (such as occupation or age) in order to protect their identity. I do use actual names for public figures, such as state and federal politicians, whose role in this research came from newspaper articles, participation in public hearings and meetings, and other events that are part of the public record.

**Participant Observation**

Participant observation took place at a number of different venues and events during the course of this research. These were particularly important sites of research, as it allowed me to gain access to segments of the population that I did not have access to for formal interviews. During my 18 months of fieldwork I attempted to attend all events directly related to coal in Wise County, and in some cases outside of Wise County.
Additionally, I sought out events that addressed themes that arose during interviews. For example, tourism was often touted as one of the most promising economic alternatives to coal mining, and therefore I attended meetings and other public events that addressed this potential economic development. I found that more often than not, coal was a central topic for discussion, regardless of the public event, meeting or hearing, creating an even deeper and nuanced vision of this coalfield community. Public events highlighted tensions about coal, economy, and environment—both in regards to what was the current situation with the downturn in mining in Wise County, and in considering the future possibilities for a sustainable economy that could revitalize the community.

Specifically, participant observation took place at monthly membership meetings of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards (SAMS) at their office in Appalachia, VA; a community meeting with Anthony Flaccavento, the U.S. Congressional Candidate for the Democratic Party in Virginia’s 9th district, held in Andover, VA; a House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee Hearing on the Environmental Protection Agency’s proposed Greenhouse Gas New Source Performance Standards (NSPS) for utilities held in Abingdon, VA; the Remote Area Medical (RAM) Fair in Wise, VA; a special event hosted by the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards for the general public entitled “Weekend in Wise County”; a locally organized, grassroots pro-coal rally and prayer chain entitled “Standing United for Coal”; a meeting held by the Virginia Department of Transportation in Bristol, VA for public input about annual projects, including the Coalfield Expressway (November). a “Reading a Mine Permit” workshop hosted by SAMS; a special panel hosted by SAMS for an event “Mountain Justice Spring Break” entitled “Women in Appalachia”; local music festivals; the Virginia/Kentucky annual
district fair; two public conferences on the administrative denial of the Ison Rock Ridge Strip Mine Permit at the Department of Mines, Minerals, and Energy in Big Stone Gap, VA; two “Know Your Rights” trainings for communities affected by mining in Appalachia and Saint Charles, VA; a House Energy Subcommittee Hearing entitled “The Future of Coal: Utilizing America’s Abundant Energy Resources;” a presentation by the local tourism group Spearhead Trails; two two-day United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) bus trips with mine workers and their families from Southwest Virginia to Saint Louis, MO to rally at Arch Coal and Peabody Energy; the Town of Appalachia’s annual festival “Coal Railroad Days;” tour of the local coal museum; and local outdoor drama entitled “The Trail of the Lonesome Pine.” While I made concerted efforts to attend events that were promoted as “pro-coal” or otherwise supportive of the coal industry, this was not an easy task. Members of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards were much more active in the community-- both in creating and implementing events and programs, and also in attending other types of events, such as strip mine permit hearings. Public events, especially permit hearings and political events, allowed me to investigate public discourse on coal, as well as the workings of processes related to coal mining regulation.

**Informal Activities and Archival Research**

Other sources of data collection included opportunities for more informal participant observation that derive from living and being a part of the local community. For example, in 2013 while the race for governor was heating up in the state of Virginia, I witnessed numerous signs that demonized the democratic candidate as an enemy of coal. Editorials in the local newspaper revealed that both Democrats and Republicans were
claiming that the other candidate was “anti-coal.” Additionally, observations made driving through the community revealed local businesses publically supported coal through signs that proclaim “Friends of Coal” or “Coal=Jobs.” Other informal activities included the observation of less mining activity in places in Wise County (equipment moved off sites, lack of coal trucks on the road), and local businesses shutting down (including two prominent locations– a local, independent drug store and a local deli serving coal miners). Other types of informal participant observation include hiking/4-wheeling trips with informants on abandoned strip mine sites- reclaimed and not reclaimed; attendance at local community events such as the 4th of July parade and fireworks event, local school sporting events, and local music jams and festivals; and “hanging out” with informants. Along with data collected from informal participant observation, other sources include articles and editorials in the local and regional newspapers and television networks, as well as literature obtained at local businesses, events and community meetings, which included the quarterly newsletter of SAMS, the local workforce development publication created by the local community college, materials at meetings related to coal issues, and advertisements and other relevant material about the 2012 U.S. Presidential election and the 2013 Virginia gubernatorial race.

As with more formal participant observation, I attempted to pay attention to and write down anything related to coal that came my way. Sometimes this would be something as simple as observing a coal miner in the grocery store, still in the uniform of navy blue coveralls with orange stripes, covered in dust—a reminder that coal mining, while in decline, was far from gone. Other times it would be snapping a picture of a
homemade political sign supporting coal on a road trip to a fiddlers’ convention in another part of the state. All of these informal activities further enhanced my understandings of life in the coalfields.

In addition to collecting data from newspapers, fliers, and other print materials, I conducted archival research at the state regulatory agency, the Department of Mines Minerals and Energy (DMME). This research consisted of obtaining records of coal mining activity in Wise County and the state, as well as public records of complaints filed with the DMME about coal mining activities. With these public records, I sought to substantiate the things people told me, both with numbers about coal employment and production from the DMME, but also in the comments residents made directly to the DMME as the regulatory gatekeeper of mining permits.

**Data Analysis**

All interviews were transcribed. Additionally, when appropriate, public meetings and events were recorded and transcribed. Interviews and field notes were coded using an inductive, or open-coding methodology, allowing ideas and themes to emerge from the texts (Bernard 2006:493). Initial coding began in the field, as I first discovered major themes (such as economic transition) that emerged as part of the narratives of both my interviewees as well as people I interacted with on a daily basis (Strauss 1987). Because of the limitations in sampling of interviewees, I also gave ample weight to participant observation (including public comments, displays, or actions in relation to supporting mountaintop removal mining and coal burning) and archival research in an attempt to create a data set that is representative of all sides of the debate over mountaintop removal
mining. These observations are especially relevant and apparent in Chapter 4, which examines the political context of coal mining in southwest Virginia.

**Situating the Researcher**

While the intent of this research was to examine an entire community and their reactions to mountaintop removal mining, several barriers limited my data set to rely heavily on interviews and interactions with the local residents who were members of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards. First, the contentious nature of the research topic—mountaintop removal—made it a very polarizing and difficult topic to discuss with people who did not know me from the next “outsider” who was either documenting or protesting MTR. I found that while local activists were almost always willing, and even energized, to discuss the devastating natural resource extraction practice, other community members who either supported or felt more conflicted about the practice were often guarded about their feelings. I was a stranger to many community members, and even after explaining my research and reading my IRB cover letter, residents may still have doubted the intentions of my research. Additionally, some miners and other pro-coal community members described feeling negatively targeted by media and the federal or state government, perhaps making my position as a researcher even more tenuous.

Second, my own affiliations and previous work with Appalshop, a media arts and education non-profit just over the border in Kentucky, meant that I was automatically associated with the anti-mountaintop removal movement. Indeed, since its inception as a War on Poverty project in 1969, Appalshop has been known for (and often criticized locally for) its film and radio exposes of the environmental and economic problems created by resource extraction. Third, in 2009 I conducted preliminary dissertation
research in which I focused on the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards’ campaign to stop the construction of a 585 mega-watt coal fired power plant in Wise County. During this research with SAMS I became friends with many of their members and kept in touch with several of them until I began my dissertation work in 2012. Therefore my ability to gain access to all facets of the community had already been compromised based on both the topic of my research and my past work.

However, while much of this dissertation focuses on SAMS and their efforts to stop mountaintop removal, hold coal companies accountable for pollution, and create viable economic alternatives for their communities, I did find that one aspect of my personal life seemed to transcend political (or environmental) positions-- old time music. Thanks to my work as a music instructor both at the local community college, as well as in the after-school Junior Appalachian Musician program in Wise County, I met a wide range of residents, many of whom became friends and were willing to talk to me about their own feelings about mining, community, and life in the coalfields. Some of these friendships also led to interesting connections (and interviews) with other community members who were more sympathetic to the plight of coal mining in central Appalachia.

It was thanks to one music-related friend who lives outside of the coalfields but had been raised in neighboring Dickenson County that I was able to interview a local United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) organizer. This interviewee ultimately invited me to join two UMWA sponsored trips to Saint Louis, where I was able to talk to retired UMWA miners and observe first hand their critiques of the coal industry and corporate America more generally. The insights I gained from these interviews and observations are a
critical part of this dissertation, providing perceptions of an important piece of life in the coalfields that I would not have had access to without connections to the UMWA.

Finally, my identity as a married woman with two children (one of whom was only six months old when I began my research) also opened up doors that may have otherwise been shut to me. My family and I attended and participated in numerous community events, including local music festivals (at some of these we were musical performers), holiday celebrations and parades, and weekly farmers markets, music jams, and church services. At these events (as well as at the local grocery store, Mexican restaurant, and other establishments), we saw many of my informants. My children also attended a local childcare facility, owned by a mother and daughter who had strong family ties to the region and the coal industry. Both owners’ husbands were miners (along with many of the fathers of other children who attended there), and my daughter’s artwork would often come home on the back of mining maps. Furthermore, my husband’s occupation as an electrician— a job that is very peripherally related to the coal industry— also provided me with some connections that I may not have been able to gain on my own. For example, one of my banjo students’ grandfathers was an electrician in the mines, and he had numerous conversations with my husband about electrical work.

My position as a wife and mother, as well as my family’s interactions with other community members on a regular basis, seemed to help solidify my position as an active community member—at least to those community members we interacted with on a regular basis-- rather than as an “outside” researcher from a large university. In many ways, it seemed that my social location as a wife and mother allowed me to be able to connect to people on a most basic human level. In other words, it was easy to start
conversations with local residents about my children or my husband’s work. Many of
these relationships that were created from my family’s active role in the community have
continued beyond my time in Wise County, and we often make trips back to the area to
participate in local festivals, music schools and other events.
Chapter 3: Audit Culture and Corporate Control in the Coalfields

This chapter focuses on the roles of coal corporations, politicians, regulatory agencies, and local citizens in permit hearings and other public meetings held during the course of this research. Drawing upon the literature within political ecology and anthropology that examines corporate control of scientific information, the use of audit culture and technocratic management of resource extraction, and corporate green washing, I argue that one way that coal companies were able to maintain local support for their environmental practices was through their influence and privilege at hearings, as well as their control over the discourses and conversations that took place at these public meetings.

In order to examine the ways that permit hearings advantaged coal corporations and disadvantaged citizens with negative views of resource extraction, this chapter primarily relies on data gathered from participant observation at permit hearings and other public meetings with regulatory agencies. Because of the limitations of my data collection as described in Chapter 2, participant observation became an important method for witnessing “pro-coal” discourses that were a part of the setting in southwest Virginia. On occasion in this chapter, I utilize excerpts from interviews, as they provide additional context or clarification for the events and hearings being discussed. To begin the chapter, I provide an overview of the “pro-coal” signage that dotted the landscape of Wise County to provide a visual backdrop of my research site. I then discuss three public meetings that provide insight into how coal corporations benefited from their role in the regulatory processes involving surface mining in southwest Virginia.

Points of Divergence in the Coalfields
The issue of mountaintop removal coal mining, and coal mining more generally, divided residents in Appalachia along a spectrum of support for or opposition to this type of natural resource extraction. Residents often felt pulled in different directions along this continuum, as will be discussed throughout the dissertation. But these points of divergence over coal mining and mountaintop removal first became observable on the landscape of the community. Indeed, these symbols and images related to the coal industry were part of the everyday realities of residents in Wise County. Not only were surface mine sites, railways, abandoned and operational coal preparation plants, and coal trucks a part of the visible reminders of coal mining, but symbols and images primarily in support of the coal industry were found on every main street corner, four lane highway, and dirt road. While these coal-related symbols were not the only aspects of place that residents relied upon for their own visions and understandings of community, their presence certainly influenced the ways that residents viewed their home and the issues that affected their region.

A description of these images and symbols on the local landscape—often in the form of billboards, yard signs, bumper stickers, and business signs—provide an important tangible milieu for the permit hearings, political campaigns, and other coal related events and rallies that took place in the community. Driving to any location in the county entailed riding past numerous signs that suggested a proud support of coal. These signs and symbols, while commonplace, provided a constant reminder for community members that tensions were high, and indeed stakes were high, over the future of mountaintop removal mining and coal in Appalachia.

“Friends of Coal” Signs and Symbols on the Landscape
“Friends of Coal.”

“If You Don’t Like Coal, Don’t Use Electricity.”

“Save a Coal Miner, Shoot a Tree Hugger.”

“Yes Coal, NO-bama.”

“United for Coal.”

Each of these phrases were observed on bumper stickers on vehicles during my research, although they only begin to scratch the surface of the stickers that find their place on the back of minivans and pick-up trucks alike. A Calvin cartoon character urinating on Obama, a homemade sticker that stated “If you don’t like coal, then fuck you,” and a red sticker that carried the same visual design as the “Friends of Coal” bumper sticker that instead said “Enemies of Obama,” were among the other stickers that dotted cars on the landscape in Wise County.

Figure 3.1 A Mini-Van with “Pro-Coal” Bumper Stickers, Photo taken July 2013

Less common, but still noticed, were stickers that suggested a different (and less confrontational) view of coal mining. These bumper stickers stated things like “I Love Mountains” and “Friends of Mountains and Miners.” To only observe bumper stickers in the community would paint a simple portrait of what was a very complex issue for local
residents. For some, supporting coal mining did not mean that they blindly approved of all of the consequences of coal mining on their communities. This point became very clear to me in my preliminary dissertation research in 2009 when I accompanied a member of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards to visit a man in a small former coal camp community. Our objective in this visit was to discuss some details of his work to get the local coal company to clean up the high levels of dust that was covering houses, yards, gardens, clothes lines, front porches, and cars along the narrow roadway. Despite this man’s frustration with his unsuccessful attempts to get the coal company to clean up the dust, as we were leaving I noticed that his red pick up truck had two distinct bumper stickers- one celebrating the election of Obama, the other a Friends of Coal sticker. If I had not been convinced before, this moment certainly solidified to me that the debate over coal and mountaintop removal mining was not simple, and it was not black and white.

My research also demonstrated that those who proudly stood up with great conviction against mountaintop removal coal mining were not simply against all coal mining; indeed, many of these residents had family members who worked in or on top of mines. This liminal area of positionality that most residents occupied cannot be summed up by a simple “jobs OR environment” approach, or an “us versus them” mentality. The ways that residents thought about, talked about, and experienced their lives amidst an often contentious debate over coal mining was messy, complicated and could not simply fit into any number of boxes. The material realities of the surrounding physical environment of people in Wise County varied greatly from town to town. Some residents lived close to mountaintop removal coal mine sites-- and here they were bombarded by
heavy blasting that shook their homes, dust from coal trucks that covered their yards and porches, and streams that were polluted by the by-products of coal production. Other residents lived in towns that were surrounded by intact mountains that blocked views of the moonscapes created by surface mining. Not only did these sensory experiences contribute to residents’ understandings and views of coal, but furthermore, coal company executives, politicians, and regulators continued to set the terms of public conversations about coal mining. This meant that while some concerns were taken seriously or validated, others were deemed unimportant, invalid, and/or not worth discussing. These powerful stakeholders controlled the conversation in terms of what was even worth discussing.

Figure 3.2 Pro-Coal Signage on a Local Store in Big Stone Gap, July 2013
The coal industry’s power in the community was at least partly seen in the prevalence of these bumper stickers that were found on cars across the region. Additional pro-coal signage was found in numerous other places across the county. Local car dealerships with large flashing electronic signs that advertised the latest deals on new cars also flashed “Friends of Coal” every few screens. Other local businesses, such as banks, ATV dealers, a DVD rental store, a local restaurant, and local supermarkets also posted “Friends of Coal” or other pro-coal language on their store fronts or changeable letter signs. The local grocery store would occasionally mail out coupons to the local community, and at least on one occasion, the front of the mailer had the picture of the grocery store with a “Friends of Coal” logo in the top left hand corner. Sociologists Shannon Bell and Richard York (2010) have written extensively about pro-coal campaigns in West Virginia, noting the ways that the industry funds a faux-grassroots group called “Friends of Coal” in order to garner more community support while obscuring the realities of dwindling jobs and environmental devastation caused by surface mining. For example, in their study, Bell and York argue that, "to maintain their power (and profits) as their contribution to employment declines, extractive industries have increased their efforts to maintain and amplify the extent to which the 'economic identity' of communities is connected with the industry that was historically an important source of employment" (2010:111). Here they demonstrate the importance of the agency of the industry in deliberate attempts (through ideology) to gain and maintain support for a practice that is providing fewer and fewer jobs for people in the region.

Other ways that the “pro-coal” agenda was seen on the landscape in Wise County included attempts by coal companies to be visible as good corporate neighbors. A free
community lunch held at different churches each Saturday of the month in the town of Big Stone Gap revealed the coal industry’s participation in community life. At least one church had their lunch sponsored by a Bristol, VA-based coal company, and hung a large banner outside the church to advertise that the community lunch was “sponsored by Alpha Natural Resources.” This example of pro-coal signage is slightly more complicated in that Alpha donated money or food items for the community lunch--whether it was out of “good will” or to improve their image as a “good corporate neighbor” could be, and sometimes was, debated. This sign, however, further put “pro-coal” discourse on the landscape. The intended statement, for some, was that if Alpha Natural Resources was supporting families in need through their provisions for the free community lunch, how could anyone in the community be “against” their local presence? Others, of course, questioned the motives of Alpha-- explaining that the donations for the community lunch could help with tax write-offs, or to purposefully garner community support while simultaneously taking attention away from the environmental damages caused by their surface mine sites. Historians have noted how even in the early twentieth century, coal companies often used the financial support (or creation) of local sports teams and annual family picnics to maintain support from their employees and squelch opposition or the fight for unionization (Eller 1982, Lalone 2006). It is no surprise then that some residents were suspicious of Alpha’s intentions in their support of a local community lunch.

In another example of pro-coal support on the landscape, a “United for Coal Prayer Chain” was organized and held in Virginia, Kentucky, and West Virginia in October 2012. The “Prayer Chain” event turned out to be more of a rally, with people together at designated spots along U.S. Highway 23, a four-lane highway that wound
through the Appalachian coalfield states. In Big Stone Gap, hundreds of attendees, including people of all ages, stood alongside US Highway 23 near the local community college, Mountain Empire. They held signs that stated, “Save USA Coal Jobs” and “Friends of Coal.” In anticipation of this event, local businesses wrote supportive statements on signs. Powell Valley Bank in Big Stone Gap displayed, “We Stand United with Coal.” In my observation of the event, no public prayers were said.

According to organizers quoted in the local newspaper, they hoped that this event would bring attention to the region’s economic woes. In fact, it was not just the economy of the coal industry that one organizer hoped to bring attention to: “All the plants and factories that’s being built is being built somewhere besides the Appalachians…There’s no excuse for that, none whatsoever” (Gannaway 2012: A1). He also stated that “Our coal companies aren’t supporting us. A few are.” A wife of a coal miner quoted in the local paper said that she felt scared about the potential of layoffs: “All of my friends’ husbands work in coal mines. They’ve all had to tighten their belts like we have…we don’t know what tomorrow will bring” (Gannaway 2012: A2).

While the support for coal was loud and clear along US Hwy 23, the lasting impact of the rally did little more to bolster the coal economy than additional yard signs, t-shirts, and bumper stickers that already proudly supported “Friends of Coal” or “Coal=Jobs.” However, what it did do, like much of the pro-coal signage, was to continue to demonstrate support for the coal industry both in the local community, as well as to the rest of the region who learned about the rallies through regional media outlets. Perhaps most interesting was that the pro-coal signage could not capture the
complicated views of the coal industry that residents held. These varied and complex views on economy and environment are further discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

Regardless of the ways that local residents responded to local symbols and images in support of (or occasionally in opposition to) coal mining, the prevalence of such symbols could not be ignored. Indeed, the numerous bumper stickers, signs, and billboards (in addition to television and radio commercials, and mailers from local retailers and/or politicians running for office) reminded residents constantly of the pervasiveness of the coal industry in their community. The visible landscape of pro-coal signage demonstrated the power of the coal industry to promote itself, but did not adequately capture where community members placed themselves along the spectrum of the debate over coal and MTR.

**Power Plays and Setting the Terms of Envisioning Community**

In their work on conflict among stakeholders in the coalfields of Appalachia, Susan F. Hirsch and E. Franklin Dukes (2014) suggest that some individuals and groups have greater ability than others to shape how an issue is articulated. They further argue that in environmental conflict those individuals who possess this power “usually have it because they possess material resources, legal rights, a leadership position, or political power; they are situated to act on the issues involved” (Hirsch and Dukes 2014: 39). As Stuart Kirsch (2014), Fabiana Li (2015), and David Harvey (1996) have noted, environmental problems are often viewed in economic terms, and are thus also addressed in those same terms by powerful actors.

Harvey (1996) articulates two views of environmental management: the standard view and ecological modernization. Within the standard view, Harvey suggests as
capitalism encountered environmental problems, corporations and governments
addressed those issues on a case-by-case basis through the development of public policies,
institutions (including regulatory agencies), scientific understandings, and regulatory
practices. In this way, the standard view allows capitalism to operate as usual, without
excessive laws or rules standing in the way of capital accumulation (1996: 373-375). This
standard view of environmental problems allows the issues to fall primarily in to the
hands of local, state, and federal governments who create the laws and regulations the
guide these “mistakes” or “accidents” that harm the environment. The ecological
modernization approach, by contrast, allows corporations to utilize the rhetoric of
environmentalism to further their own profits. For example, using more fuel-efficient
technologies could allow for increased profit while also benefiting the environment. This
approach allows corporations to be more hands-on in developing technologies, scientific
information, and the regulatory frameworks that guide their practices. Both of these
views are relevant in understanding the role of coal companies in the regulatory context
in central Appalachia-- while “accidents” and “mistakes” in environmental management
were often dealt with on a case-by-case basis by state and federal agencies, coal
companies also utilized language of best environmental practices, especially in reference
to reclaiming strip mined land. Each of these ways of managing the environment
benefited coal companies in central Appalachia.

Following this understanding of environmental management, Fabiana Li (2015)
suggests that the hands-on approach used by corporations to deal with environmental
problems creates notions of transparency and consensus among community members. In
her study of the Peruvian mining industry, Li demonstrates the ways that these practices
of accountability in audit culture serve not only to create the terms of what is acceptable in mining practices, but also translates into values of “democratic participation, transparency, and environmental stewardship, making [corporations] very difficult to criticize” (Li 2015: 11).

Audit culture is the process by which corporations publically review their own practices in order to demonstrate their compliance with current regulations, or to create an image that they are in compliance with current regulation (Strathern 2000). Often corporations will go beyond meeting regulations to make visible other practices, which would suggest that they are being a responsible corporate neighbor. According to anthropologist Stuart Kirsch, “Audit culture reinforces the premises of neoliberalism: that the market is the most efficient means of solving problems and that effective management by the corporation can substitute for regulation” (2014:170). Corporations use audit culture to create the allusion of reform in order to avoid real constraints on its operations that would limit their financial successes (Kirsch 2014:171).

Within the concept of audit culture, Kirsch argues that the process of “certification” is one of the ways that companies avoid legal limitations on their operations: “Certification consists of a set of rules or guidelines and a mechanism for monitoring or self reporting that indicates compliance” (2014: 171). Kirsch suggests that certification is not often used in the mining industry because of the issue of “free riders,” that is companies might benefit from other corporations complying with regulations and being transparent in their actions, while not maintaining compliance themselves. However, Fabiana Li’s (2015) study of Peruvian mines demonstrates the ways that certification was used by the mining industry to create an image of a good corporate
neighbor. While certification is the set of guidelines that a corporation may claim to adhere to in their efforts to self-regulate, technocratic management is the scientific tools that corporations use to measure their practices to ensure accountability (for example, testing for chemicals in waterways), as well as to claim authority (through the basis of science as objective and verifiable) (Harvey 1996). Technocratic management is the mechanism by which corporations are able to create an audit culture that benefits their practices through gaining and/or maintaining support from regulators, government agencies, and the public.

For example, while corporate-run water monitoring programs on the exterior seem to benefit the community by providing important information about water quality, ultimately, according to Li, these programs allow science to replace some of the larger community concerns over mining. The political, social, and ethical concerns that local residents voice are overshadowed by scientific studies and the technocratic management of mining (Li 2015: 104). Technocratic management in this way is seen as the use of science and technology to determine environmental problems, as well as to solve them.

As Li notes, in conflicts over mining practices, grassroots organizers must rely on the technical and scientific experts in order to make serious claims about environmental pollution. This technocratic management further benefits corporations who often have a team of scientists (many of whom work at well-respected organizations or higher-educational institutions) at their disposal to argue that regulatory guidelines are sufficient to protect the environment and that they are utilizing “best practices” in their natural resource extraction techniques. This type of management, Li argues, translates into companies claiming that they are being socially and environmentally responsible. At
permit hearings in particular, as well as in lawsuits filed by SAMS (with the help of Sierra Club lawyers), both scientific knowledge about pollution and technical information about laws and regulations were crucial in activists making arguments that would produce a desired result-- either the cleanup of existing pollution or the stoppage of a new permit.

Kirsch (2014) suggests that there are three phases of corporate response to critique of natural resource extraction or other operating practices. In the first phase, the corporation denies any problems exist. In the second phase, corporations may make small improvements, and these improvements often incorporate the addition of an audit culture to regulate and manage environmental problems. However, these accountability programs, while giving the façade of transparency and oversight, often avoid real structural change, and as Li suggests, ignore other social and environmental problems that are important to local residents. In phase two, critics of mining operations are often portrayed as radical and impractical in their concerns over environment. Both phases, as Kirsch suggests, can exist at the same time. At permit hearings in southwest Virginia, I heard coal company executives deny any environmental problems with surface mining because they were, in their own words, in compliance with governmental regulations. I also heard opponents of the coal industry called radicals and tree-huggers, suggesting they did not have a grasp on the economic (or environmental) realities of their communities.

Similar to Harvey and Li, Kirsch also argues that corporations in phase two of addressing critiques of their practices use the language of corporate responsibility, sustainability, and transparency-- effectively “green-washing” practices to gain or maintain support from the community. Additionally, many corporations move to this
stage preemptively in an attempt to head off criticism before it even begins. This move allows stage two to be less confrontational and gives corporations the opportunity to take advantage of the ability to preemptively manage any consequences of natural resource extraction.

In phase three, mining corporations view the environmental problems as too great to manage financially and socially by themselves. In these situations, there is a shift to strategic management of critiques and the creation of a new status quo through participation in the legal and regulatory practice. This is perhaps the phase where coal companies find themselves in 2016, as numerous large and once financially lucrative coal companies continue to file for bankruptcy and halt coal production in Appalachia and across the United States. Bankruptcies of coal companies means that the burden of reclamation and other cleanup related to coal extraction falls back to the state, and while the bonding process required coal companies to front money for post-mine reclamation, it is often not enough to cover the full cost of recovering land in post-mining condition.

One place to view the utilization of audit culture, technocratic management of environmental problems, and the power of the coal companies to strategically involve themselves in regulatory processes and public perception is the permit hearing process at the state regulatory agency in southwest Virginia. Examining public strip mine permit hearings and conferences, along with other official government sponsored public-input events demonstrates that those in positions of power-- politicians, corporate officials, and other governmental employees- were privileged to speak first and also set the terms of the public conversations about coal and other community issues. Additionally, public participation in the state permitting process required a sharp eye and understanding of
legal language on the part of residents in order to even find out when a mine was being proposed, thus limiting local involvement and knowledge of what mining (actual and proposed) was happening in the community. While the application for new strip mine permits waned during my research (in part because of the laying off of coal miners and the shutting down of existing mine sites), occasional hearings still took place and are worth documenting here. These public hearings and meetings held by the Department of Mines, Minerals, and Energy (DMME), the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSMRE), and the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) provide insight into the way corporations and other powerful actors were able to influence the regulatory process and the public conversation about coal. Before delving into the details of these meetings, I first outline the basic structure of a permit hearing at the DMME.

The Process for Public Input in New or Revised Mine Permits

When a coal company submitted an application for a new permit for a surface mine site, a revised permit for an existing mine, or a renewal of an existing mine permit with the state regulatory agency, the Department of Mines Minerals and Energy (DMME), they were obligated under Virginia state law to place an advertisement in the local newspaper for four consecutive weeks. The advertisement was required to include the name and address of the mining company making the application; a map that showed the proposed location of the mine site; the location where citizens could review a copy of the permit; and the name and division of the office where written comments and/or requests for a public input session (called an informal conference) could be sent. Copies of the comments and/or objections to the permit were filed at the public office and also sent to the applicant. An informal conference had to be requested within 30 days of the last
publication of the mine permit advertisement, and was required to include a summary of
the issues to be raised at the conference as well as denote whether the requestor desired
the conference to be held near the locale of the proposed mine site. The date, time, and
location would then be sent by the local division of the DMME to the applicant, requestor
of the informal conference, and other interested parties, and would be also posted in the
local newspaper at least two weeks in advance of the conference date.

At a typical public conference for a new surface mine permit, a renewal of a
surface mine permit, or an amendment to an existing surface mine permit, the protocol
was the same. A member of the DMME would announce the beginning of the meeting
and present the basic information as to what the hearing or forum was about and ground
rules for how the hearing or forum would proceed. Next, the coal company officials in
attendance were allowed to speak first. Following their comments about the permit, the
public was then permitted to speak on a first come-first serve basis. In some instances, at
the beginning of the conference, the DMME official would instruct attendees as to what
issues they should or should not address at a hearing.

At other official DMME public hearings and forums, the format was the same--
DMME officials set the tone for the meeting, coal company executives and local
politicians spoke first, and citizen voices were heard last. Additionally these meetings
were most often held in the local DMME office, a place where coal company executives
were familiar and comfortable, as they were required to frequently visit various
departments throughout the process of applying for a new surface mine permit. On the
other hand, most local citizens were not as familiar with the office or the employees at
the DMME. Other state agencies that held public meetings or hearings, such as the
Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT), also maintained a similar format, with coal officials and local politicians being privileged to speak first. This privilege of speaking first also further gave these power holders media attention. Thus, while local politicians and company personnel would have their voices heard in local media outlets, citizens with differing opinions were not heard, as the media often left lengthy hearings early, before local residents were given the floor to speak.

Ison Rock Ridge Permit Denial Hearing

In July 2013, a permit denial hearing was held at the DMME office in Big Stone Gap to allow public comment on the administrative denial of a mine permit for a 1200 acre surface coal mine called Ison Rock Ridge by A&G coal company, a subsidiary of Southern Coal. This proposed mine site would border five communities, including the town of Appalachia. Concerned with the expansive nature of this permit, as well as its close proximity to another large surface mine site, many residents, including members of SAMS expressed concern over the cumulative environmental impacts and the potential of harm to human health.

Gathering in a small room on the second floor of the DMME office, which was located on top of a hill behind Mountain Empire Community College, five representatives from the DMME, one representative from A&G coal company, seven SAMS members, and myself sparsely filled the beige and brown colored space for the hearing. Against the sides and front of the room, six long tables were set up in a “U” formation where DMME employees sat with notepads and recording equipment to the left, and maps and information about the mine site and the administrative denial of the permit were located to the right. Additionally, a sign-in sheet for all attendees was located
on the table nearest the door. On this sheet attendees could indicate whether or not they wished to speak at the hearing. At the back of the room, two rows of several chairs lined the wall for those attending the hearing to sit. A podium with a microphone for recording was located in front of the chairs, facing the DMME representatives who were taking notes on comments.

This particular hearing was set up to specifically deal with the *administrative denial* of the permit, rather than the permit itself. The denial came from the DMME because of A&G’s failure to produce the bond money required to secure the permit. However, because of SAMS’ two-year campaign to stop this permit, members showed up to reiterate their concerns about the environment if the permit was allowed to move forward, as well as to urge the DMME to uphold the administrative denial. In addition to the failure to pay the bond requirements for the permit, A&G had also failed to secure a permit for discharging water pollution (called the National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit- or NPDES- for short) from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). A&G had failed to receive this permit because a local stream, Callahan Creek, had failed to meet state requirements for pollution control, specifically the Total Maximum Daily Load of Total Dissolved Solids or Sediment (known as the “TMDL”). Essentially, this meant that Callahan Creek (which would be further impaired by the Ison Rock Ridge strip mine) already had more pollution than was allowable according to the levels set forth by the state. In an interview, SAMS staff member Tom Powers explained the TMDL requirements:

The formula for a TMDL, it’s actually based on a conceptual formula. TMDL equals your waste load allocations, which is your point sources [for pollution]. Within mining that mostly looks like Sediment Ponds and other discharges from processing plants. And then [there’s] your load allocation, which is your non-
point sources, which can be just unmanaged sediment. If there are places on a
mountain that aren’t being controlled by a sediment pond, dust in the air which
then makes its way into the water, other unfound or unmanaged gob piles, acid
mine drainage, and all that stuff [are considered non-point sources]. The [TMDL]
number is the total amount of pollution allowed at the trunk stream of that water
shed. The [government has] a maximum number they don’t want the trunk stream
to exceed. And one of the tools they can then use to then arrive to that number is
to reduce the overall allocations for the individual NPDES permits. If it’s a
sediment TMDL like Callahan Creek has, they could say, “there’s a hundred
ponds in this water shed, and they are contributing this much sediment, and we
want to reduce that sediment to this amount,” so then the mining companies
would have to do something to their ponds to reduce the sediment by a said
amount. (Tom Powers Interview Transcript, June 2013).

What Tom explained here was the situation in the Callahan Creek Watershed— one
particular area in question in the administrative denial of the Ison Rock Ridge permit.

Tom’s quote was full of a lot of scientific language and technical information,
demonstrating the ways that local citizens were required to not only understand the law in
order to make arguments at permit hearings, but also to be taken seriously by regulatory
agencies, coal companies, and in some cases, the judicial system. Another interesting
aspect to this analysis was that Tom, the only paid employee of SAMS, had a master’s
degree in ecological sciences that gave him the scientific knowledge that many local
residents did not have. Tom also worked tirelessly with lawyers and employees of the
Sierra Club to help him understand state and federal laws and regulations. Tom often
disseminated this information to other SAMS members before permit hearings,
sometimes creating a list of “talking points” for SAMS members. However, the inability
of many residents to speak in scientific or technical terms about their environmental
concerns often limited the kinds of claims that would be considered valid by regulators or
industry representatives. Additionally, as Li (2015) notes, claims about the cultural
importance of ecological resources (such as fishing in local streams), first-person
accounts of pollution (such as observing a lack of aquatic life in streams), or the sensory attention to a different sight, smell or feel (such as the discoloration of water sources) were not taken seriously without scientific or technical information.

To return to Callahan Creek, what Tom explained in very technical terms was that because the watershed was already impaired in the area of the proposed Ison Rock Ridge mine permit, an additional TMDL allowance would overload local waterways with pollution. Because of the results of extensive water testing completed by Tom and other SAMS volunteers on Callahan Creek that indicated an overload of the mineral selenium, members understood that more pollution would create more problems. However, concern over the Callahan Creek watershed was just one of the many concerns that SAMS members and other residents listed as a reason to deny the permit. It is worth noting here, that despite these valid concerns, the DMME official who began the meeting asked for comments to be limited to the administrative denial only, and not the proposed strip mine. Essentially he was asking residents who were present and had signed up to speak not to bring up their environmental concerns over the permit. Despite this suggestion, however, residents voiced their concerns over the potential negative environmental consequences of the Ison Rock Ridge permit. In attendance at this permit hearing were three DMME officials, one coal company representative (who did not wish to speak), and eight SAMS members and other residents, including myself.

SAMS member Pam Miller, a resident of Andover, a former coal camp community that would be affected by the mine site, spoke about the negative impact the mine would have by limiting the biodiversity of the forest and streams. She applauded the DMME for denying the permit, stating, “It is time to breathe a sigh of relief, it is time for
justice to be done in our communities” (Field Notes, July 2013). Six other community members also spoke about concerns about the environmental damage caused by this type of mining, such as concerns about wildlife habitats and dust problems from blasting and coal trucks on the roadways. Ruby Wells, another SAMS member, spoke about her concerns about the health consequences of the pollution, citing her own battle with allergies and cancer: “I’m sure I’m not the only one there with health issues, and if this mine goes in, it will be double” (Field Notes, July 2013).

While citizens showed up to express both their concerns over the permit, as well as their support of the DMME for administratively denying the permit, only one representative from the coal company attended the hearing, and rather than making public comment, he submitted a written document on behalf of A&G for the DMME’s consideration. This was an unusual occurrence at a public hearing on a strip mine permit. At other public hearings that I attended (including those during my preliminary dissertation research), coal company executives, as well as miners, often showed up to voice their support for a new or revised strip mine. However, it was likely that because this hearing was on the administrative denial of the permit, the company had explanations as well as legal paperwork that they did not feel the need to present publically in asking that the denial be overturned. Ultimately the DMME did uphold the administrative denial of the permit (in 2015, after repeated appeals by the company). However, as an employee of the DMME explained to me, if A&G decided to resubmit the permit, it would not take much work to draw up the paperwork, as the same information from the original permit application could be recycled for a new permit if the company decided that the economy or political climate was favorable for surface mining again.
This permit hearing demonstrates some important points about local views of pollution and the power hierarchies that were in play at this hearing. First, residents involved with the local environmental group SAMS were very concerned with the environmental consequences, especially to the Callahan Creek watershed, that would result if the Ison Rock Ridge mine permit was approved. Second, while these concerns were often voiced by residents at these types of meetings, they were not necessarily addressed by either the administrative personnel at the state permit granting agency (the DMME) or by the coal companies themselves. Often these environmental issues were viewed as “non-issues” by the coal industry, regulatory agencies, and politicians, with the assumption that both state and federal laws and regulations were sufficient (if not overly shielding) to protect the environment from excessive pollution or damage from surface mining. These laws and regulations made up part of the audit culture in the coalfields, as coal companies often asserted that as long as they complied with state and federal regulations (which included water testing at mine sites), they were doing their part to keep the environment safe and healthy.

In addition to touting the efficacy of current regulations and laws, coal corporations were also quick to present themselves as good corporate neighbors who were concerned with the health and safety of local communities and the environment. As a spokesperson for another coal company, Alpha Natural Resources, told me,

Alpha has a very strong commitment to both concurrent [mine land] reclamation and ongoing as they mine coal to try to make sure that they are managing everything from wildlife to run off to those types of things, in addition to as they idle mines, either the reserves are diminished or the economic variability of the mine diminished, full reclamation. I think a little known thing is that all mining companies are required to have adequate financial wherewithal to reclaim all of their mines. And if they don’t have a balance sheet and cash reserve that meets that, you have to bond it. You look at Alpha’s commitment; I’m willing to bet we
have 20 or 30 professionals, environmental professionals leading our environmental team. We have 50 to 100 people that daily that’s all they do, all day long. (Joe Mason, Interview Transcript, June 2013)

For this representative of Alpha, simply the company’s willingness to abide by the law was to be commended and applauded. This comment leaves much to be determined about whether laws and regulations were enough. In other words, were current state and federal environmental regulations stringent enough to protect the forests and waterways in the coalfields? Many activists, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, would suggest that they were not. Further more, Joe’s comments also lead to questions about whether coal companies could be trusted to not only follow the letter of the law, but to go above and beyond in their care for the environment. His comments further demonstrate Kirsch’s (2014) and Harvey’s (1996) suggestion that coal companies often use the language of environmental protection and sustainability to either obscure community concerns or to head-off criticisms about the environmental pollution created by extractive practices. The stated commitment of Alpha (and other coal companies) to reclaim surface mined land was one way that the industry used audit culture to create the image of an environmentally–friendly corporate neighbor. In other words, if coal companies themselves appear to be committed to the environmental restoration of mined lands and willing to employee numerous individuals to work on this aspect of federal regulation, how could they be criticized? Through this use of audit culture and the technocratic management of environment, coal companies were seen as being transparent in both intent and practice, creating a public image that suggests they not only care about and practice complying with regulations, they also genuinely care about the environment.
Furthermore, public conversations about surface mining were often framed in a way that assumed regulations and laws on surface mining were sufficient to take care of the environment and coal corporations were forthright in their attempts to abide by these rules. However, many SAMS members were well aware of the ways that coal companies could legally skirt around some of the environmental regulations on mining practices through the granting of variances from various regulatory agencies (this will be discussed further in the next section). SAMS members and other residents also discussed how coal companies often “cut corners” illegally to save money, both through violation of environmental regulations, but also health and safety rules for miners. As the disaster at the Upper Big Branch Mine in West Virginia demonstrated, many coal company heads were only concerned with the bottom line of profitability and often put this ahead of workers safety (Scott and Bennet 2015). Indeed, as Paul Robbins (2000) notes, corruption, or the dishonest actions by those in power, happens often in environmental management and natural resource extraction. This happened both illegally (through knowingly disobeying laws and regulations), as well as legally through the use of loopholes in current laws and regulations for dishonest gain. I argue that the use of these loopholes (such as the “variances” described next) allow for dishonest gain because while the profit made from such loopholes harms the environment, the coal industry continues to tout itself as a good “green” corporate neighbor. In particular, I examine one of these “loopholes”- or variances- that was allowed on surface mine permit applications giving coal companies freedom to bypass regulations governing the dumping of “overburden” from surface mine sites into valley fills that bury streams. These variances were given out with regularity, meaning the variance often became the rule rather than the exception. In
the following section, I explore the ways that a specific variance to the stream buffer zone rule was discussed at a meeting between a federal agency and local community members.

Meeting with the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement

Concerns over insufficient laws and the overuse of variances in the permitting process were seen at a meeting with the federal government’s Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSMRE) in Big Stone Gap in May 2012. Joe Pizarchik, Director of the OSMRE, set up the meeting to discuss current issues with mining in the area after SAMS sent a letter to his office detailing grievances about the way the DMME had handled water quality violations in the area. In attendance at the meeting were 25 people including three OSMRE officials, five employees of a regional environmental organization (Appalachian Voices), and 18 SAMS members and other residents. After cramming into a small office tucked away in the run down Wal-Mart strip mall, SAMS members and other residents were asked to share specific grievances or other concerns with air and water quality; problems with the issuing of permits and variances; and other issues with public hearings and notices.

Some residents detailed specific environmental problems, such as a three and a half mile stretch of Callahan Creek impaired by pollution that limited not only recreation (such as fishing and swimming) but also animal life. Perhaps more importantly, another resident and SAMS member David Miller discussed the problems of stream buffer zone variances. The stream buffer zone rule, issued by OSMRE in 1983, created a 100-foot barrier around waterways to lessen the affect of the overburden that is created as a result of surface mining. In 2008, however, the Bush administration overturned this rule, allowing the overburden to be placed in streams, but adding new requirements to reduce
the adverse environmental impacts of this rule. However this overturning of the 1983 OSMRE stream buffer zone rule was vague and did not provide operators and other interested parties with guidelines for making sure that the health of streams was upheld. As David noted in the meeting, while federal law did allow for some environmental impacts to streams, the DMME, as Virginia’s state regulatory and permit granting agency, continued to operate under the 1983 law, which was stricter in its environmental restrictions on dumping in streams (OSMRE n.d.). However, the Virginia DMME granted these variances to coal companies by allowing them to dump closer to waterways than the 100 feet stream buffer zone rule. David noted that of the 89 permits granted in 2011, 62 (or approximately 70%) were given a variance, allowing the dumping of mine waste or overburden into streams. A local OSMRE official also stated that the stream buffer zone variance was the most commonly issued variance, followed by a variance allowing surface mine blasting within 500 feet of an underground mine.

What David described in the meeting, with great frustration, was concern not only that the federal law was insufficient to protect coalfield waterways, but that state regulatory agencies, while operating under a more sufficient ruling (the 1983 stream buffer zone rule), were granting more variances than they were upholding the rule. In essence, the variance was becoming the rule, meaning that coal companies were able to dump excess spoil from mine sites into nearby creeks and streams. Pizarchik, as well as the other OSMRE employees in attendance at the meeting were concerned with this problem, and acknowledged the importance of addressing the stream buffer zone ruling and variances, at both the federal and state level. Meeting attendees were in agreement that the current rule was not sufficient to keep heavy metal contamination and sediment
in watersheds to an acceptable (by federal and state water quality standards) level. Pizarchik, as well as two regional OSMRE employees in attendance, encouraged residents to submit complaints through the OSMRE office, not just through the DMME, which was, according to David, often slow to respond. This meeting, unlike public permit hearings, allowed citizens concerns to be heard and validated. Additionally, as Pizarchik and other OSMRE employees agreed, the stream buffer zone ruling needed to be readdressed at both federal and state levels to adequately regulate pollution in to local waterways. One other variance was also discussed during this meeting, which was the variance that allowed companies to blast within 500 feet of abandoned underground mines, a practice that could cause extensive damage such as flooding and cave-ins.

While this meeting was more of a “listening session” than a public hearing, SAMS members and other residents were encouraged by Pizarchik’s attention to their concerns. After this meeting, residents felt that they had the ability to address pollution and corruption by the coal industry as well as the lack of responsiveness by the state regulatory agency. However, the federal level of attention was an important aspect of this meeting-- while the OSMRE was understaffed according to Pizarchik, they did have the ability to intervene when there was reason to believe that eminent harm would happen to the environment. Pizarchick assured meeting attendees, “You are not alone, we are here” (Field Notes, May 2012). What was yet to be seen by local residents, however, was how this meeting would affect future variances on permits. The downturn in coal production and the numerous layoffs meant that there were few permit applications- or public hearings about permit applications- during my research. However, another space that issues of audit culture and technocratic management of the environment were evident in
southwest Virginia was through a lawsuit that SAMS partnered with the Sierra Club and Appalachian Voices against A&G coal company, who was, according to SAMS’ water testing efforts, violating parts of the Clean Water Act. It is to this lawsuit I turn next.

The Kelly’s Branch Lawsuit

Lawsuits provided SAMS members with a way to challenge coal corporations who were not, despite their insistence, appropriately regulating the pollution of air, land, and water caused by mining activities. In 2012, the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards, the Sierra Club, and Appalachian Voices filed a Clean Water Act enforcement suit against A&G coal, a subsidiary of Jim Justice owned Southern Coal. After SAMS members tested the water at a site called Kelly’s Branch, the results showed that the levels of selenium were higher than those allowed for a stream system considered impaired under the federal NPDES (the National Pollution and Discharge Elimination System). The lawsuit was not only successful during its first round in court, the decision in favor of SAMS was upheld in an appeals court as well. Tom explained the significance of their first success in this particular lawsuit:

Big picture- it means that all companies from here on out should be disclosing selenium. It puts the coal companies between a rock and a hard place. On one hand they could, I mean they should disclose what they could be polluting, but it means they will be held more accountable if they do…It’s more than just listing it, it’s listing it and saying, we’ve reasonably contemplated, and hey, this could potentially be a problem within the permit. (Interview Transcript, Tom Powers, June 2013).

In this success, SAMS, through their work with Sierra Club lawyers, were able to win the victory of changing what chemicals (in this case selenium) needed to be revealed in the permit application process. Thus, coal companies were being held to higher standards in their revelations about what chemicals may be a problem in or near their mine sites—
ultimately this could affect whether or not coal companies could obtain all the required pieces of the permit (including approval by the Army Corps of Engineers) for their proposed surface mine sites. In this example, an environmental organization was able to help create additional regulatory processes for coal companies. As demonstrated in this specific case against A&G, the company was not interested in revealing the pollution of selenium into local waterways.

Tom further explained the on-the-ground consequences of winning the lawsuit:

So by order of the judge they had to do a couple of things- one, they had to test selenium every single day until the judge issues his decision on the fines they should pay, and then they had to apply for a permit modification, which is essentially how are they going to clean this up. And at some point in the future they judge will also issue fines on that company and those can be up to $32,000 a day, but it could also be $1 a day. That’s an amount per day since the violation began (or first found a hit). If he issues those fines, and A & G would have to pay them, they would go into the U.S. General Fund. Some of my friends jokingly call it the war chest. There’s a specific provision in the clean water act that allows for things called supplemental environmental projects. So the coal company still has to clean up the selenium, and that cost is significant to them, but in addition, when this fine money, if you settle with the company, you could create a project that would benefit the community so long as the money goes to water quality projects within that watershed, and that can be interpreted broadly, like anything within 50 miles and in the watershed and be shown to improve water quality standards. That said, whatever that supplemental environmental project is, it has to be approved by the EPA and the Department of Justice. (Interview Transcript, Tom Powers, June 2013)

In winning this case, the coal company was forced to clean up the water, and also pay fines that would benefit the water in the community in another way. Tom’s explanation of the success that SAMS and the Sierra Club had in the Kelly’s Branch lawsuit demonstrates the importance, as well as the complications, of citizen enforcement. While the law clearly allowed for citizen water testing in order to help facilitate better oversight where government agencies lack funds and employees to check-up on surface mining activities, the financial and scientific burden that falls on citizens shows how regulatory
practices and the laws that guide them covertly supported corporate polluters. Because of
the difficulty in obtaining all the resources needed for water testing (people, money,
equipment, knowledge), many cases of corporate pollution are likely to go unnoticed. Or,
the citizens who do notice will likely lack the time, skills, or funds necessary to pursue
these sites of pollution.

In addition to the initial success of the lawsuit against A&G, SAMS had another
success in the U.S. Appeals Court, in which the judge upheld the initial ruling in the case.
A&G had attempted to argue that first, they did not know that they would be discharging
selenium at this mine site, and therefore should be covered by a “permit shield,” which
prohibits new excessive regulations after a permit is obtained; and second, that the
DMME should have contemplated the possibility for selenium discharge based on the
presence of selenium at various other mine sites in the same watershed. The judgment
noted the contradictory nature of A&G’s argument:

We nonetheless highlight the lack of consistency that plagues A&G’s argument. A&G has asserted repeatedly that it had no reason to believe that it would discharge selenium from Kelly Branch. In the same breath, however, it contends that, because it had previously informed the DMME of the presence of selenium at a different mine in the same watershed, the Kelly Branch selenium discharges were within the reasonable contemplation of the agency. This is difficult to comprehend. Either A&G and the DMME should both have been aware that selenium would be discharged, or neither had reason to be. (US Court of Appeals 2014)

The upholding of this lawsuit meant a major victory for SAMS, and as one SAMS
member stated,

It's good to see the courts standing for the people, and not bowing down to King Coal. Looking at what’s right and what’s wrong, and not just what's best for the corporations. We need better protection from this powerful industry, and from industry tycoons like Jim Justice, to make sure that when they leave town, we're not left holding the bill for toxic pollution. (Sierra Club 2014)
In addition to the importance for protecting the environment-- and boosting the morale of activists-- the ruling also set a new precedent for companies attempting to use the permit shield to shirk responsibility for cleaning up pollution that exceeds legal limits. The success of the lawsuit and its upholding by the U.S. Circuit Court made national, state, and local headlines, and also appeared on numerous law blogs, as analysts discussed the implications for the decision. In particular, the ramifications for individual permit holders under the Clean Water Act were noted, as permit holders can no longer “invoke the permit shield protection in agency enforcement or citizen suits if those pollutants are in fact present in discharge” (David and Schoomaker 2014). Furthermore, in setting a precedent that protects waterways in central Appalachia from the pollution caused by mining, the particulars of the judgment meant that A&G Coal Company would be required to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars both for the cleanup of the impaired watershed, and also for other community enhancement projects in southwest Virginia. Lawsuits such as the Kelly’s branch case revealed tactics used by both activists and coal companies in order to safeguard their own interests—for A&G this meant arguing a permit shield defense so as to be able to continue to operate freely without additional costs for pollution clean-up, and for SAMS members it meant upholding the Clean Water Act to protect important watersheds from further environmental degradation.

The last public meeting I detail in this chapter is a regional meeting of the Virginia Transportation Board that addressed state transportation projects, including the building of the Coalfields Expressway, a four lane highway that would connect coalfield communities to larger regional hubs. During this meeting, the roles of politicians, industry officials, and local citizens in conversations about coal and economy was clear,
demonstrating once again, that those in power have the ability to control the conversation about important community issues.

The Coalfield Expressway and the Commonwealth Transportation Board Meeting for Public Input on Transportation Projects

I was first introduced to the Coalfields Expressway (CFX) project through an outreach program of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards. On three occasions I accompanied SAMS members to a small community in neighboring Dickenson County to knock on doors to talk to people about a proposed 1100-acre surface mine site that would be the first phase of a “coal synergy method” to construct a federal highway called the Coalfields Expressway. On each trip, we contacted community members to disseminate information about the proposed mine site, including where it would be located and the need for residents within a one mile radius of the site to obtain pre-blast surveys on their homes. Pre-blast surveys were crucial to for home-owners to be able to hold coal companies accountable for any damage that might occur from blasting at mine sites.

The first of these trips took place in the summer of 2012 with Chris Bates, a local SAMS member and regional organizer with the Sierra Club. As we drove by gob piles, “reclaimed” strip jobs sprayed with a quick dusting of switch grass seed, and then entered into lush green forests running next to the McClure River, we talked about the Coalfields Expressway and what it would mean for local communities- for Chris, and many others in the community, it meant more environmental devastation with strip mining, and more state and federal tax money spent on a project that would not actually help coalfield communities.
The concept for the Coalfields Expressway (CFX) began in 1995 when U.S. congress designated it a high priority corridor. According to the Environmental Assessment provided by the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT), the need for the CFX was designated high priority to satisfy legislative needs (congressional funding has already been set aside), improve mobility and safety (because of the current steep and narrow roadways), and support regional economic development (including tourism efforts and the attraction of new industry) (VDOT 2012). The state congress approved the plan for the road in 2000, and shortly after, in 2001-2002, the first Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was issued by the VDOT. However, because of budgetary concerns, the federal government pulled its financial support of the project in 2005, leaving Virginia in a bind.

In 2006, Alpha Natural Resources assumed the rights and obligations for the project, and in 2007 the coal synergy concept was born. Under this process, Alpha would surface mine the coal along the road and sell it to offset the cost of building the road (Alpha Natural Resources 2008). According to VDOT’s Environmental Impact Assessment, the coal synergy process would take advantage of coal recovery within the proposed right-of-way to substantially reduce the amount of public funds needed to complete the project. Coal companies could extract the coal and leave mined locations graded and suitable for roadway construction, thereby saving considerable roadway construction costs. (VDOT 2012: 7)

In 2008, the federal government reinstated funding for the project; but in 2011, another change to the project came with a significant re-routing of the expressway, which would mean that the town of Clintwood (located in neighboring Dickenson County) would be
completely bypassed, leaving even less potential for economic development in a town already boarding up downtown shops.

In December 2012, a regional meeting was held to allow public input on multiple state transportation projects, including the Coalfields Expressway. The meeting, called the annual Commonwealth Transportation Board Meetings for Public Input on Transportation Projects, was held in a conference room at the Holiday Inn in Bristol, Virginia, located about an hour and a half from Wise County. This meeting was intended to provide state residents the opportunity to voice their support for or concern with projects and programs included in the current Six-Year Improvement Plan proposed by the Commonwealth Transportation Board, as well as other highway, rail, and transit initiatives proposed for 2014-2019 in the Statewide Transportation Improvement Plan.

Attending the meeting were county administrators and local governmental officials from Buchanan, Scott, Wise, Dickenson counties, the city of Bristol and town of Abingdon. Additionally, a representative from U.S. House Representative Morgan Griffith’s office was present in his own words, “just to be supportive” (Field Notes, December 2012). During the meeting, officials and the public had an opportunity to speak up about the various projects. As with other official state level meetings, politicians were allowed to speak first. The two county administrators from Buchanan and Wise County both emphasized the importance of the continued support of the Coalfield Expressway. Charlotte Mullins, the executive director of the Dickenson County Industrial Development Authority also called for continued support of the Coalfield Expressway, arguing that in order for manufacturing jobs to come to an industrial site in Dickenson County, the CFX would need to be built. Dickenson County chairman Donny Wright
argued, “We live in an area where we have to make level land, it’s the terrain we have” and that the CFX was the single most important thing to put in place to ensure that the “rest of the world can come back and visit the mountains” (Field Notes, December 2012).

While local governmental officials overwhelmingly spoke in support of the CFX, members of SAMS also attended the meeting, but spoke up about their apprehensions about the CFX. SAMS members cited concern over the environment, including the damage that would be caused to streams from the mining and valley fills. As Tom (the sole SAMS staff member) brought up in his public comments, one area of the CFX, Hawk’s Nest, was already home to the Bull Creek watershed, which failed the TMDL (Total Maximum Daily Load [of pollutants]) without any additional mining. In other words, the water in the area of the proposed strip mine and highway site was already exceeding allowable pollution levels.

Another SAMS member brought up concerns about wasting tax payer money for a project that would actually end up harming the economy by bypassing local business communities. Rather, this local resident encouraged the state to improve existing routes and promote projects such as the Virginia Creeper trail, a rails-to-trails project that provides 34 miles of bike routes. SAMS member Merryl Stidham argued that the CFX was a bad idea for taxpayers and would only stand to profit Alpha Natural Resources. While this meeting was a place for public input, it was clear that local politicians and other officials framed state transportation projects in terms of economic development, a fact that is not entirely surprising considering the Appalachian Regional Commission’s commitment to building infrastructure, especially highways, in the region (Eller 2008).
This meeting was particularly instructive in the different ways that residents expressed their understanding of the project in both economic and environmental terms, as well as the ways that politicians and local leaders envisioned the ways that the CFX could positively impact local communities. Several points are worth noting. First, coal company officials, as well as local and state politicians were able to make their points easily and clearly to the public. Not only were they welcomed to speak first at the Commonwealth Transportation Board meeting, they were also vocal in their support of the CFX in local media outlets. Clearly, for these powerful elite, a combined surface mine site and federal highway was a win-win situation-- using the land for economic gain through the extraction of coal and the building of a road that “promised” to bring in thousands of industrial jobs. As with other public meetings, in addition to public officials and politicians speaking first, the conversation primarily focused on the state’s ability to help bring economic development, especially in terms of industrial development, to the coalfield region through the building of better roads.

While SAMS members considered the possibilities beyond new four-lane highways, the conversation still focused on economy. SAMS members brought up environmental concerns related to the proposed coal synergy project, but they were also quick to propose other economic alternatives, so as to speak the same language as the public officials that were in attendance. This is not to say that they only talked about the economy because of the framing of the CFX in these terms, rather SAMS members were acutely aware of the connections between the environment and economy in their community.

Conclusion
Formal and informal participant observation of the landscape of the community as well as at public events, meetings, and hearings provided an interesting backdrop to the ways that residents talked about, thought about, and experienced issues related to surface mining and coal in their communities. In particular, coal signage on the landscape revealed the dominance of the economic narratives about coal in the community. However, the pro-coal signage painted a much too simplistic picture of how residents felt about coal mining and its consequences and/or benefits on their community (as is discussed further in Chapters 4 and 5). Participant observation at public hearings provided another insight into the ways that the community encountered public conversations and regulations about surface mining. In particular, it demonstrated the way that audit culture, or the ability of corporations to monitor themselves-- both through controlling the regulatory process and also publically declaring their operating procedures-- allowed coal companies to control conversations about pollution, environment, and economy. Furthermore, these public events and hearings showed how politicians, coal company heads, and state and federal regulators maintain the ability to steer conversations about environmental issues towards an economic slant. These meetings further demonstrated the prioritizing of scientific evidence and technocratic management over the local knowledge that informed legitimate concerns of local residents. In the Kelly’s Branch lawsuit, SAMS members were able to gain a significant victory because they were able to use legal knowledge and obtain scientific data about water pollution in the Callahan Creek watershed. This issue of scientific evidence remained a salient aspect of organizing in coalfield communities, as time, money, and
intricate knowledge of science, laws, and regulations were required to hold coal corporations accountable for their polluting practices.
Chapter 4: The Decline of Coal Mining, Economic Uncertainty, and Everyday Economic Representations in Wise County

When I arrived in the coalfields of Southwest Virginia in 2011, the lay-offs at coal mines and decline in the coal industry were well under way. News headlines over the course of my research suggested that almost 500 miners were laid off by three major coal companies in Wise County in 2012 and 2013, almost half of the amount of miners in the county. This air of economic uncertainty resonated throughout the community. Driving and walking through the downtowns of Appalachia and Big Stone Gap, the boarded up store-fronts and newly closed businesses— a restaurant, a novelty shop, a drug store— told a story of a place in economic peril. Residents often expressed their concern over the future of their communities, suggesting that without economically viable options for employment, the youth would leave, the towns would continue to spiral into disrepair, and there would be nothing left for people to come home to.

One of the biggest shocks in the town of Big Stone Gap came with the announcement that Mutual Drug, a locally owned and operated pharmacy, restaurant, and odds-and ends store, would close its doors after 60 years of business. In July 2013, it closed its doors, and residents were devastated at the loss of a town staple—not only was Mutual the only diner on the main downtown thorough-fair to serve lunch, it also served as one of only two pharmacies where United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) retirees could fill their prescription drugs. It’s no surprise, then, that with the continued economic decline of Wise County and other coalfield communities, that the economy—and what to do about it—were constant fixtures in the discursive landscape.

In this chapter I explore different understandings of the local, state, and national economy that residents of Wise County expressed. In particular I draw upon the work of
economist David Ruccio (2008), geographer David Harvey (1996), and political economists J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006) to explore how these varying understandings of economy reveal the ways that powerful interests are able to shape some conversations about economics and livelihoods in the coalfields. These discourses about the economic condition of Wise County and the larger Appalachian region, its relationship to the national economy, and the ways that economy was related to other aspects of life in the coalfields are instructive in understanding the different positions that people occupied in relation to envisioning coal’s past, present, and future contributions to the lived experiences of residents. Furthermore, following David Harvey’s (1996), Shaunna Scott’s (1995), Dwight Billings’ (2016), and Karen Brodkin’s (2009) conceptions of class, I look at how, within the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) specifically, class processes and relationships informed how organized labor thought about the economy in interesting and different ways.

To explore these various ideas about economy, I utilize data gathered from interviews with community members, as well as the information gained from formal and informal participant observation at public political events and campaigns. Additionally, the public permit hearings discussed in Chapter 3 provide supplemental data that demonstrates how economy was presented in the context of environmental regulation and/or concerns. Finally, I draw upon my interactions with UMWA members on two bus trips to coal company headquarters in Saint Louis, Missouri to explore the ways that class processes informed ideas about economy.

Theories of Everyday Economic Representations
Following the work of economist David Ruccio, I maintain that local economic knowledges are legitimate and should be examined closely:

Instead of presuming that economic knowledges have a center, and thus a singular standard against which all other knowledges can be compared and declared valid or not, it becomes important to see the terrain of economic representations as expansive (occurring across and outside the academy), fragmented (because the knowledges produced in one arena are often incommensurable, in both form and content, with those produced in other arenas), and contested (precisely because some representations, implicitly or explicitly, differ in their most basic elements from others, within and across arenas). (Ruccio 2008: 13)

The economic representations in southwest Virginia are expansive, as residents’ narratives encompass a wide range of information coming from editorial posts in the local newspaper, nationally syndicated talk radio shows, and family conversations around the dinner table to name only a few places where residents gather economic information.

Local economic representations are also fragmented, as some sources may be grounded in numbers from an organization such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the Appalachian Regional Commission (such as those numbers presented in the Introduction), while other sources may be hearsay from any number of local or national sources. Further, these representations are contested, as lived material experiences sometimes contradict the information coming from politicians, news sources, and neighbors. If coal is supposed to keep the lights on, why are so many residents struggling to pay their electric bills? These expansive, fragmented, contested, and varied economic representations among the residents of the coalfields of Virginia are what I explore in this chapter.

Following Ruccio’s idea of economic representations, it becomes apparent that these representations can help provide a broader understanding of a place and the conflicts that ensue over economic (and other) issues. These different ideas about
economy demonstrate the various understandings residents have: “what it is, where it exists, how it operates, how it is constituted, how it is related to other aspects of the natural and social world, what problems might exist and how they can be solved, what the goals of economic activity are, and much, much more” (Ruccio 2008:7). In looking at how coalfield residents conceptualize the economic condition of their communities, towns, counties, and region, it was apparent that a variety of ideas exist about the economy- and its relationship to environmental problems, social problems, and other coalfield issues. Residents had many ideas about these issues. What caused its currently depressed state? What activities could provide an economic boost to the area? How were individuals, families, and communities affected by the economic downturn? What role should government play in revitalizing the economy? These questions were answered with economic representations that provided a broad vantage point rather than a simple demographic calculation of unemployment rate, poverty rate, average annual income, and the like. Economic representations expose what people think about the economic conditions in their communities, what changes they want to see, and how they think those changes need to happen. Certainly demographic information is useful in establishing a baseline understanding of the level of impoverishment in an area (such as those presented in Chapter 1), but these numbers also neglect to represent the economic conditions of those who participated in alternative economies, whether it was the illegal prescription drug trade or foraging for edible forest products.

Simple numbers limit the level of understanding because they do not reveal the ways that local people think about and experience their own economies, nor do they take into account non-capitalist modes of production. Investigating economic representations
can not only reveal the different ways that people piece together a living, but also provide insight into the reasons people come into conflict over defining and understanding economic problems.

Furthermore, as David Harvey (1996) notes, ideas about economy, and indeed the current economic debates that happen at local, state, national, and global scales were not created in an even playing field. Rather, powerful interests (corporations, governments, and other political elite) created the public conversations about economy and dictate what is considered a valid topic for consideration. This is particularly salient in the permit hearings described in Chapter 3, as well as in broader political conversations, as some residents’ concerns (such as those over personal observations of pollution) were seen as invalid or off-topic in considering the economic benefits vis-à-vis the other externalities of continued surface mining in the region.

J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006) have further explored economies that are alternative to the current capitalist system, a point that is particularly important for activists with the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards who consistently tried to think outside the box about the potential economic future of the coalfields. Their analysis is especially poignant in pointing out that other types of economies do exist along the current capitalist system. Among SAMS members, and indeed other residents in Wise County, a sharing economy continued to exist as it did in Appalachia hundreds of years ago. Memories of neighbors “helping each other out” compliment the narratives by SAMS members who were interested in creating spaces such as community gardens that are open and available to all—free of cost or obligation.

Class as Identity, Process, and Relationship to Capital Accumulation
In her study of class-consciousness among union miners in Harlan County, Kentucky, Shaunna Scott (1995), asks, “How have experiences been shaped by history and social position (class, race, gender, region, generation)? In sum, how have our ideologies been shaped through our interaction with material and social reality, and vice versa?” (1995: 39). In examining these questions among current and former members of the UMWA, Scott uses class identity to discuss how miners see themselves in relation to ideological issues of capital accumulation. She suggests that community identity eclipsed class identity as the most important connective vein among Harlan Countians:

The ideology of community emphasized the experiential, historical, and structural common ground between the local elite and the working class. It did not, however, articulate the equally important differences and conflicts between the classes. (Scott 1995: 121)

This community-centered identity did not mean that miners were unaware of the unjust nature of coal operations. As Scott points out, miners did acknowledge the social stratification and power differentials between those who reaped large profits and those who did not. However, miners did not think of themselves in terms of class, or the working class, but rather as individuals, family, and local community (Scott 1995: 133).

In his view as class as process, Dwight Billings (2016) has encouraged scholars of the region to consider thinking about class in non-reductive ways that might be helpful for imagining a transition toward a more just and democratic post-coal economy (2016: 58). He suggests looking at class as only one of many identities that is the cause for social (and other) inequalities; recognizing other non-capitalist forms of production and exchange that exist within the dominant capitalist economy; and recognizing class as a process (not a group). In thinking of class as process, it opens up the possibilities for overlapping identities and even contradictory interests.
In her work on the movement against a proposed power plant in southern California, Karen Brodkin (2009) examined two different types of working class environmentalism—a “teamsters-and-turtles approach” that supported the move of a “clean” power plant into a neighborhood in southern Los Angeles county versus an environmental justice approach that was against moving in any polluting industries into a community of color that was already plagued with pollution. Building upon the work of these scholars, this research examines how the emphasis on class processes provides a way of examining differences among people who might otherwise be construed as members of a unified working class.

Following the work of Karl Marx, geographer David Harvey (1996, 2000) takes a materialist view of class, suggesting that class is the relationship of workers to resource allocation for capital accumulation. Harvey argues that accumulation by dispossession is a way that the owners of capital continue to grow their wealth-- that is they gain more wealth by taking from others. In particular, they utilize accumulation practices that include the privatization of land and other natural resources, the commodification of power, and corporate welfare programs that benefit big business through tax incentives (2000:159). In this way, class is seen less as an identity, but rather as a relationship to the means and modes of production.

To explore these varying economic representations and class positionalities, I first examine the narratives of Wise County residents that address issues of the economy and its relation to the history, the present, and the future of their communities. Local people, as mentioned above, were acutely aware of the devastating economic conditions of their own communities and communicated this in both private conversations (such as
interviews), as well as public expressions (such as publically supporting new economic initiatives). Second, I examine how politicians and political campaigns were influential in the ways that public discussions about the region were framed in economic terms, and how this, in turn, affected how local residents envisioned economy in terms of coal and its alternatives. Third, I assess how members of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards viewed the economy as directly related to their environmental work, advocating for social justice and considering alternative economic systems or livelihoods for their community. Fourth, I explore how class processes influenced economic representations. In this section, I specifically examine the ways that UMWA members talked about economy, and how their class identification influenced their vision of economy to include other larger scale issues such as corporate greed and outsourcing.

**Everyday Economic Representations in Wise County**

“We are different than any other part of Appalachia. We’re just poor, and there’s a reason we’re poor, a clear reason. It’s kind of like I told [Representative] Griffith, take a map of the coal reserves in Appalachia and a map of poverty in Appalachia, and they are the same map-- there’s an issue there.” –David Miller, life-long resident of Wise County (Interview Transcript, David Miller, July 2013).

Like many residents in Wise County, David was painfully aware of a concept that social scientists (Ballard and Banks 2003, Filer and Macintyre 2006) have called the “resource curse.” The “resource curse” has often been applied to communities in the global South who live in an area that is abundant in natural resources, but because of capitalist production, reap very few economic and other benefits while the capitalists (owners of the modes and means of production) make large profits. Anthropologists have argued that resource extraction often results in a lack of other development, internal political tensions, human rights abuses, and cultural loss (Imbun 2007, Lahiri-Dutt 2011,
Indeed the history of the Appalachian mountains paints a portrait of a region that has long been exploited by industry. John Alexander Williams (2002), David Whisnant (1994), Ron Eller (1982) and other scholars of the region have demonstrated how the money made by coal companies continuously left the region bound for the pockets of company heads who lived in major urban centers up north, only leaving behind paychecks for miners to help with local economies. While coal boom times certainly enhanced the economies of coalfield communities for a time in Appalachia, the boom and bust cycle of coal production and sales created uncertain economic conditions that would, during bust times, leave workers without jobs and communities without the funds to support local businesses. A look at statistics on coal mining employment and

Figure 4.1 Annual Coal Production in the Commonwealth of Virginia by mine type, 1983-2009
Source: McIlmoi et al, 2012
coal production in the Appalachian region paints an interesting picture of the economic condition of communities.

As the data in Figure 4.1 demonstrates, annual production of coal in the state of Virginia has decreased since 1983. Additionally, statistics have shown that Appalachian coal employment peaked in the 1940s and 50s, plummeting from approximately 120,000 employees at this time to less than 20,000 in 2002. However, while employment plummeted, production actually increased over the same period of time from 140 million tons to 160 million tons (Appalachian Voices 2013). Additionally, Virginia’s underground mines employed around 10,000 miners in 1990, as compared with 5,000 in 2006. Surface mine employment began at around 1,500 in 1990, with a peak of around 2,000 in 2001, and was back to 1,800 in 2006 (Virginia Technical Institute n.d.). These numbers show that the heyday of coal mining employment has been long gone since the mid twentieth century in Appalachia, and coal production and employment continue to decline in the region.

However, several interviewees and other secondary source material described the booming period of coal in Wise County. In the town of Appalachia, VA where West Moreland Coal provided jobs for much of the surrounding community, local historian Lawrence Fleenor, Jr. (2005), documented the “boom” period in the 1950s. He explained that in the 1950s, the town would bustle with people crowded in the streets on “pay day Saturday”-- shopping at grocery stores, visiting diners and bars, and gambling illegally. And men would even visit the local prostitute who hung around the illegal gambling joints.
However, it was not long before the bust period hit the town of Appalachia, and after numerous layoffs in the 1980s, West Moreland Coal closed its operations in Appalachia permanently in 1995, leaving miners without jobs and businesses without any clients. What had once been a bustling town became a town with empty storefronts and high unemployment. Resident Jennifer Brown recalled her father’s lay off:

I’m 30, and my dad worked for West Moreland Coal Company. He didn’t work underground. He worked on the company side. He was a supervisor. He was a coal sampler, [and] he worked in a lab. Dad got a college education here. West Moreland had its first big lay off in the late ‘80s and then in ‘95 is when it shut down. My dad lacked 56 days of having 25 years in, then they sold out [and] left. They paid them, bought them out to settle up, [but] you still wouldn’t get financially what you deserved if you put in the time and had retired… (Interview Transcript, Jennifer Brown, February 2013)

Jennifer’s story was not the only one I heard in my interviews about the way the town changed when West Moreland shut its doors. Many local residents recalled the booming days of coal when downtown Appalachia was flourishing with a movie theater, multiple taxi stands, and plenty of other stores and restaurants. Sissy Burke, a SAMS member, recalled what it was like to live in Appalachia in the 1970s:

There was a lot of money floating around here, and very little unemployment I think. You could ask any guy, and they’d either work in the mines or on the railroad. Those two go hand in hand, those were the two major employers. And it was like people had money to burn. This town was full of people, not just on the weekend, you could come into town on a weeknight and there’d be people. Every storefront was full, there was always something to do. Grocery stores, department stores, cab services. Anything you wanted was here- you didn’t even have to go down the road to Big Stone. In the ‘90s it started going downhill. (Interview Transcript, Sissy Burke, May 2012)

As alluded to above, West Moreland began its major lay-offs in the 1980s, closing its doors for good in 1995, laying off 650 employees with a payroll totaling $25 million (Lester 2004). According to residents it was largely because the cost of operating union mines was too high. While this closure certainly signified the end of a boom era in
Appalachia and Wise County, other coal companies (primarily non-union) continued to operate and provide some employment for local people. These jobs provided some of the best paying jobs in the county that did not require years of higher education.

It seems to be, in part, the remembrance of Appalachia when there were plentiful coal mining jobs that were important memories of life in the coalfields for some residents. For example, local official Terry Stamper recalled his time as a boy growing up in a thriving community:

And I’ve… been here in Appalachia through times of boom, when a lot of people were employed in the mines, and the mines weren’t so mechanical. In other words the mining depended upon labor. Of course over the years that’s diminished, it’s become more mechanical. And we see people leaving the area looking for jobs because of the mechanization. We’ve always been a coal mining community, we’ve always been a close-knit community. We’ve always supported each other in times of good and bad…right now we are obviously seeing an ebb in the use of coal. We are seeing a lot of miners lose their jobs. We hope [it] will turn again, [but] we know that it will never come back to the hey-day it used to be. (Interview Transcript, Terry Stamper, March 2013).

Terry’s recollection of the “hey-day” of coal demonstrates how many people felt about the period of time when Appalachia was a booming town. It was a good place to live because people had money, businesses were thriving, and the community was close. But as he, and many other residents recognized, it was not something that would ever come back, no matter how bad people wanted it to. Terry’s quote also demonstrates that he had an understanding that the change in means of production, from underground coal mining that required numerous employees to operate a site to surface mining that only required a few people to operate heavy machinery, meant many miners were unemployed while coal production continued.

Furthermore, Terry’s understanding of the past economy that coal provided for his community heavily influenced his current outlook on the economic situation in Wise
County. Terry was especially concerned about coal severance taxes that the county received each year. In the state of Virginia, coal severance tax is a county-based tax based on the gross receipts of coal sales from that county. In Virginia, the maximum tax allowed is 1%, which is what Wise County collects. This money is put into the county’s general revenue fund that provides funds for any type of county programs, including school funding, infrastructure development, and other economic initiatives (Farren and Partridge 2015). Because the severance tax was based on the sales of coal that is mines, a downturn in mining production (and subsequent sales) also meant a downturn in tax revenue available to the county. For the 2012-13 fiscal year budget in Wise County, approximately 20% of the budget (or $11.4 million out of $56.6 million) was budgeted to come from coal severance tax funds. By contrast, the following fiscal year, 2013-2014, only had $4 million allocated from coal severance tax funds, an over 50% decrease (Wise County n.d.). Terry was concerned about what this lack of coal severance tax funds would mean for the county’s future fiscal state:

Wise County as a whole has become dependent on coal severance. And the towns within Wise County themselves feel the brunt of the reduction in coal severance. Take for instance the town of Appalachia, we’re small. If we see a reduction in our coal severance revenue of 50 to 100,000 dollars [each] year, it stings really bad. We don’t have a way to make up that loss. In addition to that, when there’s not a lot of coal activity, that means there’s not a lot of people on the street, [and] there’s not a lot of activity. There’s no one buying gas or food. So we see a reduction in revenue there too because we have tax revenue on the books that comes from these businesses that are in town. So it’s a trickle down effect, it affects us all. And folks that aren’t employed obviously don’t spend a lot of money in town. And eventually, they start looking elsewhere for employment and so we lose population. We lose revenue from folks that are not here in their homes, [that are not] consuming water that we sell them. So there are a lot of factors that come into play that we can see. We can feel it when we are in kind of a recession like we are with coal. (Interview Transcript, Terry Stamper, March 2013)

Terry’s points about the systemic effects that the loss of coal jobs had on the community
were certainly visible on the landscape- empty store fronts, news of additional businesses shutting down, and the annual declining population all backed up his observations. Terry also made the point that the region had become “dependent” upon coal- a fact that many residents seemed to regret as they lamented the lack of diversification in their local economy.

Jennifer, whose father worked for the railroad industry in Appalachia, expressed frustration over the economic situation of Southwest Virginia, claiming that the undiversified economy had been a serious hindrance to the region:

I get frustrated here in Wise County. They’ve placed so much of their eggs in one basket for an economy, for a nonrenewable resource that once it’s gone, what are you going to do? Because I’m not seeing [local officials] bring in any other kind of industry. I’m not seeing them bring in any manufacturing jobs. There’s not even call centers that they could bring in for people. I think that was the difference in ’95-- when people lost their jobs in ’95 with West Moreland, they could leave and find a job elsewhere. Now it’s so bad they can’t even leave the area to find work, so it puts you in a worse situation. (Interview Transcript, Jennifer Brown, February 2013)

Despite her understanding of the need to diversify the economy, Jennifer also wanted to be clear that she still supported the coal industry. She continued,

I don’t want people to think I’m against the coal industry, because I’m not. It’s provided people, you know, a living, a way to live-- they’ve got clothes on their back, they’ve been able to take their kids on vacation, provide an education and send their kids to college, you know. These men deserve every dime they get for going down in a hole like that, and I respect them for it. I think right now, too, with the coal industry, they are probably going to have to start researching and catching up on energy. (Interview Transcript, Jennifer Brown, February 2013)

Jennifer’s comments demonstrate the ways that many coalfield residents felt conflicted over the role of the coal industry in their community. On the one hand, coal provided good-paying jobs for community members, while on the other hand residents understood that with the most recent “bust” of the coal industry, the community needed a more
diversified economy—one that included a variety of good-paying jobs for a variety of skill and education levels.

In addition to Jennifer’s statements about the need to bring in other types of jobs, while still sustaining some coal related employment, she also made it apparent that she respected coal miners and their hard work. In an interview with an energy industry spokesman, Gary Smith, he discussed his thoughts on the contentious nature of coal in Wise County:

Well I can see, understand why people are upset. I mean for decades coal miners were romanticized, what they did, these guys went underground and mined coal and it was feeding the mighty American industrial machine. They were heroes, more or less. And all of the sudden they’ve been turned into criminals in popular media and people’s minds. (Interview Transcript, Gary Smith, July 2013)

Gary’s perspective offers interesting insight into the oft times polarizing debate over coal mining in Appalachia-- while environmentalists attempted to be clear that they were critical of the coal industry or coal company heads, and not the miners who worked for these corporate entities, local coal miners felt personally attacked—by the media, by the governmental regulators, by President Obama, and by environmentalists. An attack on coal, by proxy, was also an attack on the miners who currently worked, and those who had worked in the industry—in many cases, generations of families who worked in or on top of the mines.

Gary continued,

I think if that was me it would piss me off too, you know your daddy and your granddaddy and then you, and you are doing this great thing by keeping the economy going. And then all of the sudden here you are some kind of criminal. That’s one thing, people who want to do something about greenhouse gasses and coal mining, not just greenhouse gasses, the effects of coal mining on the land, they should approach it from the standpoint, you can’t just throw a bunch of people out on the street and expect them to be happy about that, because its their livelihood. A lot of these guys are in their 40s and 50s and its what they’ve known
their whole lives and there’s no alternative work in the area. It’s kind of late for them to be retrained for something else. (Interview Transcript, Gary Smith, July 2013)

Gary’s points here are instructive to the sentiments that Jennifer was expressing about respecting miners. Whether or not the coal miners of Wise County were staunchly for or against surface mining coal, it did not seem to really matter. What mattered was how they thought and felt about the occupation of mining and its role in the history and heritage of the region, as well as the movement that sought to end surface mining. While on the surface the contention over coal seemed to be a simple “jobs versus the environment” zero-sum debate, Gary’s and Jennifer’s narratives suggest that it was not only the financial aspect of coal jobs that mattered, but rather the heritage and tradition of mining that went along with the livelihood. While this local conflict over the economic benefits of coal mining versus the negative environmental consequences of coal mining created an oft-contentious situation for discussing the local economy, the underlying issue of coal history and heritage remained an important aspect of the debate. As Ruccio would suggest, these economic representations encompassed more than just financial considerations, but also those of history and heritage.

Local resident and member of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards (SAMS), Pam Miller, recounted numerous stories of the conflicts she faced with relatives over the coal industry- and specifically how it related to the jobs held by members of her family. In this story, she recalled how she felt conflicted over her family’s reaction to a letter to the editor she published in the local newspaper condemning strip mining for its negative bearing on the environment:

I got a brother in law that works in the mines. When we are all together or go out to eat or something, I used to try to talk to him [about mining], but I just don’t
even broach the subject now. They never said anything to me in person or called me a name, but they don’t like to talk about it. I wrote a letter to the editor one time, and my sister-in-law remarked to me that one of my relatives had said, “I don’t know why [Pam] does this.” She said “they don’t know why you are writing stuff like that in the paper.” (Interview Transcript, Pam Miller, July 2012)

It was not just family members of miners, like Pam, who felt conflicted about the discord over mining in their community. Framed by the coal industry as a simple “jobs versus environment” issue, many coal miners themselves recognized that the issue of coal and the local economy was more complicated than a zero-sum game. Many residents recalled how miners felt conflicted over surface mining in particular-- while they did not approve of the environmental damage to the mountains, they also understood the economic importance of the industry to their community. Pam discussed her brother-in-law’s own internal struggle over the role of coal in the community:

My sister and her husband…they don’t belong to SAMS, he used to work in the mines. He came down when we had that Army Corps hearing. [The coal company] told him to come. Of course I got up and spoke while he was there. I think it was mandatory that they were there. And I dreaded it because I [was going to] get up to speak. He told my sister, “[The Coal company] said [SAMS] was trying to do away with coal mining.” She told him, “[Pam] is not trying to do away with underground. It’s where they are blowing up mountains and dumping all this in our water system, what she’s doing.” I couldn’t talk about it in front of him…I’d tell her when he wasn’t around, if I went on a trip or something. But, he started coming to a few things, she told him you just come on down here. But she says she can’t join. Actually he’s changing his mind. He’s seeing my side of it now, but they can’t join because they have a grandson who works in the mines. (Interview Transcript, Pam Miller, July 2012)

One way that many local environmental activists felt that they needed to and could justify their stance against surface mining with their own families’ histories and heritage as coal miners was by stating that they were “not against underground mining.” This was a phrase that members of SAMS used over and over to try to garner more community support, as well as assuage family tensions over coal. SAMS members were acutely
aware of the good-paying coal jobs that provided for family and community members, while also envisioning ways to move beyond coal to find economic possibilities that were both good for the community economically and environmentally. As mentioned in the introduction, coal miners in far Southwest Virginia made between $60,000 to $100,000 a year, which was a significant income in an area with an average income of $30,000 a year (Newman 2015). Members of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards were often the most critical of the coal industry’s role in local economy, stating that while it had offered good-paying jobs, its economic contribution to the community had been small in comparison to the large profits made by corporate heads.

Similarly, other local residents and members of SAMS felt that the coal industry had never truly contributed to the well-being of the communities in central Appalachia, economically or otherwise. Resident John Brooks stated his disdain with the way that the coal industry had created a cycle of poverty in the region:

Because [of] the large coal companies [the economy has] been a downward arc. The money has always been centered in Pittsburg, or Chicago, or London. All the major structures were outside the coalfields, they still are. The office for Alpha is not in Wise County or Dickenson county, it’s in Bristol, [Virginia]….The wealth has gone out of this area, it’s gone to Pittsburg, its going to New York, its gone to Atlanta. Historically, even before the coal industry, we took our hogs and drive them down the Tennessee River Valley and they landed up in Atlanta or New Orleans or wherever. We’ve always sent our wealth away and we’ve just taken the crumbs. (Interview Transcript, John Brooks, August 2013).

John, like many SAMS members who were critical of the coal industry, recognized the long history of exploitation and abuse by big coal in the region. This was apparent to some residents in the ways that the profits earned by coal, timber, or railroad companies did not stay in the region to the benefit of the people, rather the money left and followed the CEOs and other upper-level administration to big cities outside of Appalachia.
The various and often contradictory ways that local residents viewed their local economy demonstrate the diverse economic representations that exist in Wise County. Even among a single individual’s understanding of the economy often lay a contradictory feeling towards the ways that the economy had or should be operating. While Jennifer called for Wise County to stop putting all their “eggs in one basket,” she also was sure to acknowledge the importance of the coal industry in providing living wages for hard-working miners. Similarly, many SAMS members expressed their strong convictions about underground mining being the “right” way to mine—as it did not harm the environment like surface mining and also provided local jobs. Some SAMS members even went as far as to state that mountaintop removal mining was not a mining job, rather it was “heavy equipment operation.” This was an important distinction for many, as the majority of SAMS members, while critical of mountaintop removal mining, were more open to the idea of underground mining because they had family members who had worked or currently worked in the mines, or in some cases, they themselves had worked underground. This point of differentiation made it clear that they respected the heritage and history of mining and continued to support current underground miners and their jobs (and thus the local economy), while also allowing for criticism of the environmental damage caused by surface mining.

Critical to this discussion is not only that residents held varied economic representations, or understandings, of their community and its relationship to the coal industry both historically and at present, but also that these economic representations did not exist in a bubble, but rather were formed by lived experiences, as well as by power holders who set the terms of the debate over coal mining in Central Appalachia.
Further complicating how residents view their everyday life and economies in the coalfields was the constant onslaught of discourse in public meetings, events, and political campaigns that continued to promote coal as the “answer” to the region’s economic problems, as well as the way to the future. Politicians and local leaders advertently and perhaps inadvertently often framed the debate over coal mining purely in terms of economics. In running for office, political candidates across scales (local, regional, state, and federal) used discourse for campaign literature, commercials, billboards, and mailers that almost solely focused on coal related issues, especially in relation to the economy in Southwest Virginia. Additionally the work that politicians participated in after their election victories further demonstrated their support of the coal industry. This observation is not necessarily surprising to anyone who lives in the coalfields, as coal tends to dominate conversations about economics- and economics tends to dominate political conversations. Additionally, many (if not all) political candidates at all governmental levels receive campaign financing from the coal and energy sectors.

While certainly other issues concerned voters in southwest Virginia (I heard local people discuss abortion, gay marriage, and the Environmental Protection Agency, for example), the focus in southwest Virginia remained on economy. For the coal industry, this focus was beneficial, as coal companies provided some of the best paying jobs in the area and also contributed significantly to the local tax base (1/5 of the total budget in FY 2012-2013) that funded schools, roads, and other government programs. For most politicians, the focus on economy provided a space for conversations that both
encompassed their support of coal as the backbone of southwest Virginia’s economy as well as their intent to fight unjust federal regulations that made burning coal more costly. Much of the campaign discourse used by politicians relayed the point that local communities would not survive without coal mining to provide the economic backbone of the region. This discourse demonstrates as David Harvey (1996) and Daniel Faber (2008) noted both corporate interests and political elites control the public conversations about important economic and environmental issues.

_The 2012 Election Cycle in southwest Virginia_

In the U.S. Senate race in Virginia in 2012, a strong effort by right-leaning super-pacs was concentrated in associating contender and Democrat Tim Kaine with President Obama, suggesting that Kaine supported Obama’s restrictions on coal fired power plants. Mailers, yard signs, billboards, and television and radio advertisements from this election cycle demonstrate the ways that elections in far southwest Virginia seemed to be fought over a single issue- the coal industry. One mailer I received read, “Tim Kaine: Looking Down His Nose on Us. Betraying Coal.” The same mailer suggested that, “Tim Kaine betrayed us and chose to stand arm-in-arm with President Obama and work to shutter coal-fired power plants and make it impossible to burn coal.” In an already economically depressed area, the idea that a politician might take actions that would further depress the coal industry was held in distaste by most residents. Super-Pacs that funded Republican candidates spent a lot of time making the connection between democratic candidates and Obama’s policies that included stricter regulations for burning coal in new power plants.

Another anti-Tim Kaine mailer stated, “Coal is the life-blood of Southwest Virginia. That little black rock. It’s supposed to put food on the table. Keep communities
alive, pay the bills, and create jobs for hard-working men and women. But because of policies strongly supported by Tim Kaine and forced on us by President Obama, our entire way of life is being threatened— even destroyed.” The bolded print on the mailer seemed to be an attempt to drive home the point that if elected, Kaine would attack the “way of life” in Southwest Virginia. This “way of life” implied by the mailer was of course coal mining—thus, not only would Kaine destroy thousands of jobs, by extension he would be destroying the heritage and pride of the people of Southwest Virginia, something held tightly by all community members.

Again and again mailers attacking Tim Kaine and President Obama focused entirely on the alleged desire and ability of the candidates to take away coal jobs and,

![Figure 4.2 Political Sign in southwest Virginia, Photo Taken October 2012](image)

according to campaign discourse, ruin the entire economy of the coalfields. Interestingly, no references were made to the already seriously depressed economy of central Appalachia, and the social problems that have accompanied the decades of systemic
impoverishment of Appalachian people. Rather, dozens of commercials and mailers drove home the discourse that Kaine and Obama would try to entirely demolish the coal industry, and thus destroy the local economy (and community). Another mailer stated, “Tim Kaine and President Obama want to destroy the coal industry and that kills our economy…” Still another mailer suggested, “If Tim Kaine and President Obama have their way, the coal industry will be put out of business and our families will suffer. There’s just no way to support coal AND support President Obama’s policies.” Again and again the point was the same—if Tim Kaine or President Obama were elected to office, the economy would be further depressed and families would be destroyed. Figure 4.1 demonstrates some of the political discourse that was a part of the landscape of the 2012 electoral cycle.

During the same election cycle, in the presidential race, mailers also demonstrated that it was not just Republicans attacking Democrats over coal, but it was also Democrats attacking Republicans and attempting to show their support for the coal industry (and by extension, win local votes). One mailer attacking Republican Presidential Candidate Mitt Romney suggested that “Mitt Romney Needs to Come Clean On Coal,” quoting the former Governor of Massachusetts’s record as an anti-coal and anti-worker leader of the state who once said of a coal fired power plant: “that plant kills people.” The mailer further tried “Setting the Record Straight” suggesting the coal production was up 7%, $5 billion dollars had been invested in clean coal technology, and black lung protections had increased, all under the leadership of President Obama. Again, the discourse used was clear, even from the Democratic side, that the economic aspects of coal were crucial in reaching the people of southwest Virginia.
In another show of Democrats and Republicans trying to show the most support for coal, Virginia State Senator Phillip Puckett (D) was quoted on an anti-Kaine and anti-Obama flyer as stating, “I am strongly opposed to any proposed regulations and legislative efforts that are trying to eventually shut down our coal industry and in the process destroy jobs, dismantle the economy of Southwest Virginia, and devastate our way of life.” Indeed many local SAMS members grumbled about the lack of “difference” on coal issues between Republican and Democratic politicians in the coalfields, although some would regress that at least the Democrats were at least slightly better on environmental initiatives.

Perhaps the only campaign that focused on coal issues beyond its economic impact in the region was Anthony Flaccavento’s bid for the District 9 House of Representatives seat against incumbent Republican Morgan Griffith. When both candidates were asked questions specifically about the economy and economic transition beyond coal by the local newspaper, The Post, Morgan Griffith responded by stating that, “We need regulations and tax policies that will make it easier for businesses to operate and encourage them to move to the U.S” (Gannaway 2012: A1). While not directly referencing coal, his answer, like many of his comments about the Obama administration’s policies, points to his view that coal was overregulated. Griffith further maintained that coal mining was a “crucial part of the jobs discussion” and that “those jobs are being lost, which can devastate entire communities” (Gannaway 2012: A7). Flaccavento, on the other hand, suggested that southwest Virginia should diversify its economy by building sustainable jobs, such as green energy, new food products and water efficiency, as well as contributing to the redevelopment of downtowns. Flaccavento
further argued that coal miners could be retrained to work at high paying skilled manufacturing jobs. For Flaccavento, while coal was an important issue, he felt that economic policy was the more pressing issue, arguing that the region needed “a bottom-up economy that takes advantage of opportunities for small businesses, family farms, companies that can use the region’s excellent broadband network and other forms of growth that are rooted where they take place” (Gannaway 2012: A7). Flaccavento’s vision for a future economy in southwest Virginia was broad, and unlike other candidates, he looked beyond the coal industry to solve the region’s woes.

While Flaccavento’s campaign heavily focused on a diversified economic development, he also reached out to coal miners in the region. Specifically, he ran on a platform that was different than other mainstream politicians in that he did not try to paint himself as a “friend of coal,” but rather a “friend to miners.” One of his key points in this platform was to fight for black lung benefits for miners. While he did garner the official support of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) with his pro-worker approach,
the unfamiliarity of his name in the region coupled with the amount of money poured into Griffith’s campaign ultimately meant that he was defeated. The sign in figure 4.3 states, “Congressman Morgan Griffith Voted Against Black Lung Protection and Widow’s Benefits. What part of coal is he pro?” Again, coal issues, even those not specifically economic in nature, dominated the campaign cycle.

Looking at the campaign contributions for each candidate during the 2012 election cycle reveals the drastic difference in financial and industrial support. Flaccavento raised $450,000, with his top five contributing industries including retired, unions, lawyers, education, and health professionals. Flaccavento’s top five individual donors included two unions, for a total of $10,000. On the other hand, Griffith raised $1.4 million, with his top five contributing industries including mining, oil/natural gas, retired, manufacturing, and health professionals. Additionally, Griffith’s top five individual donors included three energy companies, for a total of $70,000 (Virginia Public Access Project n.d.). Clearly the difference in the amount of money each candidate was able to raise, as well as the industries that supported each campaign, influenced the ability of each candidate to be seen and heard. While Griffith raised three times more money than Flaccavento, he also had the support of the coal industry and energy sector—a sponsorship that mattered beyond the money spent to finance his campaign.

Public Discourse in Political Work

Another way that politicians influenced local perceptions about life in the coalfields was through their political work. Politicians wrote editorials for the local newspaper; they spoke at public events; they attended events sponsored by the coal industry; and they spoke at local meetings (such as those held by the county governing
body, the Board of Supervisor, or by the School Board)—all places that allowed politicians to have their views on the state of the coalfields—almost always dominated by economic discourse—heard by large audiences.

Newspaper Editorials

The local newspaper in Wise County ran columns written by Republican Representative Morgan Griffith in which he would attack President Obama’s policies on numerous topics, including new coal and power plant regulations proposed by the Environmental Protection Agency. For example, in the April 25, 2013 edition of The Post, Griffith’s letter included his musings that because other countries were not doing their part in curbing pollution, the U.S. government should take that into consideration when making regulations: He wrote,

I support the use of coal in this country with reasonable regulations, but we must also protect American jobs. While recognizing that climate change is a serious issue, we must remember that we do not have this planet to ourselves. Countries like China and India are increasing their coal production and usage with equipment that is far less efficient than ours and without even having many of the reasonable regulations we had a decade ago. They do this because they want jobs. We cannot solve the worldwide pollution problem without their participation. Put simply, it requires a global solution…we need other countries to act as well. After all, we want jobs too. (Griffith 2013)

This opinion piece, like many of the pieces written to his constituents in the 9th District of Virginia, demonstrate how local, regional, and U.S. politicians used public platforms to continue to focus public conversations about coal on the economic benefits of the industry. Readers of his column also received his view on the current national and global situation in relation to what was happening with Appalachia, coal mining, and the economy more broadly.

The Governor’s First Biennial Natural Resources and Energy Law Symposium
In another example of politicians publically stating their concerns about coal and economy, the Governor’s First Biennial Natural Resources and Energy Law Symposium (NRELS) gave local, state, and federal politicians the opportunity to state their opinions about energy policy in the United States. Held in Abingdon, VA in September 2013, the conference consisted of panel discussions focused on the future of energy in the United States. With over two hundred attendees and participants including industry representatives; lawyers; local, regional and state politicians; as well as members of the environmental activist community, the conference covered a range of issues from climate change to the BP Oil Spill in the Gulf of Mexico to the newly proposed EPA regulations for new coal-fired power plants. While the conference included experts, lawyers, and politicians that held many different perspectives on the various issues, the discourse from local, state, and federal politicians was clear: coal was viewed as the most important economic engine of communities in Southwest Virginia.

Democratic U.S. Senators Mark Warner and Tim Kaine wrote letters of welcome to participants that were included in the NRELS binder that was provided for conference attendees. In these letters, both Senators applauded the importance of the coal industry in the state of Virginia while also calling for support for the creation of new and innovative fossil fuel technologies and energy alternatives. In addition to the letters written by Virginia’s U.S. Senators, other politicians were physically present during the conference and gave remarks to attendees about the current state of energy policy in the U.S. and the region.

In his introduction of Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell, Virginia Delegate Terry Kilgore began, “It’s nice to see so many friends of coal and gas, and people wanting to
learn more about energy,” to which he received a room full of applause. Governor McDonnell gave a short address in which he focused on the role of Virginia in the future of energy in the U.S. calling the state “poised to be a long-term innovative leader in energy” (Field Notes, September 2013). He further suggested that the United States needed to continue its progress to becoming energy independent, so that long-term foreign “entanglements” could be avoided. Laying out his vision for Virginia’s future in energy, McDonnell was clear that he believed that even with natural gas on the rise in production and consumption, the coal industry would not diminish, first because of carbon sequestration technologies getting better and second, because of the possibility of coal gasification. But to do this, McDonnell argued, the U.S. needed a regulatory structure that worked and Virginia needed to be able to “stand up when the federal government is over-bearing, which is like everyday” (Field Notes September 2013). From here, McDonnell criticized the EPA, which he called the “employment prevention agency,” claiming that the agency stifles jobs and prevents the ability to use “God-given resources” (Field Notes September 2013). As with the other politicians addressing conference attendees, McDonnell was clear in his statement that energy production was important for both the local and national economy.

Democratic State Senator Phillip Puckett also addressed the crowd, stating, “I support renewables, but it’s going to get cold and dark around here if you depend on them.” Taking his short speech to a more serious level, he began, “I want to put a face to what we are talking about here today…I have a neighbor who works for Alpha. And a lot of his fellow employees lost jobs, and he’s concerned he might be next. If you shut down coal, everyone in the Southwest here will be affected” (Field Notes, September 2013).
Puckett’s real concerns for his neighbor was echoed by other residents throughout the coalfields, and many politicians were keenly aware that layoffs in coalfield communities were not good for people and not good for the economy. Puckett also set the stage for what he, and many other coalfield politicians, believed was or was not possible for the future in his comments about the inability of renewables to meet U.S. energy needs. For Pucket and many others, efforts to bolster the coal industry could meet both U.S. energy needs and also provide jobs for the people of Southwest Virginia.

U.S. Representative Morgan Griffith also addressed conference goers, beginning his speech with a call to use natural resources, “If we use our God-given energy resources there is no reason we cannot continue to be the number one economic force in the world through the end of this century” (Field Notes, September 2013). He, like Puckett, also addressed the very real heartache of coalfield residents losing jobs, “People losing jobs is heartbreaking. And it’s not just coal miners, it’s people making equipment, it’s people in grocery stores, restaurants. Where’s the compassion for these folks? Do we have to destroy the economy of southwest Virginia and Central Appalachia before we get to the point where we realize we killed the goose that laid the golden egg?” (Field Notes, September 2013). Like other politicians, Griffith’s statements to public audiences focused on coal as an economic issue, with its ability to provide for U.S. energy needs as an important secondary value. In his discussion of economics, Griffith pointed to the production of coal as providing jobs for coal miners, as well as for other industry related and service jobs, but importantly he also argued that it provided the United States with the opportunity to be the “number one economic force in the world.” Here as Bell (2016)
noted in her work in West Virginia, coal mining was connected to patriotism, that is, Griffith suggested providing energy and a boost to the U.S. economy was a patriotic act.

While many comments made by politicians at the conference continued to focus on coal and its importance not just to the local economy but to meeting national energy needs, natural gas was also a large part of the discussion, with representatives from the oil and gas industry, as well as company heads, participating in panel discussions. Interestingly, like the conversation about the importance of coal to the region’s economy and its ability to help meet U.S. energy demands domestically, the conversation about natural gas reiterated these points while also avoiding the suggestion that natural gas was “cleaner” than coal, although this point was reflected heavily in conference materials.

It was not only politicians who took the podium at the day-long conference, but other experts in the fields of law and environmental science also took part. During the first panel session—a response to the current state of national energy policy—several attorneys spoke about the direct and indirect impacts of environmental regulations on energy production and use. John Wilkinson, counsel for a law firm out of Charleston, WV, presented numerous charts, graphs, and statistics to discredit the concept of global warming, claiming that the Obama administration had chosen coal as its primary target. He further argued that new energy policies (such as those limiting greenhouse gas emissions) would destroy hundreds of thousands of jobs, raise energy prices for consumers, make U.S. goods less competitive because of the high cost of electricity, and fund hostile terrorist regimes in the Middle East though the buying oil from OPEC (Field Notes, September 2013). While his views probably represented the most extreme of those I heard during the conference or during my research, his sentiments resonated with many
residents who voiced concerns over U.S. energy dependence on other countries. Scaling up their concerns about the local economy to also encompass concerns about the national economy meant that for many, coal mining or natural gas extraction (as was becoming more popular in the region) was a way to provide locally for residents and their families through employment, but also to provide for the nation’s economy through the provision of a cheap and reliable energy source.

_U.S. House Subcommittee Meetings_

Beyond the conference on U.S. Energy Policy, public hearings of U.S. House subcommittees proved to be a sounding board for politicians pushing a “pro-coal” agenda based on its economic impact to both the Appalachian region and the United States. In March of 2012, the Environmental Protection Agency released a proposed rule of limiting greenhouse gas emissions at new coal-fired power plants that sent Republican lawmakers and proponents of the coal industry into an outrage. The proposed rule outlined standards that would limit carbon dioxide emissions to 1000 pounds per mega-watt hour, a feat that would not be easy considering the lack of affordable technology to do so. To address this proposed rule, the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Energy and Power held a hearing in Abingdon, a town about an hour east of Wise County, to hear from local leaders and coal miners about the rule. Representative Morgan Griffith addressed other politicians and attendees, arguing that coal “powers America” and that the EPA was waging a war on coal. He argued that Obama’s policies would increase the cost of electricity (since utilities would have to spend more money to curb emissions) and this cost would be passed on to consumers, devastating America’s middle class. He argued that this new EPA rule would have a devastating direct and indirect affect on coal
jobs (Field Notes, March 2012). Other speakers, such as Republican U.S. Congressman Phil Roe from Tennessee, echoed Griffith’s sentiment, while a female miner was asked to speak to the affect of mining on her own personal life, to which she described the importance of being able to provide for her family and continue to work in the coal mines.

In opposition to this prominent view of the EPA as “bad” for the region and the United States, the Virginia Sierra Club organized a rally in Abingdon outside of the hearing location for community members to gather to show support for the EPA. SAMS member Pam Miller said that she spoke to two young miners on their way to the hearing who said that they were paid to be at the meeting—demonstrating that although many miners were present, it did not necessarily indicate their consent. Around 55 people rallied in front of the meeting, holding signs that said, “EPA is good for us” and “Yes! The EPA!” in support of proposed regulations of coal fired power plants that would limit emissions. Despite the prevalence of Southwest Virginia’s politicians to continuously drive home the idea that the EPA was detrimental to the local economy, rally-goers constructed an alternate economic representation, one that suggested a healthy environment (which would be supported by EPA regulations on coal fired power plants) was an important part of moving beyond a destructive environmental and economic industry. Rather, rally-goers, like SAMS members, argued that a healthy environment and economy could go hand in hand.

In another house subcommittee hearing related to coal, the messaging about coal and economy was much the same. Held on July 25, 2013, the House Science, Space, and Technology Subcommittee on Energy sponsored “Hearing on Future of Coal” featured
representatives from coal-producing states. Representative Cynthia Lummus-R of
Wyoming, began the conference stating:

Coal is of critical importance to the United States… coal has led the way in enabling the enormous improvements to America’s health and well being. It remains our leading source of affordable and reliable electricity, providing a foundation for our national and economic security, while directly supporting hundreds of thousands of jobs, powering industrial facilities that produce the inexpensive goods we too often take for granted, so middle and lower income Americans can enjoy a higher standard of living and make their hard earned dollars go farther. (Field Notes July 2013).

The discourse here focused on the thousands of jobs provided by the coal industry, as well as its ability to make other American’s economic lives better by supplying low-cost electricity, and by extension, low-cost consumer goods that were produced with the help of cheap electricity. Interestingly, these comments did not take into account the large number of consumer goods now manufactured outside the United States, made cheap by their production in countries without stringent labor or environmental standards.

Regardless, this discourse was consistent with what Appalachian politicians had also been saying- the mining of U.S. coal provides important economic contributions both locally and at a national level.

Local Meetings

Meetings outside the realm of U.S. politics also demonstrated the ways that the coal industry’s impact on communities was viewed in purely economic terms. Local meetings in Wise County, including those of the Board of Supervisors (the governing body of the county), as well as local school board meetings, revealed the anxiety held by local politicians who were facing serious budget deficits because of the reduction in coal production, and thus the reduction in coal severance tax funds available for county level
projects. As discussed earlier, Wise County collects and allocates the coal severance tax at a rate of 2% of gross receipts (with 1% designated for roads).

At a town council meeting in the town of Appalachia in September 2012, the town manager stated that he expected coal severance tax funds, which make up the largest part of the town’s budget, to decline by 35 to 40% in the coming years. Similarly, the Wise County finance administrator also said that he expected a 25% drop in coal severance revenue for the county for the then upcoming fiscal year (Field Notes, September 2012).

The discourse about coal as a primarily important economic (as opposed to environmental) issue resonated throughout politicians’ comments during their campaigns, as well as at public hearings. Of course not all residents agreed with these comments, as demonstrated by the divergence in opinions about coal mining by residents. SAMS member Meryll Stidham expressed her disgust:

I think our federal and state governments, and county governments, from the bottom to the top have just become friends of corporations, friends of coal. Friends of big money and that’s a big problem in our government, we are just like corporate ruled. I mean when did that happen, that you get elected by how much money you could raise to campaign. When did that happen and who’s got all the money? Corporations. (Interview Transcript, Meryll Stidham, August 2013)

There were many residents who expressed the same concerns over the connection between corporations and politicians created by money given to super-pacs and campaigns. For Meryll, and for others, this influenced not only the public discourse from politicians, but also actual laws and regulations related to coal mining. Despite the dissonance from residents, the discourse used by politicians also showed up in the ways that people viewed the economy in relation to coal. Not only was some of the discourse repeated at times verbatim by residents in conversations and interviews, but it was also
publically displayed with bumper stickers and T-shirts among the community. Residents echoed the comments made by politicians about coal being vital to the local community and that coal jobs were more important than the environment. Regardless of whether residents agreed or disagreed with power holders about the economic value of coal, what is important here is that all residents responded to the messaging about coal equating jobs. As David Harvey (1996) argues, concerns for environmental issues are often (if not always) placed in a secondary role to economic interests because dominant systems of power are able to not only control discourse about environmental management and resource allocation, but often also discourses of opposition from even the most radical ecological movements. So despite disagreement about whether the community economic gains from coal mining were worth the environmental costs, all Wise County residents felt compelled to discuss the economic importance (or lack of importance) of coal in public discussions.

Interestingly, while many residents echoed this discourse from power holders, the residents who found themselves both at odds with and supportive of the coal industry were members of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). These UMWA retirees repeated messaging about the importance of coal jobs, but also criticizing the greed and lack of care for workers demonstrated by coal companies. This very focused criticism of the coal industry grew out of a specific economic representation that was formed not just by experience and the strong public statements by politicians, but also by class processes. For the final section of this chapter, I turn to my interviews and experiences with the UMWA.

**UMWA and the Critique of Corporate Greed**
It was a typical summer morning in July 2013 with a dense, white fog enveloping the valley of Big Stone Gap. I knew that like other days, the fog would lift shortly and sunshine would warm the bright green hills and hollers that encompassed the heart of the Appalachian mountains. I climbed into my husband’s red Chevy S-10 and headed for a town on the opposite side of the county where I would park his truck at a gas station off the four-lane and meet up with members of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) catching a chartered bus headed for a union rally at Arch Coal in Saint Louis, Missouri. Nervous and excited about the journey that lay ahead, I finished my mug of coffee, grabbed my backpack, locked the doors, and said a silent prayer that all would go well.

“Is this your first trip?” one of the grey haired retired miners asked as we stood on the rumble strip along the highway. “Yes,” I said shyly. “Is your husband a miner?” he asked, sipping on his gas station coffee and then tossing the Styrofoam cup into the ditch. “No,” I explained, “I’ve been doing research on coal mining in southwest Virginia and was invited to go on the bus trip by a local UMWA organizer.” After about 30 minutes, the bus finally arrived, just pulling onto the shoulder of the highway long enough for us to file on before we took off on the thousand mile round trip that would last less than 48 hours. After finding a seat, I was introduced to the bus captain, Rodney Mullins, who asked my name and inquired as to my purpose of going on the trip— as a woman, and as a person under the age of 60 with no familial attachments to the UMWA, I was an anomaly. When I explained my research project, Mullins and other retired UMWA miners who sat near were very receptive to my joining the trip. It was here, as we wound through mountains that eventually opened up into the bluegrass of Kentucky and then the flat
cornfields of Indiana and on to the Gateway Arch, that my true education on the UMWA began.

This section examines the connections made by UMWA members in relation to their economic representations of critiques of corporate greed and corruption in the coalfield region of southwest Virginia. Specifically, I explore how union-based narratives of supporting coal jobs in the region combined with their critiques of the mistreatment of coal miners and unsafe working conditions reveal how class processes and identity influence the ways that their economic representations are formed. I further explore how UMWA members’ discussions of greed and corruption in the coal industry primarily started and stopped with the treatment of workers and conditions in the mines, although they often expanded their critique to include corruption in Corporate America more generally.

In 2013, the UMWA’s campaign called “Fairness at Patriot” brought these critiques of corporate greed and global capitalism to the forefront of retired Appalachian UMWA coal miners’ minds, many of whom had not participated in any type of civil disobedience, rally, or strike since the early 1990s during the Pittston Strike in Dickenson County, Virginia. Interviews with UMWA members in the coalfields of Virginia reveal how they specifically related these broader issues of economy to their local communities. Additionally, interviews with SAMS members, a handful of whom were retired UMWA miners, demonstrate the different ways that corporate greed was identified and understood in the context of the coalfields. I argue that narratives criticizing the coal industry, and the kind of economic representations these helped create, fluctuate because of fluid notions of identity; meaning that individuals experienced and expressed both
competing and complementary aspects of coal mining in their communities. This was true for many residents, but it was most apparent in conversations with UMWA retirees.

_Fairness at Patriot_

To return to the UMWA, the thousand mile journey that I took with members of the UMWA in July 2013 (and then again in August), had been in the making for at least a year, or really several years, before many UMWA members even knew what was happening. On July 9, 2012, Patriot Coal, a spin off of Peabody Coal, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in the Southern District of New York. Members of the UMWA immediately understood that this meant it was time to gear up for a fight—one that would not be easy, but one that would be necessary to retrieve the healthcare benefits promised to employees, retirees and their families. With 2,000 active UMWA employees at Patriot Coal, and another 10,000 retirees that received their benefits through Patriot, a stop in healthcare payments to these workers and their families would mean a serious hardship for over 20,000 people. Cecil Roberts, President of the UMWA, explained his view in the pages of the UMWA Journal:

_In 2007, Peabody Energy put all of its union mines and some nonunion mines in West Virginia and the Midwest, along with the retiree health care and pension obligations from operating and closed union mines, into a single entity and spun it off into a new company called Patriot Coal. This was Peabody’s way of trying to get out of its obligations to pay for the pensions and health care of thousands of people who spent their lives working for Peabody. (UMWA July/Aug 2012: 8)_

Furthermore, another company, Arch Coal, had also sold off its union mines to a company called Magnum Coal, which later merged with Patriot. As Roberts and other UMWA members saw it, this was Peabody Coal’s and Arch Coal’s deliberate way of shedding themselves of obligations to union miners by creating smaller companies who would not be able to survive when the market for coal collapsed, as it had been doing
over the last few years. Indeed, it seemed as though Peabody had set Patriot up to fail. UMWA members across the country began to rally in Saint Louis, twice monthly, in front of Peabody Coal headquarters and Arch Coal headquarters in an attempt to pressure the companies to uphold their obligations to retired and current miners. UMWA members from across the country, including many from the Appalachian coalfields, attended these rallies.

When asked about the problems with the current state of the coal industry, the local organizer for the UMWA who set me up to go on these trips, responded, “I think some of them are more greedy. I feel like it’s a mentality with board of directors and CEOs that they try, it’s a game to them of trying to outdo the other one by showing they make more profit and they can do it cheaper and get by doing it unsafe. The miners and people in the communities pay the price” (Field Notes, July 2013). Other union miners also discussed the “greediness” of coal companies, especially when it came to obtaining federal black lung benefits. Black lung and rock lung, two occupational diseases caused by inhaling coal and/or rock dust, while working in or on top of a mine site, can be debilitating to miners, causing numerous lung and heart problems, and eventual death. While mine safety legislation passed in 1969 made eliminating black lung a priority through more rigorous safety measures to eliminate dust, the problem persisted. Equally frustrating, was that many miners struggled to get benefits. Perhaps this contention over black lung benefits was one reason that the union bargained heavily for its excellent medical benefits.

During the rally at Arch Coal in Saint Louis in July 2013, Cecil Roberts gave a riveting speech to rally goers before participating in a planned civil disobedience action
in which he and other pre-selected members of the UMWA were arrested. Greeting an enthusiastic crowd with his iconic camouflage union shirt and celebrity status, Roberts began,

Now brothers and sisters, there’s a labor song that calls into question, which side are you on? Anyone should be able to go about their business anywhere in this country without having to answer that question. Now, all of these speakers, I want them to come up by here by me for just a second…Now, these people have made their choice, they are standing with you. (Field Notes, July 2013).

Several other unions were represented and standing in solidarity at the UMWA rally at Arch Coal—including steel workers, iron workers, communication workers, teachers, and fast food workers. Robert’s vision, as he articulated it, was for all workers to stand up to corporate greed together. Here he called upon a Bible story to explain his stance:

But let me tell you something, some people say, people who believe shouldn’t be acting like this. Let me share something with you, one of my favorite stories about Jesus, is when Jesus looked at the temple and saw the money changers, oh yes, the money changers, Jesus couldn’t take it anymore, and if Jesus were here today, some people actually believe that when Jesus comes back he’s going to capitol hill and try to get one more tax break for the millionaires and billionaires. Let me
tell you where Jesus would be today, he’d be walking through this crowd right here, by your side. And Jesus, looking at the money changers, he became angry, and Jesus found a whip. Can you imagine our savior found a whip, and he went into the temple and drove the money changers out of the temple. I want to tell you something. I want this movement to grow, and I want the young people, I want every person of color, I want every union to stand up collectively and say ‘we’ve had enough, we’ve had enough.’ Have you had enough?
The crowd responded: “yeah”
Roberts: Are you fed up?
The Crowd, enthusiastically: fed up
Roberts: Are you fed up?
The Crowd: Fed up! (Field Notes, July 2013).

Consistent with Robert’s narratives about corporate greed in the United States and across the globe were individual UMWA members’ critiques of not only the coal industry and specific companies, but also any corporations who were a part of outsourcing jobs, paying low wages, and union busting.

After the rally, retired UMWA member Jack Bush, echoed the critiques that were heard at the rally:

It’s like Cecil Roberts said up in Charleston, WV. Those people back there in Peabody’s office, said they wear a ten thousand dollar suit and a thousand dollar tie and ride to work in a limousine. I know they got stockholders, and they expect a return on their investment, and I can understand that…Cecil said it was all about money. They want to keep their money, they don’t want to give it to the people that made them their money. They want to give it to their CEOs. Most of the time the CEO is just a man who sits up there behind a big desk and smokes a cigar and the rest of the people do the work. I mean he’s kind of an overseer and such, but he’s got accountants there that do the accounting work. He don’t have to work about numbers, they pay hundred thousand or hundred and fifty thousand a year to do that for him. (Interview Transcript, Jack Bush, August 2013)

For Jack, not only was the problem the greed of the companies and their corporate executives, but also the fact that he did not consider the work done “behind a desk” to really be work at all. Rather, the coal miners were the ones doing the “real” work, but they were also not reaping the benefits of the large profits made by coal companies.

Interestingly this demonstrates some of the pride in the heritage and history that many
residents expressed about coal mining and was detailed above. Part of the importance of coal mining was the idea that was honest work done by hard-working, deserving miners. Unlike miners, the executives were not part of this heritage in the minds of coalfield residents.

A handful of UMWA retirees were also members of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards, and as such, their critiques encompassed more than just job security and workplace health and safety concerns. For example, Tim Miller a retired UMWA miner and SAMS member, took the critique of coal operators beyond just the mistreatment of workers to understand their greed as part of a mistreatment of communities:

You know one of the things that really surprises me about UMWA, and believe me I love the UMWA, I think all our working people ought to be some kind of union member. But what gets me, they won’t stand up and make a stand against mountaintop removal, so therefore they are aligning themselves with the very ones they fought against- scabs, non-union people that we call scabs. So now UMWA people and scabs are standing side by side, and that was something that was a no-no for UMWA. We didn’t want them around. Now they think to protect their jobs they have to stand with them. And I don’t believe that …The big money is going out of here anyways, it always has, it never really stayed right here. I don’t think it would hurt this area that bad if they shut down mountaintop removal, I may be wrong, but I don’t think it would. The only benefits I see [to mountaintop removal mining] is to them, the operator. They get rich quick, or richer. (Interview Transcript, Tim Miller, April 2012)

In one criticism of the economics of the coal industry, former UMWA miner, Clarence Estep, recounted how the coal industry did not pay the miners what they deserved:

Speaking from my heart for what I think about the coal company-- I’ve worked from them for 26 and a half years and they’ve hired these lawyers and give them a big bunch of money to keep us from getting anything. I feel that we gave our life, so to speak, our health…if I was to go to them and say I needed this or that, they’d rather throw it away or get rid of it than actually give it to the person who helped them make their money, like giving it to the big lawyer. That’s how I feel. I think it’s bad, it should be the other way around. (Interview Transcript, Clarence Estep, May 2013)
Clarence’s anecdote about the coal industry preferring to give money to lawyers or others, rather than the workers, speaks to two issues that came up in our interview: first, the coal industry hired doctors to try to keep miners from receiving federal black lung benefits (and thus having to pay for the medical care entailed by the disease), and second, the coal industry worked hard to defeat any union strikes that would require them to pay higher wages or grant better benefits. These sentiments were echoed by numerous UMWA retirees that I spoke with.

Narratives from UMWA members and SAMS members demonstrate that class identity and the local community’s relationship to the UMWA were important parts of the debate over coal mining in central Appalachia. Working class people were found all along the spectrum, as well as at the polarized ends, of the debate over surface mining. In many ways, and especially at the local level, the controversy over mountaintop removal was a struggle of one segment of the working class (such as the union miners who were members of the local environmental organization) against another (including those currently employed as strip miners). However, as the narratives of UMWA members demonstrate, class is not a static or easily defined identity.

Like Appalachian scholar Shaunna Scott’s ethnography of miners and class-consciousness in Harlan County, Kentucky, I also found that miners (both current and retired) expressed their concerns in terms of “community” rather than class. The miners in her study, like the miners that I interviewed, did not use terms like working class or proletariat, rather their identities were primarily tied with family and local community (Scott 1995: 133). However, an important distinction between the miners that Scott interviewed and the miners that I worked with was that the UMWA members who were a
part of my research did, in fact, claim to identify with workers beyond other union coal miners. Much of this identification stemmed from critiques of global capitalism and capital flight, which had not only caused the loss of American jobs, but also created less support for unions and great profit gains for those at the top. This became especially clear in the rallies in Saint Louis, where other unions sent members to join the rallies. Clearly, here class formations (based on union membership and participation) affected the kinds of understanding and critiques that UMWA members formed about the local, regional, national, and global economy. As Billings (2016) pointed out, residents of Appalachia (and everywhere) participate in multiple economic processes, even over the course of a day. While union membership was an important part of UMWA retirees’ identities, it was not the only defining feature. Further, while the UMWA certainly affected the ways that these retired miners thought about larger scale economies (especially those on the national and global scale) in terms of critiques of corporate greed, it was not surprising that their ideas about the local economy aligned more closely with local politicians who hoped to keep coal jobs alive in Appalachia.

Anthropologist Karen Brodkin’s work on the fight over the construction of a power plant in a working-class Mexican-American neighborhood demonstrated that often these conflicts over environment and jobs also encompass additional aspects of identity, such as race. While some environmental justice activists who opposed the plant because of the negative impact it would have on air-quality, activists of color were also keen to point out the legacy of environmental racism that created the grounds for this plant to be built in a neighborhood of minority. Here, in addition to concerns for environment, concerns for class and race were also evident in the tensions over the possibility of
building a power plant that would provide jobs, but also pollute the community. For many of these residents, health AND good jobs was an important part of the working class vision.

Interestingly, in contrast to the activists that Brodkin encountered in California, while UMWA members expressed concern over safe and healthy working conditions, they did not extend this concern to the health and safety of local communities outside of the workplace. One simple explanation for this phenomenon was varying views of the environment and pollution. As one UMWA member said to me about reclaimed strip mined land, “I think it’s more beautiful than it was before” (Field Notes, August 2013). Combined with the inconclusive nature of environmental health impact studies and money poured into efforts to discredit peer-reviewed studies on health and mining communities, it was difficult to find consensus about whether or not pollution was happening, and whether or not the environment was better off before of after mining.

Even more so than UMWA members, local environmental activists were stronger proponents of what Brodkin described as working class environmentalism, that is, “a range of environmental politics that speaks to interests that its proponents believe are important to low-income and blue-collar wage workers. Good jobs, safe working conditions, and non-toxic neighborhood are all important interests” (Brodkin 2009:11). Indeed, environmental activists in Wise County have linked the destruction of physical environments and the unfair treatment of workers to a long history of extractive industries in the region-- these extractive industries not only took the minerals and other natural resources out of the region, but money also constantly flowed out of the region, leaving only small earnings for laborers to support the local economy. To
environmentalists, the disregard for the land, air, and water (and its impacts on human health) that came along with cheap methods of the extraction of coal, such as mountaintop removal mining, were a part of the same larger problem with corporate greed.

For residents in Wise County, class identity was occasionally evident among UMWA retirees. This was most apparent in the interactions I observed between UMWA members and members of other unions during my trips to Saint Louis to rally at the headquarters of Arch Coal and Peabody Coal. Here working class miners identified with the struggles of others in the working class, including members of fast food unions, teachers unions, and communication workers. Here, at the corporate offices of international coal corporations, they offered a critique of the greed of corporate America that was seen as harmful to all hard-working Americans. However, as Scott discovered in her work, class identity was not something that primarily stood out for miners, and when they were at home in their mountains they were more likely to identify as members of the community, or as coal miners, rather than as class conscious members of a union.

Class process was also demonstrated among Wise County residents, as residents operated both within and outside of the neoliberal capitalist system in their efforts to make a living. Many residents continued to both raise their own food in gardens and with livestock, as well as forage for non-timber forest products such as berries, greens, and mushrooms. Additionally, the process of class intersected with other important aspects of identity.

Finally, more so than any class identity or process, residents in Wise County shared a love of community and mountains, but also of a shared relationship to the long
history of exploitation of the land and people of central Appalachia by coal corporations. Certainly not all residents identified the coal industry as the source of economic and environmental woes, but as coalfield residents, local people were acutely aware of the differences between the heads of coal companies who lived in million dollar mansions both in and outside the region, and the local miners whose hard labor did not produce such wealth.

If we follow the work of David Harvey, Shaunna Scott, Dwight Billings, and Karen Brodkin on class as positionality in relation to processes of capital accumulation, it does not simply limit class to a static or permanent identity separate from other identities (such as religion, kinship, and community), but rather as a fluid understanding of life in a community that is influenced by social relations, imaginaries, material practices, and power relations. While class may not be the “end all be all” category for identity among community members in the coalfields, narratives of UMWA members as well as those unaffiliated with a union alike, revealed the ways that coal corporations were regarded as part of the community, as well how they fit into larger conversations about national economy and the global economic system. While UMWA members tended to be more wary of criticizing the industry’s role in coalfield communities, UMWA members who were also environmental activists recognized a larger process at work that connected multinational corporations’ desire for large profits to poor working conditions and union busting, as well as cutting corners in relation to environmental regulations and standards with the contentious practice of mountaintop removal mining. In this way, class processes affected the development of everyday economic representations of many residents. In addition to different understandings of the far reaches of corporate greed, residents often
held differing views on what the environment even consisted of, what it should be used for, and whether or not it was polluted by surface mining activities. These conflicting understandings of environment will be addressed in the following chapter.

Conclusion

To return to everyday representations of economy that residents held, it is clear that in Wise County, a variety of factors influenced how local citizens thought about the economic situation of their community, region, state, nation, and world. These factors included a myriad of influences such as personal experience and family history, powerful political campaigns and actions, and class processes. There were three primary ways that the economy of the coalfields was discussed or addressed during my research: first, residents expressed concern over the current economic conditions of the coalfields and related these to both how they viewed the past and how the envisioned the future; second, political campaigns and other public events demonstrated the ways that economy was always privileged over environment (or other issues) in public discussions; and third, the United Mine Workers of America demonstrated the ways that class processes privileged some critiques of capitalist corporate America, while discouraging other forms of dissent because of the importance of coal jobs. At the intersection of personal experience, community history and heritage, and power hierarchies, a variety of everyday economic representations surfaced in Wise County, leading sometimes to disagreement over the local economic situation, and other times to cohesion in concern for the economic sustainability of the community for years to come.
Chapter 5: “Strip Miners Love Mountains, Too”:
Narratives of the Environment, Pollution and Appropriate Land Use

We didn’t have any pollution at all growing up. We had a spring, and we carried our water from the spring. We’d drink from the spring. It was clear water and [it had] nothing in it, no chemicals. [It was] good spring water. I think if we could go back to those days we’d be a lot healthier-- fresh vegetables and fruits, no additives in our foods, spring water. We had a good childhood… With mountaintop removal, just to see them taking the mountains off and see what’s left, I’ve actually cried… I don’t think God intended for these mountains to be blown up. In Biblical times, mountains were sacred. They were a refuge. The mountains protect us from floods. They have a lot of habitat in there. We have a lot of good soil, until it’s blown apart, and refuge for our animals, our insects and all of that. And some are on the endangered species list like the Indiana Bat. It just takes away a home for God’s creatures.

- Pam Miller, local resident and member of Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards (Interview Transcript, Pam Miller, July 2012)

Now as far as the community, there’s a lot of environmental impacts whenever it comes to strip mining. My personal opinion- I don’t like strip mining, even though the company I work for is one of the major strip mining companies in the country. I don’t like having my mountains removed. One of the reasons I love this area is because of the mountains. We’ve got memories of childhood running around these mountains, and some of these areas we run in are no longer there.

- John Stallard, local resident, underground coal miner, and local government official (Interview Transcript, John Stallard, March 2013)

When residents of Wise County talked to me about their communities in the coalfields of Southwest Virginia, regardless of whether they claimed a “pro-coal” stance or took an “anti-mountaintop removal” position in the ongoing debate over natural resource extraction in the region, they all overwhelmingly expressed a love of their home, their community, and their mountains. As one local activist told me “strip miners love mountains, too.” How then, despite this point of cohesion in caring for the mountains, did people continue to be so divided at public hearings, political forums, and other public events over the issue of surface mining? And furthermore, how did this care for the mountains lead to drastically different visions of appropriate land and resource use?
To examine the varying ways that residents in Wise County, Virginia conceptualized their own lives and environmental surroundings, I explore the narratives that informants shared with me in interviews and other conversations about their personal experiences with the environment, as well as the ways that environmental knowledge was constructed through scientific discourse utilized in legal proceedings. Both the lived experiences of individuals and the larger public discourse about environment and coal mining in the region worked together to develop differing views about the pollution caused by mining and appropriate land and resource use that I found among residents.

In the first section of this chapter, I explore these various, but often overlapping, ways that residents talked about, envisioned, and understood the physical environment around them. In particular, I argue that SAMS members took an environmental justice framework in understanding the environment, linking the economic, environmental, social and other issues that plagues the region to the same inequitable processes of resource extraction. Next, I examine how the scientific data required in legal proceedings provided a different and more technical understanding of environment, as also served as a barrier to holding coal companies accountable for their polluting practices. In the final section, I return to the topic of the Coalfield Expressway (previously addressed in Chapter 3) to examine the different environmental imaginaries that residents held for appropriate land and resource use in the region by specifically focusing on the discourse that developed around a federal and state highway project. In the conclusion, I demonstrate how local residents often found themselves in the “grey” area in the debate over surface coal mining, as discourses found in the public sphere resonated with some aspects of their lives (for example, family members who rely on coal jobs to feed their
families) but contradicted other embodied experiences with the physical environment (for example, coal dust covering yards so that growing a garden is nearly impossible).

**Environmental Justice and Imagining the Environment**

Residents in Wise County often noted numerous community problems when they discussed the environment. Often, the environment was seen not just as the ecological aspects of the mountains, but as a way for people in the area to make a living (either through its preservation and marketing as a tourist destination, or through the extraction of coal). The environment was also sometimes seen as the backdrop for problems that the area faced - not just that it was what was often the biggest point of contention among residents, but also the ways that times had changed. For some this meant that most (but not all) people no longer relied on the forests and streams to bolster their subsistence, for others the environmental devastation to the mountains were a huge part of what people believed to be a mental health crisis with rampant rates of depression and drug abuse in the community. According to a 2012 report compiled by the U.S. Department of Justice, in Southwest Virginia, 85% of all drug cases were related to prescription drugs, with 70% of total police case loads being related to drugs (U.S. Department of Justice 2012). In particular, the narratives and interactions with SAMS members demonstrated the ways that these local environmental activists understood their work as encompassing more than saving mountains from being blown to pieces. They were acutely aware of the devastation to the ecology of their area, but they further understood how this natural resource extraction was tied to more than just environment. The work of SAMS encompassed addressing more than mountaintop removal - they also worked hard to create economic series to find viable options for non-coal employment and ways to make
a living; they volunteered with the Remote Area Medical fair that provided free health care for two weeks each summer at the fair grounds to low income individuals without health insurance; and they participated in numerous county-level conversations about tourism and economic development.

Following the work of Melissa Checker (2005) and Mark Moberg (2002), this chapter examines these environmental challenges, and the ways that residents understood the devastation of the local environment as encompassing community problems beyond flora and fauna, hill and holler, valley and mountain, water and air. I also return to the work of Harvey (1996), Li (2015), and Kirsch (2014) detailed in Chapter 3, suggesting that corporations have the ability to determine or influence laws and regulations around environmental management, creating barriers for activists to hold them accountable for their polluting practices, and also influencing the way that local residents understood the environment. Political ecologists Peet and Watts (1995), Nesbit and Weiner (2001) examine how differing environmental imaginaries are influenced by both the sensory experiences of residents, but also by the power of coal corporations who hold much control over the public conversations about, and regulatory practices of, the environment.

**Environmental Justice Organizing**

Anthropologists examining environmental justice have often focused on the importance of race in understanding environmental problems. Melissa Checker’s work (2005) demonstrated how the locating of several polluting factories in a community of color in south Georgia was directly related to a history of slavery, share-cropping, and racism. For Checker’s informants, environmental justice activism included not just a struggle to clean up the physical environment, but also the pursuit of a better social
environment to live in—including better housing, better education, and better employment opportunities: “For them, the environment is not just ecological but also includes a host of social factors such as housing, schools, neighborhood safety, and employment” (Checker 2000:17). The problems with the physical environment could not be separated from the social environment, which was influenced by a long history of institutional racism. Checker further asserts that while her work was primarily focused on the environment and race for African-Americans, “by extension, it also has much to tell us about the meaning of civil rights and the environment for all Americans” (2005: 189). She argues, “the poisoning of the environment—like racism—endangers all of us” (Checker 2005: 189). In his seminal work on environmental racism and environmental justice, sociologist Robert Bullard (1990) suggested that there were several reasons that environmental racism continues to exist including corporations and local governments take advantage of populations that are economically powerless, communities of color lacking access to financial, organizational, or legal resources, and communities of color facing other pressing issues such as crime, drugs, and unemployment.

The foundations of the environmental justice movement began in 1982, when truckloads of toxic PCBs were dumped along a highway in a predominantly black community in Warren County, North Carolina (Skelton and Miller 2016). Following this incident, a 1983 study by the U.S. Government Accounting Office, and a 1987 report by the Commission for Racial Justice for the United Church of Christ recognized a link between race and toxic waste sites. Although noted that socioeconomic status played a role in the unequal distribution of environmental hazards, race was more significant. In 1991, over 600 leaders converged in D.C. for the first National People of Color
Environmental Leadership Summit, in which they released a document that outlined the basic principals of environmental justice. Some of these principles included the halting of production of toxic and hazardous wastes and materials; reparations for victims of environmental injustice; and rights for communities to participate in all levels of decision-making and not be forced to chose between healthy communities or employment (Ejnet n.d.). Mark Moberg’s (2002) work in Mobile County, Alabama, examined low-income white communities that also faced a disproportionate amount of environmental hazards based on their economic class. Certainly, many SAMS members understood the historic and present exploitation of the land and the people in Appalachia as a unifying force behind the economic, social, and environmental problems of the region.

The U.S. EPA’s definition of environmental justice is less inclusive of the social issues that Checker, Bullard and other social scientists examine, stating that, “Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies” (US EPA, n.d.). In this definition, the natural environment is not expanded to include social factors, however, as the EPA notes, there is a correlation between social location and environmental pollution. The EPA states that their goals in environmental justice are “the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards, and equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work” (US EPA, n.d.). Some SAMS members did identify themselves as environmental justice activists in their understandings of environmental issues and Appalachia as a place of poverty and exploitation by big corporations. However, SAMS activists more closely
aligned with the EPA’s definition of environmental justice which connected issues of social location and environment, rather than considering the environment as inclusive of things outside the ecosystem (such as schools and workplaces).

Interestingly, members of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards worked closely with the Sierra Club, who through its environmental justice initiatives partially funded the only full-time SAMS staff position. This subsection of the Sierra Club came about through an initiative by an environmental justice group in 1990, who spearheaded an effort to get the “Big 10” environmental conservation agencies in the U.S. to establish better working relationships with environmental justice groups (Checker 2000:154). SAMS primarily had a good working relationship with Sierra Club, who not only provided financial support for a staff position, but also provided lawyers and support for lawsuits against coal companies who were in violation of federal and state regulations.

In addition to SAMS members understandings of environmental problems as being tied to other issues of economic and social justice, residents across Wise County had very different ideas about environment—in particular about appropriate land and resource use and pollution. Peet and Watt’s (1996) concept of liberation ecologies is instructive here, as they incorporate the idea of environmental imaginaries into understanding human-environment relations. Environmental imaginaries are just that—they are the ways people think about the environment in their imagination. Thus, environment is not just materially based, but also based in the minds of the people who interact with it. This social construction of nature is important, as it allows for different perspectives not only what the natural environment consists of, but how it is valued and utilized by the human world. In other words, how people think about the natural
environment is “a product of social processes, beliefs, ideologies, and history” (Robbins 2014: 121).

Nesbitt and Weiner (2001) explore contested environmental imaginaries in central Appalachia and argue that “struggles over environmental resources and patterns of development are as much struggles over how nature is understood as they are battles over material practices” (2001, 337). These imaginaries are an integral part of the place-based environmental discourses I found in my research: the lived, sensory experiences of residents combined with the political processes at work in the community created varying imaginaries. For example, what constituted the material reality of pollution in the scientific community (e.g., selenium in a local creek) may or may not have constituted pollution in the minds of local people. Furthermore, other material conditions that were witnessed or experienced by local people informed their understandings about pollution—excess coal dust covering houses and yards from coal trucks on community roadways, the smell of sulfur in the water, and the visual appearance of acid mine drainage also created an embodied sensory understanding of pollution that was sometimes outside the purview of scientific testing, but none the less a significant part of the lived experiences of local residents. As discussed in Chapter 3, the way pollution was addressed or disregarded in public meetings demonstrates the ways that these imaginaries became more and more complicated in the political arena.

The Experience of Environment and Surface Mining

Sensory experiences were a very real part of the narratives of local residents who explained how they viewed the local ecology of the coalfields. Following the work of Deborah David Jackson (2011), I contend that these sensory experiences (those of sight,
smell, feel, and sound) of pollution and environmental degradation informed the ways that residents thought about their own relationship to the environment. What their experiences told them, a bureaucratic process could not match, but indeed, as noted by many top scientists, there were real, tangible pollutants in their environment as a result of mountaintop removal mining. Sights, sounds, and smells were not only a part of daily life, but they also alerted citizens when something in the local environment had changed. The change in storm patterns over a local mountain, the discoloration of a creek, and the smell of faucet water all alerted residents to the potential for pollution in their community. While residents often explained these observations, they were often just that—informal, non-scientific observations. There were no water samples or other data that accompanied these experiences, rather they were personal, and could not hold up in a court of law or at a regulatory hearing. They were, in a most basic sense, considered hearsay. However, I maintain that these observations were an important part of both the material reality of residents (even without “scientific proof”) and that they also provided insight into the ways that local residents understood their environment.

In this section I explore two ways that the material consequences of surface mining were demonstrated in my research. First, I explore the narratives of residents—those observations that alerted residents to their surrounding environment. Second, I explore the efforts of SAMS to collect data on environmental pollution in order to pursue lawsuits or other types of regulatory action on the part of the state agency. While both of these material experiences were valid and important, only the scientific data gathered by the only SAMS employee or volunteers was accepted as admissible for pursuing environmental change. This technocratic management of environmental regulation
through the requirement of scientific data (sometimes multiple data sets were required), meant that the economic cost (both in labor time and in the amount of money it cost to have water samples tested at a laboratory) were often too high ($200 for a complete analysis of a water sample) for SAMS to pursue these types of lawsuits and regulatory intervention on any regular basis. This meant that many environmental concerns of residents often went unanswered by state or federal agencies or coal companies, and that claims that went beyond the ecological impacts (such as those environmental justice claims of increased health consequences of MTR) were not even considered as valid or appropriate for the conversations at hand.

*Narratives of the environment*

Despite the warm sunshine and blue skies that cloaked the mountains around us, storms were imminent on the hot July afternoon. Notwithstanding the large dark puffy clouds we spotted in the distance, 70 year-old Ruby agreed to take me (and her nine year-old great-granddaughter) four wheeling up on the Looney Creek Surface Mine site that towered above her mobile home in the small former coal camp community of Inman. The three of us loaded up on a two-seater four-wheeler, and headed down an old dirt road, first passing the four large coal storage silos (pictured left) that marked the entrance to the town of Appalachia on Old U.S. Highway 23 from Big Stone Gap. The silos were no longer being used, and had not been since West Moreland Coal Company shut its doors in Appalachia in 1995, which, according to Ruby and other residents, was the beginning of the economic downturn which continued at present. The silos towered above us and above the town, seeming to simultaneously remind residents of a better time when the
economy was booming and also reinforce that coal, despite its dwindling numbers of mines and miners, remained “king.”

Figure 5.1 An Idled Mountaintop Removal Site in Wise County, Photo Taken July 2013

Riding beyond the coal silos, we passed the entrance to a former underground mine, and finally, after heading underneath the U.S. Highway 58 bridge, we headed up the mountain on a gravel road built to access the mountaintop for surface mining. The road was windy and full of hair-pin turns, surrounded by brush and grass— not the tulip poplars, oaks, and other native tree and plant species that would normally be found on a mountain in the area. When we finally reached the flattened surface that was now the top of the mountain, there was little left that resembled the lush green mountains of Appalachia. Ruby stopped the four-wheeler so we could hop off and take a better look on foot. In front of us was a large mound of rocks and boulders, reminiscent of the rubble
left after a building is demolished. But here we stood, in the wilderness, on top of a mountain, one that had been literally blown to pieces to expose the coal that lay beneath. There was no mining equipment to be seen, no current mining happening, no reclamation taking place-- it was a grey barren wasteland left on top of the mountain. Ruby explained to me that A&G Coal had “idled” the mine, which meant that they could halt mining (almost indefinitely, with the appropriate paperwork submitted to the Department of Mines, Minerals, and Energy), and did not have to proceed with any reclamation efforts. Idling, she said, allowed coal companies to stop mining when it was not profitable and also allowed them to refrain from paying to reclaim the area. She shook her head, “It looks like a war zone.”

Ruby grew up just over the state border in Harlan County, Kentucky. Like many residents, she was raised by her mother, who stayed at home working the garden and rearing children, and her father, who worked as a coal miner to provide for Ruby and her 12 siblings. Over a cup of coffee and a Hardee’s steak biscuit one fall morning, she recounted to me her family’s reliance on the surrounding mountains for food, and how the subsequent destruction of the mountains caused by surface mining was destroying this way of life:

You asked me how I was raised. We ate from the earth, a lot of times this was our food. If food was low, mommy always taught us about greens, about the herbs of the earth and they have pulled us through many times…I’m an old mountain girl… I like to go every summer, [or] when spring comes, I’m always looking for something green. I’m always looking for something. But with these strip jobs… I said you’d starve to death up here… I mean there’s berries, and greens, I pick greens. But you don’t have it where the mountains is being torn down. (Interview Transcript, Ruby Wells, June 2013)

Ruby’s story, like many I heard, was full of anecdotes of growing up in the mountains—gardening, foraging, hunting, and fishing to provide food for families; and hiking and
swimming for recreation. The destruction of the ecology of the mountains, as Ruby described, were not the only issues that came with mountaintop removal mining. Indeed, the economic loss of foraging, the social loss of outdoor recreation, and the potential health consequences that she often spoke about (including her own battles with cancer), were part of her vision of a healthy environment—and they informed her search for justice. Ruby once explained how the pollution affected not only the environment outside her home, but also inside her house:

And I turned my sink on one time, and it was black, and dust flew from it, it had to be coal. The mines is probably a quarter mile from where we live. And I’ve been up there and looked around, on our 4 wheeler you know, and they have dug that mountain up. There’s this raw mountain, there’s nothing but rock, dust. And you can’t go back through there breathing, when you come home you are spitting sand and dust, and your nostrils is just like plain mud cakes. And they have all these sludge ponds or what they call sediment ponds. I guess we’ve counted, well I know of at least 15, and some of them are running over and down in the creek. Looney Creek runs by our house. And the water there had been tested and it’s pretty contaminated. So I feel like all of this is not good for our health, there is a lot of sickness in the community. I myself, I have lived there off and on since 1996, I’ve come down with stomach cancer, and three different kinds of cancer. Whether I hear that it’s related to all of this, whether it is or not, this is what’s happened. (Interview Transcript, Ruby Wells, June 2013)

For Ruby, not only was her house filthy with coal dust, but she also believed that the pollution of the environment was directly linked to her illnesses, including stomach cancer. The pollution caused by strip mining was an affront to her health and also destroyed the mountains that she loved and had relied on for extra subsistence in hard times.

It was not only local environmental activists who proclaimed a deep love for and connection to the physical environment. In an interview with Clarence, a retired UMWA coal miner, he recounted a similar story of growing up in a family that relied on the land for food to supplement what earnings his father could make as a coal miner. In fact,
Clarence continued to carry on the tradition of growing a big garden and raising farm animals, often bringing me boxes of vegetables when he attended my old time banjo class at the local community college. He was proud of the hard work he put into his large garden and gladly shared the bounty with his friends, extended family, and fellow churchgoers.

John, the local government official and underground coal miner quoted at the beginning of this chapter, also expressed his love of the mountains and his dislike of strip mining. But during our conversation, he went on to explain that he believed if strip mining was “done right” it did not create the environmental problems that Ruby and others were concerned about:

> We have run off from these mountains where they strip the tops off of them, which some of the run-offs come down and there are contaminants, [they] put dissolved solids into the streams, pretty much sediments in the streams. There’s a lot of environmental things. But there you go. If it’s done properly, we don’t have these problems. (Interview Transcript, John Stallard, March 2013)

Despite this idea that surface mining was “done right”—or according to the laws and regulations in place—many residents’ negative feelings towards surface mining were directly related to the sensory experiences of seeing dead fish in the creek, breathing in excess coal dust from explosions, or smelling chemicals in the water. While some mining companies may have worked hard to do things the right (legal) way, the material reality for residents was that pollution caused by surface mining (“done right” or not) covered their homes, affected their health, and destroyed the mountains that they love. When major polluting events did happen in an Appalachian community, such as a sludge pond breaking through an underground mine in eastern Kentucky, companies often deemed these as horrible accidents that only happen on occasion and were properly dealt with.
when they did happen. Companies instead “insist that their everyday operations are carefully monitored and do not create pollution or negatively impact the environment” (Li 2015:91). As John’s above quote demonstrates, some residents continued to hold faith that coal companies were operating within the confines of the law, and therefore could not be responsible for any major environmental problems.

In addition to the localized pollution, three residents discussed their concern over the changing weather patterns with me. While formerly, big storms and other weather systems had been broken up by the high peaks of the mountains, with those mountains flattened by surface mining, weather events were more significant. Kathy Miller, a resident of Appalachia, explained,

> If there’s no trees and no mountains, there’s things, especially coming in from Kentucky, you know. Black Mountain would stop a lot of the storms, and as that mountain gets smaller and smaller, there is nothing there to help changes, so the weather pattern even changes. You know you could watch on the weather channel, on the radar, they’d say you know, this big front is moving in, and they would show Black Mountain, but then you’d see it crumbling up and not being able to get over it where that’s the highest point in Kentucky. So if the trees and the tops of the mountains [are gone] there’s nothing to stop it. I mean we had a tornado in Big Stone Gap, which is something that is not very common. We have a lot of those, down bursts, wind bursts now. Our weather pattern here has changed significantly. (Interview Transcript, Kathy Miller, March 2013)

The negative changes in the local environment were acutely evident to residents who lived near mountaintop removal mine sites as they recognized that the flattening of the mountains changed not just the landscape, but also the climate.

On the other hand, some residents expressed the hegemonic view that strip mining was actually beneficial to the community, both in terms of economic development, but also in terms of providing more opportunities for outdoor recreation. During an interview with two former UMWA miners, Rodney Mullins and Dwight Sanders, they discussed
the land after it had been stripped and reclaimed. Rodney, who had been the bus captain on one of my trips to Saint Louis, explained, “I think reclamation is wonderful compared to what it used to be. You take Red Onion Prison for instance; see it’s built on a reclaimed strip job. I’ve heard they are using those old strip jobs, they’ve turned elk loose in Wise Counties and Buchanan Counties” (Rodney Mullins, Interview Transcript, August 2013). Dwight chimed in, “A lot of people have these leased around here to hunting clubs” (Dwight Sanders, Interview Transcript, August 2013). For both Rodney and Dwight, the use of reclaimed land for wildlife, and even the economic potential of hunting clubs, provided a worthwhile post-mining use for the landscape, a use that, in their opinion, could allow for more residents to interact with the natural environment.

These perspectives point to the position held by the coal industry that strip mining makes the land more useful for economic development and makes the natural landscape better (i.e.-flat). It is interesting that these two former UMWA miners held this position, as it did not coincide with the track record of the coal industry harming the environment (as demonstrated through numerous scientific studies) and taking advantage of the economy of the region, something that the UMWA often criticized. However, these perspectives demonstrate how pervasive hegemonic discourse was in support of the coal industry. Further when this discourse was combined with the naturalization of economic and environmental problems on the landscape caused by coal mining, as well as individual economic interests in keeping coal jobs afloat, it served to influence how people thought about the aftermath of strip mining.

Rodney and Dwight continued their discussion of the benefits of reclaimed stipe mined land:
Rodney: And also this new 4 wheeling road down here in Saint Paul. That’s all on strip land. There’s about 80 miles of it, I think they say, as you turn back. And that’s been a boom to Saint Paul, because the first time I ever seen them allowed to ride 4 wheelers in the town down there in Saint Paul. And Bailey Hardware down there, he sells those licenses. The reclaiming is excellent compared to what it was. They know more about how to do it.

Dwight: They go back and they replant the trees and they hydro-seed the grass.

Rodney: They got better larger equipment to move that stuff, better than they used to have years ago.

Dwight: They bench the water, it comes off at one point. If you turn a cup over, it runs everywhere. [With this] they control where it rolls off. (Rodney Mullins and Dwight Sanders, Interview Transcripts, August 2013)

In the hegemonic view of these two former miners, when land was reclaimed after strip mining, it changed from unusable mountainsides into productive land that could support economic development such as prisons or outdoor recreational activities like hunting or 4-wheeling. This logic was flawed, as numerous studies have shown that prisons are not good for local economies. Additionally, other studies have demonstrated the difficulty of maintaining wildlife on top of strip mined land.

Furthermore, the building of Dominion Energy’s Virginia Hybrid Coal Fired Power Plant in the mid-2000s, which had been fought heavily by local, state, and national environmental groups, was actually seen by some local residents as a way to clean up the area since the plant was designed to burn gob, or coal waste that had been piled up in slate dumps or dumped in hollers since they began mining coal in Wise County in the nineteenth century. As Dwight explained, “[The benefits are] getting rid of eye sores and the potential of a slide or something like that. It’s a good thing, because our resources are somewhat limited. But it don’t take a whole lot to move the-- creates more jobs, tax revenue” (Dwight Sanders, Interview Transcript, August 2013). The clean up of gob piles
in order to burn this waste product with coal at the power plant did not negate the environmental harm taking place from the water and air pollution that coal-fired power plants emit.

Coal was not seen as harming the environment by these two former UMWA miners, despite the fact that this idea flew in the face of scientific data that shows the environmental damage caused by strip mining and the burning of coal. They did, interestingly, acknowledge the legitimacy of certain complaints about the environment in relation to extractive practices, as seen in this anecdote:

We had some that lived up the road a little ways from the prep plant and across the road and they complained all the time. But you know, even the company went over there and spray washed their mobile home, it was a mobile home, and the guy knew when he was moving over there about that being over there. He was trying to get some money out of it is what he was trying to do. Anyways, I can see their [point of view], I would be concerned too. But most companies try their best to keep the dust down, but sometimes it’s impossible to get it all. And I can see their point about that too. And some of them move in there knowing that it is there, and then they complain about it, but now some people that’s been there over the years, I can see them being [upset]….some of them that lives there might even be one that’s working in the coal mines on up the road away from the particular dust they are getting, but yet they are benefiting from it. (Interview Transcript, Rodney Mullins, August 2013)

This story further demonstrates the ways that some local residents adopted hegemonic ideas about the affects of coal on local communities. These ideas that justify environmental pollution fall in line with the coal industry’s interests to continue mining operations without taking responsibility for problems that come from coal mining practices. While Rodney claimed to understand the complaints about dust problems, he went on to place blame on the victim—especially those who moved in to an area with the knowledge that they were locating their homes near a coal preparation plant. He also seemed to find a problem with complaints being made by someone who lived near a mine
or prep plant site, but was also working in, and therefore benefiting from, the coal industry. In addition to justifying the actions of the coal industry, Rodney and Dwight further demonstrated their own middle class interests in coal jobs from their past employment also influenced the ways they believed others should act towards the coal company. In a sense, the argument here was that if someone makes a living off of coal, they should not be levying any complaints of coal, environmental or otherwise. Again, this example demonstrates that some residents with a vested financial interest in coal made the decision to support the interests of the coal industry when they collided with their own interests. This financial interest, alongside the hegemonic discourse of the coal industry, influenced how these two former miners positioned themselves in thinking about the environmental and economic affects of strip mining and coal production.

In addition to the complications of suffering from pollution and making a living from coal, some members of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards also recounted experiences of tabling at local festivals and meeting strip miners who stated that they hated their jobs and what they were doing to the land, but felt that there just were no other economically feasible options. Sissy Burke related:

I think a lot of these guys don’t really want to do this. We were told this when we were tabling at a fair. We had some come through there and say, if you can offer me a job at the same rate of pay, so that I would not have to do this, I’d take it. One guy said “I have a wife and these two little girls I have to take care of, that I have to feed and I have to send these kids to school. But if you can offer me a job at the same rate of pay, I’ll take it in a heartbeat,” he said, “I hate what I do,” and he said “there’s a lot more like me.” But there aren’t any job offers. And I think that’s a lot of mental anguish. (Interview Transcript, Sissy Burke, May 2012)

Here the material reality of destroying mountains was juxtaposed to the material reality of needing to make enough money to feed a family. It was a complicated position that
was repeated to me both in the form of anecdotes from SAMS members, but also from retired and current mine workers.

Much of what I found in talking to residents about the environment was a love of the mountains-- the physical place of their existence. This deep care for the mountains was created by the experience of foraging for wild greens, fishing in the local creek, eating corn straight from the garden, catching crawdads in small streams, or more recently, hiking on trails in the national forest or four-wheeling on old strip mined roads. What residents wanted, like other environmental justice activists, was a healthy community- one with a safe environment, good-paying jobs, decent education, and opportunities for recreation and subsistence.

As Anita Baviskar notes, natural resources and the environment have value beyond their material use value: "Cultural politics thus embeds resource struggles within a larger symbolic economy where the 'roles' that resources perform are several" (2003: 5052). Thus, natural resources and their meanings are not predetermined, but rather are cultural products. It is not entirely surprising that residents raised in the same county shared a similar experience with, and love of, mountains; but while one “side” was valorized for their conservationist stance on the environment by national big green organizations, the “other side” was applauded by the coal industry and local politicians for their ability to put the needs of people in the community over pristine nature. Indeed these natural resources were embedded with different meanings for community members. Those who identified as pro-coal, anti-mountaintop removal, and indeed everyone in-between, agreed that the mountains are valuable, both in economic and cultural terms. But whether there was environmental degradation taking place as a result of surface
mining and what activities were an acceptable use of land (and resources) remained a point of contention—both in lived experiences and in political processes.

SAMS Water Testing and Coal Company Fraud and Dishonesty

Tom Powers, the only full time staff member for SAMS, met with me one summer afternoon at the SAMS office for an interview. The office was located in an old building in downtown Appalachia, with storefront windows filled with posters used at rallies and protest events stating “Stop Mountaintop Removal,” and pictures of mountains that had been flattened and left to become barren moonscapes by the practice of mountaintop removal mining. Inside the office, a couple of desks and computers lined opposite walls, while the center of the room was filled with fold up tables used in a conference style with a dozen chairs around the tables to form a square. On the left side of the office, an old orange couch provided a place for interns to hang out and work on their laptops, and on the opposite side of the room, a small table with a coffee maker, mugs, and various bottle of soda pop provided refreshments for SAMS members. A small stage lined the back wall, where large puppets and a plastered model of a green mountain that said, “Save Ison Rock Ridge” were stored. Behind the stage, there was a small space for a bathroom, sink, microwave, printer, and office supplies. The wood paneling on the walls was covered with more pictures, maps, and posters about mountaintop removal mining, and here the work of the many volunteers, interns, and staff of SAMS was seen in the numerous reports about water testing, pictures of strip mine sites, and other documents demonstrating efforts to gain scientific rationale in the fight against mountaintop removal mining. As the only full-time staff member of SAMS, Tom was often overloaded with all kinds of work, but his focus was on water quality and lawsuits
pursued in conjunction with the Sierra Club, who paid for part of his salary at SAMS. His own thoughts about his work revealed the obstacles of working for a small non-profit that was mostly volunteer-run and lacked sufficient funds for its projects and campaigns:

Day to day my job looks like going out and testing water for various parameters, temperature, conductivity, PH, so those are the physical parameters, and I also do heavy metals testing. A portion of that sometimes when we find heavy metals that are over state water quality standards, we then may bring a lawsuit or two in order to force the coal companies to be in compliance with the law. (Interview Transcript, Tom Powers, June 2013).

Only when time and money allowed could Tom and SAMS bring lawsuits against coal companies that were polluting local streams. The pollutants from mine sites were important to SAMS members because of the problems these elements cause for aquatic life, as well as human health. This type of citizen enforcement was a part of Tom’s everyday work with SAMS trying to do environmental organizing in southwest Virginia. As he explained to me, the DMME lacked resources (especially in terms of labor power) to be able to check up on the water testing reports that were required by state and federal regulations and filed with their office by environmental consulting agencies hired by coal companies.

Tom continued,

We [have] found lots of selenium underneath many mines. Bear in mind that heavy metals testing is very expensive. It costs me 15 dollars per metal per sample and if you are looking for everything in the primary drinking water list, you are looking at about $200 per site. So I’m also sparing… I try to keep my budget in mind in doing some of these sampling procedures as well. It’s always a balancing act between following quality assurance protocol, and keeping your budget in line. Then you ship them off to the lab and see what kind of results you get. I’ve found selenium, I’ve found arsenic, I’ve found cadmium recently in some acid mine drainage. (Interview Transcript, Tom Powers, June 2013).

Despite the presence of heavy metals in many of the water ways in southwest Virginia, as Tom pointed out, the cost of this water testing was expensive, and even with financial
support from the Sierra Club, SAMS could not afford to test every waterway that was likely impaired by surface mining.

Further complicating the water issue was the role of environmental consulting groups contracted by coal companies to provide EPA required water sampling at streams impaired by surface mine sites. These private companies had been found to at times falsify heavy metal ratings in these samples for the benefit of the coal company paying for the testing. In 2010, Appalachian Voices (a non-profit environmental organization) and the Waterkeeper Alliance reviewed these records, kept at the Kentucky State Energy and Environment cabinet, and found over 20,000 violations of the clean water act at many coal mines in Eastern Kentucky (Chance and Savage 2012). According to the findings, the environmental consulting agency was copying and pasting data from one month’s pollution discharge report to the next month’s report, only changing the date.

Tom explained,

> We know in Kentucky they found massive duplicates by the same [consulting firms]… [They] also operate over here in Virginia. So that casts somewhat of a shadow on this whole operation. So there’s a thing called a discharging monitoring report… they analyzed and looked for duplicates of every single parameter, so conductivity, TDS, and iron manganese, and they got a range. And they found copies from month to month, and the physical likelihood of that happening is essentially impossible. Water qualities change hourly. And the statistical likelihood of it is like winning the lottery seven times in a row. The coal company has to sign off on it, to the DMME each quarter. (Interview Transcript, Tom Powers, June 2013).

The statistical improbability of the same results happening month to month, according to Tom, clearly implicated the company in the fraud. Tom also explained similar examples of the coal industry’s attempts to circumvent measures to curb pollution:

> I also heard stories of coal companies. I have friend in the industry who has told me stories of them sampling multiple times, more than the quarterly, and then sending in the results, things of that nature. I also heard a story, they made him
walk all over the permit, sometimes the company monitoring is also the company treating, and they were making him walk all on the permit, and there were guys on four wheelers, he was testing the ponds as they were being treated, there was a big ethical blur there. (Interview Transcript, Tom Powers, June 2013).

In sampling the water source multiple times, companies could use the sample that yields results that were favorable for their mining operations—i.e., ones that show pollution levels that fall within the federal guidelines. In other cases, Tom’s friend was asked to conduct tests while a water source was being treated, thus skewing the results favorably for the coal company. These examples show ways that the lines of the law were crossed in subtle and often invisible ways. Thus while coal companies should have been testing water using scientifically and technically sound measures (as stipulated by the EPA and other federal and state regulators) to ensure that they were not polluting beyond the federally allowed level, instead they often cut corners in ways that skewed the results to allow the coal company to continue to operate freely. Because of these cases, which were well known to SAMS members and other residents concerned about the pollution created by surface mining, SAMS members often felt that the burden to test waters fell to them as citizens. But resources to test water- the people needed to go out to do the testing, the equipment, and the funds to send the samples to the lab- were extremely limited. Despite these obstacles, SAMS, in conjunction with the Sierra Club, did have some successes in the lawsuits filed against coal companies over water pollution, as the Kelly’s Branch lawsuit (discussed in Chapter 3) demonstrated.

While lawsuits like Kelly’s Branch made it into the newspaper on a regular basis as developments in the case arose, how many other cases of pollution were hidden from the public eye? The “hidden” nature of some types of pollution caused by surface mining (such as invisible heavy metals and sediment in waterways) certainly influenced the ways
that residents thought about the environmental consequences of mining—for some, out of sight meant out of mind; and for others, the invisibility, both to the naked eye and to the public eye, just further demonstrated the corruption of the coal industry and its ability to circumvent regulatory laws. Additionally, the scientific determination of pollution and appropriate responses to pollution provided yet another area for ambiguity over the natural environment. In particular, this was seen through the use of “equivalences” by the Department of Mines, Minerals, and Energy in their granting of permits to coal corporations.

**Pollution and Equivalences**

Many scholars have noted the ways that corporations promote social responsibility in order to gain community (and national and international) support (Himley 2013, Welker 2009). In their examination of audit cultures in mining communities in the Global South as discussed previously in Chapter 3, Li (2015) and Kirsch (2014) have also explored the ways that corporations were also quick to move beyond following regulations to promote an ideal of being good community partners, or socially and environmentally responsible corporations. One way they achieved this was through what Li calls “equivalences”—that is equating one resource to another, both in materialistic and political terms: “First, equivalence refers to the scientific and technical tools used to make things quantifiable and comparable; and second…equivalence [is] a political relationship that involves constant negotiation over what counts as authoritative knowledge” (Li 2015: 149). For example, in Peru, one water source was used and polluted by a mine site, so the company created an alternate water source for local residents (chemically treated water from the mine’s treatment plant) and also awarded
local residents monetary compensation. The idea was that replacing the formerly natural source of water with chemically treated water, as well as providing monetary compensation, in addition to local jobs and development, was equivalent to the natural water source that was lost (Li 2015:27). However, as Li demonstrates, local residents did not always feel that the equivalences decided upon by the mining companies were accurate, as water quality varied, and the cultural meanings of the natural source were lost in the new chemically treated water source. Additionally, in negotiations over these equivalences, companies were further advantaged in their ability to use mining experts and scientists to argue that their knowledge was credible and legitimate. Local residents who relied on their own knowledge from sight, taste, smell, and feel could not expect their understandings to be taken seriously within the realm of the technocratic management that often drove these debates and negotiations.

Li further discusses the ways that the Doe Run mining corporation created a number of community programs, including participatory water monitoring, and environmental and health campaigns. In particular, the health campaigns urged local residents to take charge of improving their own personal health and hygiene habits, and discouraged them from “focusing on the smelter’s emissions as the primary source of pollution” (Li 2015: 62). Rather, residents were encouraged to improve their nutrition, wash their hands, and keep their children from playing in the (contaminated) dirt.

Similarly, when it came to mining waste and pollutants being put into local waterways, coal mining companies in southwest Virginia had options that resemble the “equivalences.” As discussed in Chapter 3, mine permits issued by the Virginia DMME must include compliance with the state’s TMDL, or total maximum daily load of
pollutants allowed in impaired streams. Bob Dunlap, an employee at the local DMME office in Big Stone Gap explained the rationale for this process:

There’s about 30 streams in southwest Virginia that the state has identified as impaired by coal mining. The state general standard says that all streams need to be swimmable and fishable, by the [Virginia Department of Environmental Quality]. There’s hundreds of impaired streams throughout the state, but 30 that directly relate to coal mining. The mining permits that we issue have to be in compliance with and consistent with the TMDLs once they are drafted. It’s an extra requirement. the TMDLs include a transient waste load, a pollution speed limit, if you will, for active mines. Our agency does monitor that pollution limit from the active mines, we aggregate it, we compare it to the transient allocation. They need to be less, if not they have to offset that pollution load or clean up the watershed. (Interview Transcript, Bob Dunlap, May 2013)

In order to be in compliance with these state requirements, mining companies had various options for curtailing or offsetting pollution in already impaired streams. These options could include reducing the amount of pollution being discharged in the water, or something equivalent for the watershed, like providing sewer infrastructure in communities where sewage runs through straight pipes directly into the waterway. In the permitting process, meeting the state’s TMDL for impaired streams could mean either limiting pollution so as not to exceed state limitations for the stream, or cleaning up part of a stream in the same watershed. These two options were seen as equivalents, meaning they were ultimately determined to have the same benefit to the watershed, although they produced drastically different localized results. Bob further explained:

Best management practice would be something that a company would do on the facility [mine] itself to reduce the level of pollution they are discharging. An example there would be something like build a larger facilitation structure, reclaim an area not currently reclaimed to try to limit the pollution coming from that area, things like that-- on-sight practices. If they don’t want to do that, they can choose [to] do an offset. An offset is typically something off site from the facilities operation. They go into the watershed and take out a level of pollution that’s at least two times as much as they are putting in. That’s the reason we like offsets, we require a ratio with offset. Examples of offsets are [reclamation through] AML [Abandoned Mine Lands] projects. If a coal company wants to do
a project in a watershed and whatever pollution reduction that generates, that’s the offset that we give them. Paving roads used in mines reduces water pollution. We like paving because it also reduces air pollution and dust which is a big coalfield problem and continues to be. (Bob Dunlap, Interview Transcript, May 2013)

While Bob expressed the agency viewpoint that offsets were favorable because they required more cleanup than on-site practices to eliminate pollution, there remains a question of who decided that cleaning up straight pipes or paving roads would offset the harmful release of chemicals into local waterways. How were these two drastically different measures of pollution control considered equivalent? What is interesting here is not necessarily the scientific ways that regulatory agencies adopted the practice of “offsets” for pollutants in impaired waterways, but that it allowed coal companies to continue to operate freely, without further regulation. While some effort, both in terms of labor and finances, was certainly required of coal companies to offset their pollution of impaired streams, it did not stop “business as usual.” Furthermore, the idea that pollution limits can be regulated and controlled through offsets using other mechanisms for cleanup (such as carbon trading) suggests that scientific knowledge provides all the information needed to understand what trade-offs are acceptable in terms of human pollution of the environment.

This example of equivalences in TMDLs is important in understanding that even though the DMME’s actions may not have been what environmentalists had hoped for, the simple recognition by the DMME that watersheds were important to protect and clean up was a significant contribution to limiting pollution on and around strip mine sites. Like residents who often felt themselves pressured by the coal industry in their perspectives, the employees at the DMME were also put in a precarious situation. That is, they were tasked with making sure that the coal industry followed environmental laws
and regulations, but they also needed a good working relationship with coal companies. The DMME relied on the coal industry for their jobs, indeed with few operational coal mines, jobs at the DMME would dwindle. Furthermore, it was within the interest of both the DMME and the coal companies to have a good working relationship, one in which they worked together in the permit granting process, as well as in the compliance with environmental laws. In this situation, trade-offs, while not perfect, allowed the DMME to both protect the environment in some way, while also allowing coal companies to continue operations.

What gets left out of this equation, especially in terms of localized pollution in the coalfields, is the cultural meanings that residents associate with the natural environment. While paving a coal haul road may be even “better” for the environment than limiting chemicals in a local watershed according to scientific calculations, the killing of aquatic life in a local waterways may hold more importance to local residents who grew up fishing in their local stream and continue to supplement their livelihoods with bounty from their backyards.

The cultural meanings that were embedded in the natural environment were especially evident in conversations with residents about appropriate land use. The proposed Coalfields Expressway provides an interesting case to look at varying understandings and ideas about land use in central Appalachia, and it is here I turn next.

**Appropriate Land Use and The Case of the Coalfields Expressway**

On one of my trips to Dickenson County to talk to residents about the Coalfield Expressway (as discussed in Chapter 3), I interviewed SAMS member Merryl Stidham, a woman in her mid 50s who grew up in Wise County. As a child, she was raised by
working-class parents-- her mother stayed at home to raise her and her five sisters, and
her father worked in the underground coal mines. And like many other residents I talked
to, her family raised much of what they ate—growing a big vegetable garden with corn
and beans, and raising animals such as hog, and chickens. And for Merryl’s family, and
many others, coal provided a decent living for the family. That was before, as Merryl
describes it, that coal companies got greedy and began stripping the land to get to the coal,
instead of the traditional method of underground mining:

The coal industry is making big money and the miners are just scraping to put
food on the table. Deep mining used to be economically beneficial to the area
because it takes a whole lot more people to mine coal underground than it does on
surface. You go out on these mountaintop removal sites, and there’s nobody there.
There’s maybe six people on the job, running big machinery. It just takes the
mining out of the equation, it’s not even mining, it’s just demolition, excavation.
So no, ever since that mining has come to be it’s been the downfall of
Appalachian coalfield communities. (Interview Transcript, Merryl Stidham,
August 2013)

But it was only when Merryl returned home after being away for many years that she
noticed the change:

I came back in early 80s, and I drove over what they call Fox Gap, which was one
of my favorite places to go, and when I got to the top of the mountain, I looked on
the other side and it was gone. That was mountaintop removal, I had never seen it
before, and I think that’s when I began to see the decline in prosperity if you can
call it that. I understand they started that mountaintop removal in the late 70s, and
massive surface mining. I had the inner desire to do something about it, but
eventually I came to find out about SAMS and what they were going, so I joined
and that’s when I got involved. It was about 2008. (Interview Transcript, Merryl
Stidham, August 2013)

For Merryl, and for many other local environmentalists and coal supporters alike, this
awareness prompted shock at first, then anger, and then resolve that something had to be
done about the way the land was being used and abused. Working with SAMS provided
Merryl this outlet- a way to get involved and promote change in her community,
specifically in the way that coal was being mined. In 2012, the Coalfields Expressway grabbed the attention of SAMS members, including Merryl, who became aware that that VDOT and the federal highways administration were partnering with Alpha Natural Resources to strip mine the road route in order to save the state money.

As was detailed in Chapter 3, local politicians and officials with Alpha Natural Resources praised the plan for CFX. They argued that it would provide much needed economic support to the region in the form of industrial economic development. The idea was that a four-lane highway would allow the empty industrial parks of the coalfields to become accessible to large companies looking for a hard-working labor force. While an Environmental Impact Study was required by law to examine the ecological impacts of such a project, they remained liminal in public conversations about the CFX. Additionally, while VDOT's Environmental Impact Survey did address some of the environmental affects of the project, it ultimately concluded that no major issues would arise for the forests, waterways, and wildlife habitats along the CFX route (VDOT 2012). Local politicians and coal industry representatives, alongside many local residents agreed that the construction of the CFX was an appropriate use of land and natural resources, one that would help local economic development. When I talked to Clarence, a UMWA retiree, about the CFX project, he argued that without it there would be no chance of economic development in the area (Interview Transcript, Clarence Estep, May 2013).

SAMS members, on the other hand strongly argued against the use of this land for surface mining, as it would further impair fragile watersheds and ecosystems along the route. Rather, they advocated for another use of local lands-- ecotourism. Biking and hiking trails, specifically, were brought up numerous times as an appropriate way to use
local lands and bolster the local economy. While these two discourses on appropriate land use differed drastically in how the land should be used, there was no question that the land should be used for economic benefit to the community. While Merryl and others would argue that both the economy and environment could “win” in an ecotourism scenario, land was still seen as an economic valuation-- something that should be used for the benefit of local residents. On the other hand, residents who supported the CFX (according to one resident- “who wouldn’t want to get to a Wal-Mart in less than 45 minutes?”) followed the line of reasoning set up by coal company representatives and local politicians-- using the coal synergy process would save taxpayers money and also provide important coal jobs for the dwindling economy. Here again, the economic value of the land and natural resources took precedence in thinking about the environment; but in this line of thinking, the land held no value if it was not strip mined and then turned into a road. On the other hand, for environmentalists, if the land was strip mined, it then holds no economic value, as Merryl once asked, “Who wants to come see a moonscape?”

**Conclusion:**

The environment, often verbalized as “the mountains,” was something all residents, regardless of their position in the debate over coal extraction, professed to love. This common understanding of and care of the environment stemmed from residents’ physical experiences growing up utilizing the land for subsistence needs- in growing food, providing recreation, and underground coal mining. Despite a commonly held care of the mountains, residents did vary in their views of how to care for the environment, and specifically about the coal industry’s role in perceived pollution of the environment and the appropriate use of land and natural resources. Discourses of pollution were informed
by both lived experiences of residents (sensing the pollution around them), as well as the political processes that made up public meetings and hearings about coal related issues. Complicating the experiences of residents with pollution, power holding public officials constantly denied the existence of pollution caused by mining or dismissed it as a “non-issue” based on the existence of current laws and regulations. Furthermore, regulatory ambiguity in matters of certain types of pollution made it difficult for residents who were vocal in the environmental degradation in their communities to have these issues appropriately addressed. Additionally, residents also held differing views on appropriate land use, as seen through the example of the Coalfields Expressway. Local and state politicians who touted the economic benefits of using the land for both mining coal and building a road were the first to speak at public forums on the CFX and were vocal in media outlets. On the other hand, environmentalist residents were quick to also note the economic value of the land, but only if it was used in a sustainable and environmentally friendly way, such as ecotourism initiatives. Residents were again in agreement about their concern about the future of the mountains and the ability of citizens to live and survive in this area, but differed in how they thought this ought to be done. Many politicians and industry officials continue to hold strong to the “coal is our future” model that touted the industry’s ability to create an economically viable future for the mountains, only if federal environmental regulations were lessened. For residents advocating recreational tourism as an alternative to coal mining, if the air and water were polluted, which it would be if surface mining continued, there would be no possibility of getting people to come to these mountains to participate in outdoor activities.
The implications for the different understandings of environment are important for understanding the reasons that people do or do not support coal mining and/or mountaintop removal mining and further, why they do or do not make their stance public. For miners, even those that do not “like” what strip mining does to the land, the history of the coal industry in the area and the pride that accompanies generations of families working in the mines combined with the desperate need for jobs that pay living wages, the conservation of a local, recreational environment had to be secondary to the support of the mining industry. Furthermore, some local residents believed that strip-mined land was useful to the local community—providing flat land for potential future development.

While this has not played out in southwest Virginia, as demonstrated by the empty industrial parks scattered across the region and built on former strip mine sites, the possibility still provided hope for people who reside there. For local environmental activists, conserving the environment was an important part of an economic future for the region beyond coal that included eco-tourism as a source of revenue for local entrepreneurs and county governments. Unfortunately, while ideas about ecotourism and other forms of economic development outside of coal mining provided potential for success in transitioning coalfield communities to an existence beyond coal, the political workings of local politicians and coal industry officials often squelched this conversation. In meeting to discuss new economic efforts in the community, many county level politicians continued to argue that “we need coal” and further dismiss other creative ideas for local entrepreneurship, community-owned green power sources, and tree planting on former mine sites to help offset carbon pollution as unrealistic ideas for the future. As Wise County looked to the future, some residents firmly held onto the coal mining
heritage of the past, while others hoped to move beyond the different views on pollution and land use to create a new economy that does not rely on one industry to keep the local community afloat.
Chapter 6: A Place-Based Approach: Diversifying the Economy, Sustaining the Environment, and Finding Common Ground in the Coalfields of Southwest Virginia

On any given weekend in the spring, summer, or fall, truckloads of recreationists carrying four wheelers and other All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs) descended upon southwest Virginia to ride on trails that traverse the tops of mountains on old abandoned strip mine sites. In the southeastern end of Wise County near the Virginia City Hybrid Coal Fired Power plant, the Mountain View multiuse trail system provided over 60 miles of trails through forests and on former strip mine sites, offering expansive views of the surrounding mountains and valleys. The Mountain View trail system catered specifically to ATVs, with easy routes for beginning riders and more challenging routes for experienced riders. While many self-made or “bandited” ATV trails existed in Wise County on old strip mine sites and mining roads, the Mountain View trail was created in 2013 as an economic development project designed by the southwest Recreation Regional Authority, also known as Spearhead Trails, to bring the first officially maintained and operated ATV trail to southwest Virginia, requiring riders to purchase a permit to gain access to the trail system. Local officials have touted the trail system as a huge economic boost to the region, bringing in additional businesses (such as a campground and bed and breakfast) to accommodate out of town ATV enthusiasts who visit the area specifically to ride the rail. In addition to attracting people from the nearby states of Tennessee, South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, Florida—or even as far away as Montana, the trail system also attracted local residents who found a maintained and patrolled trail system beneficial to the area.
Living in an area where coal miners and environmentalists alike spent fair weather weekends riding four wheelers on trails across southwest Virginia and even into the neighboring states of Kentucky and West Virginia, it comes as no surprise that this recreational opportunity was at the forefront of residents’ minds as a potential source of economic development for the struggling region. Tourism, especially outdoor recreation—sometimes referred to as ecotourism by residents, was often brought up in interviews as a way for southwest Virginia to capitalize on the resources that were already there— in this case, the natural environment. Interestingly, however, residents often differed in both how they viewed the ability of tourism to be successful alongside surface coal mining; as well as how much, or even if, tourism could provide a real economic future for the region. Despite some variance in how residents believed tourist activities and other economic initiatives for the region should move forward, there was solid agreement among residents on the need for economic alternatives to move the coalfields forward into a sustainable future.

In this chapter, I discuss the ways that local residents viewed their communities in terms of what its potential was for the future, both economically and environmentally. All of these ideas for new economic development were rooted in a place-based love of the mountains. Utilizing literature on place-based processes and movements in Appalachia and beyond, I explore how ideas for the future were based not only in a place-specific context, but also in a deeper understanding of the connections to regional, national, and global economies. Further, while ideas of what was the best kind of economic development for the future varied greatly, residents’ dedication to their community was
evident in their concern for and ideas to make Wise County a viable place to live for generations to come.

**Care about and Care for the Environment in Visions of the Future**

While residents in Wise County all expressed care *about* their mountains and community, a major point of divergence came in their ideas of how to best care *for* their home. In their study of environmental values among U.S. citizens, Kempton et al. found that “American environmentalism represents a *consensus* view, its major tenants are held by large majorities, and it is not opposed on its own terms by any alternative coherent belief system” (Kempton et al. 1999: 216, my emphasis). Defining environmental values as “guiding principles of what is moral, desirable or just” in relation to biophysical surroundings, they found that that members of radical environmental groups as well as industrial workers shared similar environmental values, arguing that opposition to environmental regulation did not stem from an absence of environmental values, but rather competing models or values (Kempton et al. 1999:12). Interestingly, these competing models or values could include, for example, economic models that value the need for jobs that are environmentally destructive over the need to protect the environment. Certainly these studies suggest that while many U.S. citizens may profess to care *about* the environment, how they envision caring *for* the environment may drastically vary.

In her book, *Loving Nature: Towards an Ecology or Emotion*, anthropologist Kay Milton examines human emotion in relation to nature. She argues that humans’ experience with environment is dependent upon their personal experiences: “It means that some people think of non-human animals as resources for human use, while others
see them as non-human persons worthy of moral concern, or respect or punishment. It is diversity of experience that generates diversity in perception, knowledge, and understanding” (2002:3265). These diversities in perception, Milton argues, also lead to a diversity in the strength of feelings about the environment, as well as action:

Our emotional development as individuals, what we learn, through experience, to hold sacred, informs our actions in the world. It creates politicians eager for power or anxious to serve, it creates developers intent on the creation of wealth and prosperity, and it creates nature lovers who value natural beauty more highly than prosperity, and who fear for the future of life on earth….Clearly people will experience different strengths of feeling about the thing they value. (2002: 3293)

This understanding of environmental perception and action allows for the differences in caring about and caring for the environment. A shared love of the mountains and community in southwest Virginia did not always translate into a shared idea of how to care for the environment. While activists with SAMS were clear in their intentions to safeguard the natural world as a way to preserve both the mountains and the communities for generations to come, other residents thought about the environment in terms of trade-offs, much the same way that politicians discussed an environment-economy dichotomy in public discourse. Nowhere was this shared love of the mountains and disjointed view of how to care for the mountains more evident than in conversations about the future of the coalfields. While some residents felt that trade-offs that privileged economy over environment through the continuation of mining were necessary for the future economic health of their community, others felt that there were ways to preserve the environment while also promoting local economic development, specifically this was addressed in ideas of ecotourism.

Place-Based Economic Development
Anthropologists, scholars of Appalachia, and other social scientists have explored the importance of place in organizing for change. While some residents may not have considered themselves “organizers” by any means, they all held opinions and ideas on how to create an economically sustainable community and region. As Ann Kingsolver (2011) noted in her study of a tobacco farming community in the foothills of Kentucky, places often share culture, or a similar and collectively constructed sense of the way the world works. While this certainly does not mean that all community members have the same visions for their community or agree on everything, it is a place to start. In Wise County, community members understood the historical and present role of coal in their community, and it provided a shared sense of how coal mining jobs and other income from mining (such as the coal severance tax previously discussed) helped the county function economically. Despite this shared notion of how the world works, Wise County residents also held varying opinions about the actual financial benefits of mining, as well as what the future should be. Additionally, as Kingsolver noted, it is “possible to participate in multiple discourses simultaneously, and since they may sometimes have contradictory aims, ‘placing’ enables individuals to shift between different identities and relatedness” (2011: 16). Placing both grounds community members in a specific locale, but also allows them to draw upon multiple identities at various intersections of their social location, and at local, state, regional, national, and even global levels. As Fisher and Smith (2012) point out, place is important because inequalities (and the power relations that produce them) are spatial, and the neoliberal economic policies that may be global in scope are both produced in specific places, and also affect numerous places across the globe.
Arturo Escobar argues that place, although constructed and not static, is an important reality that “refers to the experience of, and from, a particular location with some sense of boundaries, grounds, and links to everyday practices” (2001: 152). Combining these ideas of boundaries, groundedness, and experience with Ferguson and Gupta’s ideas about the multi-scale process of place-making provides important insight for this chapter. In particular this analysis considers how the everyday lived experiences of residents in coalfield communities, as well as the multi-scale influences of politics, economics, and society, create different understandings of place and the future of place for different members of the community. Just as scholars of Appalachian Studies have pointed out, places are imbedded in local practices, but are also connected to global processes.

Place was particularly important to residents in Wise County as they thought about and discussed their futures. While some residents looked for solutions not just for their own community, but also other communities regionally, there was still the urgent concern for the local. Residents wanted to know how they could keep their young people from moving away, how they could replace the good-paying coal mining jobs with other types good-paying jobs, and how they could maintain local entrepreneurship and build a new tax base to fund county programs. These were local, place-based concerns, but they were, as Anglin (2016) and Fisher and Smith (2016) would suggest, not unique to Wise County or the coalfield region. These were concerns that crossed boundaries, concerns that other communities across the U.S. and the globe echoed on a daily basis.

Gupta and Ferguson (1997) further argue that place is a social and historical construction—not something that simply exists. They ask,
How are understandings of locality, community, and region formed and lived? To answer this question, we must turn away from the commonsense idea that such things as locality and community are simply given or natural and turn toward a focus on social and political processes of place making, conceived less as a matter of “ideas” than as embodied practices that shape identities and enable resistances. (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:6)

As Appalachian coalfields look to new kinds of economic development, social and political processes of place-making become especially important in the creation of a new way forward as the region creeps towards a post-coal future.

As Escobar (1999), Gupta and Ferguson (1997), and others suggest, being grounded in a place does not negate global context or connections. In my research, the love of place pointed to the potential for a larger place-based movement-- one that could transcend stances that were pro- or anti- coal, but rather be built on the shared love of place of in Wise County, and connected to other communities across scales facing similar issues. I explore the place-based narratives and various ideas about economic development that residents expressed during my research. In particular I explain three types of potential economic development that residents envisioned for the future: new industrial development, entrepreneurship and tourism, and alternative, non-capitalist economies.

First, I examine how some residents continued to maintain that new industry was needed to bolster the economy. Following the work of geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006), I maintain that traditional capitalist forms of economic development are naturalized and often limit the visioning of new possibilities for economy in local communities. This idea for the future went hand-in-hand with the “old way” of doing business where one industry provided most of the jobs and created the economic backbone of the community. Additionally a few residents continued to express hope that
coal mining would go back into a “boom” period. Within this “new industry is the answer” model, I explore the ways that politicians and other local leaders discussed the future of Wise County in meetings, events, or campaigns made it clear that how they thought about the future was directly tied to the past; that is, many politicians and local officials continued to hold to this “old model” of looking to industry and resource extraction for the economic future of the region, hoping that a Republican controlled federal government would allow for more lax restrictions on coal mining, allowing for a “boom” in the cycle of coal.

Second, I explore how many residents had ideas for a new type of economy in southwest Virginia, one that would be founded on entrepreneurship and tourism initiatives. Specifically I discuss how some residents who were critical of mountaintop removal mining first, tied their ideas for the future to a need to both stop damaging the environment via coal mining and also conserve what is left so that it could provide opportunities for economic activities outdoors, and second, scaled up their vision for the future from only focusing on the local community or coalfields region to envisioning the way that a different future could meet national energy needs and global environmental demands. Drawing upon James Scott’s (1990) concept of “hidden transcripts,” I explore the ways that some local residents were able to transcend the limitations of how the power elite framed the conversations around coal and economy to envision a different type of future for the coalfields rather than relying on the possibility of a future “boom” in the coal industry.

Third, I examine how many of these residents imagined a post-capitalist economy for the region, picturing types of non-capitalist economic transactions that could lend
itself to a new way of doing business in the region. Again, using the works of J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006), I explore how residents thought beyond the hegemonic model of capitalist economy to envision a community economy that would be centered on community ownership and interdependence. Finally, to conclude this chapter, I argue that while certainly there were limitations to the ways that residents envisioned the future, the creativity and ingenuity of local residents to think beyond the current industrial development speaks to the ingenuity and flexibility of the people of Wise County and Central Appalachia to create a better future for the region.

**The Old Model: Industry as the “Answer”**

As has been evidenced earlier in this dissertation, the people of Wise County all seemed to agree in their love of the mountains and their care and concern for their communities. So when I asked people to tell me what they envisioned for the future of the community, everyone had ideas about the best way forward. In some cases, these ideas pointed to the way that things had been done in the past, with new industrial development and the use of natural resources as key to a healthy local economy.

Some residents held tight to the idea that without coal mining, the towns of central Appalachia would continue to deteriorate with no alternative economic options. The son of a UMWA organizer and former hospital worker, Michael Stanley, felt that the decline of coalfield towns was inevitable without mining to provide jobs to community members who could then spend money in town:

When we’ve got working coal miners, the community thrives on it, and without the mines, the communities are going to end up like Appalachia and Big Stone and all the other coal camps, they’re going to go by the wayside completely. If you look at Appalachia, there’s nothing there, you look at Big Stone, there’s nothing downtown now, there’s even less. I heard Barbara’s gift shop is closing, so we are going to be another ghost town. Nobody is going to invest in a bad
situation, no one is going to put their money in a place nobody visits. When the [Trail of the Lonesome Pine] drama is over, nobody comes to Big Stone, I mean there’s no reason to come here. Or downtown Harlan, [Kentucky], it’s pitiful. It used to be all the stores were nice stores, and you could do all your shopping on that one little block. And no one is going to invest in a bad situation. (Interview Transcript, Michael Stanley, May 2013).

Some others also held this bleak outlook on a future without coal, and certainly coal mining was the main economic activity that people remember from their own histories, and the histories of the generations before them, in the region. However, most residents who still felt that coal would or should be an integral part to the future economy of the coalfields also expressed the need to diversify, bringing in other types of industry or economic activity alongside the continued resource extraction.

Bob Dunlap, a local resident and employee of the Department of Mines Minerals and Energy (DMME), explained his vision for an economy of southwest Virginia that continued to utilize natural resources, but also exported other types of resources:

Locally our government is going to have to transition to some other economic engine, as coal goes down. It’s always been a source of revenue for our local government. I’ve always said, going all the way back in the history of our area, it’s been a local resource generated economy, where we had timbering at the turn of the century, then coal and now gas…we are exporting resources from here. I would prefer that part of our future economy continues to be that. I would even argue that tourism is that same type of industry, you are exporting. You don’t have a factory where you are building something or have to bring in things from outside to assemble it, it’s what we already have that we are marketing…maybe that could help compliment gas, coal, timber, but add that to it. It something that we have, we’re not trying to create. I think some of the shell buildings that the economic development folks built didn’t take off, because you were basically having to try to import some type of business, and it’s tough to do that. (Interview Transcript, Bob Dunlap, May 2013).

For Bob, continuing the use of natural resources, but also “exporting” other assets of Wise County, such as the ATV trail system (i.e.- exporting an experience) was key in the future economy. Furthermore, as Bob noted and as was evidenced in driving through the
county, industrial parks that were built to attract business remained empty. Similarly, local underground miner and government official John Stallard articulated the need to make up for the loss of coal severance funds and that the community has been thinking about ways to bolster the economy beyond coal:

[The] recession, it gradually started three years ago. Three years ago we started being active in ways we were going to reduce our budget to make up for loss in coal severance tax funds. We were fortunate to see it…it devastates our budget, the loss of coal severance tax, the real estate tax, the sales tax we’re going you lose, the trickle down effect. Some of these small businesses that we still have in this community, they will eventually not be able to keep their doors open. Some other industry has to come in here if coal is going to die…any at all would help in industry, we are landlocked here in Appalachia. We can’t build a factory here or bring in a big industry. (Interview Transcript, John Stallard, March 2013).

While John expressed the need for “some other industry” to come in, he also noted that, at least in the town of Appalachia, it would not be possible because of the lack of space and adequate transportation.

Social worker Sally Sturgill explained how the roads hindered further development, including attracting business to industrial parks, in southwest Virginia, “I think upgrading our roads is going to be a big factor. Getting the roads to where people would want to come, these little curvy roads, they’re not going to bring a whole lot of big development here. Until they see our highways as a major factor I don’t think anything is going to stay in this area” (Interview Transcript, Sally Sturgill, March 2013). For Sally, updating roads could provide a much-needed boost to the economy, allowing companies to be able to access the workforce with more transportation ease.

Former UMWA miner Clarence Estep suggested that the Coalfields Expressway, the four lane highway linking Wise County and other parts of the Virginia coalfields to Beckley, WV at Interstates I-64 and I-77, could provide a much needed economic boost
to the region: “This new road thing that they are trying to put in, the coalfields expressway--that’s going to add to our businesses and stuff, get to where they can get their stuff in easier” (Interview Transcript, Clarence Estep, May 2013). Local UMWA organizer Jack Bush agreed, “We need the coalfield expressway to help open up more doors and more areas to be done. More tourists, it could be more small businesses being put in, it would make it a lot easier to get products out of here to other markets, manufacturing” (Interview Transcript, Jack Bush, July 2013). For many residents, the ability to access communities in southwest Virginia faster and on better roads, such as the Coalfields Expressway, could be crucial to the future economy.

In addition to residents expressing their ideas for the future of the economy in southwest Virginia, politicians and other local leaders often spoke about these ideas at public meetings, events, and hearings. During the annual Virginia state transportation plan regional public feedback meeting discussed in Chapter 3, the focus of most comments made on VDOT’s plans was the ability for these transportation routes to provide economic boosts to communities. For example, a proposed “Innovation Highway” was touted by a Wise County official as a way to bring more technologically based industry to the Wise Industrial Park, as well as connect with the University of Virginia’s College at Wise. Additionally, this same administrator’s comments in strong support of the Coalfields Expressway also spoke to the importance of transportation, as well as coal mining, in the future economic plans for southwest Virginia.

Furthermore, as demonstrated in the ways that politicians talked about the current and future economy of southwest Virginia, ideas for the future remained tied to the coal industry. In particular, they often advocated for a reversal of any federal level
environmental regulations that made it more difficult to surface mine. Attacks on other candidates often came in terms of associating democratic candidates with “Obama’s EPA,” a federal agency that according to the conservative Super-Pacs and Republican candidates sponsoring these advertisements, wanted to take away coal jobs and destroy communities in southwest Virginia. Politicians who wanted to be elected in southwest Virginia must first prove their loyalty to the coal industry, and thus the future of coal jobs, otherwise, it would not be possible to be elected or gain votes in coalfield communities.

Two democratic candidates were actually elected during the 2012 and 2013 elections (U.S. Senator Tim Kaine in the 2012 election, and Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe in the 2013 election), but it is worth noting two things about their successes. First, while both candidates were attacked heavily by supporters of the coal industry, both candidates also spent large amount of their campaigns in southwest Virginia combating negative images and trying to prove that they were committed to coal jobs, and that they were in fact, “friends of coal.” Secondly, while there was a concerted effort spent in trying to show how supportive they were of the coal industry, both candidates did not, in fact, win the votes of coalfield communities, but received enough votes in the rest of the state to win the election. Again, here, as in other political discourse targeted at southwest Virginians, the discourse about the future has primarily been (with the exception of Flaccavento’s 2012 campaign for U.S. Representative detailed in Chapter 4) that coal should continue to be the backbone of the economy. This discourse is important because it reveals two important points. First, the discourse of political campaigns demonstrated the power of the coal industry to influence politics, especially through the amount of financing they provide for certain political campaigns. Second, this discourse that was
targeted at southwest Virginians suggested to residents that even the local, regional, state, or federal leaders elected believed that coal was the answer to solving the current and future economic problems in the region. As anthropologist James C. Scott and others have noted, the prominence of these kinds of statements often frames the way that conversations can move forward, determining what is possible and what is not. In this case, the majority of campaign discourse during elections seemed to suggest that the only answer for the future of southwest Virginia was to reinvigorate the coal industry. The coal industry—and capitalist modes of production more generally—were naturalized in the minds of many residents as the only possibility for economic recovery in the region.

In addition to politicians discussing the future of the coalfields in their campaign discourse, other ways that future came up in public discussions with local leaders was in forums discussing the current state and plans for the future of the county. In 2013, more evidence of the concern over the future of Wise County came with plans to update the county’s comprehensive plan from 1998. With coal severance tax dollars decreasing every year with the closing of mines and decline in coal production, county officials were concerned with how to replace those funds to make up for the deficit it left in the budget and realized the serious need for economic diversification. Interestingly, while public input on the plan noted some of the successes of industrial recruitment and infrastructure support in the county, residents noted that in order for the county’s full outdoor tourism efforts to be realized that environmental protection must take priority. By the time that my research concluded in Wise County, officials seemed finally to be on board with the need to find explore alternative economic activities to coal mining.

**Outdoor Recreation, Tourism and New Entrepreneurship Efforts**
In seeking out economic alternatives to coal for Wise County, many residents expressed their approval of and hope for more outdoor recreational activities to provide new tourism opportunities for the region. Additionally, others also considered the ability of more local businesses, if supported by the local community, to keep young people in the region, or to bring them back after going away to college. Because of a few successes in these areas, residents seemed most excited about the possibilities that encompassed both tourism and entrepreneurship.

One initiative that many SAMS members were a part of was a University of Virginia sponsored project called the Clinch River Valley Initiative, or CRVI (pronounced ‘curvy’). CRVI sought to, “[connect] downtown revitalization, outdoor recreation, water quality, entrepreneurship and environmental education along the Clinch River” (Clinch River Valley Initiative, n.d.). CRVI’s biggest project and goal was to create the Clinch River State Park by 2020, a linear state park located along the Clinch River in Wise, Scott, and Russell Counties. In anticipation of the park, CRVI began working to create access points to the Clinch River, as well as to create campgrounds and trails along the river for added recreational benefit. According to an economic impact study conducted by Chmura Economic Analytics, the park would, by its third year, attract over 100,000 visitors; would provide an annual economic impact of 3.58 million dollars; and would sustain 31 local jobs (Clinch River Valley Initiative, n.d.).

Interestingly, one of the important aims of CRVI was water quality enhancement. Specifically, CRVI maintained, like many environmentalist residents, that the health of the environment was vital to local communities’ future tourism endeavors. Without clean water, residents and visitors could not swim, fish, or utilize the river to its fullest extent.
This sentiment was often echoed by members of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards, many of whom were also involved with CRVI’s initiatives.

In their book *Mountaintop Mining in Appalachia: Understanding Stakeholders and Change in Environmental Conflict*, Susan F. Hirsch and E. Franklin Dukes describe the beginning of CRVI as an “informal, occasional gathering of stakeholders with diverse interests who were exploring shared possible interests” (2014: 94). Five goals were outlined at their meeting in October 2011: develop a Clinch River State Park; develop access points, trails, and campgrounds along the Clinch River; enhance water quality of the Clinch; develop environmental education opportunities for all community members in the Clinch River Watershed; and connect and expand downtown revitalization efforts in the Clinch River Valley (Dukes and Hirsch 2014: 95).

SAMS member Merryl was actively involved in the CRVI initiative and expressed both hope and concern over the ability for Wise County to utilize tourism as a part of an economic future for the region:

> I think there’s hope, but only if we stop the destruction, because if you let it go on, there won’t be anything left to work with. I’m thinking about the towns, if that strip mine permit goes through, that will be the end of the town. Who wants to come see a moonscape? We do have some things left, we have the second highest mountain in Virginia in our national forest. (Interview Transcript, Merryl Stidham, August 2013).

Merryl pointed out that while there were currently parts of the natural environment in Wise County, including High Knob, that would be suitable for outdoor tourist activities, if surface mining did not stop soon, there would be less area to work with. Merryl also discussed the possibilities for Wise County to become like other non-coal producing Appalachian communities that have capitalized off of their natural beauty and outdoor recreation. In discussing a workshop that SAMS organized as part of ACES, or the
Appalachian Community Economic Series, Meryll described the way that the town of Damascus, also in southwest Virginia, was able to create a whole economy around outdoor tourism:

We’ve had panel discussions about the future economy. Last year we had a discussion, which was pretty exciting actually, we had the mayor of Damascus sit on the panel and he was talking about the potential of Appalachia and Big Stone and the whole county, he said you guys have more than we do, he said years ago we were boarded up over there, until the Virginia Creeper trail and the Appalachian trail came to rebuild the economy over there and 40 percent of their economy is tourism, and he said you guys have a lot more than we do, and so I see that potential. (Interview Transcript, Merryl Stidham, August 2013)

Many local residents hoped that the new ATV trails, alongside outdoor initiatives along the Clinch River, such as canoeing, fishing and camping, would provide a needed boost to the economy and reinvent local communities much like Damascus.

Others also discussed the potential for tourism to help local economies. In an interview with two pro-coal governmental officials from a local township, they jointly explained to me their thoughts on the future of their little piece of the county, which included tourism. One official explained:

Well, we saw some of this [economic downturn] coming [with the loss of some coal severance tax funds]. My council has been really pro-active and has allowed me to pursue some things to go off in other directions to produce and, in the future, replace some of the revenue we’ve lost. The first thing we did, we opened up our streets to use ATVs, and we are hoping that we can eventually work with the county and landholders around the town that have these strip mined lands that they will allow us to use for ATV trails, similar to the Hatfield and McCoy trails in West Virginia. We think if we could eventually hook up our trail system with theirs, we would have the largest number of miles of trails in the world that one could come to and go for days-- maybe 5 to 7,000 miles of trails. (Interview Transcript, John Stallard, March 2013)

Other residents had similar ideas about how to replace lost income and jobs with tourism efforts that could include ATV trail systems. Merryl said she believed that there was hope
for the economy of southwest Virginia through strategies like tourism and farming, but only if there was a decline in coal mining activity:

But I’m hopeful if we see a decline in coal because of the global market and it’s not economically feasible for the corporations to make big money any more, and that’s what its all about-- if that happens, if coal goes away, it will be the first time that these communities have had to think beyond coal and create something new and I think it’s good. I think the whole culture will change. (Interview Transcript, Merryl Stidham, August 2013)

DMME employee Bob Dunlap viewed the possibility of capitalizing off of cultural heritage- mainly music and drama, as a potential source of new economic opportunities in the region. He envisioned venues that would support local traditional mountain music, an effort that was being revamped through an afterschool music program for youth called Junior Appalachian Musicians. And he further felt that more promotion of the Trail of the Lonesome Pine Outdoor Drama in the summer months could also bring more people into the community.

In an interesting turn of events, a federal designation that could have opened up more federal funding for cultural programming and made parts of southwest Virginia, including Wise County, a sought-after tourist destination, was met with opposition under false pretenses that this designation would further curtail coal mining. The Crooked Road, a 330-mile driving trail that connects and promotes traditional music venues, events, and historical places across southwest Virginia, began a quest in late 2012 to become designated as a National Heritage Area. This designation, proponents believed, would bring more tourism to the region and create more jobs. Opponents, headed by a woman named Catherine Turner who was a spokesperson for a local Tea Party group, argued that a National Heritage Area designation infringed upon individual property rights, allowing the federal government to seize property. Furthermore, and perhaps what
resonated more with residents in the coalfields, was the threat that this designation could curtail mining because it would bring more regulations to the area, as national heritage areas must be in compliance with the National Environmental Protection Act and the National Historic Preservation Act.

The heritage designation would have given the area an allotment of funds each year from the federal government, which would be used for a pre-approved work and management plan for the area. U.S. Representative Morgan Griffith in Virginia’s District 9, supported the Crooked Road’s efforts, as long as, he stated, that the language of the proposal included protection of private property rights and did not influence zoning activities. Interestingly, according to the national coordinator for National Heritage Area programs assured that this designation would have no impact on local zoning and would not grant authority to review or change local land use management plans (Bunch 2013). Furthermore, the national coordinator stated that this designation would not restrict uses, including coal mining, natural gas extraction, or other economic activities. Despite the fact that there was no factual basis for the claims made by Turner and other Tea party supporters, their organizational efforts made it clear that continuing to seek the federal designation would not be successful. Several counties passed resolutions against the designation based on the misinformation about property rights and the designation’s ability to further decrease coal mining in the region. What would have been an economic boost to the region, both through the provision of new jobs and the increase in tourism revenue, was ultimately abandoned.

While the national heritage designation initiative fell through, work continued to try to vamp up tourism in the county. In part of the effort to promote tourism, especially
in terms of both outdoor recreation and cultural heritage, there was also hope that tourism would provide the need for and support of other local businesses, such as restaurants, stores, and lodging establishments. 20-year resident John Brooks discussed the need to celebrate the rich cultural heritage of this area, as well as for local young people to become entrepreneurs and open up businesses that the community would then need to support:

We can’t give up on ourselves and our own heritage- we have to create a collective mindset, we need to find ways to fix our mistakes. We need to tell our stories, we need to develop young people who aren’t afraid to start a business, and then we have to support them instead of going to Walmart. Every Walmart is a downtown that is dead. So what do we do with our downtowns? We create shops that trade on who and what we are. (Interview Transcript, John Brooks, August 2013).

Other residents also talked about the possibility for entrepreneurship and local business to provide economic opportunities for the region. Life-long resident of Wise County David Miller talked about the possibility of energy evaluation companies that could help save local businesses money and provide jobs for this type of new and growing industry:

Stores need to be looking at how to save. You have to force any kind of change. It’s just like if gas was 99 cents a gallon, you’d have [a lot of] people driving these big Land Rovers or Ford Excursions. Business is the same way, as long as electricity is reasonably priced they’re not going to spend a lot of money for innovative lighting like LEDs and things like that. But once the price increases, they’ll start looking for ways to save electricity to keep their costs down, and that’s where energy evaluation companies could come in and work with them to help them save, show them where they are losing energy and how they could upgrade this or that, and they could test their equipment to see if it was in the range of a newer piece of equipment. That could be a whole industry in and of itself. (Interview Transcript, David Miller, June 2013).

According to David’s vision for the future, the energy evaluation industry could not only save businesses money and provide jobs for local people, but it could also create less
demand for coal—something that he saw as good for the mountains, and good for the community.

Other residents talked about the potential for green energy to provide new jobs and economic growth in the mountains, while at the same time diminishing the need for environmentally destructive resource extraction like surface coal mining. In thinking about the economy of southwest Virginia, as well as about repairing the environmental damage that had been done in the mountains, one environmental activist and local Sierra Club organizer, Chris Bates, discussed his hopes and dreams for the region:

In the long run, I’m hopeful and optimistic for the future of this region. I think there’s a lot of potential here—and a lot of amazing resources here that don’t have to be extracted and burned. I see money being poured into reclaiming the mountains, and reforesting the mountains that have been destroyed. I think there’s economic spinoff activity that can come from that, that’s micro-hyrd, that’s non-timber forest products, that’s sustainable timber harvesting. Carbon sequestration through the planting of trees on strip mines is promising…I think ecotourism, adventure tourism, heritage tourism, all of those will be sectors that will grow in the next 5, 10 [years] and will continue to grow. That’s hopeful, but it’s really a shallow piece of the economy and a shallow substitute for coal production. The things I really have hope for is reclaiming mountains, reclaiming forests, and economic activity that spins off of reclamation and reforestation. (Interview Transcript, Chris Bates, August 2013).

Chris envisioned reclamation projects as a big part of the economic future of the region, and while he agreed that tourism would continue to grow and help with the local economy, he noted that realistically those type of jobs and economic opportunities would not be enough to replace high-paying coal mining jobs. Rather, jobs like reclamation could build upon skill sets already held by local residents and would theoretically provide stable, long-term, high-wage employment.

Interestingly, many residents still thought about the region and its economic possibilities in terms of providing electricity or energy sources, albeit through green
energy. One such green energy that was actually implemented was a wind and solar project at the local community college. In December of 2012, the local newspaper published an article that detailed Mountain Empire Community College’s efforts to use solar and wind energy to power the annual Home Craft Days festival in October. In May of 2012, the college installed 48 solar panels and a wind turbine as part of the Virginia Sustainable Energy Project that was funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, a Virginia Tobacco Commission grant, and local funds. According to the project’s administrator, the energy created more than what powers the school, with the rest of the energy feeding into the power grid of Old Dominion Power. The project furthermore enabled students in the energy management program to monitor the solar panels and wind turbines to learn about their inner workings. Additionally, one of the future goals of the program was to install charging stations for electric vehicles. Following this example of a successful project, many community members shared ideas about the possibilities of green energy in Wise County. For many residents, the idea of an Appalachian community continuing to provide energy for the United States aligned with notions of region in terms of being a place that produced and met national energy needs.

Not everyone’s visions for green energy development in the region fell within the current capitalist and corporate model that would give energy companies more profits from the region. Meryll discussed the possibility of wind and solar in the mountains, but owned by local communities:

I don’t want to see more industry, to be honest, when they talk about putting factories in, that doesn’t excite me. It’s just more pollution and it’s more big corporate jobs. And I just want to see us grow into a self-sustained community. I’d like to see us have wind farms on some of these reclaimed sites, and solar farms, of course my dream would be to have community owned solar farms

Merryl, like many other SAMS members, thought beyond the current capitalist economic system to suggest the possibility for community, rather than corporate, ownership of new economic enterprises. These non-capitalist visions for the future of the coalfields of southwest Virginia are where I turn next.

**Non-Capitalist Visions for the Future**

Merryl’s ideas about economic development for the region sometimes fit within the current capitalist model, but other times she expressed ideas for collectively owned businesses, including green energy. When I asked Merryl about the work that the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards had been doing, she talked a lot about their efforts to help local communities find other sources of income and ways to make a livelihood outside of extractive industries, and mostly outside of current capitalist models:

We [SAMS] started something three or four years ago called ACES, Appalachian Community Economic Series. It was like a take off on an event that was held in Abingdon about other ways we can survive, other ways we can build an economy. And so we started hosting some events, like we had a workshop on how to build a hoop house and grow your own vegetables from seed, and we actually kept a green house up and used a lot of the proceeds to send to the food bank of the town of Appalachia, and to teach other people how to farm. We’ve taught people how to build cold frames and rain barrels and we’ve had discussions on how to build your own solar panels and wind turbines and we’ve had groups like Asheville Green Opportunities come up and talk about the things they do with insulating homes and improving energy efficiencies in homes in underprivileged communities. (Interview Transcript, Merryl Stidham, August 2013)

The Appalachian Community Economic Series (ACES) was a big part of SAMS’ work, as well as their vision for the future of the coalfields. ACES provided community members with free opportunities to learn skills or information to help transition to a new
economy that was built on local traditions and assets and would be sustainable for the future. Offered monthly or bi-monthly, ACES workshops included a wide range of topics, including foraging for non-timber, edible forest products; launching a successful business; extending garden seasons; developing community owned solar projects; building a rain barrel; canning/preserving food; building a tourist economy; and winterizing homes. Following the environmental justice work of SAMS, ACES was created in order to facilitate discussions about and provide training for sustainable economic practices in the region. In addition to the ACES series, SAMS also sponsored a community hoop house project (CHHP) to provide local, organic produce to low-income residents of Appalachia and surrounding coal camps through the local food bank, as well as to teach sustainable gardening techniques to community members. For many SAMS members, programs supporting and promoting sustainable communities were just as important as the organization’s work to stop mountaintop removal mining. As the mission of SAMS stated, “Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards (SAMS) is an organization of concerned community members and their allies who are working to stop the destruction of our communities by surface coal mining, to improve the quality of life in our area, and to help rebuild sustainable communities” (SAMS, n.d.). Improving the quality of life and rebuilding sustainable communities were key parts of the mission, and many members of SAMS that I talked to listed the important work of SAMS as including not only the work to stop surface mine sites such as Ison Rock Ridge from being approved by the DMME, but also the provision of economic alternatives to help local communities move forward toward a more sustainable future.
Some of the younger activists with SAMS, including Chris, were also a part of an organization located in the town of Appalachia called the RReNEW collective, or Remembering and Re-Energizing Neighborhoods, Economies, and Watersheds. Created in 2009, the RReNEW collective was established by interns with the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards in order to help provide support for and placement of volunteers and interns with organizations in the area. The collective owned and operated a house in the town of Appalachia that provided a place for volunteers to live during their time in the region. The mission of the RReNEW collective was to, “help in the building of a healthy, environmentally responsible and economically Fair Appalachia (the town and the region) by providing affordable living and working space for long term volunteers supporting local organizations that share the vision of a just and sustainable Appalachia” (RReNEW, n.d.) As a collective, RReNEW was run by consensus model, meaning all of its members (past and present residents of RReNEW) participated in decision making, as well as provided necessary physical work for the volunteer house and support work for its residents. During my research, SAMS also provided some funds to help support the house and the interns that lived there. These funds were primarily used for living expenses (food and other household supplies). Chris explained the history of the RReNEW collective in one of our interviews:

Over those few years, [a fellow activist] had ended up buying this little house …in Appalachia, and it ended up just sitting there for a little while. Then my friend, who I was working with ended up moving down here and tried to live in the house and had a real hard go of it and didn’t have support from SAMS folks. The intention was to build on this model that had been going in West Virginia, to set up this campaign house or volunteer house, to host interns that could support local organizing efforts…and it be something that’s fully engaged in and enmeshed with the local organizing, and not something that is separate and stand alone, that fits with the local group. In the months before I finished up at school, those of us who had been the core of Blue Ridge Earthfirst!, we decided that we
needed to move our efforts from… fighting this power plant to more directly supporting the local organizing, so we started talking about setting up this house that [a local activist] had bought as a volunteer house, and I agreed to move down when I finished school to help get this house going. (Interview Transcript, Chris Bates, August 2013)

Building upon strategies and tactics used in the anti-MTR movement in West Virginia, Chris and others began envisioning ways to support on-going movement activities of local, grassroots environmental organizations. He continued:

So we set up the RReNEW collective. We decided we wanted a little bit of autonomy from SAMS, to make our own budget decisions, money decisions, so we could have ownership of the house and the space…That spring we had a guy, a carpenter, to fix up the house, and we raised a little bit of money to fix it up and to provide for bills for food and we started hosting interns. That fall we had four of us in the house…and we started up RReNEW, part of that too, was that [a bunch of folks] who were involved in the early days of RReNEW…were wanting to move away from just fighting mountaintop removal and wanting to support more solutions work and economic transition work…we could leave ourselves room to address transition from the beginning and talk about economic transition from the start….rather than tacking it on [like other organizations had]… We decided to make a separate organization and not have it be one hundred percent about fighting mountaintop removal. (Interview Transcript, Chris Bates, August 2013).

For Chris and others involved in the creation of RReNEW, creating a separate organization gave their members more freedom to both employ more radical tactics in the movement that may or may not be sanctioned by SAMS members, but more importantly it gave them space to begin to envision a future for the region and start working towards an economically and environmentally sustainable community. Rather than focusing only on stopping the devastation caused by MTR, these activists hoped to implement economic practices that could help the difficult transition from coal to other forms of economic activity. Chris and others saw their work at RReNEW as part of a push for social change in Appalachia at many levels:
We do have ambition about being part of social change in Appalachia, it’s about remembering our history, the rich history that’s here in these mountains, and about energy, sustainable energy, and social energy, about youthful energy leaving this place, we wanted it to be local and neighborhood focused, and we wanted it to be about the economies, we need money, and we want to talk about sustainable economies that aren’t mono-economic and extraction based. And we really wanted to talk about watersheds...a lot of us have a lot of love and awe for the watershed in this region, and especially in southwest Virginia, it’s the source of so much. (Interview Transcript, Chris Bates, August 2013)

Chris saw the RReNEW collective as a place that could also help young activists that were working with other organizations, which may or may not focus on the environment:

Our real mission was to provide housing and working and living space for interns and volunteers to work with SAMS, really. We didn’t put SAMS in the mission statement because we wanted to expand and support other groups and social movements in the region, and power building in the region, but the reality was that we had a relationship with SAMS. (Interview Transcript, Chris Bates, August 2013)

The RReNEW collective certainly housed activists working with SAMS on various campaigns, but they also housed activists working with the Central Appalachian Prisoner Support Network (CASPN), which supported families (many located in Richmond, Virginia) of prisoners located at two federal maximum security prisons located in Wise and Dickenson Counties by providing transportation for families to and from the prison. Other activists living at the RReNEW collective worked with a variety of organizations that support environmental work in the region, including the Upper Tennessee River Valley Watershed Roundtable that worked to restore the health of local watersheds in the Tri-State area (Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky). The intentionality of the RReNEW collective to step outside of what would have perhaps been an easier route, in other words to allow SAMS to own and operate the physical space of the volunteer house, speaks to the importance that members of the collective placed on having the freedom to work on issues concerning the future of the region. Rather than just “trouble-shooting” or
protesting against something, members of the collective wanted to be proactive in changing the future of Appalachia, especially through a new sustainable economy.

Geographers Stephen Healy and Julie Graham discuss the ways in which traditional development practitioners often prioritize economy over the environment, suggesting that environmental stewardship and economy are stuck in a zero-sum game, only allowing for sustainability to become part of the development equation when it does not “threaten the existing economic order” (2008: 296). They argue that often, economic imaginations are confined to thinking only of how environmentally sustainable practices can best serve the economy. In southwest Virginia, residents encountered this type of thinking on a daily basis- with the ideas that safeguarding the environment against the practices of surface mining must be met with something of equal or greater economic benefit. Healy and Graham also argue that in order to shift away from a preoccupation with capitalist production and towards the end goal of social well-being, communities need to produce surplus that can be used for the well-being of communities and move away from thinking of environmental and economic concerns as being opposed to one another. Many SAMS members expressed the sentiment that it was possible to have both a healthy environment and sustainable economy, whether through community gardens or eco-tourism efforts.

These ideas are further embellished in J.K. Gibson-Graham’s book *A Postcapitalist Politics* (2006). They argue that communities need to imagine the economy differently and challenge capitalism as being the necessary and natural economic system. Rather, they argue that a discourse of community economy can help communities start where they are and build on what they have- allowing for “modest beginnings and small
achievements” (Gibson-Graham 2006:196). These modest beginnings and small
achievements can be seen in SAMS’ work to provide residents with free workshops (part
of the ACES series described above) that would allow local residents to utilize the
resources their community already had to contribute to their livelihoods, whether through
a hoop house for late fall and early spring gardens, or by learning how to forage for wild
greens and other edible forest products. Furthermore, ideas about community owned
wind or solar projects demonstrated some community members’ willingness and interest
in creating an economy outside the typical capitalist model to create a sustainable
economy and environment for southwest Virginia.

Conclusion

Despite their shared concerns about the economic future of the region, residents
were hopeful for the future- and not just hopeful, but proactive in finding new economic
revenues for the area. Regardless of their differing views about coal and mountaintop
removal mining, all residents were in consensus that a multifaceted strategy should be
employed to transition the area to a healthy and sustainable economic future. Certainly
residents had divergent ideas about the best path forward for the economy in Wise
County, but all ideas were place-based while not place-bound. Even the more
conservative efforts of local tourism such as the “Trail of the Lonesome Pine” outdoor
drama relied on notions of culture being something marketable at local, regional, and
even national scales. While some residents continued to advocate for coal mining to play
a vital role in the county’s economy, others felt that in order to have a thriving region,
there must first be a halting of coal extraction (and other resources) in other ways that
was harmful to the environment.
The literature on place-based movements is especially instructive in understanding economic transition in this Appalachian coalfield community. Community members, regardless of their stance on mining, felt grounded in a specific place, but also recognized their own communities position as a part of larger state, regional, national, and global economies. As Ann Kinsgolver (2011) notes, as residents of a globalized world, all citizens are a part of multiple communities. This becomes important in place-based organizing, as communities across the region, state, nation, and globe can join together to advocate for better economies and share ideas for creative capitalist and non-capitalist ways of moving forward. As Dwight Billings noted, “Even in counties where ‘Coal is King,’ capitalism is not—at least in terms of official employment and the under-reported preponderance of non-capitalist class processes” (2016: 61). Perhaps this gives hope for a way forward that will move the region beyond participation in exploitive global processes, but rather find new, creative ways for communities to survive both economically and environmentally.

In Wise County community members agreed that “something” needed to be done about the local economy- coal was no longer providing for the needs of the whole community, and with the most recent economic downturn, it would be unlikely to provide even a small level of support for the community through wages and taxes in the years to come. While my informants agreed that there needed to be economic diversification, they often did not come together in public arenas to discuss or plan for the future of the area.

In my research, local, state, and federal politicians serving southwest Virginia, as well as other community leaders and coal company executives, continued to frame the
debate over the coal industry in purely economic terms- if the environment was brought up at all, they argued that the environment was a non-issue and that the industry complied with all federal and state environmental regulations. They further argued that increased federal oversight by the EPA would be detrimental to the ability of the industry to operate profitably and employee local miners. This framing created a binary, the “coal divide,” that served to keep residents pitted against one another, even when working towards the same goals.

Both those residents supportive of the coal industry in some form or fashion and those opposed to mountaintop removal mining emphasized the importance of a new economy in the future of the area. While pro-coal residents hoped to find a balance of a bolstered coal industry and some new economic efforts, residents who opposed the environmental destruction caused by surface coal mining advocated for an entirely new economy post-coal-- one based on reclaiming areas that had been environmentally damaged, creating new businesses, and supporting new ecotourism efforts that benefit from the mountains and environment that have not been damaged by mining. Residents all along the spectrum of the debate over mountaintop removal mining were focused on economy, and while many disagreed on exactly how to move the central Appalachian region forward in a way that would be sustainable for generations to come- environmentally and economically- they felt hope for these mountains in the ingenuity of small projects and economic initiatives that had begun the process toward community revitalization.
Chapter 7: Conclusion: A Future Beyond the Coal Divide

They are fighting mountaintop removal in Kentucky, West Virginia, Virginia, and Tennessee... I’ve heard them [environmental organizers] say things in West Virginia where some of their dogs have been poisoned. [It’s] different, you know, [they get] flattened tires. But I have to say I don’t know of any of us here that we’ve ever got a flat tire or our windshield broke out. I think there might have been a couple threatened on the phone, but overall I think even though the coal miners, underground and strip miners, some of them don’t like what we are doing, but I don’t think any of them have ever felt that they needed to do anything physical to us or make threats. I think we are better off than most of them, we don’t have to look behind our shoulders when we go out or come in at night, [or] think someone might be there to harm us. I think we are a whole lot better off than other states. (Interview Transcript, Pam Miller, March 2012)

Continued Struggles

Wise County was an interesting place to examine the dynamics of coal issues in the 21st century. Unlike the neighboring states of Kentucky and West Virginia, which Pam referenced in the above quote, the state of Virginia was not fundamentally dependent upon coal to make up a large part of its economy. The result, as Pam Miller suggested in the above quote, was a less contentious—or less violent and prone to public conflict—division among residents on coal related issues. Stances on coal were furthermore not solidly on the pro- or anti-side, as residents had their own complicated relationships with the industry. The history and heritages of coal, lived experiences, and political discourses about coal were powerful forces that influenced the ways residents thought about life in the coalfields. This place of quiet, and sometimes silenced, conflict over coal related issues allowed the messiness and complex reality of coalfield life to be explored.

This dissertation demonstrates the power of the hegemony of coal in southwest Virginia. It shows that while some residents adopted these dominant economic and environmental ideologies that privilege economy over the environment, others took a
counter-hegemonic stance that suggested the coal industry was not good for the environment or economy. Moreover, other residents found themselves in between these positions, with a range of responses to the powerful public discourses, material realities, and cultural ideologies that sometimes contradicted each other. It was not just a matter of residents weighing the various economic and environmental benefits and/or consequences of coal. Rather, this research demonstrated that coal heritages, history, and cultural meanings were deeply important in how people thought about the industry and its role in their lives. Additionally, the place of Wise County was constantly changing through political, social, and economic processes—these changes were compounded by the wax and wane of the coal industry, as well as changes in the regulatory climate and labor relations. Finally, residents were constantly asked to respond to hegemonic discourse that touted coal as a socially responsible corporate neighbor and vital part of the local economy. In some cases this meant that residents found their own financial interests (through coal jobs, for example) were in collusion with the coal industry, in other cases, residents created counter-hegemonic discourses that suggested coal was not good for the local economy or the environment.

Throughout this dissertation I have attempted to highlight the voices and experiences of people in southwest Virginia who, while continuously stereotyped by media and essentialized in the public imagination, live incredibly complex lives. Their experiences were compounded by a history of economic and environmental devastation that remains a daily reality and an important rallying point for working towards a more sustainable future. These voices are scattered throughout this dissertation. They provide important insight for a region that already finds itself in a moment of serious transition,
and will likely be headed for even more difficult times and challenges given the political climate of 2017.

In letting people tell their stories of life in a coalfield community, I sought to highlight a broader political and economic context that these narratives underscore, including a more nuanced understanding of life in the shadow of mountaintop removal mining. Indeed, I found that along a spectrum of support for and opposition to coal, southwest Virginians were deeply place-based in their love for their communities and mountains. They were also very aware of their economic, political, and environmental place in the region, the state, the nation, and the world. Insights from members of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards and United Mine Workers of America were especially reflective of these multi-tiered perspectives. They drew their own conclusions about what coal meant for their local economies and environment and for economies at multiple scales. They also voiced understandings of the natural environment—ranging from personal observations of dead fish in local streams to insights into the weather patterns in the mountains changed by global warming—something many environmental activists were acutely aware of as they criticized not just the local devastation from surface mining, but also its contribution to the devastation of the global environment.

I additionally highlighted the ways that politics—both in the discourses used by elected officials and in the ways that regulatory practices were constructed and implemented—influenced how people envisioned their own lives. Those who held power and influence over the material realities of coalfield residents, that is the coal corporations, local, state and federal politicians, and other regulatory officials, certainly had much influence over the conversations that were taking place, both publically and
privately. But these power holders were not simply brainwashing local residents, as is sometimes suggested by mainstream media, including recent laments over the Trump landslide in Appalachia. It was not the case that local residents were not educated enough to see through much of this political discourse. However, the focus on the coal industry as the most important economic engine of the region remained powerful and all-consuming in the public arena, including elections, surface mine permit hearings, and public discussions about the future of regional culture and economy. As James C. Scott argued in his critique of theories of hegemony, there are “other reasons for the compliance and quiescence than the internalization of the dominant ideology by subordinate groups” (Scott 1990: 84). These reasons are many and varied, but include the possibility of cultural or geographical differences, or calculations that suggest any sort of going against the mainstream might be foolhardy or threatening to livelihoods.

As Wise County residents talked to me throughout the course of my research, there were very complex reasons that residents felt conflicted about mountaintop removal coal mining and were willing (or not willing) to discuss their views on the topic. As Pam Miller and others often vocalized, they had sons, uncles, brothers, nephews, and in-laws in or on top of the mines, and their well-being was paramount to the health of not only their own families but to the community as a whole. While this was true for many residents, including SAMS members, it did not necessarily preclude them from voicing their concerns with the coal industry, even if it was only done so privately and quietly. What also became very clear throughout the course of my research was that while powerful public discourses about coal influenced how people thought about their lives, their lived material experiences were equally important. Sometimes this was the material
reality of residents relying on the coal industry to make money to feed their families. Other times this was the reality of turning on the kitchen sink and having brown and black water run out of the faucet. One of the most poignant and evident complexities of life in the coalfields could be found here in the intersection of powerful public discourse and lived experiences.

One of my informants once echoed a commonly heard concern in the coalfields about the effect of pollution on her son and grandchild: “They used to have tadpoles and would use those to catch fish in the creek behind the house. There’s no life there now. When [Daniel] was young I used to not think anything of him playing in the creek. But as he got older I wouldn’t even let him get near it. Everything is dead” (Interview Transcript, Kathy Miller, March 2013). One of the important points here is that with or without the continuation of surface mining in Appalachia, the pollution remains. And in an era of bankr uptcies by numerous coal companies and severely limited state and federal funding for clean-up, these concerns of polluted waterways and devastated landscapes will remain an issue for generations to come. As an employee of the Department of Mines Minerals and Energy told me, “An environmental disaster for our area would be for the coal industry to pack up their bags and go away, because we’ve got to count on the revenue we are getting from them to repair and reclaim those past damages” (Interview Transcript, Bob Dunlap, May 2013). Residents and regulators alike realized the need for a continued focus on, and financial support for, the coalfields, regardless of whether coal ever makes a rebound or not. A disappearance in active mine sites does not mean a disappearance in the pollution that has already been caused by mine sites, and it will be an issue that residents will be forced to deal with for generations to come.
Even as Appalachian coal may be dwindling in its production, its labor force, and its reserves, it remains an important part of the region’s and nation’s past, present, and future. If nothing else, the 2016 U.S. presidential campaigns of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump demonstrated the continued importance of coal, coal mining, and the transition of Appalachian economies in the future. Trump promised a return of coal jobs, which many analysts have claimed would be impossible because of current market forces. Clinton, on the other hand, revealed a 30 billion dollar plan to rebuild the economy of the coalfields and other areas formerly dependent upon the industry (Sanati 2016, McDonnell 2015). Clinton’s plan included grant funding and tax incentives for public health, education, and entrepreneurship initiatives that would help revitalize areas that were struggling with the loss of coal jobs. In these national conversations, Appalachia maintained a prominent place in considering how the government can help meet the needs of rural America.

The victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 election further signals a need for continued organizing in the region as many of the social security nets that people across the region rely on may disappear, and many analysts are doubtful of coal’s return. The residents involved in place-based organizing in Appalachia—those that are working to stop mountaintop removal and those that are working to create vibrant economically sustainable communities—can provide important pieces in the puzzle of how Appalachia will move forward in this [almost] post-coal moment.

**The Future of the Coalfields in the Era of Donald J. Trump**

One can only speculate, at this point, what the Republican led White House and congress will mean for the future of the coalfields. But the past and present suggest there
is much potential for this accumulation by dispossession to continue to privilege an elite few over the masses under the Trump administration (Harvey 2000). It begs timely questions: How will corporate welfare programs increase? Will a decrease in federal regulations or taxes on corporations create an atmosphere that is financially viable for coal companies to continue operating in Appalachia? How will social security nets for the most vulnerable populations be affected? Will there be major decreases in funding for programs like social security, disability, food stamps, and WIC—programs that have been vital to impoverished communities across the United States, including Appalachia? Will Trump seek to defund the Environmental Protection Agency? How else will Appalachian communities—and other marginalized communities-- be affected by this new era in U.S. politics? These questions are not just relevant now in this very particular moment in the history of the United States and Appalachia, rather they have been important factors for the region with each new Presidential administration. What perhaps is different now than in previous histories of the boom and bust coal economy in Appalachia is that a coal boom, regardless of the Trump administration’s environmental and economic policies, is highly unlikely.

Most analyses of the future of coal in the U.S. suggest that the downturn of coal production in Appalachia is primarily attributed to international market forces, cheaper operational costs in the Western United States, and cheaper sources of fuel such as natural gas. However, it will still be interesting to watch how and if President Trump will work towards his promise to bring coal jobs back. Indeed, as many analysts have assessed in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, Trump offered a message of hope to the coalfields. In a rally in Abingdon, Virginia in August 2016, miners came out in support of
Trump, holding signs that said, “Trump Digs Coal” (Hagen 2016). As he promised in southwest Virginia, as well as in West Virginia and other coalfield areas: “[Coal miners’] jobs have been taken away, and we’re going to bring them back, folks. If I get in, this is what it is” (Hagen 2016). In his campaign speech in Abingdon he also offered this caution, “Hillary will be a horror show…The miners will be gone if she’s elected.” (Hagan 2016). In an economically depressed region that has been steadily losing coal jobs for three decades, Trump’s promises, combined with Clinton’s earlier campaign statements about putting coal miners out of work, resonated with many residents as he sought the rural white working class vote all over the U.S. Indeed, in Wise County, Trump took 79.9% of the vote, with Clinton only taking 17.9%.

Many reporters and analysts have discussed what a Trump presidency will mean for these impoverished coal-producing communities. As noted above, even before the election analysts suggested that it is unlikely that coal-mining jobs will return in any great number. Indeed, international market forces that prefer cheap and abundant natural gas over dirtier and more expensive coal, as well as a decline in demand for coal for manufacturing and other industries, means that even with a reduced regulatory climate, coal production and employment will not return to its past levels. Additionally, concerns over pollution and climate change have also had some bearing on coal production, as large investment companies such as JPMorgan Chase and Bank of America have pulled back on financing new coal fired power plants (Krauss and Corkery 2016b). All of these factors point to the reality that even with some changes to environmental regulations, it is unlikely that residents in the coalfields will feel the economic relief they hoped a Trump presidency would bring.
In addition to speculations of how Trump will be able (or not be able) to deliver on his promises of bringing coal jobs back, post-election reports have gone as far as to vilify people in the Appalachian region, especially in regards to what might happen to their healthcare and other social services. In a particularly scathing piece on the *Daily Kos*, the founder of the online news source stated, “Be Happy for Coal Miners Losing Their Health Insurance. They’re Getting Exactly What They Voted For” (Moulitsas 2016). Some reporters came to the defense of Appalachian coal miners who voted for Trump, arguing that the reasons for a landslide in Trump country was more complex than the idea that people were voting against their own interests. For example, in a response to the *Daily Kos* piece on *Vox*, journalist Jeff Stein suggested that Appalachian coalfield residents overwhelmingly voted for Trump because he campaigned on a platform to roll back regulations and fight for their coal jobs. He was not running on a platform to strip miners of their benefits. Further, as Stein pointed out, many Republicans have supported measures to protect the benefits and healthcare of miners (the exception was Kentucky Senator Mitch McConnell) (2016).

Similarly, CNN reported on Trump supporters in Eastern Kentucky that were worried about losing their Black Lung benefits (CNN 2016). In response to this piece, Greg Sargent of the *Washington Post* argued that while Trump did vow to repeal Obamacare, he did not signal that he would leave residents in the coalfields (or elsewhere) without benefits or federal protection. In fact, Sargent argues, Trump worked hard to set himself apart from other Republicans ideologically, suggesting to voters that he may hold different ideas on the role of the government in providing benefits like healthcare to lower income citizens. Whether or not coalfield residents were paying
attention to the nuances (or vagueness) of Trump’s promises and ideas for his time in the
White House, Sargant’s analysis provides at least some context for understanding the
reasons that people in the coalfields voted for Trump, and according to much of liberal
America, voted against their best interests (2016).

However, what many of these analyses have failed to address in the aftermath of
the election is the structural inequalities that have continued to prevail in the region. Even
with the support of social programs throughout the Obama administration, Appalachia
continues to be one of the most impoverished regions in the country. Despite
government-subsidized healthcare, social security programs such as food stamps and
Women Infants Children (WIC), the coalfields in Appalachia have continued to see jobs
and incomes decline. A recent report in the Roanoke Times detailed the effects of out-
migration on local public schools in far southwest Virginia. According to the report,
dwindling numbers in schools, caused by people leaving because of the lack of
employment opportunities in the region, means less state funding for schools, but not less
costs (Gregory 2017). Localities are left to make up the lost financial resources, but with
dwindling coal severance tax funds, schools are left without the money they need to
replace textbooks, upgrade important technologies and infrastructure, and provide raises
for teachers. In addition to the region’s other woes, adding educational struggles makes
life in the coalfields even more difficult. These daily struggles are real for coalfield
residents, and such structural inequalities—such as a lack of equal access to education,
healthcare, and employment—may be further compounded under an administration that
favors limited government services and supports big business.
Despite the serious challenges that likely lay ahead for coal country during the Trump administration, it is important to note that residents of the coalfields are not strangers to the boom and bust economies and regulatory changes that often coincide with the changing of Democratic and Republican administrations. Indeed, during the Obama administration, the Environmental Protection Agency was strengthened, climate change was addressed as a real threat, and new regulations on building coal-fired power plants were created and enforced. However, despite the Obama administration’s pro-environment stance, Appalachia continued to lag behind the rest of the nation in employment, education, income, and poverty levels. Social programs have certainly been essential for many residents in Appalachia, but they have not solved the region’s structural inequalities that have persisted through administrations of both parties. Additionally this political moment allows for broader questions about organizations working for social change within the region. How do organizations like the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards work within structural limitations? How do they connect to other community members? Why do community members who disagree with SAMS’ initiatives continue to tolerate them within the community?

This dissertation has the potential to add to important conversations about the Appalachian coalfield region in this transitional and liminal moment in American history. While Trump did carry Appalachian counties, a closer look at the structural inequalities that exist in the region, the lived experiences of individuals who have lost their ways of making a living, and the political discourse that continues to flood public conversations about economic and environmental issues, can provide a more nuanced understanding of the position that people in the coalfields find themselves in. In a recent Young Turks
interview during a rally for a $15 minimum wage in Richmond, Virginia, a young man from Dickenson County, Virginia (a coal mining county adjacent to Wise County) discussed his own views of Trump’s presidency, stating, “[Trump] has said so many times, ‘we’ll bring back every coal job, 100 percent of the coal jobs,’ that’s what he said. And these people are so desperate to believe in something” (Clark 2016). He further took a stand against white supremacy and rejected notions that people in the Appalachian region do not fully understand the negative consequences of coal mining. His voice, like many that are scattered throughout this dissertation, provide a more diverse understanding of life in the coalfields. It is these voices that are often neglected by mainstream media, media that have, unfortunately, continued to use West Virginia (and other coalfield communities) as the ignorant white working class scapegoat for what happened during the 2016 presidential election.

**Theoretical Contributions**

Not only is this research important in this era of transition, but it also falls into a longer disciplinary trajectory that offers insights into the field of anthropology. Specifically, this dissertation has the potential to offer an interesting look at rural America in this late capitalist moment. The same market forces that allowed coal to operate unfettered in the 1980s and 90s are now allowing other sources of fuel to fill that need-- meaning that coal is no longer the front runner in the cheap and lucrative energy sector—and also no longer a viable option for even a small portion of local and regional economies.

*Audit Culture*
Following the work of other political ecologists who wish to highlight the various ways that corporations are able to pollute freely while promoting an agenda of being good corporate neighbors, this work demonstrates that the ways regulations were constructed and how complaints were handled are part of a broader problem in the privileging of scientific discourse over the experiences of residents in areas where natural resource extraction takes a toll on the environment and the economy. In Chapter 3, participant observation at permit hearings revealed the ways that politicians and coal industry executives were privileged to speak first and set the tone of each hearing. For example, during the Ison Rock Ridge Permit Denial Hearing, residents were advised not to speak about the reasons that they did not support the permit. These reasons were seen as irrelevant to the administrative denial of the permit. Further without the backing of scientific proof, many criticisms about polluted water and diminished health of residents were viewed as here-say.

Additionally, corporations used the practice of regulatory oversight as a way to garner support for their practices. This regulatory self-oversight, or audit culture, suggests that corporations who were transparent about their own practices, especially in relation to complying with regulations, were being good corporate neighbors. In the coalfields, audit culture demonstrates the ways that coal companies were able to continue to garner support for and create the façade of support for their practices. They did this by arguing that their self-monitoring and reporting of pollution to the appropriate regulatory agency demonstrated compliance with state and federal law. Audit culture allowed coal companies to argue that because they are complying with federal and state level regulations, they are beyond rebuke. Further, within audit culture, the privileging of
scientific knowledge over other kinds of knowledge meant that residents who had real and visceral experiences with pollution caused by strip mining were not taken seriously unless they had verified scientific results that could “prove” both the existence and cause of the pollution. This additionally disadvantaged residents who often lacked the financial means, tools, or knowledge to conduct testing that would hold up in a court of law. The result of audit culture and the privileging of scientific knowledge was that residents with negative experiences with the coal industry struggled to be taken seriously when their complaints were not backed up by scientific data. Additionally, their complaints were often dismissed when they suggested current regulations were not stringent enough. With the financial and other constraints of scientific testing, this was yet another structural restriction that kept local residents from being able to levy any serious complaints or lawsuits against corporate polluters. Combined with the pro-coal discourse of politicians, coal industry executives, and other local leaders, audit culture created a powerful barrier for residents who wished to hold the coal industry responsible for environmental pollution.

While audit culture was at work in Appalachian communities with the use of self-regulation by coal companies, it was not limited to corporate use. Studies of audit culture have focused on how corporations promote their images as good corporate neighbors through transparent self-regulation. However, these studies have not shown the ways that government regulation can work alongside corporate self-regulation. The regulatory processes for strip mine permits demonstrates that it was not just corporations that were creating this façade of compliance, rather it was a combination of government agencies and corporations working together. In southwest Virginia, the Department of Mines,
Minerals, and Energy enforced state and federal level regulations that required self-reporting of specific discharge sites of pollution by coal companies. This was in part due to a lack of funding and resources that would allow the DMME to conduct all the monitoring required by environmental regulations. In this way, the DMME and coal industry benefited from this arrangement.

Audit culture further has the potential for covering up corruption. As demonstrated by the illegally replicated water testing results that were turned in to regulatory agencies by a coal company (discussed in chapter 5), audit culture not only creates a façade of compliance, it also has the potential to hide illegal actions. Additionally, this work shows that audit culture can resonate in places because of the connection to public discourse that supports industry. Politicians and local leaders vocalized their support for the continued operation of the coal industry as well as the regulations that were supported to safeguard communities. This discourse reinforced audit culture and further worked to dismiss complaints from residents who argued that regulations were not stringent enough to protect the land and the people.

Political Ecology

This dissertation further contributes to the work of political ecologists who wish to envision ways that local people can be a part of conversations about development and conservation, especially in regards to the ways that environment is envisioned and constructed by people who live in places of embattled wildernesses. Environmental imaginaries played a prominent role in the ways that residents thought about their lives in the coalfields. As demonstrated in Chapter 5, some residents expressed negative experiences with pollution caused by mountaintop removal mining and recounted
polluted water and negatively affected climate patterns. Other residents argued against scientific evidence and suggested that surface mining left the land in better shape than it was before. Residents’ experiences with the natural environment, combined with the overarching public discourse supporting the coal industry, created a complicated vision for residents of what the coal industry meant for the economic and environmental health of the community. Many residents found it difficult to rectify their own visceral experiences of the natural environment with the pervasive discourse that suggested coal was the only way for the community to continue to move forward amidst such economic uncertainty and liminality.

This work further addresses questions about who benefits from social constructions of nature. When nature is constructed as a commodity, corporations as owners of the means and modes of production benefit. However this research further complicates such a simple view, as even environmental activists viewed the environment in terms of economy. That is, local activists saw the potential for other economic value (such as ecotourism) in preserving the mountains that were left intact in Wise County. While caring about the environment was clearly shared among residents, what this meant in terms of caring for the environment was not. The ambiguous nature of living in a coalfield community created this overlap and shared perspective in the love of community, but did not necessarily translate into what residents thought was the best way forward to a sustainable future. Because there was no clear unilineal position for residents to take, they often struggled to figure out where to place themselves on what public discourse suggested was diametrically opposite sides of the question about coal and surface mining in southwest Virginia. The tradeoffs touted by the coal industry and other
public figures in their privileging of economy over environment was something that residents all along the spectrum of the debate grappled with. Lived experience and public discourse often did not overlap in a clear narrative or envisioning of what the future of the coalfields should look like.

This dissertation further contributes to understandings of place-based organizing. Interestingly, residents who were proponents of a polluting industry were concerned with other place-based issues such as economy, social programs, and the creation of a place where people could make a decent living and young people wished to stay. However, there was a clear distinction between those who were involved with the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards and wished to find a way to promote a sustainable economy and environment, and those who continued to privilege economy over environment. All residents did express care about the environment, meaning that they were invested in their community and the mountains in terms of livability and long-term economic and environmental longevity for future generations. However, there were certainly different iterations of what this meant in terms of caring for the environment. As demonstrated in Chapter 6, residents’ visions of the future economy of southwest Virginia varied greatly. While some residents suggested that coal should remain an important part of the local economy, others argued that alternative economic development to clean up the environment would be one of the only viable ways forward. In caring about the mountains, all residents wanted to their communities to thrive. In caring for the mountains, some residents did not necessarily agree with the mission of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards that caring for nature was an important part of the answer to this question of finding a sustainable future.
As Kempton, Boster, and Hartley discuss in their work *Environmental Values in American Culture*, opposition to environmental laws or regulations does not necessarily mean a lack of environmental values for U.S. citizens. They found that environmentalism was strongly entwined with other American values, such as parental responsibility and obligation to future generations (Kempton et al. 1999: 214). Rather, Kempton, et al. suggests that while environmental values are often shared among American citizens, other structural constraints (such as the lack of systems to support environmentally sustainable alternatives and the presence of systems that benefit corporate polluters) create barriers to action. Among community members in the impoverished coalfields, the issues of environmental sustainability moved beyond structural constraints, as the potential for envisioning alternatives was also limited, with community leaders and power holders continuing to tout a roll back of environmental regulations as the answer to community economic woes.

Additionally, the discourse of coal as the only economic answer to the region’s various problems was a powerful strategy utilized by power-holders with a keen interest in allowing the coal industry to continue operating. These power holders included prominent politicians (many of whom held financial interests, albeit through campaign contributions, in the coal industry), local leaders (who counted on coal severance tax monies for the local budget), regulatory agency employees (whose jobs depended on the continued operation of coal companies in southwest Virginia), and coal industry executives. To garner support for their practices, despite protest from a few citizens, they employed rhetorical strategies to ensure that the conversation always started and stopped with coal as an economic engine for southwest Virginia.
Environmental imaginaries revealed the different ways that people thought about the natural environment, as well as the ways they envisioned the future for the coalfields. Among residents, the environment was seen as something to be used to the benefit of humans. For environmental justice activists with SAMS, this meant conserving the natural environment both for the health of residents, but also for the future potential of eco-tourism. For residents who held a more favorable view of the coal industry, the environment remained an important resource for extraction. Furthermore, when these visions and understandings of the natural environment intersected with pro-coal public discourse, audit culture, and everyday material-realities, the ambiguous and complex nature of life in the coalfields was revealed.

Despite these serious differences of vision in how to care for the environment, there still remain possibilities for bridging the coal divide to create new regional economies not reliant on extractive industries. As Barbra Ellen Smith and Stephen L. Fisher note in their edited volume *Transforming Places: Lessons from Appalachia*, relational organizing can transcend boundaries—those of identity, politics, and place. They argue that simple actions such as sharing stories and music across social divides can help create a collective knowledge that is more inclusive of viewpoints outside those of the mainstream power holders (2013: 280). In particular they argue that the successes of movements to create new economies and other social change in particular places rely on the ability for residents to envision alternatives. This visioning requires both conversations about potential alternatives for economic development, and cultural practices such as storytelling and music. Certainly the music of labor organizers still rings true for many residents. In the early twentieth century, Sarah Ogun Gunning sang of life
in the coalfields, “Coal mining is the most dangerous work in our land today/with plenty of dirty, slaving work, and very little pay/Coal miner, won’t you wake up, and open your eyes and see/what the dirty capitalist system is doing to you and me.” Almost a century later, her words continue to be sung by, and certainly ring true for, many residents of the coalfields of Appalachia. Remembering these struggles, especially in the absence of a strong union or other wide-spread collective organization, could provide an important piece to unifying the community, envisioning new economies, and building the future of a sustainable Appalachia.

Borrowing Raymond Williams’ concept of militant particularism, David Harvey explains how movements can address vulnerabilities across society: “Ideals forged out of the affirmative experience of solidarities in one place get generalized and universalized as a working model of new form of society that will benefit all of humanity” (1996:32). In examining the environmental justice movement, Harvey argues that this type ecological militant particularism works to create a vision for society that includes healthy natural environments (urban and rural), as well as access to safe jobs, housing, education and health care (Harvey 1996:390). The environmental justice movement demonstrates the ways that this type of militant particularism is actually the melding of both ecological and social justice initiatives to the benefit of not one particular issue or group, but to all. This work demonstrates the potential for place-based organizing to reach across barriers and borders to create new visions and realities for future generations.

*Discourse, Power, and Class*

As James C. Scott and David Harvey argue, power holders (such as politicians and corporate executives) use public discourse to define what options are feasible. This
research suggests that in the coalfields, the overarching rhetoric was that coal was- and is- and will always be- the best answer to the region’s economic problems. Power-holder make this argument while simultaneously suggesting that economy must always be juxtaposed to the environment, and that given this dualism, the environment must always come second. While this discourse certainly resonates with some residents, as demonstrated by the oft-contentious nature of the debate over mountaintop removal mining, the lived experiences of coalfield citizens were much messier. Sometimes lived experiences directly opposed the idea of privileging economy over environment (especially for those dealing with localized pollution). Other times, residents’ lives directly contradicted the claim of importance of the coal industry, as many lost their jobs to mechanization in and on top of mines. For people who wanted both to provide for their families through employment in the coal industry, but also wanted to continue to enjoy hunting or hiking in the mountains, there were no clear answers or options. While the dualistic thinking of jobs or environment continues to pervade mainstream media accounts, and some academic accounts, that seek to understand sites of disagreement over natural resource extraction, in the coalfields there was no such straight-forward or clear cut way of envisioning life. Just as coal heritages were diverse in the region, so too were people’s experiences with both the economic and environmental consequences of coal mining. In these times of economic and environmental uncertainty, residents were acutely aware of the need to find ways to move forward, ways that could provide jobs with a decent living wage for families, and ways that could also conserve one of the greatest resources of the coalfields- the mountains.
These pro-coal discourses that were purported by powerful politicians and other local leaders created even more division in local communities that were already split in terms of material realities and environmental imaginaries of natural resource extraction. In the midst of this division, SAMS members sought to engage the broader community in meaningful conversations, actions, and visioning of the future. While maintaining a minority voice in the community, SAMS was able to gain members who had family in or on top of the mines, as they engaged legal tactics, such as lawsuits and lobbying, to create change. However, despite their successes and influence in the community, residents remained divided.

Most residents of the coalfields of southwest Virginia did not identify with a certain class, and in the absence of a strong union, the issue of class was complicated. The relationship to exploitation and the harsh reality of lost and dwindling livelihoods remained poignant for Wise County residents. While there was a common understanding of coal’s relationship to livelihoods among residents, many residents disagreed on who or what was to blame for the systemic poverty and unemployment in the region. With an acute awareness of the economic vulnerability of the region, but no common agreement or understanding of the cause of economic problems, public conversations were often fraught.

On the one hand, UMWA members identified with other union struggles across the U.S., their critique often started and stopped with the unfair treatment of workers by corporations. The assumption among most UMWA retirees was that if workers were treated well and provided with safe working conditions, fair wages, and good benefits, the company was looking out for the community. In some cases, as demonstrated by
narratives of UMWA members in Chapter 4, this favorable view of coal corporations extended beyond those companies who employed UMWA miners to any coal company. The employment of community members in any mine eclipsed the importance of union mines. Furthermore, the degradation of the environment by the process of mining itself was not part of the UMWA’s critiques of the coal industry. On the other hand, members of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards were quick to draw connections between corporations benefited from the exploitation of workers and the environment.

David Harvey argues that class processes include “permanences,” or the “institutions, social relations, discourses, imaginaries, material practices and power relations” that allow class politics to function (1996:359). However, these permanences are fluid and changing. This idea of the fluidity of class process was demonstrated by the power of the UMWA (an institution) that has decreased over time in its power and influence in relation to capital accumulation in Appalachia. This fluidity of class processes contributed to the vulnerability of life in the coalfields, as the cycle of coal has been boom and bust, social programs have waxed and waned, and union representation has diminished.

*Further Implications for Anthropology*

This dissertation demonstrates the ways that power relations can be upheld through public discourse. Public discourse encompasses the beliefs and ideas that politicians, local leaders, and other corporate heads express in public settings. This discourse serves to influence local values and ideas about various economic, political, and environmental issues. It furthermore sets limitations on what is deemed feasible for alternatives to dominant narratives of economy and environment. The power elite are not
only able to control public discourse over contentious debates, but they also are key players in deciding how regulations are enacted at a very localized level through the use of audit culture.

Furthermore, these findings demonstrate the pivotal role of government agencies in practicing environmental management that benefits corporate polluters. In particular, government agencies are in a precarious position because they do not have the financial resources to monitor natural resource extraction practices. Thus, government agencies must comply with a regulatory regime that allows for self-regulation by corporations. This self-regulation in turn allows for illegal actions that can be easily covered up by corporations while they simultaneously promote an image of compliance. Self-regulation by corporations further places a burden upon citizens who must monitor the reporting by corporations to ensure that they are complying with the law. Government agencies also allow legal exemptions within regulatory practices that permit corporations to pollute more, going against the spirit of existing laws that are in place to protect the environment. Government agencies find themselves in a difficult position, as their own jobs and finances require the continuation resource extraction, but they are also tasked with protecting the environment. It is further in the best interest for government agencies and corporations to maintain a good working relationship, but sometimes this collaboration serves to further sanitize the unjust use of variances or loopholes to allow more pollution.

Additionally, this work adds to conversations about how different material experiences and visions of environment influence how people in contested places of resource extraction think about their lives. Material realities of pollution are often juxtaposed to public discourse that influences how people think about the appropriate use
of natural resources. This work shows how the intersection of public discourse, regulatory processes, and lived material realities create complicated narratives and ideas about natural resource extraction and pollution. Despite the messiness of life in the coalfields, residents were clear in their desire to create a better future for generations to come.

**Moving Forward**

I guess our last word is stories are important. It’s important who names people and places, who tells the story, who constructs the history, who uses it and why, and how important it is that we keep revising, inventing, constructing and deconstructing our history for our own survival (H. Lewis 2012: 186).

While residents’ reactions to the issues of coal mining remained complicated by many factors—political pushes and pulls, everyday economic and environmental experiences, and complex cultural and historical ties to an extractive industry—Wise Countians agreed that they wanted to find a way to sustain the communities they lived in and loved. This dissertation provides some insights into the ways that residents of a coalfield community talked about the past, present, and future of coal mining, as well as the ways that they struggled against the unjust practices of an environmentally polluting industry. In assessing the current situation and the possibilities for the future in the coalfields, in the final section I have considered how activists felt about the conditions of organizing in the coalfields; the ways that place-based organizing for environmental justice can connect communities in meaningful and empowering ways; and how the continued fight against mining pollution can lead to broader changes that challenge power structures.

**Organizing in the Coalfields**
In addition to the difficulty in getting issues in the coalfields addressed by high level politicians, even the young, radical energy that drove the anti-mountaintop removal movement for many years seemed to be dying down. This was evidenced by smaller numbers of college students and others coming to the region to join the movement, as well as strategic funding cuts (from various foundations and organizations) that limited the financial support available to contribute to anti-MTR activities. In one particularly serious budget cut, members of SAMS had a meeting with the Wise Energy for Virginia Coalition. The Wise Energy for Virginia Coalition (Wise Energy) was originally founded in 2007 to help support and bring together organizations that were working to stop the Dominion Virginia City Hybrid Power Plant from being built in Wise County. With a larger reach than SAMS, Wise Energy was able to garner state-wide support for their campaigns, as well as secure funding to help in the fight against the power plant. Part of this funding was used to finance a part-time staff position for SAMS. But in 2012, Wise Energy decided to change courses to focus on renewable energy sources for the future of the state, rather than fighting existing or proposed power plants. With this change in course, Wise Energy decided to defund the staff position for SAMS. According to SAMS members who attended the meeting, the representative from Wise Energy, who many SAMS members had worked with on environmental campaigns in the past, was very tearful in delivering and discussing this decision made by Wise Energy. Furthermore, many SAMS members expressed feelings of abandonment by this move—while the consequences of current mountaintop removal coal mine sites remained a serious problem for communities, the fact that financial support from a statewide coalition was being taken away was a double blow. It was not as if surface coal mining was outlawed
and organizations decided to move on to other issues; rather, it seemed that many organizations and activists outside the region assumed that with the new EPA regulations for coal-fired power plants and the market for coal declining, it would only be a matter of time before the mining stopped. The threat of surface mining was perceived as less of a threat than other issues, and thus many local activists felt abandoned by former allies.

At least two SAMS members linked the shift away from organizing against surface mining to the newer and more appealing anti-fracking and anti-Keystone pipeline sites of protest and action that were taking off. Chris Bates, a Sierra Club organizer and SAMS member, discussed the kind of tension that was caused by young energy (college-aged activists and those in their 20s) leaving the anti-MTR movement for other newer movements:

> And then there’s the kind of anti-fracking movements and anti-tar sands movements and anti-pipeline movements…where the young radical Earth First! energy is going that was coming to fight mountaintop removal in 2009 or 2008. So watching those movements really grow and become bigger on the national stage [is hard because we] know our funding is being cut and the future is somewhat in doubt as to how we are going to continue to be as effective as we are, and how we are going to turn it around. (Interview Transcript, Chris Bates, August 2013).

For Chris, and others, although they strongly supported anti-fracking and other similar movements that they viewed as being a part of the same struggle against neoliberal capitalist economic policies that allowed for environmentally destructive resource extraction, they also felt conflicted, as more resources for another movement meant, unfortunately, less for the anti-MTR movement.

The constant struggle for grants and funding just to keep the lights on in the SAMS office was an almost daily reality. Small donations from members locally and nationally would filter in, as well as occasional small grants from places like ACORN.
But the amount of funds received never matched the work to be done. As SAMS members were acutely aware, even with the downturn in mining, the work was not done. Mining continues, albeit at a smaller scale, and the amount of reclamation work needed on abandoned mine sites is vast. But as anti-MTR activists have found, college students are flocking to other places that have more pressing and timely fights at hand. What was once a popular place for well-meaning youth to spend spring break is no more, and movement organizations in the coalfields are strapped for volunteers. Place-based movements such as the anti-MTR movement beg the question, how can these localized movements reach across scales to work together with other communities facing similar challenges, challenges that are often part of the same uneven global economic processes?

**Scaling Up and Scaling Across**

As the scholarly literature shows, place is an important rallying point for people to gather together to challenge existing inequalities and create new futures. Indeed members of SAMS, as well as other residents in Wise County more generally, felt a common bond in their love of community. This love was translated not only into the ways that residents talked nostalgically about the past, but also in the ways that they actively approached the future, working to create new economic possibilities for a county in peril. As documented in Chapter 6, residents had a myriad of ideas for creating a vibrant future for themselves and generations into the future. Sometimes ideas came in the form of the old traditional forms of economic development, while others imagined green energy based worker cooperatives or sustainable agriculture. While most of these ideas remained place-bound, these movements had the potential for reaching both across scales (to other communities in the region, the U.S., and the globe), as well as scaling up to challenge larger power
structures. A few examples of how this is happening in the region provide insight into the ways that place-based movements have the potential for broader implications.

In 2009 I had the opportunity to attend a presentation by Colombian coal miners at the University of Kentucky. These miners had come to the U.S. as part of a collaboration with Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC), a state organization dedicated to social, economic, and environmental justice, and Witness for Peace, a national organization committed to non-violence. The program sought to create a cross-cultural exchange between the unionized coal miners in Colombia and residents from the coalfields of Eastern Kentucky, who had both shared and conflicting histories of unionization, social justice, and environmental organizing (Chomsky and Montrie 2012). This exchange sought to highlight both the similarities and differences between two different groups who faced problems created by the same global economic processes. While unions remained strong in Colombia, the coalfields had seen their unions deteriorate with the loss of underground coal mining jobs in the 1980s and 90s. The exchange was powerful for participants, as it made many participants acutely aware of the ways that their struggles were connected to the profit making of multinational corporations. In this way, the groups had much to share with each other as they both fought against unjust processes that created poverty and environmental degradation.

Tom Hansell’s (2015) documentary film *After Coal: Appalachian and Welsh Mining Communities* provides another example of both the scaling across and scaling up of place-based movements in Appalachia and in Wales. Based on a collaboration between mining communities that was started by Helen Lewis and John Gaventa in the 1970s, the film explores the ways that former Welsh mining communities created new economic
alternatives post-coal, while still honoring and maintaining the coal mining heritage of their communities through music, language, and folk art. The film documents the ways that the Welsh communities relied on their past to create their future, something that Appalachian communities have begun to consider as economic transition becomes more and more of a priority in places where mining has all but stopped. Both Wales and Appalachia faced a major downturn in a coal-based economy, and while Wales’ was forced to transition to a post-coal economy years before Appalachia, the exchange provides some important insights for U.S. coalfield residents who are considering new ways, such as the use of art and music, to move their communities into an economically sustainable future.

Both of these collaborations provide some considerations for the ways that place-based movements, including that of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards, can potentially scale across and scale up to support other communities and challenge broader processes of political, economic, and environmental injustice. While SAMS members and other residents were already acutely aware of these connections to other mining communities or the multinational mining corporations who influenced their lives, finding ways to create larger movements was a bigger challenge. The exchanges between east Kentuckians and Colombian miners, as well as the between Welsh and Appalachian community members, provide an interesting example of the possibilities for coalfield communities as they consider their futures, both locally, but also as citizens of an increasingly globalized world.

Challenging the Power Elite
The description in Chapter 5 of the lawsuit brought forth by the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards against A&G coal company for pollution violations of a local stream (Kelly’s Branch) provides awareness of the ways that local citizens were able to challenge audit culture and regulatory processes through the use of a lawsuit. For SAMS members, winning the lawsuit meant not only that A&G had to clean up the selenium pollution in Kelley’s Branch, but it further signified an important change in the “permit shield” defense that companies often used to avoid legal action requiring that they clean up their pollution. This “permit shield” allowed companies to claim that because they did not disclose the emission of selenium (or another chemical) during the permitting process, they were not responsible for testing or cleaning it up. However, in this particular case the “permit shield” defense failed. Setting precedence, this case demonstrated the ways that citizen monitoring could change the regulatory process to the benefit of the environment and local communities. While still required to use scientific and technocratic language and processes to challenge polluters, SAMS was able to secure cleanup of the waterway and further changed the ways that coal companies were allowed to use the “permit shield” defense in legal proceedings. Additionally, A&G was fined over $300,000, much of which was required to go to other environmental cleanup projects all over the county. While SAMS and other environmental justice organizations may still be required to play by the rules created by coal corporations, governments, and regulators themselves, they are also able to use these rules—scientific proof of water pollution, for example—to challenge the environmentally destructive practices of corporations and create lasting changes to laws or regulations.

**A Final Glimmer of Hope**
A Trump presidency certainly creates a bleak outlook for the future of the coalfields without the real possibility of returning coal-mining employment to past levels and with the potential for social security nets to disappear. However, despite the vulnerability that may lie ahead for low-income people, residents in Wise County and elsewhere in the coalfields continue to seek out new ways to create a viable place to live. What remains to be seen is how residents, all of whom care about their communities, can find common ground in deciding how to care for their communities -- in the material realities of making a living, as well as in sustaining a safe and healthy natural environment. It is not just the external structural and ideological forces that dictate life in the coalfields, rather local residents have their own agency in visioning their pasts, presents, and futures.

Two years after I exited the field, I read a post on social media from one of my friends, a longtime anti-MTR organizer and member of SAMS. He explained that he had attended a public forum about “Southwest Virginia’s New Economy” on a weeknight in Wise County. As one of the few non-local members of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards, his place in the community was not always welcomed—especially when he spoke out (as he often did) against coal companies at hearings about string mine permits or the proposed Coalfield Expressway. But in his post, he explained that his favorite part of the forum was sitting down with people from the coal industry (whom he recognized from speaking --albeit on opposing sides-- at numerous public hearings). After acknowledging their disagreements, this working group was able to reach consensus on what Wise County needed for the future. They came up with the following list: reclaimed strip mines that encourage economic development; agricultural resources;
and training for high school and college students to prepare them for local jobs. While certainly the residents that I talked to and spent time with over the 18 months of my research would have more to add to this list, the fact that a consensus was reached among a group that included a “radical” anti-MTR activist and coal industry representatives provides so much hope for the future. My friend’s post was a sign for me that my suspicions were true—the people of Wise County, and of the coalfield region more generally, can find ways to bridge the coal divide to work together to create an economically and environmentally sustainable future worth sharing.
### Appendix A: List of Informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>SAMS Member?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pam Miller</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
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<td>John Stallard</td>
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<td>Miner/Local Politician</td>
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<td>Ruby Wells</td>
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<td>Bob Dunlap</td>
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<td>50-59</td>
<td>Employee at regulatory agency</td>
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<td>Meryll Stidham</td>
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<td>Retired Nurse</td>
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<td>Social Worker</td>
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<td>Retired Hospital Worker</td>
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<td>Gary Smith</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>Dominion Resources Representative</td>
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<td>Chris Bates</td>
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<td>Sierra Club Organizer</td>
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<td>John Brooks</td>
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<td>Joe Mason</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>Coal Company Spokesperson</td>
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<td>Dwight Sanders</td>
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<td>Jeff Martin</td>
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<td>Anna Maedor</td>
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<td>Freelance organizer</td>
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Note: All interviewees were white.
Appendix B: List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACES: Appalachian Community Economic Series
AML: Abandoned Mine Lands
ARC: Appalachian Regional Commission
CFX: Coalfields Expressway
CRVI: Clinch River Valley Initiative
DMME: Department of Mines, Minerals, and Energy
EPA: Environmental Protection Agency
MSHA: Mine Safety and Health Administration
MTR: mountaintop removal
NPDES: National Pollution Discharge and Elimination System
NRELS: Natural Resources and Energy Law Symposium
OSMRE: Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement
RReNEW: Remembering and Re-Energizing Neighborhoods, Economies, and Watersheds
SAMS: Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards
SMCRA: Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977
TMDL: Total Maximum Daily Load
VDOT: Virginia Department of Transportation
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