

**“THERE IS WEALTH IN THE STRUGGLE”:
UNEARTHING AND EMBRACING COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGES
THROUGH ORGANIZING WORK IN APPALACHIA**

by

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*For my grandparents
Austin, Doris, Earl, and Mabel*

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ABSTRACT

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Title: "There is Wealth in the Struggle": Unearthing and Embracing Community Knowledges through Organizing Work in Appalachia

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In the midst of a period of economic transition, community organizers across Appalachia are working towards a just future that privileges community growth over corporate gain. A recent turn towards social justice concerns in Professional and Technical Communication suggests that efforts of community organizers might be of interest to scholars focused on addressing wicked problems in disenfranchised communities. This dissertation draws from results of a participatory photovoice study in which 11 community organizers took photos, wrote narratives, and responded in focus groups, and site visits to several communities. These methods call for deep engagement with community knowledges, producing rich visual and textual portraits of life in Appalachia that challenge stereotypical renderings of the region and its residents. After providing a heuristic for uncovering and re-valuing community knowledges, this dissertation looks at how place, technology, and community factor into the experiences of community organizers. Results from gathered qualitative data suggest that community members are experts on their own experiences, as participants revealed understandings of complex problems that call into question standard development practices lauded by technical experts. Second, participants demonstrated a capacity for embracing the very elements of their communities that had been used to marginalize them, pointing to the power of unexpected and creative tactics. Lastly, their reflections revealed the need for more attention to be placed upon community organizing in rural contexts and what kinds of community knowledges exist beyond expected parameters. By documenting their experiences organizing around public problems, participants confronted monolithic representations of their region, articulated their own nuanced accounts of life in rural areas, and crafted strategies for community-focused development that privileges people. Ultimately this project argues that by inviting community knowledges into the academic sphere, we might craft more effective coalitions to tackle complex public problems.

1. UNEARTHING APPALACHIA BY MAKING VISIBLE NARRATIVES THAT CONSTRUCT THE REGION

This project is dedicated to making community knowledges visible. More specifically, it is dedicated to highlighting the knowledge of people who often go unseen in a region of the United States that we often fail to see clearly because of pervasive cultural stereotypes. An utterance of “Appalachia” conjures a multitude of images, including mountainous back roads, miners with coal smudged across their faces, and barefoot children standing in front of trailer homes. These images come together to form a particular narrative about the region that casts its people as simple, backwards, and ignorant. And this narrative is so ingrained in our collective cultural psyche that it has largely silenced the efforts of those who wish to present more nuanced portraits that present Appalachians as inventive, resourceful, and resilient.

Despite this narrative’s pervasive nature, Appalachia has recently received media attention for innovation rather than stagnation. The region is currently in a state of economic transition, as coal—its most visible industry—is in decline. Communities are looking to other industries to bolster economic opportunities, including manufacturing, tourism, and technology. Local, statewide, and regional coalitions like Kentucky’s Shaping Our Appalachian Region and TechConnect West Virginia seem to be especially invested in high-tech ventures, lobbying for tax initiatives to lure tech firms to the region. These efforts have led to a new moniker for areas that seek to become hubs of technological innovation: “Silicon Hollers.” While programs that teach laid-off coal miners how to code and projects that convert abandoned strip mines into high-tech greenhouses beckon towards a so-called Appalachian Renaissance, many see an influx of venture capitalists as history repeating itself: in the mid-1800s, coal and natural gas companies arrived and have since dominated many aspects of life in the region. It seems that one central industry stands to be replaced by another, leading communities in Appalachia to question whether their futures will be so different from their pasts.

Facing this vast economic transition, community organizers across Appalachia are working towards a just future that privileges community growth over corporate gain. By embracing knowledges, people, and resources embedded in their communities, organizers might harness community knowledges to address the needs of people overlooked by typical approaches

to economic development. Through a participatory study with 11 community organizers working on development projects across the region, this project investigates the following questions:

- *What narratives and knowledges emerge from community organizers working to address issues that arise during a time of economic transition?*
- *Which elements (and relationships between elements like place, technology, and community) of community organizing do organizers identify as integral to their work?*
- *How might this new or increased visibility empower stakeholders in rural regions as they navigate an increasingly interconnected world?*

Drawing on experiences that organizers shared with me, this project presents an assemblage of narratives that present Appalachia through the eyes of Appalachians. Some of these support depictions of the region outsiders assume to be true, while others directly challenge them. But taken together, this collection of narratives subverts the dominance of popular representations and presents a more nuanced portrait of the region. Ultimately, this dissertation provides an antenarrative of Appalachian life. Building on Boje (2001, 2008), Jones, Moore, and Walton (2016) describe antenarratives as “poly-vocal, dynamic, and fragmented—yet highly interconnected. They link the static dominant narrative of the past with the dynamic ‘lived story’ of the present.” They, in short, “can enable change” (p. 212). By documenting their experiences organizing around issues like access to clean water and unjust land ownership patterns, participants confronted monolithic representations of their region, articulated their own nuanced accounts of life in the region, and crafted strategies for community-focused development that privileges people—especially people marginalized by institutional powers.

In Chapter One, I first provide some background on how this project emerged. I then position organizing work at the center of this study within two histories: that of the Appalachian region as a whole, and that of the Highlander Center for Research and Education, which oversaw the organizers I partnered with in my research. This chapter illuminates several overarching narratives about Appalachia that later chapters will respond to through investigations of the roles that place, technology, and community played in participants’ community development projects.

1.1 Project origins

This project began far before I had a theory to contextualize it, or even an idea of how to pursue it. During my first year of doctoral work, I traveled to southeastern Kentucky for my great uncle's funeral. Standing in the funeral home, surrounded by immediate family, gaggles of cousins-once-and-twice-removed, and friendly faces from summers of my childhood, I realized that *this* is what I cared about, *these* are the people that I wanted my work to speak to. This was home.

I returned to West Lafayette, energized, and wrote a seminar paper about Appalachian women entrepreneurs; however, throughout the next several years, my motivations faded and doubt crept into my mind about my connections to such work. So what if both sides of my family were from small towns in southeastern Kentucky, where my ancestors were railroad workers, farmers, teachers, and—yes—coal miners? I was living in the Midwest, as I had for most of my life. My mom longed to return to Kentucky but had settled into life in suburban Cincinnati after her Mamaw's farmhouse (which she hoped to buy and move into) had burned down. My dad had lost his accent, formed by growing up in small towns across Kentucky and Tennessee, save for one word: "July," pronounced, of course, "Jew-llllllllie." When I went to college in Kentucky, my friends from around the state called me a "Yankee," because I was from north of the Ohio River.

Reflecting on these truths, I concluded that I wasn't really "Appalachian," anyway, a sentiment that grew stronger each time I told someone about my hopes to work on a dissertation project related to Appalachia. "But you're from Cincinnati, aren't you?"¹ So, I picked up other threads of inquiry, continuing my work on social change, digital spaces, and community engagement. But when I pitched ideas for a different dissertation project to my chair, her question of, "What about your hillbilly stuff?" dramatically shifted this project's trajectory, and perhaps, more importantly, how I would come to see my own identity.

¹ At the time, I didn't know that my family's migration to industrial centers of the Midwest mirrored the histories of many others, as families moved out of coal country for other economic opportunities. I also didn't know that Cincinnati was a hub for Urban Appalachians; I just knew that I had friends who happened to have similar backgrounds. I certainly didn't know about the debate within Appalachian Studies about insider/outsider identity (Arnow, 1988; Brislin, 2017), which quickly becomes complicated in a place-based culture where people come and go. (Who is truly an insider, and who is truly an outsider?) I point these things out because they point to the cognitive dissonance I think I will always carry about my Appalachian roots.

It has not been easy. Throughout this process, I have struggled with my positionality to this work. I am one generation removed from my Appalachian roots: not a complete outsider, but also not embedded in the region. I understand both the affordances and constraints of my position. I bring this up because I want to state that I am cognizant of the problems of speaking for others (Alcoff, 1991). As a result, I engage a participatory methodology that positions participants at the core of this project, seeks to respect complexities buffeted by uneven power relations, and acknowledges my own relationships to people, places, and knowledges made visible through this work.

1.2 The Appalachian region

Appalachia holds a fraught position in our cultural psyche, as “both the essence of America and a place apart” (Williams, 2002, p. 8). This duality positions the region simultaneously as an exemplar of traditional American values *and* ignorant redneck sensibilities. Appalachia has long held the attention of those living outside of its borders, as media accounts have built archetypes of mountain life that figuratively and literally separate Appalachians from the rest of the country. But D. Powell (2007) argues that despite the capacity for regional definitions “to isolate, to idolize, or to stigmatize a network of places,” the very idea of a region suggests “an isolated part and a larger whole” (p. 14). Regions signify relationships. Powell continues that when we discuss a region, we are not invoking “a stable, bound-ariied, autonomous place, but a cultural history, the cumulative, generative effect of the interplay among the various, competing definitions of that region” (p. 15). And there is perhaps no other region of the United States that feels material effects from competing definitions as deeply as Appalachia.

1.2.1 Appalachia as a geographic area

Stretching over 700,000 square miles and 13 states, Appalachia is most simply seen as a geographic region in the United States, associated with mountains, hollows (or hollers), and forests. Appalachia’s official borders, however, result from the work of the Appalachia Regional Commission (ARC). The United States Congress created the ARC, an economic development agency, in 1965. Originating from a desire to bring some of the poorest states into the mainstream American economy, the Commission classified Appalachia as all of West Virginia

as well as counties in 13 other states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. After its creation, the ARC assessed each county in the projected region using a scale of economic distress, and ultimately included 420 counties in its official borders (Figure 1). Geographic and economic definitions of Appalachia have fed into widespread cultural understandings of the region and its people: “as the region came to be defined by poverty, and subsequently poverty came to be defined by the region” (Catte, 2018, p. 11). Though Appalachia might initially be seen as a collection of counties, it is interpreted through other, more value-laden lenses.

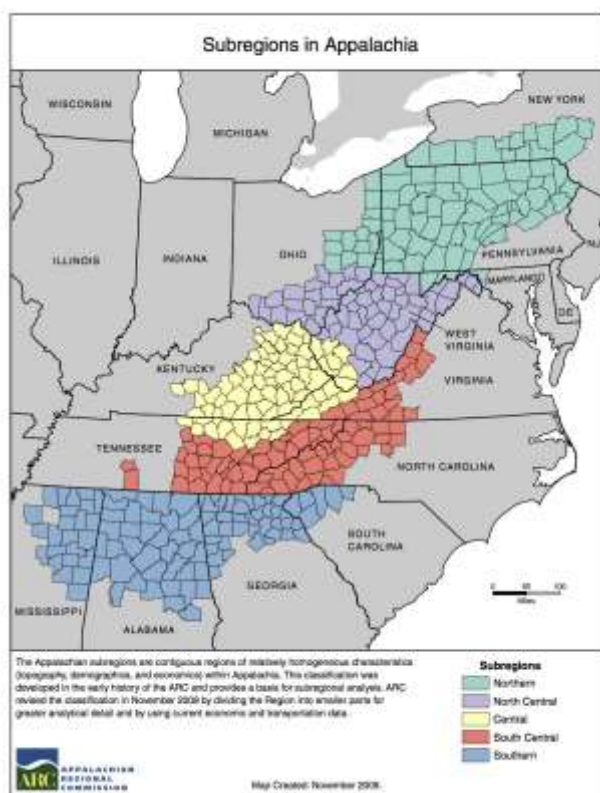


Figure 1: Map of Appalachian region

1.2.2 Appalachia as an economic force

Assumedly linked to its associations with poverty, Appalachia is often discussed in terms of its economic contributions. Extractive industries are the cornerstone of the region’s economy, and this reliance is not without its complexities—particularly when it comes to coal. While the industry has provided economic stability (and prosperity, in some cases) for many towns over the last century, coal company practices have hampered environmental, social, and cultural lives in

the region. Eller (2008) writes, “In Appalachia, economic growth [linked to extraction industries] produced material wealth for some...but it also fueled poverty and inequality within the region and between Appalachia and the rest of the nation” (p. 265). Schumann’s (2016) assessment is tougher on economic interests, especially coal: “Appalachia is by and large on the receiving end...of socio-environmental genocide” (p. 19). The region seems to have been placed in an impossible bind: as it produced coal to maintain economic security, it simultaneously placed its future in limbo as coal reserves dwindled, environmental hazards unfolded, and economic expansion into other arenas was delayed. Proponents of the coal industry attribute recent decreases² to government oversight, but even under the oversight of the 45th President (who promised the return of the coal industry), coal interests are not bouncing back. Regardless of cause, many feel that the dominance of coal in western markets is largely over (Gruenspecht, 2019).

Despite coal’s historical dominance, some stakeholders in the region have worked to diversify its economy over the last 50 years. Glenn wrote in 1970 that the 1960s held numerous “innovative experiments for social change and regional development” (p. 7). And while those changes might have been overshadowed by coal’s presence then, similar projects garner attention today. Fisher and Smith’s edited collection *Transforming Places: Lessons from Appalachia* (2012) describes a range of efforts undertaken by businesses, activist groups, and government agencies to bolster the region’s status. A series of special issues on economic development in *Journal of Appalachian Studies* features work on local food chains (Webb Farley & Blanchard Bush, 2016), sustainable development initiatives (Taylor, Hufford, & Bilbrey, 2016; York, 2016), economic integration through supply chain management (James & James, 2016), as well as interrogating as more complex relationships between poverty and uneven development (Greenberg, 2016).

Though these developments suggest a departure from coal, each is framed as a response to coal’s decline. Coal has defined Appalachia’s economy, and will continue to do so. As Bradshaw (2018) argues, “coal is a multigenerational experience, not just a job...it is both materially and rhetorically persistent: a condition not likely to change overnight” (p. 10). Coal frames understandings of the region’s economy, as well as its culture.

² In 2016 alone, Kentucky lost 24.2% of its coal jobs, resulting in the lowest number of coal miners in the state since 1898 (Estep, 2016).

1.2.3 Appalachia as a cultural identifier

Appalachian culture is subject to stereotyping. Batteau (1990) argues that this is primarily due to the tendency of economic and political elites to “invent” Appalachia in whatever ways suit them best. Among stereotypical depictions of people in the region, perhaps the most innocuous is that of a hardworking, but simple, person fiercely devoted to family. A number of cultural texts, including 1941’s *Sergeant York* starring Gary Cooper, Arnow’s 1954 novel *The Dollmaker*, and songs from Loretta Lynn (“Coal Miner’s Daughter”) and Dolly Parton (“My Tennessee Mountain Home” and “Appalachian Memories”), fit this image. These quaint representations, however, can easily venture into problematic territory. Unsettling scenes in *Deliverance*, the lore of the Hatfield-McCoy feud, “Appalachian Emergency Room” skits on mid-2000s *Saturday Night Live*, and countless other vignettes contribute to the belief that inhabitants of Appalachia are ignorant hillbillies or rednecks.³ Journalistic accounts have bolstered this interpretation since the late 19th century, when local color writers began to circulate stories about family feuds and moonshining in the backwoods. During the War on Poverty in the 1960s, photographers such as John Dominis spent time in the region, taking photos that depicted poor, rural communities in the mountains with few modern amenities, which shocked middle and upper class Americans. These pictures were then used as political propaganda to support social and economic policy reform, and their effects linger today. Hillbilly stereotypes, which Snyder (2014) argues have been “invented by outside oppressive forces and used to denote the status of the Appalachian people” (p. 22), still shape the lives of Appalachians.

J.D. Vance’s 2016 book *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Culture and Family in Crisis* is a particularly notable contribution to lore surrounding Appalachia. Vance casts Appalachia as a lost culture that has fallen victim to its inhabitants’ lack of ambition and love of welfare benefits. He explicitly states that Appalachian culture “increasingly encourages social decay instead of counteracting it” and harbors “too many young men immune to hard work” (p. 9). In order to break that cycle, he argues that young Appalachians need to put their heads down and overcome their circumstances through sheer will, blatantly disregarding structural issues that plague Appalachian communities. Vance’s bootstraps narrative complemented coverage of 2016’s

³ Though these terms have a pejorative connotation, there have been recent moves to reappropriate them, especially in light of the links between “redneck” and organized labor (some heartening, some disheartening). See Huber, 1995, 2006.

presidential election that portrayed the region as “Trump’s America.” Countless human-interest stories leading up to the election contained interviews with working class Appalachians, disenchanted with big government and ready to vote for someone who would supposedly “drain the swamp.” These stories, juxtaposed with equally plentiful accounts of the nationwide opioid epidemic’s effects on communities in areas of Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia, cast Appalachia as an impoverished region overrun by social and economic problems.

There are efforts, however, that challenge one-dimensional renderings of the region. Extensive work on Appalachian identity and literacy (Fedukovich, 2009; Shepley, 2009; Snyder 2007; Webb-Sunderhaus, 2016); rhetorical strategies (Bradshaw, 2019; K. Powell, 2007; Taylor, 2015; Vetter, 2018); communication patterns and practices in community contexts, documented in Webb-Sunderhaus’ and Donehower’s 2015 edited collection *Rereading Appalachia: Literacy, Place, and Cultural Resistance*, as well as *Reclaiming the Rural: Essays on Literacy, Rhetoric, and Pedagogy* (2012, eds. Donehower, Hogg, & Schell); and linguistics and dialect (as discussed in *Talking Appalachian: Voice, Identity, and Community*, eds. Clark & Hayward, 2013; Hazen, 2018) problematize overarching narratives of Appalachian life that infantilize the region’s inhabitants. This research is important, according to Hayes (2018), because a focus on Appalachian life “adds to our field of knowledge” and responds to an increased interest in “place-based dynamics” in studies of writing and communication (p. 6). In spite of the cultural baggage that an Appalachian identity can pack, such an identity is increasingly being seen as valuable both inside and outside of the academy.

1.2.4 Appalachian as a marker of race or ethnicity

Depictions of Appalachia are overwhelmingly white. Vance’s work focuses on this whiteness by writing extensively about his Scots-Irish ancestors. This signals that to be truly Appalachian is to be of pure Scots-Irish (read: white) descent. In the introduction to his book, he writes:

In our race-conscious society, our vocabulary often extends no further than the color of someone’s skin. Sometimes these broad categories are useful, but to understand my story, you have to delve into the details. I may be white, but I do not identify with the WASPs of the Northeast. Instead, I identify with the millions of working class white Americans

of Scots-Irish descent who have no college degree. To these folks, poverty is the family tradition. (p. 9)

In this single passage, Vance briefly gestures towards white privilege then quickly dismisses it, separating *poor* whiteness from *rich* whiteness. This is the same rhetorical move deployed via photos of poor rural whites during the War on Poverty, as well as writings by Caudill in that same time period with *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*. Vance, like others before him, re-directs contemporary conversations about race and inequality back to the suffering of poor white people.

In *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia*, written as a direct response to Vance, Catte writes the following about the passage above: “In his willingness to present white Appalachians as a distinct ethnic entity, Vance has placed himself in a disturbing lineage of intellectuals who relished what they presumed to be the malleable whiteness of Appalachia for its ability to either prove or disprove cultural beliefs about race” (2018, p. 66). According to Catte, this move discounts connections between racism and structural inequality, i.e. if poor white people exist, then clearly our systems are equal opportunity when it comes to poverty. Vance’s work glosses over issues of race, as well as gender, sexuality, access, and the complexities of class. He plays into simplistic stereotypes that have disadvantaged Appalachians for decades, even as he claims his intentions are to help people in the region. Widespread acceptance of this message (signified by Vance’s status as a media darling and his book’s presence on countless university summer reading lists) “is bad news for people of color as well as for poor whites because it is one more way in which affluent whites prevent cross-racial coalition building among the socioeconomically disadvantaged” (Pruitt, 2019, p. 127). Once again, dominant, simplistic narratives have material consequences for the most vulnerable members of communities.

1.2.5 Other Appalachias

While frames we use to understand Appalachia cast the region in different ways, they each flatten the region, strengthening one-dimensional representations of Appalachia and its people. Instead of seeing these frameworks as entries into lived experience that can serve as a basis for multiple Appalachias, the narrative of one monolithic Appalachia tends to dominate public discourse. This has contributed to not just the marginalization of the region’s inhabitants

as a whole, but especially of women (Latimer & Oberhauser, 2004; Massey, 2007; Sohn, 2006), people of color (Anglin, 2004; Thompson & Hacquard, 2009; White, 2019), queer communities (Detamore, 2010; Mann, 1999), indigenous peoples (Stoll, 2017), and migrant workers (Turner, Molenda, & Westendorff, 1996). While stories from communities in Appalachia often go unheard, accounts from these groups are particularly susceptible to silencing.

Despite an overwhelming past and present focus on the romanticized coal miner, “the real forgotten working-class citizens of Appalachia, much like the rest of the nation, are home health workers and Dollar General employees” (Catte, p. 12). Appalachia holds more diversity than stereotypes imply. Black coalminers, Affrilachians (a term coined by Frank X. Walker), descendants of Hungarian and Italian coal miners, and Latino families who have lived there for decades are all important residents of the region whose histories and stories are overlooked. Further, regional demographics are changing. 42% of people who moved into the region from 1980 to the late 2000s belong to racial and ethnic minority groups. As of 2016, 18.2% of the region’s population classified themselves as minorities—up from 16.4% in 2010 (Pollard, 2004; Pollard & Jacobsen, 2018). This project seeks to unearth knowledges embedded in communities, including those that have been overlooked, in order to better understand the problems that everyday people face—problems that have not been solved by elites and experts. Community organizations, including the Highlander Center, have been doing this work for decades, and offer a participatory, activist model for engaging with disenfranchised communities.

1.3 The Highlander Center for Education and Research

Currently located in New Market, Tennessee, the Highlander Center for Education and Research (referred to after this as “Highlander”) has been a steadfast force for social change in the Southern and Appalachian regions of the United States since the 1930s. Highlander has been associated with a variety of figures, and has faded and re-emerged into popular consciousness over the duration of its existence. Currently, Highlander is dedicated to grassroots organizing and advocacy for justice, equality, and sustainability. They manage a range of programs, including the Appalachian Development Project,⁴ which I partnered with in my research.

⁴ The name of this program, participants, and their community organizations have been changed to protect participants’ identities and their work.

1.3.1 A brief history of Highlander⁵

In 1932, Myles Horton and Don West founded Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, to serve as a hub for labor organizing and community action. Given the monopoly that extractive industries held over the region, Horton felt that a folk school dedicated to self-guided study, inquiry through social movement and historical lenses, and development of community values “would better serve the Appalachian community than traditional folk schools because many rural areas were experiencing downfall and poverty after labor companies took advantage of them” (Masters, 2017). As they helped to develop a progressive labor presence, Highlander also became associated with the civil rights movement, holding its first integrated workshop in 1944. This work continued over the next several decades, as Highlander hosted meetings and workshops to educate anti-segregation activists. In fact, Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. attended workshops at Highlander in the 1950s, and a photo of Parks and King at Highlander was used on billboards proclaiming Highlander to be a “Communist Training School” (Figure 2). This image would become famous in the history of the civil rights movement, linking civil rights with Highlander ideals (Bechtel & Coughlin, 1992).

As Highlander’s influence increased, so did its enemies. In 1961, Tennessee state officials seized the land and buildings and revoked its charter. Highlander staff quickly took out a new charter as the Highlander Center for Education and Research and moved to Knoxville. In their new location, Highlander continued to work for the civil rights movement, supporting the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Mississippi Freedom Summer, and the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign. They would be forced to move once again, as urban renewal and continued harassment drove them to their current location in New Market, Tennessee, about half an hour outside of Knoxville. During this period, they also began to craft programming around environmental and economic justice in Appalachia.

⁵ For more extensive histories on Highlander, see Branch & Scahatello-Sawyer, 2013; Glen, 1996; Horton, 1989; and Schneider, 2014.



Figure 2: Billboard of Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks at Highlander

Currently, Highlander’s work addresses a wide range of social justice concerns, including “supporting efforts to build bridges across differences of race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, and geography” (Education Team). They are a steadfast presence in the region, committed to bolstering social justice work in Appalachia and the South. As history shows, all do not welcome their efforts. In April 2019, even as I was working on this dissertation, the main office on Highlander’s grounds burned down. While nobody was hurt, irreplaceable archival material was ruined. Even more troubling was the discovery of a white power symbol spray-painted on the pavement outside of the destroyed building. Though investigators still have not determined a cause for the fire, it seems very likely that Highlander was once again targeted by hate.

Committed to their mission, in spite of these obstacles, Highlander embraces six main methodologies for change: popular education, language justice, cultural organizing, intergenerational organizing, legacy and place, and participatory action research that “recognizes information as POWER and puts that power in the hands of people seeking to overcome problems in their daily lives” (Education Team, *emphasis original*). Embracing these six central principles, Highlander’s programs foster connections between a variety of people them to reach a

more egalitarian future for Appalachia—a region that has long been shaped by power imbalances.

1.3.2 Appalachian Development Project

Highlander sponsors a number of initiatives, including the Appalachian Development Project (ADP), which is managed by the Education Team. This yearlong fellowship began in 2014 as a response to the economic transition unfolding in the region as industries related to coal and labor-intensive manufacturing declined. The program seeks to increase stakeholder capacity for addressing systemic problems in the region, while developing a just economy that privileges the long-term wellbeing of its people (“Preparing the next generation”). Fellows are placed in host communities across the region, where they work on community development and organizing projects for a year. Host communities are typically made up of multiple organizations from different sectors. For example, a nonprofit might partner with a municipal government, or an educational institution might partner with a community action group. The focus is on building coalitions between different groups so that projects might continue after the fellowship ends.

The program’s stated goals are:

1. To increase the capacity of leaders, organizations, and communities to advance a just economic transition;
2. To strengthen the skills and leadership of a cohort of emerging leaders in the region, and
3. To engage individuals and institutions across the region in stronger partnerships and collaborative networks (ADP Evaluation, 2017).

These goals mesh with Highlander’s core values, encouraging fellows to build intergenerational coalitions geared towards positive social change. Central to the program is the Appalachian economic transition framework, established in 2012 (Figure 3). This framework was designed to guide development work across the region, asking stakeholders to collaborate across sectors in order to increase opportunities for businesses and industries born directly out of Appalachian communities, instead of relying on external corporate interests. ADP’s participants took up this framework in their projects as they worked to foster a “thriving and sustainable economy generating multiple forms of wealth.”

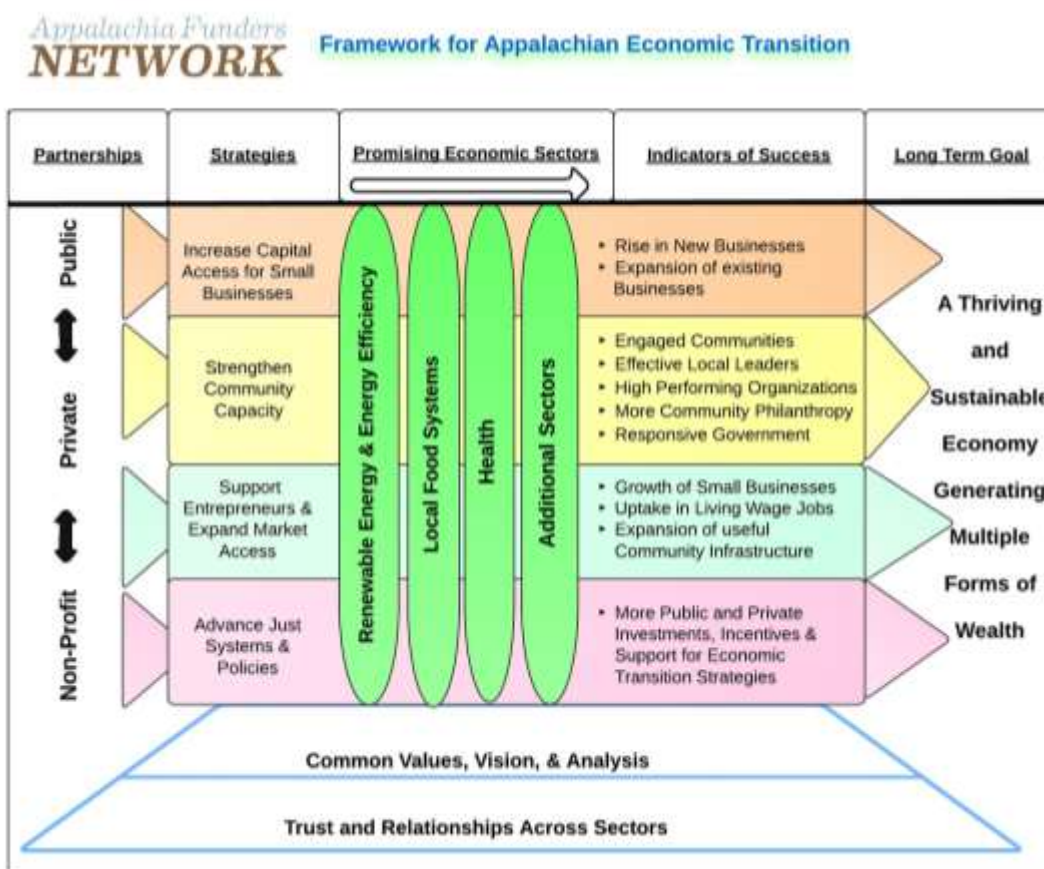


Figure 3: Appalachian economic transition framework

1.3.3 2018-2019 cohort

The 2018-2019 cohort began with 12 community organizers placed in communities across Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia. This cohort's commitment ran from June 2018-June 2019. As of May 2019, 11 fellows were still participating, marking the highest participation rate in the history of the program. Over the course of the fellowship, fellows engaged in their local communities, as well as regional gatherings hosted by Highlander and professionalization opportunities designed by the Education Team. The cohort I worked with was the most diverse in the history of the program, including women of color, queer-identifying folks, people from poor and working class backgrounds, and first-generation college graduates.

The placements of the 11 fellows still enrolled in the program were:

- Ira worked with a community action group and a legal nonprofit to address an ongoing water crisis (KY)
- Jackson developed a network of communities focused on economic development in a sub region (KY)
- Mychele ran a community action group focused on creative placemaking (KY)
- Sammi focused on youth organizing and engagement around civic spaces like community gardens and town squares (NC)
- Ellie worked on several digital justice projects focused on increasing internet access in remote areas (TN)
- Rosie's project centered on land ownership, asset mapping, and land use (TN)
- Leigh originally worked with an ecotourism group, but later was reassigned to a different alliance that organized around environmental and political issues (VA)
- Violet partnered with a university and a local food bank to bolster environmental and entrepreneurial initiatives in the area (VA)
- Phoebe worked with a racial justice nonprofit dedicated to youth and intergenerational organizing (WV)
- Carrie's placement was dedicated to family-based activism and art addressing the opioid crisis (WV)
- Baxter was placed with a group building on a land study began in the 1980s (WV)

While some fellows had similar interests and worked on projects that ran parallel to one another, their experiences were very different. They were a dynamic group of community organizers who directly engaged difficult problems and worked tirelessly as they drew upon resources in their communities to challenge systems of oppression. Their ingenuity and resilience shone through as they drew on knowledges from their own experiences, and those that members of their communities shared with them. Though community knowledges surfaced in often-unexpected ways, organizers used them to guide their efforts so that their work would resonate with communities.

This chapter provided important context surrounding the Appalachian region and organizing work supported by Highlander. It also outlined dominant narratives that stories shared throughout this dissertation will subvert. In Chapter Two, I assert that honoring community

knowledges is an integral part of socially just practices in professional and technical communication, and provide a preliminary framework meant to help identify and understand community knowledges. Chapter Three lays out the participatory methodology and study design for this project, providing background on how participants used photographs and narratives to capture their work. The subsequent chapters present findings that engage community knowledges and challenge one-dimensional narratives about Appalachia, unpacked through the isolation of timespots (King, 2011). Chapter Four focuses on place as a hub for community knowledges, and details efforts of participants to enhance their places, rather than return them to a previous time or completely replace them (as typical development strategies often do). Chapter Five articulates the relationship between organizing and technology, offering up tactics that participants engaged through everyday technologies as they challenged overarching narratives about Silicon Hollers. In Chapter Six, I present reflections on the role of community in organizing work, focusing especially on the complications that institutions—including nonprofit organizations—create for community action. I conclude this project with a brief postscript that speculates on future work. By inviting community knowledges into the academic sphere and using our academic privilege to amplify these knowledges, we might craft more effective coalitions to tackle complex public problems.

2. EMBRACING COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGES AND NARRATIVES AS SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK

Chapter One described narratives that construct Appalachia in the public imagination. Their dominance has led to the absence of more nuanced accounts based on lived experience, and subsequently, a scarcity of knowledge about Appalachian life articulated by Appalachian people. Though postmodern thought has de-stabilized simplistic notions of knowledge in the academy (Foucault, 1980; Lyotard, 1984), institutions still have a chokehold on which knowledges are seen as valid and useful, often leaving out insight from everyday people in favor of accounts from technical authorities.

Community knowledges, however, *are* valuable, especially at times when gaps between institutions and those they claim to serve appear especially wide. By embracing the knowledges⁶ of communities we work with, scholars in Professional and Technical Communication (PTC) might produce more nuanced and accurate representations of problems and cultivate solutions that serve communities instead of institutional interests. Though the context-driven nature of community knowledges has most likely contributed to their underrepresentation in academic spaces, I contend that their flexibility is perhaps their greatest affordance. This chapter calls for an embrace of knowledges and experiences voiced by Appalachian communities disenfranchised by political, economic, and social structures, locating such efforts squarely within technical communication's social justice turn. As PTC scholars and practitioners working to address social, political, and economic inequality, we should amplify community knowledges in ways that encourage community members to own, build upon, and utilize their knowledges.

Chapter Two draws out the major markers of community knowledges by juxtaposing those markers with "objective" notions of knowledge— notions that have controlled which knowledges are legitimized and which are not. After I situate this project in the terrain of PTC, I provide a mountain metaphor that speaks to the place-based nature of this project and makes visible the gap between technical expertise and community knowledge. I then provide a working definition of community knowledges by outlining four main markers of such knowledge, followed by a framework designed to help us address gaps between experts and communities.

⁶ Notice I use the term "embracing," not "using" or "utilizing." This work must be grounded in principles of reciprocity and accountability, so that disenfranchised communities are not being exploited for their intellectual resources.

Inspired by metis, or rhetorical cunning, this *metic framework for community knowledges* draws upon the collaborative and adaptive nature of metis to illuminate the very same qualities in community-based knowledge. Such an approach urges us to attend to: the contextual, shifting nature of knowledge; the power of unexpected actions; the importance of collaboration between rhetorical bodies; and the possibilities for disrupting entrenched power dynamics. Together, the mountain metaphor and metic framework offer an initial approach to re-valuing community knowledges by making them visible, so that we might more effectively and ethically address complex public problems alongside communities.

2.1 Embracing community knowledges via social justice work in PTC

Practices surrounding the development, sharing, and use of knowledge are a central concern of PTC (Rude, 2009). This concern is typically rooted in industry (Connors, 1982), and has resulted in rich accounts of how work gets done; studies by Odell & Goswami (1985), Suchman (1987), and others in the 1980s initiated interest in workplace writing. Recently, the field has further expanded its boundaries to investigate lived experiences beyond professional settings. This expansion is reflected in both a shift towards viewing user experiences within “ecosystems of activity, rather than simply considering single task scenarios” (Salvo & Potts, 2017, p. 7), as well as an increased interest in addressing the lived experiences of users that have previously gone unattended. Committed to examining and designing for under-represented users, PTC has undergone what some dub the social justice turn, in which scholars consider “how communication broadly defined can amplify the agency of oppressed people—those who are materially, socially, politically, and/or economically under-resourced” (Jones & Walton, 2018, p. 242). Listening to and honoring community knowledges that emerge directly from these groups is an important component of social justice work in PTC, as these knowledges are integral in designing solutions that meet the needs of under-represented populations.

While social justice work in PTC can manifest in many different ways, Jones, Moore, and Walton (2016) argue that inclusivity is a frame that undergirds social justice work—work that has long been part of the field. They identify several threads of inquiry, including: feminism, sexuality, and gender studies; user advocacy; community-based research; intercultural and international studies; disability studies; as well as race and ethnicity studies. By positioning these approaches as part of PTC’s history, Jones et al. re-frame the field’s past, present, and future, and

encourage researchers to actively embrace knowledge that emerges from people typically rendered invisible by institutional structures. Their call to action resonates with Haas and Eble's take on social justice approaches in PTC, which, in their words, "explicitly seek to redistribute and reassemble—or otherwise redress—power imbalances that systematically and systemically disenfranchise some stakeholders while privileging others" (2018, p. 4). Efforts such as these might begin by forming coalitions between researchers and marginalized populations in order to disrupt harmful power dynamics and to establish more just practices.

Pointing to the lived realities of under-represented communities and, more importantly, working alongside stakeholders in those communities so that they can share their insights on their terms, re-locates power in those communities. Such efforts are political, as power is often wielded over such groups by dominant political, social, and economic institutions (Foucault, 1972). By working with marginalized groups rendered so by their gender and sexuality (Cox, 2019; Edenfield & Holmes, 2019; Frost, 2016; Opel, 2014;); bodily identity (Walters, 2010; Wilson, 2000); socioeconomic status and age (Rose, 2016; Swacha, 2018); cultural and linguistic identities (Agboka, 2013, 2014; Del Hierro, 2018); risk of public health hazards (Bowdon, 2004; Ding, 2014; Scott, 2003); and race (Evia & Patriarca, 2012; Haas, 2012; Williams, 2006), PTC scholars should recognize knowledges that emerge from these communities.

Despite its value, community-based knowledge is often overlooked, especially in public arenas devoted to tackling technically complex issues. According to Simmons (2007), in her study of public participation in areas of risk, such issues "complicate the traditional notion of discourse because technical experts claim ownership of the technical issues and close off public debate even though these issues affect the public in very concrete ways" (p. 4). Even when technical experts⁷ have the best intentions—and they often do—their ownership of information and methods of communication alienate members of the public. When experts demonstrate their authority by sharing sophisticated data, or by controlling public meetings, community members have little space to assert *their* ownership over that issue. Knowledge from technical experts is seen as the ultimate authority even though community members possess insights derived from their everyday lives that are shaped by those problems. Community members are undoubtedly experts in their own right, but they are rarely awarded that authority.

⁷ I use "expertise" in this dissertation to describe knowledge held by technical authorities in industry, government, and academia; "expert" to describe those individuals that wield so-called expert knowledge.

Community knowledges, then, become even more important when facing wicked problems (Blythe, Grabill, & Riley, 2008; Gerding & Vealey, 2017; Wickman, 2014) because of those problems' deep roots and unclear solutions, as well as experts' failures to effectively address those problems with solutions based upon best practices. PTC scholars and practitioners who value "nonexpert ways of knowing and expression" (Simmons & Grabill, 2007) and consider how those ways factor into public processes might ethically and effectively disrupt negative power relationships between communities and institutions. Additionally, by explicitly privileging community knowledges and those who wield them, we might more effectively address wicked problems like gentrification, opioid addiction, and environmental devastation that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable members of communities. Thus, locating and amplifying community knowledges is an important component of social justice work in PTC.

2.2 Markers of community knowledges

Though community knowledges have historically been ignored or disregarded by institutional powers, recent research has begun to address the value of insight derived from lived experiences of marginalized and disenfranchised people. How might scholars in PTC continue this work and position community knowledges as integral in addressing fraught public problems? This section does not provide an explicit definition of community knowledges; such a definition might exclude important displays of community-based insight and defies the inherent flexibility of such knowledges. Instead, I move towards a working definition by identifying elements of community knowledges, which include:

- Emergence from lived experiences instead of studied phenomena;
- Being situated in specific places and moments rather than general scenarios;
- Understood through embodied understandings and narrative retellings, not raw data; and
- Built upon cumulative and collaborative work in lieu of individual efforts.

Because community knowledges are myriad in form and function, these markers are based upon community-based knowledge's divergence from traditional, institutional definitions of expertise. These markers also encapsulate many different types of evidence to accommodate the range of knowledges that might emerge from communities.

In addition to outlining these markers, this section explains the metaphor in Figure 4 that articulates current relationships between technical expertise, community knowledge, and visibility.

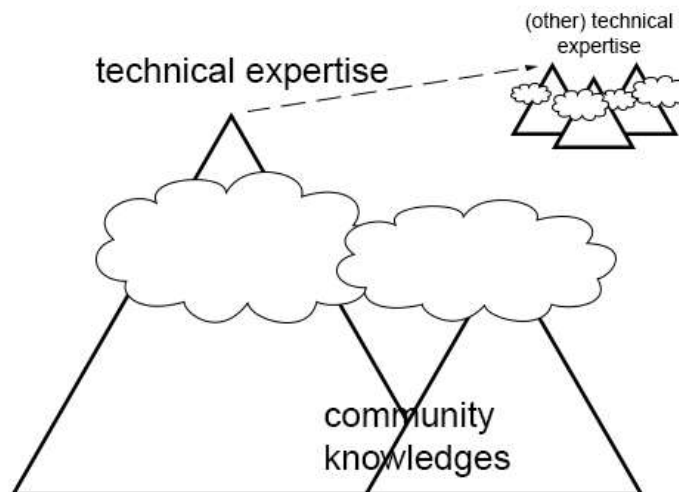


Figure 4: Visual depiction of gap between technical expertise and community knowledges

Given this project’s intimate relationship to Appalachia, a region largely associated with the mountain range of the same name, it seems fitting to use a mountain-based metaphor to unpack knowledge relationships made visible throughout this project. The summit (or highest peak) of the mountain represents the most widely accepted representation of knowledge, ratified by institutional power and streamlined through widespread adoption. When we stand at the top of a mountain and look out, we are primarily looking at the tops of other mountain ranges in the distance, which represent expert knowledges that emerged from *those* metaphorical mountains (which could be communities, or disciplines, or some other knowledge-producing entity). Expert knowledge seeks expert knowledge, locating our thoughts “in the clouds,” so to speak. As a result, we fail to notice the parts of the mountain below the clouds, but that is where embodied, raw, lived knowledges reside.

Though they might initially appear as lumps of rock, mountains are part of vibrant, living ecosystems. Movement created mountains—a truth demonstrated by the layers of earth beneath the mountain—and movement occurs on their surfaces. We initially focus on the summit, but the mountain is more than that: it is the rock at the base of the mountain; it is the soil that we stand on; it is the forests that grow on its sides; it is the minerals that industries extract from within; it

is the paths that humans and animals leave in their wake; and more. In order to more completely understand technical expertise located at the top of the mountain, and to find other ways of knowing, we must assemble a holistic account of the mountain. Inspired by recent work on ecologies and posthumanism (Haraway, 2016; Tsing, 2015), this metaphor was designed to argue that understanding the mountain requires that we must also venture away from the peaks and down into the valleys, in order to experience the multiple human and nonhuman elements that make up a mountain.

Of course, these elements layer and intersect in myriad ways, presenting multiple portraits of life that differ based on where and when those portraits are captured. To better understand these layers, I borrow from King (2011), who presents modern life as interconnected across sites, times, and cultures. She draws upon Latour's *parliaments of things* and Haraway's *naturecultures*, calling assemblages *pastpresents*, which "run together all in one word, in which pasts and presents very literally mutually construct each other" (p. 12). Future chapters focus on particular timespots, or moments where time and narrative collide, allowing us to unpack narratives about different aspects of Appalachia, including place, technology, and community. We can understand stories about a community facing difficult problems through acknowledging and unpacking the elements that make up those stories. Understanding a community's knowledges requires that we move away from simplistic representations of fact, and instead, delve into messy and complicated community lives in order to gather more nuanced accounts of problems and potential solutions. We can do this by climbing back down the mountain and experiencing it at various elevations.⁸

This mountain metaphor emerges directly from findings of one study in one region, and so reflects those particularities. Participants focused on life in the Appalachian region repeatedly gestured to the role that mountains play in representations of the region. The metaphor is, however, a basic heuristic that directs our attention to community knowledges' lack of visibility, and it might help us to think through similar dynamics in other scenarios. Most importantly, it demonstrates the tendency of academics and others with content expertise to look to other knowledge authorities, instead of looking to those who hold perhaps the most intimate

⁸ In light of this mountain metaphor, I would be remiss to fail to mention the possibility of digging into the mountain as a way to reach the base. Digging directly into the earth beneath the mountain would provide segmented layers of meaning, providing a more abstract and less embodied understanding.

understanding of an issue. Community knowledges are rich and diverse, capturing nuance that universalized renderings of the world simply cannot.

2.2.1 Community knowledges focus on lived experiences instead of studied phenomena

Positivist and post-positivist research paradigms have largely ruled the academy (Herndl & Nahrwold, 2003), resulting in an overwhelming focus on replicable experiments and data sets. These paradigms leave out orientations to knowledge rooted in lived realities. Feminist theorists have challenged dominant notions of objectivity (Haraway, 1984; Harding, 1986; Young, 2000) by emphasizing the role of positionality in knowledge construction and highlighting the value of lived experiences—especially those of marginalized people. Still, when trying to address complex public problems, we typically consult experts, but generally, “when we think of experts, we often do not think of vulnerable populations” (Rose, 2016, p. 442). As a result, many academic and industry professionals fail to engage the deep understandings that communities hold about their own lives. Community knowledges capture experiences that otherwise go unrecorded and provide “a more adequate, richer, better account of a world” (Haraway, 1990, p. 187). These accounts emerge from hills and valleys, providing a comprehensive view of the mountain not discernable by only looking at its highest peaks.

2.2.2 Community knowledges are situated in specific places and moments rather than general scenarios

Though we crave universal truths, contextual factors like place influence the formation of knowledges and how they are used. Recent work in PTC (Fagerjord, 2017; Moore, 2017; Ross, Oppegaard, & Willerton, 2019; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015) advocates for place-based methodologies that recognize how knowledges are emplaced in locations and cultures. Ingold (2011) argues that knowledge is experiential, locating it explicitly in place: “But for inhabitants, things do not so much exist as *occur*... Thus things are not classified like facts, or tabulated like data, but narrated like stories. And every place, as a gathering of things, is a knot of stories” (p. 154). Knowledges take on meaning for individuals and groups through the associations they conjure, which we often organize into narratives (a marker of community knowledges discussed more extensively in 2.2.4). In her 2016 book about indigenous Hawaiian ways of knowing, Ingersoll writes that “*Kanaka* knowledge is a totality of everything as an intertwined lineage and

knowing speaks to a personal knowledge embedded in a specific history, culture, and time that is reactivated, in part, for contemporary *Kanaka Maoli* like me through oceanic enactments” like surfing, navigation, and fishing (p. 9, emphasis original). Cultural knowledges are tied up in histories and brought into current moments through specific types of remembrances in particular places and at certain moments.

The situatedness of community knowledges rings especially true when they emerge during moments of crisis, when expert knowledge is absent or has failed, forcing communities to take charge of a situation. Studies of natural disasters (Kaewkitipong, Chen, & Ractham, 2016; Munro, 2013; Procopio & Procopio, 2007), social problems (Walton, Zrally, & Mugengana, 2014), industrial disasters (Weick, 2010), and security crises (Hochmüller & Müller, 2014) showcase the value of communities coming together and sharing information before, during, and after stressful moments. Potts (2014) writes the following about knowledge sharing through social media platforms during crises: “...communities tend to erupt around a given disaster and disperse quickly afterward...these micro-communities form to help each other work through a disaster, share much-needed information, or organize other types of responses during and after a crisis” (p. 8). Moments of instability create a vacuum, allowing everyday people to build knowledge structures that otherwise would be overshadowed by dominant systems.

I want to note that though moments of crisis tend to bring out these displays of information, community knowledges are always there—we just usually fail to notice them. To return to the mountain metaphor, we tend to look at other summits for expertise. But when that summit isn’t visible (i.e. there’s a crisis), we are forced to look elsewhere for knowledge, and find ourselves examining parts of the mountain that feature multiple components of the mountain’s ecosystem. And those parts are potentially more useful in those situations. A single peak cannot demonstrate the complexities of living on the mountainside, or in the valley.

2.2.3 Community knowledges are built upon cumulative and collaborative work in lieu of individual efforts

Though collaborative knowledge making is embraced in industry contexts and many academic disciplines, western thought still considers knowledge as intellectual property to be owned (Edwards, 2018; Rose, 1993). Knowledge, however, is socially constructed. King writes, “...all of those in communities involved in reading, writing, viewing, and creating [requires a]

struggle for understanding; the sole or even the primary responsibility cannot rest upon ‘authors’” (2004, p. 461). All knowledge accumulates over time and through collaborative efforts, and this is especially true for community knowledges, especially those of place-bound communities. Writing about post-industrial development in the Midwest, Salvo writes that in urban centers, “generations of skill, knowledge, and lore passed from generation to generation to become the foundations of identities and traditions, communities” (2018, p. 172). Knowledge is housed in community relationships, a claim bolstered by the work of feminist theorists who acknowledge standpoints and positionalities. “Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in the particular” (Haraway, 1988, p. 590). A contextual understanding of knowledge is ultimately more accurate than universalized truth, because knowledges are products of lived experiences. Though we tend to look at other situations for guidance on how to respond to situations in our daily lives, our own experiences contain the most intimate accounts of problems we face. The problems on our mountain are unique, and we have to understand our mountain to solve those problems. Additionally, mountains are hubs of collaboration—something we would see if we weren’t always battling to get to the top.

2.2.4 Community knowledges are centered in embodied understandings and narrative retellings, not raw data

Community knowledges are grounded in histories and experiences of community members, rather than abstract principles or theories. This means that such knowledges are embodied and contextual, making them difficult to quantify. A range of theoretical frameworks, including disability studies, queer theory, critical race theory, and indigenous studies, emphasize connections between bodies and knowledges. It is especially important to interrogate the ways that bodies are represented and experienced for marginalized people, as they contend with “intersecting oppressions” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 18). Theories of intersectionality, emerging from the experiences of black women, illuminate the contextual nature of experience, as they highlight the confluence of factors like race, gender, sexuality, class, age, ability, and citizenship. Because realities are read upon bodies, and then experienced by those bodies, knowledge from these encounters is tied up in those experiences and the affective bonds they create (Ahmed, 2004)—and those experiences are often encapsulated through stories. Legg and Sullivan (2018)

investigate the connections between Cherokee storytelling and technical communication praxis, noting that they both: are time-based, medium sensitive, ecology-based, focused on survivance; relational; and use ethical deception and reference networked knowledges (p. 42). These knowledges are housed in narratives, making them flexible and effective.

Narrative is the primary way that communities catalog and share information, making it a ubiquitous form of communication (Barthes, 1977). Brophy (2016) writes, “Narratives and stories...are a way of organizing the complexity of real experience and of passing it on to others, both in the present and in the future” (p. 34). Narratives encapsulate knowledges that emerge from community experiences, serving as an important vessel for shared knowledges (Bal, 2009; Clandinin, 2013). But the sheer number of narratives requires that some find their way to the top. As a result, dominant narratives reflect the worldview of powerful members of society, rendering the lived realities of less powerful groups less visible. Seeking out the narratives of marginalized groups, then, becomes incredibly important. Making space for these narratives and actively honoring them is an ethical way to bolster the efforts of these groups (Blackmon, 2017; Jones, 2016; Legg, 2014; Royster, 1996). Narratives are a powerful tool in effecting social change, as Faber (2002) argues: “stories broker change because they mediate between social structures and individual agency” (p. 25). Stories connect community members to knowledge and to one another, making them integral to addressing public problems. Looking at the top of a mountain doesn’t reveal multiple stories. It only demonstrates the dominant, overarching narrative, which is not comprehensive and often doesn’t match the experiences unfolding on the rest of the mountain.

These signs—lived experiences, contextual understandings, collaborative natures, and embodied narratives—position community knowledge as highly variable, which is part of its power. While expert knowledge is located in mountain summits, community knowledges operate below those peaks, crafting patterns of life throughout the mountain that often remain unseen. Despite their low visibility, those patterns shape that mountain. To understand that mountain, we need to unearth knowledges and components that make up knowledges operating on the mountainside. I offer the mountain metaphor to emphasize gaps that often exist between technical expertise and community knowledge, in order to encourage further work that explicitly addresses how community knowledges can inform the work of PTC scholars and practitioners. In the following section, I supplement this metaphor with a framework meant to provide an

approach to privileging a community's tendency to enact change by embracing available resources—by making do with what they have.

2.3 Adopting a metic framework for community knowledges

Because community knowledges depend upon situation and adaptation, ultimately defying a tidy definition, I conclude Chapter Two by proposing a framework that embraces this malleability. In this section, I present *metis*, or “the rhetorical art of cunning, the use of embodied strategies...to transform rhetorical situations” (Dolmage, 2014, p. 5) as a companion to community knowledges. *Metis*⁹ is the art of cultivating connections between sometimes disparate elements in order to enact change that privileges unanticipated victors; similarly, community knowledges are the product of assemblages that can foster social change for disenfranchised communities facing complex problems. *Metis* is inherently linked to knowledge; Detienne and Vernant (1991) describe *metis* as “a complex but very coherent body of mental attitudes and intellectual behavior...applied to situations...which do not lend themselves to precise measurement, exact calculation, or rigorous logic” (pp. 4-5). Community knowledge and *metis* are both complex concepts, defying explicit definition and encapsulating embodied wayfinding.

As the mountain metaphor introduced earlier in this chapter suggests, knowledge grounded in expert power monopolizes our understanding of the world, resulting in a lack of visibility and credibility for knowledge that emerges from community members. Similarly, rhetorical histories have gravitated towards concepts rooted in key classical texts, focusing on terms like *techne*, *arête*, and *kairos*, while *metis* has largely been absent from rhetorical histories. This is perhaps best represented through the story of Zeus swallowing the goddess *Metis* whole, relegating her to an existence in his head or below his throne (Dolmage, 2009). Just as masculinized expertise overshadows feminized community knowledges, *metis* has typically been categorized as neutral, when it is in fact, an inherently feminist mode of navigation (Carlson, 2019). A metic framework embraces a messy, untidy world; anticipates and searches for the unexpected; illuminates collaboration between bodies; and invites disruptions in power dynamics. Such a framework might be a useful heuristic for scholars and practitioners in PTC

⁹ Just as I do not present the mountain metaphor as a universal heuristic, I do not seek to position *metis* as a companion to *all* community knowledges. It is a concept steeped in the western rhetorical tradition, bringing along with it legacies of colonization and domination that must be acknowledged. Instead, I offer it as a preliminary frame for understanding the embodied, divergent, and sometimes-paradoxical nature of community knowledges.

working alongside communities facing wicked problems. Such an approach: 1) moves us away from the mountain summit by encouraging us to delve into other spaces so that we might uncover community knowledges; and 2) urges us to honor community knowledges by recognizing them but not codifying them, which preserves their adaptable, malleable power.

2.3.1 A metic framework acknowledges a messy yet navigable world

A metic framework challenges notions of an orderly world, where rhetorical speech effects change linearly. Instead, a metic worldview holds that things happen because an actor has effectively navigated a vast assemblage of factors, wielding them in ways that advantage their own causes. This savvy has led some to cast metis as opportunistic or exploitative—including Plato and Aristotle, who “dismiss[ed] the concept as sophistic in the pejorative” leading to its low profile in rhetorical scholarship (Pope-Ruark, 2014, p. 327). However, it has been recovered from a variety of vantage points that cast metis’ flexibility as a strength: disability studies (Dolmage, 2014; Walters, 2014); professional, pedagogical, and programmatic identities (Fedukovich, 2009; Kopelson, 2003; Savage, 2004; Scott, 2008), embodiment rhetorics (Ballif, 2001; Dolmage, 2009; Hawhee, 2005; McDermott, 2015), user experience and automation (Pflugfelder, 2018; Salvo, 2018), public writing (Grabill, 2007), and connections to other classical rhetorical concepts (Atwill, 1998). These recoveries offer a revisionist history of sorts, positioning metis as a purposeful way of approaching “a world powered by persuasion, differentiation, shifting contexts, and meaningful bodies” (Dolmage, 2014, p. 6). Such a world does not preclude agency; on the contrary, it creates opportunities for unlikely interventions at the hands of underrepresented actors.

While traditional accounts feature “omniscient and rational agents surveying, as if outside and above, all possible moves within the given situation,” a world ruled by metis positions situations as “embodied enterprises,” shaped by shifting circumstances that often are not fully known (Trapani & Maldonado, 2018, p. 284). These shifting circumstances require us to adapt, often quickly and without warning. Detienne and Vernant write that metis literally embodies this way of shifting, appearing multiple because “its field of application is the world of movement, of multiplicity and of ambiguity...in order to dominate a changing situation...it must become even more supple, even more shifting, more polymorphic” (p. 20). Metis offers us a way to make sense of seemingly nonsensical, unpredictable movements, and locates intention in those

movements. By linking metis and community knowledges, we might be better prepared to ascribe purpose to displays of information that might otherwise be dismissed as arbitrary. This framework invites us to wander the mountainside and notice the ways that different actors navigate the world.

2.3.2 A metic framework anticipates the unexpected

A messy world invites complex modes of being in that world, especially for actors who aren't classically powerful or strong. Greek myths about metis often feature people or animals that draw upon their physical attributes in order to navigate the world effectively. Cuttlefish, seals, eels, crabs, and anglerfish are all credited with the possession of metis, but perhaps the most evocative personifications offered are that of the fox and the octopus. A fox has “a thousand tricks up its sleeve,” such as playing dead in a field until prey is nearby and effectively reversing its appearance; an octopus is “able to take the shape of the bodies to which it clings perfectly” and even “imitate the color of the...things which it approaches” (Detienne & Vernant, pp. 34-38). These characteristics gesture towards an ability to outwit opponents by using whatever resources are available. Devoid of traditional bodily strength, foxes and octopi use qualities they have been given by nature to succeed—an incredible feat when they face predators much larger, stronger, and faster than them. These metic moments often emerge when an actor effectively reads a situation and acts, drawing strength on characteristics that might be seen as liabilities in other situations. For example, Fedukovich (2009) argues that using her Appalachian accent in the classroom to connect with working class students is an act of metis because of her ability to “shape-shift, to negotiate those identity constructions as they appear and thus perform Appalachian Femininity with purpose” (p. 150). While she shed her accent in spaces outside of the region and outside of the classroom, she recovered that important aspect of her identity for use in a particular context. A metic framework expects and celebrates these sorts of reversals.

In addition to anticipating utilizations of unexpected resources, acts of metis also rely upon timing. While *kairos* refers to the opportune time in which an action can unfold, metis “intervenes at moments when the divine world seems to be still in movement or when the balance of the powers which operate within it appears to be momentarily upset” (Detienne & Vernant, p. 108). An ability to act when things are slightly off-kilter is associated with the embodied nature of metis, as one adapts to situations based on the circumstances they face. The

initial story that Detienne and Vernant draw upon to explain *metis* is that of Antilochus' chariot race. Before the race, Antilochus's father reminds him that though he is a more skilled driver than his opponents, his horses are slower, and so his victory cannot be achieved by strength or speed. To secure victory, instead, he tells Antilochus that he must "keep [his worse horses] well in hand when he sees the doubling-post; he knows the precise moment at which to pull the rein, and keeps his eye well on the man in front of him" (p. 12). Following this advice, Antilochus essentially forces a game of chicken upon his opponents when they reach a narrow point in the course. Because his opponent will veer off the path to avoid a collision, Antilochus will then be free to take the lead. Detienne and Vernant argue that this tale encapsulates the use of *metis*: utilizing skill in lieu of strength, operating in a rapidly changing scenario, and embracing an awareness of physical place. A *metic* framework embraces this type of movement, encouraging us to expect the unexpected, and to look for moments in which marginalized people might come together in order to enact change in their communities—to linger at the base of the mountain so that we might notice moments of ingenuity rooted in community knowledges.

2.3.3 A *metic* framework explicitly highlights collaboration between rhetorical bodies

Being described as "a distinctly bodily intelligence" (Dolmage, 2006, p. 119), *metis* is often cast as a trait held in individual bodies; however, *metis* crafts assemblages of rhetorical bodies—both human and nonhuman. Athena and Hephaestus are Greek gods who demonstrate expertise in managing rhetorical bodies in ways that benefit them. For example, ancient illustrations of Hephaestus showcase his blacksmithing skills, as he creates fanciful tools to assist his physical traits (signified by feet twisted backwards or a crooked leg). These tools, however, "are not compensatory, they do not 'correct' him. They are part of him, incorporated" (Dolmage, 2014, p. 170). Hephaestus' physical form drives his craft, ultimately empowering him as he leverages his skills. Similarly, Athena tames Poseidon's horse through her bodily strength combined with a bit, demonstrating the importance of bodies and tools working together. These are physical acts that require mental strength, so that one might "effectively maneuver a cutting instrument, a ship, a chariot, a body, on the spot, in the heat of the moment" (Hawhee, 2005, p. 47). *Metis* is cast as practical, experiential knowledge—compared to *techne*, or abstract, technical knowledge, and provides power to those marginalized by their circumstances, locating value in their savvy as they leverage different elements. Pflugfelder argues that *metis* "is enacted

by bodies, but is likewise enabled by a wide array of nonhuman materials...[and] exists only through moments when bodies and their surroundings blend in performance” (2018, p. 204). A metic framework embraces assemblages, as we garner strength from linking elements of a situation, like intellect, body, tools, and environment. After all, bodies “enhance their power in or as a heterogeneous assemblage” (Bennett, p. 23).

The embodied nature of metis, however, requires that we privilege its connection to bodies—especially if we are linking it to community knowledges that are based in human experience. Flynn, Sotirin, and Brady (2012) describe it as a practical agency that fosters a “communality...tempered by a relational ethic” and signified by “intuitive knowledge, bricolage, and ‘shapeshifting’” (p. 11). Metis, like community knowledge, requires assembling different stakeholders, narratives, and ideas, in order to create cohesion. A metic framework, while acknowledging the interplay between humans and nonhumans, privileges the lives of people, protecting us against the “stifling” of human voices (Latour, 2005, p. 125) and the risk of posthuman approaches leaving out “the nonhumans we encounter every day...not every human is seen as fully human in every situation” (Bay, 2017, p. 448). Metis is collaborative, pointing us towards a better understanding of how different rhetorical bodies work together in order to enact change. A metic framework encourages us to see the interplay between different resources on the mountainside, and to locate value in those relationships.

2.3.4 A metic framework actively locates power within the “underdogs” of the world

Finally, metis is a concept inherently linked to power through its manifestation as a form of knowledge suited for disrupting the status quo. Because it thrives on uncertainty, metis is an especially powerful frame for communities facing difficult, unstable circumstances. It is a threat “to any established order; her intelligence operates in the realm of what is shifting and unexpected in order...to reverse situations and overturn hierarchies which appear unassailable” (Detienne & Vernant, p. 108). Metis is a collective way of navigating precarious circumstances, especially powerful for vulnerable groups, because it ascribes agency to members of these groups in moments when oppressive institutions seem to prevail entirely. “It is a way of knowing that makes available ways of acting...possessing ways of knowing—actionable ways of knowing—that enable reversal” (Grabill, 2007, p. 92). While traditional approaches to knowledge focus on refined and institutionally-sanctioned accounts, a metic approach designed

to engage with community knowledges explicitly seeks out insight from actors that lack access to institutional structures—or in many cases, are marginalized by those structures. A metic framework makes visible the knowledges that are rendered invisible by our preoccupation with technical expertise—with the mountain's summit.

This chapter introduced a metic framework for community knowledges, which primes PTC scholars and practitioners to engage with communities in ethical ways, urging them to notice and invite displays of community knowledge. Instead of lingering at the metaphorical peaks of information, we must travel down the mountain to see how the soil, the rocks, and the forest are intertwined, producing complicated networks of knowledge. We must make room for knowledges that emerge from scenarios where people are not only surviving with what they have, but also thriving by crafting knowledge networks. While the mountain metaphor and this metic framework are only preliminary tools for valuing community knowledges, they are an important step towards such work because they explicitly locate power within communities who experience the very problems that we are all—as experts, as community members, as practitioners—trying to solve. Chapter Three describes the participatory methodology of this study, emphasizing how and why it is designed to engage with and reveal community knowledges in Appalachia.

3. ASSEMBLING COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGES VIA PLACE-BASED AND PARTICIPATORY METHODS

Chapter Two outlined markers of community knowledges and argued that scholars and practitioners in PTC might engage public problems more effectively through a metric framework that embraces the adaptive, collaborative nature of such knowledges. Traditional research methods are not always suited for meeting community knowledges where they are, but participatory methods are more flexible, positioning participants as co-researchers and incorporating community knowledge directly into research practices. Because participatory studies locate authority within everyday communities, rather than studied experts, they seem to be a natural fit for PTC scholars doing social justice work, suggested by the work of Agboka, 2013; Crabtree and Sapp, 2005; Rose, 2016; and Walton, Zrally, and Mugengana, 2014. Advocating for a better balance between researcher control and open discovery, Sullivan (2017a) writes: “Encountering users’ experiences without controlling them opens us to hearing/seeing beyond what we expect, beckons us to the new or unexpected, and in opening the events to others’ views and actions, we open new ways to experience” (p. 24). Though she is writing about user experience research, Sullivan’s call for efforts to hear and see beyond what we expect fits a central tenet of Participatory Action Research (PAR): if we position communities as collaborators, we might uncover more nuanced accounts of problems and solutions.

Place is an integral component of how community experiences unfold, especially in areas that are defined primarily by geography. Despite the centrality of place to human experience (de Certeau, 1984), it is often overlooked in academic studies. In *Place in Research: Theory, Methodology, and Methods*, Tuck & McKenzie (2015) lament this absence, writing that if place receives attention at all, it is but an afterthought, and perhaps more troubling, rarely ever factors into methodological choices. Working from Indigenous and environmental studies, they argue for research framed through *critical place inquiry*, which is “informed by the embeddedness of social life in and with places, and...seeks to be a form of action in responding to critical place issues” (p. 2). In Appalachia, critical place issues include environmental and economic devastation that results from unsustainable industry practices. No stakeholders can provide more insight into how place and these issues intertwine than members of communities experiencing the outcomes of those practices every day.

Place-based and participatory methods position research as generative, rather than extractive, as they seek to give back to places and communities. “Extractive research” is a term that has been used to describe transnational, translingual research that colonizes populations through the application of hegemonic frameworks in local contexts (Kouritzin & Nakagawa, 2018); I borrow it in this chapter to describe practices that have occurred in Appalachia at the hands of companies, journalists, and academics. Some have taken natural, social, economic, and intellectual resources from inhabitants of the region, paying minimal regard to their wellbeing. PAR research that involves participants in research decisions is a step toward disrupting this dynamic. It is my hope that this project faces those legacies and provides a different orientation to research in Appalachian contexts, as it engages place-based participatory methodologies through a PAR study detailing community development work in the region. Over the course of 6 months, 11 participants (fellows in the 2018-2019 Appalachian Development Project cohort) engaged with photovoice methods, as they took photos, composed reflections, and contributed to periodic focus groups. As participants produced visual, narrative texts, they assembled rich accounts of their work and their communities. I supplemented this data with site visits to three communities, where participants engaged in interviews and participatory mapping that provided deeper understandings of their projects and places.

This chapter begins with a description of PAR, including its historical links to Highlander. I then discuss the visual and place-based nature of methods deployed in this project and describe the study’s design and coding processes. Though participatory research is becoming more commonplace in PTC, there are few resources outlining how to actually plan and facilitate such projects, so I provide an extended discussion of my efforts to start and maintain this study. This chapter provides an example of flexible research design that seeks to invite expressions of community knowledges in visual and narrative forms, meshing with the metic framework established in Chapter Two and challenging extractive forms of research. Ultimately, I highlight a connection between place-based, visual participatory research methodologies and the elicitation of community knowledges that often go unexpressed.

3.1 Participatory Action Research methodologies

Traditional research “has the potential to marginalize and exclude vulnerable people, especially those who reside in challenging places. Moreover, research-based knowledge has the potential to silence the voices and choices of vulnerable people” (Lawson, Caringi, Pyles, Jurkowski, & Bozlak, 2015, p. 2). This dissertation study utilizes participatory methodologies, an approach committed to facilitating efforts of marginalized groups and “their collective creation of knowledge about themselves and their own reality” (Hall, 1981, p. 11). This commitment embraces embodied knowledges as told by the bodies that have cultivated those knowledges.

3.1.1 PAR origins

Especially popular in sociology, public advocacy, and public health fields, PAR projects position participants, rather than researchers, as the driving force of a study. These projects ideally increase citizen voice and power in their communities, as well as disciplinary and public conversations. Most importantly, PAR projects incorporate “an element of social action that involves building sociopolitical awareness and facilitating social action, policy reform, and other types of social or systemic change” (Jason, Keys, Suarez-Balcazar, Taylor, & Davis, 2004, p. 4). So, PAR projects privilege community-based knowledge, destabilizing traditional academic knowledge while also working to re-invent it.

Many researchers who engage PAR projects trace their inspiration to emancipatory thought, including the work of Freire (1970), Lewin (1944), and Maguire (1987). Hall offers a comprehensive history of its origins, focusing explicitly on the scholars and activists who began to use these methods under the label of PAR. In 1977, the Participatory Research Network was formed, made up of researchers from different continents, each working on projects devoted to bettering the situations of communities through health activism, community development, and democratic participation. Hall cites a lone American member of the network: John Gaventa, who worked with the Highlander Center to design a PAR project involving three communities in central Appalachia negatively impacted by economic development practices. In Dungannon, Virginia, Jellico, Tennessee, and Ivanhoe, Virginia, Highlander assisted community members in conducting their own research, which included collecting oral histories, developing and distributing community surveys, and mapping communities to trace concentrations of power.

The projects across central Appalachia facilitated by Gaventa and Highlander provided a model for PAR in the United States.¹⁰ Gaventa's 1982 book *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebelling in an Appalachian Valley* details these projects and their outcomes.

3.1.2 PAR as transformative for communities

By focusing on community needs and agency, members of the network began a dialogue about how research might enact change in communities, as well as the political nature of knowledge. PAR projects operate on both micro- and macro-levels, reshaping daily lives of participants and contributing to larger conversations about knowledge and power. Since participants drive a project's inquiry, their material circumstances are more readily addressed as they shape the questions asked and methods used. This embeddedness allows researchers and participants to cultivate resources that directly address community problems. Since participants take on a more active role in research, participatory research might also "challenge participants to think critically about their own identities, as well as about the ways in which the multiple identities of all participants, that is, all co-researchers, interact within the context of the research process" (Lykes & Hershberg, 2012, p. 351). To place control in participant hands is to promise more nuanced research and relevant outcomes, but also, to establish more equitable relationships between researchers and participants.

Most importantly, this shift in project dynamics privileges community-based knowledge and challenges static notions of expertise. Participatory research brings ordinary people's knowledge "into the open" where it is collaboratively reflected upon "with or without allied intellectuals and those who have both broader and deeper insights" (Hall, p. 12). This knowledge materializes from communities and is meant for communities, rather than being theorized by experts and passed down to the public. The flexibility of such research contributes to a range of outcomes, from the self-realization of individual participants to large-scale organizing. Participatory research shirks traditional concerns about validity and replicability, and as a result, presents a research model that disrupts traditional notions of expertise. Gaventa wrote, "by altering who controls knowledge [and] what knowledge is produced...the very definition of what

¹⁰ This is not to say that there was no other participatory research happening in other contexts, just that PAR as a label emerged in the early 1980s and Highlander has continued to be a model for other organizations taking on participatory projects.

constitutes knowledge may also change” (1988, p. 26). Participatory methods place community members in a position of authority, marking their experiences as being equally legitimate to information derived through more traditional research designs.

3.1.3 PAR as transformative for researchers

An academic’s role—how involved they should be, whether they should contact a group or wait to be contacted, if they should use the research that emerges from a PAR project in their own scholarship—has been a subject of interest since the 1970s. Hall has written about these issues, which came up during a 1980 meeting of the PAR Network. The network seemed to agree that a researcher facilitating a PAR project, whether that researcher is originally a member of that community or not, finds themselves in an outsider position, as they encapsulate an institutional authority and must navigate that authority carefully in order for a project to truly be participatory. If they can negotiate their authority effectively, support community needs, ensure that community members are engaged with the project, and build “an indigenous capacity for collective analysis and action and the generation of new knowledge by the people concerned,” the network concluded that a researcher could make an ethical, significant contribution to academic work without exploiting community members (p. 10). To avoid exploitation or extraction, though, requires active vigilance and openness from the researcher—an insight that I will expand upon in this project’s brief epilogue.

Academics are typically trained to conduct research that resonates with positivist and post-positivist frames, so we often strive for research designs that give us a significant amount of control. PAR projects do not allow for this type of control, requiring researchers to relinquish a great deal of it to participants. While this is admittedly unsettling, especially for a dissertation project, participatory work can be as transformative for researchers as it is for participants. By shattering traditional power dynamics and reminding researchers of how wide the world is (that is, though they might have content expertise, such expertise is not always as immediately handy in community contexts), participatory methodologies offer scholars a different perspective on knowledge.

3.2 Engaging visual, place-based methods

Despite the ubiquity of images in our everyday lives, rhetorical studies—and by extension, PTC—has only recently begun to develop explicitly visual methods (i.e. Gries’ iconographic tracking, 2013). Typically, we have adopted methods from other fields, or applied heuristics developed for text-based artifacts to visuals. To work with a visual methodology is to consider relationships within a particular image, as well as across images. McNely (2015) calls these two modes *ideographic*, where an image might “provide rich textures and details about a specific case that may aid analysis and understanding,” and *nomothetic*, fostering “cross-case comparisons” to develop “visual typologies with generalizable claims” (p. 51). Interpreting images can contribute to a widened rhetorical understanding of an image’s origins and effects.

Visuals are especially powerful at depicting place due to their capacity to simultaneously present multiple relationships in one image. Visual and place-based methods (which often overlap) include “significant participatory and collaborative components” (McNely, 2013, p. 123). Visual methods typically invite participants to draw, map, take photos, create videos, and so on, inserting a level of agency into a research participant’s role that often isn’t there in a study that only uses interviews or text-based evidence. In addition to an increase in agency, visual methods often invite participants to locate themselves explicitly in artifacts they produce, emphasizing the corporeal nature of creating and sharing visuals. The depth that visuals can communicate invites both participants and researchers to consider contextual factors surrounding that visual, which results in a deeper understanding of that image’s significance.

3.2.1 Photovoice

Photovoice, also known as Participant Generated Imagery (PGI), is a PAR method that initially emerged from public health and public policy (Wang & Burris, 1997) and has been recently introduced to technical communication (Sullivan, 2017b). Sullivan writes that photovoice addresses a gap in PTC research: “A perennial problem for researchers in this area is how to involve community members in ways that allow them to share their knowledge, wisdom, opinions, and understandings of a project’s risks and rewards while using their own language” (p. 93). Placing control in participants’ hands (or, cameras) as they capture moments they deem important gives participants a platform for knowledge making. In projects that use this method,

participants take photos on a regular basis, often guided by a general prompt. Then, in interviews or focus groups, participants interpret their photos, identifying patterns across their images. In addition to interviews, researchers gather other types of data to supplement photographs. Sometimes, this supplementary data takes the form of written or spoken narratives gathered during the same time period as the photographs; other times, researchers ask participants to curate their photographs and to write reflections about their experiences after the project has ended. Photovoice provides participants with a lot of freedom in how they approach a project, meshing with goals of the method, as outlined by Wang (1999): to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns; to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small group discussion of photographs; and to reach policy makers.

While photographs are undoubtedly evocative in any setting, they are particularly notable when used to depict Appalachian life, because of the history of photographs being used by journalists to depict the region as poor and helpless. Utilizing photographs that have been captured by Appalachians, then, has the potential to re-cast these narratives and the power dynamics they reinforce. Activists and researchers alike have called upon citizens of the region to capture their own experiences on their own terms. *100 Days in Appalachia*, a joint effort between the Media Innovation Center of West Virginia University Reed College of Media, West Virginia Public Broadcasting, and the Center for Rural Strategies, is one such project. Photographer Roger May organized a project called *Looking at Appalachia*, a crowdsourced image archive that “will serve as a reference that is defined by its people as opposed to political legislation” (May, “Overview”). Social scientists have also tapped into the power of images taken and gathered by participants, utilizing photovoice methods to explore a range of topics in Appalachian life, including organizing in coalfields (Bell, 2008); rural development (Downey & Anyaegbunam, 2010); and health concerns (Downey, Ireson, & Scutchfield, 2009).

3.2.2 Participatory mapping

In addition to the collection of photographs and accompanying narratives, this study incorporates another form of visual research: participatory cartography or mapping (see Crampton, 2009; Kim, 2015). While researchers approach mapping practices differently (some utilizing pen and paper, others utilizing high-tech digital systems), a major outcome is the

“challenging [of] assumptions and testing [of] theories of what people appreciate in their community and what they contribute to them” (Townley, Pearson, Lehrwyn, Prophet, & Trauernicht, 2016, p. 405). In some cases, participants create their own maps of the spaces they inhabit. In others, participants amend maps that already exist; sometimes shifting them to more accurately represent relationships and other times adding new markers that indicate places significant to their experience. Participatory mapping is especially valuable when used with participants dealing with problems inherently linked to place, like environmental crises or gentrification: it allows them to re-define static representations of their communities that fail to document recursive processes. This method asks participants to reflect on connections between static representations and lived experiences of a place as they take on what Diehl, Grabill, Hart-Davidson, and Iyer (2008) call “citizen knowledge work.”

Participatory visual methods ask participants to document, interpret, and even reimagine elements of their daily lives, including place. As a result, participants articulate connections between their environments and problems their communities face, illuminating previously unseen elements that can help in crafting solutions to wicked problems. Additionally, participatory visual methods invite participants to act as co-researchers as they direct a study’s inquiry alongside academics and practitioners. Rich visual and narrative data can be used to amplify the lived experiences of disenfranchised communities. This data also serves as a hub for collaboration, in which multiple stakeholders can come together to address problems. Rather than relying on technical experts and discounting community knowledge, participatory visual methods embrace knowledge that comes from the community and provides a space for collaboration between these groups.

3.3 Research methods and study design

Our larger project took place over the course of a yearlong fellowship program; however, this dissertation study only reports findings from the first six months, which includes six months of photos and narratives, two focus groups, and three site visits. The study has three distinct stages of data collection, each designed to build upon the data collected in the others (Figure 5). During the first, participants generated photographs and narratives about their daily experiences in their communities. The second stage consisted of focus groups with participants that provided space for reflections on their photos. During the third stage, I conducted site visits with three

communities featured in the project, engaging participants in interviews and participatory mapping scenarios to better contextualize the experiences they shared in the first two stages.

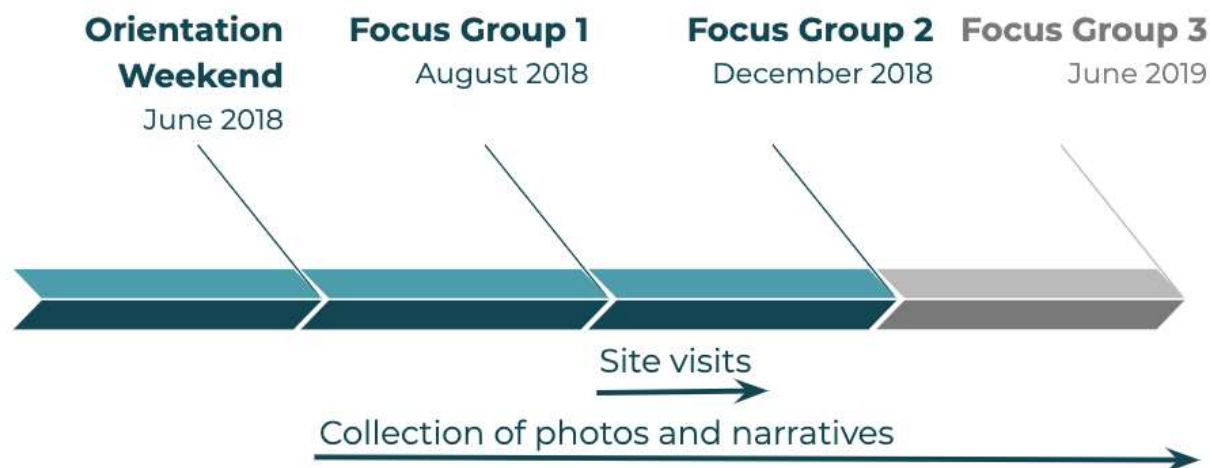


Figure 5: Diagram of study design

When I reached out to Highlander in hopes of establishing a contact that would provide guidance on how to reach out to different communities or organizers, I did not anticipate cultivating a thriving, even growing partnership with Highlander. Even when I began speaking regularly with Charice, a member of the Education Team that manages the Appalachian Development Project (ADP), I *never* anticipated that they would want to incorporate a participatory project into the curriculum of the program. But they did. I worked with the Education Team at Highlander for about six months before the fellowship program began to set up some basic timelines and structures, and then worked directly with participants to establish research questions, guiding prompts, and communication protocols. While the participatory nature of this project created a significant amount of uncertainty¹¹ as this partnership formed, it also allowed our collaboration to develop in meaningful ways that were meant to serve participants and their communities first.

¹¹ Read: a staggering amount. Throughout this process, I was continually reminded of Bazerman's claim that serendipity is a central component of research, as it "appears at all levels" (2008, p. 315). Again and again, things fell into place, and for that I am so grateful and perpetually in awe.

3.3.1 IRB Protocol and questions about reciprocity

Because this was a community-based research project, writing documents for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval introduced some crucial concerns, including: protecting participant identities, since their work was inherently political; assuring that I had support of the managing organization; finding secure storage for photos and narratives that participants would be sharing; and ensuring reciprocity for participants' time. While none of these markers proved to be particularly different from a more traditional academic study, two considerations did shape the way I framed the project for IRB.

First, expectations of reciprocity in this project stretched far beyond compensation. While I do think that compensating participants for the time it took to catalog their work is important, the value that we hoped participants might get out of this project was difficult to articulate in an IRB narrative that requires clear descriptions of benefit and risk. As a result, I presented the main benefit as compensation for their time via gift cards. Participants received \$15 for taking photos over the course of the project, \$5 each time they participated in a focus group, and an additional \$15 if they engaged in an individual interview during a site visit. While I believe that their time is valuable, especially as workers in the nonprofit sector who are typically under-paid for their work, I also believe that their contributions to this project cannot completely be accounted for through compensation.

Second, I struggled with the fact that a truly participatory project would require participants to be engaged in the development of research questions; however, I couldn't technically work with participants until I had an IRB protocol approved. So, this project had two sets of questions: my initial questions noted in Chapter One (and again later in this chapter) that were in my original IRB protocol, and more generative questions that participants came up with during our orientation session. These participant questions were used to frame photography prompts, as well as focus group and interview questions. We felt that this allowed participants to leave their mark on the research design, while still operating within institutional parameters.

I talked with Charice and the fellows about reciprocity (Cushman, 1996; Deans, 2003) extensively throughout the duration of this project. Knowing the legacy of extractive work in the region, I did not want my dissertation project to contribute to that dynamic, even though it was undeniable that I would benefit from the work of participants. I was straightforward about this, and asked Charice in our first conversation directly what I could do to make this project as

collaborative and meaningful as possible for Highlander and participants. On an institutional level, Highlander hoped to use data from this project (with participants' blessing) as part of an internal assessment of the fellowship program, and I was asked to help write up that report following the program's conclusion in June 2019.

For participants, their response could be most easily categorized as, "We want you to listen to us, not just our data." They wanted to have a hand in designing questions and prompts, have access to their photos and narratives, and wanted to work collaboratively on a public-facing project using the data we collected (the nature of which shifted throughout the project). As part of my commitment to thoughtful representation, I conducted extensive member checks during the project. I transcribed recordings of the focus groups myself, and shared them with participants, asking them to correct any inaccuracies or to remove any information they did not feel comfortable having in writing. I did the same with individual interviews. Towards the end of the study, I shared drafts of my findings chapters with them, asking for their feedback on how I was representing their work, and what they thought of my interpretation.

I want to note that relationships I developed with participants were central to this project's reciprocity, because those relationships encouraged them to be honest with me about their desires for the project, and to tell me directly how I could support their work beyond the project itself. Since participants wanted to know what was going on with their project facilitator, they wanted to know me. Immediately after I met them, I started getting social media friend and follow requests, which initially threw me for a loop: *Was this allowed?* But as a feminist researcher facilitating a participatory project, it made sense that participants would want to connect with me on a different level (a thought solidified in conversations with mentors). Further, if I wasn't open enough with them to share my life through a public platform like Instagram or Facebook, how would they trust me enough to share their experiences through our project? As the project unfolded, we got to know each other more extensively through social media, bonding over our collective disdain for J.D. Vance and our shared love of astrology memes and Taco Bell. Several also sought me out for advice on grant and proposal writing, and towards the end of their placements, feedback on job documents as they considered what to do after the fellowship ended. I believe our personal connection made this project more meaningful for all parties involved and serves as an argument for "the vulnerable researcher" who connects ethically with participants outside of research scenarios (Griffin, 2012).

3.3.2 Participant recruitment

While working alongside the Education Team to design the study, we agreed that the primary participants would be the members of the fellowship—as they would be a representative sample of work going on across the region, and they would also be the most likely to participate because of how the study had been imagined. The Education Team informed fellows of the project during their interview process, and I spoke with them about the project via a Zoom call in March 2018. I also attended their Orientation Weekend in June 2018 to co-design the specifics of the study and officially recruit them into the project.

However, during these conversations, we kept returning to the importance of the host communities as people who were embedded in the places that Fellows were being placed. Six of the 12 fellows were either returning to their home communities or continuing work in communities they had already lived in for at least a year, but for the other six, they would be entering new communities and would have different stakes in the projects. We agreed that, depending on the research questions that the fellows generated, we would invite host community members to participate via email.

We did invite host community members, but only one agreed to participate (another academic). Charice had cautioned me against expecting their participation: most of these hosts were working for non-profits and were pressed for time, especially with the added responsibility of managing a fellow. Ultimately, a participant group made up of fellows proved to be the best-case scenario for logistics and managing a public-facing project.

3.3.3 Phase Zero: Orientation and generating research questions

The fellows would all meet for the first time during their orientation weekend in June 2018. During this orientation, they went through basic training and took care of logistics like tax paperwork. They also met with representatives from their host communities and began strategizing their next year of work. Most importantly, this orientation weekend served as a teambuilding experience, as fellows learned more about one another and started to build peer relationships. Charice scheduled a two-hour session for me to talk with the fellows about the project, and to work with them on generating research questions to frame our study. The goal for the session was two-fold: first, to cultivate confidence in the project and its possibilities; and

second, to get participants working towards robust research questions that could guide their inquiry.

While scholars in PTC and writing studies facilitate PAR projects, there is a dearth of literature on how to actually *design* and *implement* such projects. So, in the rest of this section, I share details of how this session unfolded with hopes that it might prove useful for other researchers. When I was asked to plan this session, I sought out texts from other disciplines for guidance, but again, failed to find strategies that would help me in my specific stage. Most of the handbooks I found discussed how to find communities to work with or how to manage partnerships. So, using a combination of this advice and my own pedagogical and organizing experience, I put together a session. The session was organized into the following steps:

1. Discuss the importance of PAR, what exactly it means, and what it can contribute.
2. Outline the logistics of the study, including what the fellows would be asked to do each week, and go over consent forms.
3. Clarify what fellows would receive (including compensation for their time, as well as intangible benefits), as well as what I would contribute and how I would benefit from their work.
4. Develop research questions that would guide the inquiry of the study.
 - a. Brainstorm key concepts or ideas that they thought would be important during their placements (Figure 6).
 - b. Review cohort goals for the program, and then return to the list of concepts to add any that might have been overlooked.
 - c. Using this list, break into teams (3-4 participants in each group) to develop 3-5 initial questions.
 - d. Come back to the larger group and try to identify patterns and trends that we might want to pursue.
 - e. Using a framework inspired by empirical research principles (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2008), review best practices for qualitative research questions.
 - f. In the same smaller teams as before, revise list of questions to result in 1-3 research questions.
5. Coming back to the collective group, work to develop three key questions that address the concepts that the participants have identified as central to their intended inquiry.

6. End the session with general reminders, collection of consent forms, and answering any questions.

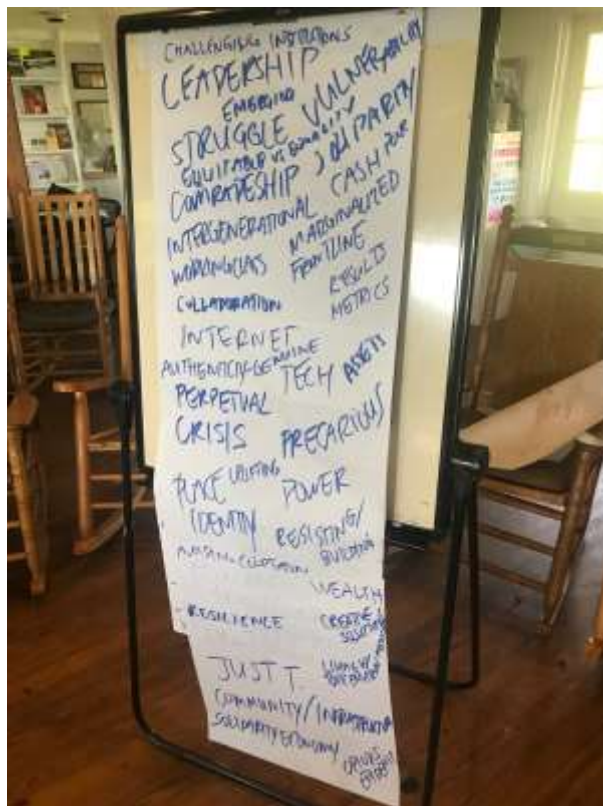


Figure 6: Brainstorming and planning during orientation meeting

We had three groups of four people, and each group generated dynamic, rich questions during each step. When we came back together after splitting apart for the first time, each group had 5 questions, and so we were trying to parse through 15 different, but comparable questions. Realizing that we didn't have enough time to work through each one separately, I made a quick decision to let each group read theirs as the others listened for similarities and differences, and we had a brief conversation about shared themes. Thankfully, there were several elements that had carried through in each group: questions of what wealth looks like; how the past and future influence the communities they would be working in; the relationship between progress and crisis; and the work of economic transition. During this period, we also had a conversation about research questions and what we might do with them. Centering on shared themes, we separated again, and each group was asked to generate 1-3 questions.

When we returned to our full session, we decided that each group would share one question, and as each question was shared, the other groups would shape it in order to capture

their own concerns. This, again, was not as easy as I had anticipated, but it was incredibly fruitful. Conversations about our terms, how to ask questions, what they ultimately wanted to explore, and how their findings could influence their communities unfolded. We ended the session with three questions that everyone agreed upon. Because I wanted the fellows to have some more time to think about these questions, I created a GoogleDoc and shared it with them, so that they could make any changes they wanted to in the week after our meeting. (There were some minor wording changes, but the questions remained largely the same as what we had generated in the session.)

The research questions we generated are displayed in Table 1, next to the research questions that guided my initial foray into this project.

Table 1: Comparison of initial research questions and participant-generated questions

Researcher Questions	Participant Questions
What narratives and knowledges emerge from community organizers working to address issues that arise during a time of economic transition?	How do you see the past, present, or future of this place's economy, culture, or society? Is the just transition framework useful in understanding these elements?
Which elements (and relationships between elements like place, technology, and community) of community organizing do organizers identify as integral to their work?	How might various forms of wealth be converted into people power?
How might this new or increased visibility empower stakeholders in rural regions as they navigate an increasingly interconnected world?	What is the relationship between building the world we want and challenging or resisting harm?

While our questions are not necessarily parallel, they do reference the same types of concerns: place and history, relationships between different elements, notions of wealth and power, and perhaps most importantly, what we might do with this knowledge in order to improve communities. (It is important to note that participants were not privy to my research questions, because I wanted them to develop their own approach, free of my persuasions.) Their questions

were the cornerstone of photography and narrative prompts, focus group and interview questions, and mapping instructions.

3.3.4 Phase One: Collecting photos and narratives

During the initial phase of the project, participants took photos that captured their daily lives in their communities. They also wrote narratives about their experiences, reflecting on their photos and projects. Participants uploaded their photos on a weekly basis through Syncplicity and wrote and shared their narratives each month. (Both their photos and narratives were also used by ADP for their purposes, primarily publicity on their website.) I sent reminder emails every two weeks.

Though participants could have taken photos of anything in their daily lives that they deemed important, they did have prompts to get them started that were developed directly from participants' research questions (Appendix A). For narratives, they were just asked to write about their project's progress.

3.3.5 Phase Two: Focus groups

At two points during the six-month study, participants engaged in focus groups (August 2018 and December 2018). In these focus groups, they reflected on the photos they had taken in the context of their research questions. At the start of the first focus group, I asked participants to take 10 minutes and categorize their photos to see what patterns might emerge within their own photos, and with others. Participants generated tags in the first focus group, which were then organized collaboratively into larger categories during the second focus group, focused on problems, tools, and strategies. For the August focus group, participants were given physical prints of their photos, but in December, participants did this digitally since we held the focus group remotely via Zoom.

As with most focus groups, we began with a set of questions. These questions (Appendix B) asked participants to reflect on their photos and to connect those reflections to their overarching research questions. After August's focus group, we also did a check-in to see if the processes for the study were going smoothly, and if we should re-visit any part of our procedures. After both sessions, we discussed what to do with their photos and the overarching

project. Because both myself and Highlander truly wanted the project to be participatory, with participants driving the inquiry and then actually using their data to address issues in their own communities, we spent a lot of time trying to elicit responses from fellows about what they might want to do. This was admittedly difficult, as they were handling a lot of responsibilities in their placements (a dynamic discussed more extensively in Chapter 6 and the epilogue of this dissertation). At the end of December's focus group, participants seemed to agree that they wanted to spend more time looking at one another's photos to identify themes they would want to write about in public forums, whether for the Highlander website or some other forum focused on Appalachian development work.

3.3.6 Phase Three: Site visits

Using data generated in Phases One and Two, I identified sites that I felt might respond to questions that participants had generated and correspond with my own conclusion that place, technology, and community were central to this project. Initially, I wanted to work with communities that were linked explicitly to digital technological development, but working with the fellows illuminated the complexity of other types of development projects (as well as the problematic discourse surrounding technological advancement in the region). Based on both sets of research questions, I developed a heuristic for site selection that was meant to document the presence of knowledge work, power, place, technology, and community (Appendix C). Given this project's focus on community knowledges and our participatory methods devoted to highlighting insight emerging directly from communities, it seemed important that each case explicitly embraced community knowledges. As for the other parameters, I selected one case focused on place, another focused on technology, and another explicitly devoted to coalition building. In that way, I felt that a range of projects were represented, since the short time frame of the study precluded site visits to all 11 communities.

On my three site visits, I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants, where we talked more extensively about their experiences in their communities and photos they had taken. (Interview questions can be found in Appendix D.) Participants also took me on tours of their communities, providing me with a greater understanding of participants' relationships to place. Each participant also engaged in a participatory mapping session, where they amended a topographical map on Google Maps to mark areas that serve as community wealth (broadly

defined) and areas that drain the community of its wealth (also broadly defined). Taken together, rich textual and visual data gathered from site visits provided a more nuanced look at particular sets of relationships that others might find reminiscent of their own communities.

3.4. Approaches to data coding and analysis

Just as this project uses multiple methods to generate and collect data, I used a layered approach for coding and analyzing that data. Because methods cultivated visual and textual data, woven across sites and places, I focused on connections by mapping concepts across different data collections.

3.4.1 Narrative coding

Coding schemas on narrative inquiry run parallel to those concerned with agency and participatory ethics because of their capacity to house layers of meaning, as opposed to stories with only one interpretation. Clandinin (2013) argues that narrative inquiry is a “relational methodology” requiring an articulation of links between different aspects of a study, including the moment of research and past or future events, participants and environment, and so on (p. 23), which imparts upon the researcher a sense of “relational ethics” (p. 131). The relational nature of narrative is explored by others (Bal, 2009; Hemmings, 2005), and given the multiple narratives that have emerged from this project, relationality within and across these stories drives my analysis. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write that researchers are often uncertain about how to write up results derived from narrative-focused studies because of their “knowing, and caring for” participants (p. 145), and that was certainly true in my case. Using this care, I read through focus group and interview transcripts, as well as participants’ written narratives, first identifying dominant narratives about Appalachian life (as outlined in Chapter One). I then coded transcripts for other narratives that emerged through a grounded theory approach (Strauss, 1987), most of which challenged or critiqued dominant narratives previously identified. This structure shaped the structure of Chapters Four, Five, and Six, as they each respond to prevailing narratives about Appalachian life.

3.4.2 Coding images

As noted earlier in this chapter, visual analysis has been approached from a variety of angles and disciplines, but I am most struck by Gries' argument that "the complexity of visual culture invites us to generate research that enriches these conversations with both our traditional and innovative practices" (2009, p. 449). Using *Tropy*, an open-source research management program for images developed by historians at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, I organized photos generated by participants through various categories: participant, focus group, location, primary subject, and themes. Theme tags came from repeated topics in focus groups (i.e. resilience, history) and visual patterns noted in photos. For example, participants shared screenshots of social media platforms, suggesting that these were a significant aspect of their experiences. Drawing on McNely's description of cross-case comparisons, I connected repeated visual patterns with narratives that emerged from textual analysis in the previous stage.

3.4.3 Mapping relationships

Participants mapped relationships in their communities through participatory mapping on site visits, and I continued this work in my own analysis. To further highlight connections between different types of data, and to explore relationality of stories that emerged in coding, I used postmodern mapping (Sullivan & Porter, 1997) as an analytical tool throughout the project. Mapping practices produced an admittedly wide range of visuals throughout the project, ranging from axis-focused charts, to visual representations of cycles, to the metaphor-based visuals present in this current iteration of the project. Ultimately, these visual representations demonstrate the linkages between different elements that emerged in the data.

In this chapter, I outlined the methodological approach of this study, focusing on affordances of participatory visual methods in documenting community knowledges. Perhaps more important for future work, I discussed the details of planning and implementing a collaborative research design that invited participants to shape their own inquiry. A commitment to reciprocal, generative research is anti-extractive in nature, especially when it takes into account the legacies of a place and its people. Chapter Four details findings about place, arguing

that participants harnessed community knowledges to enhance their places, rather than to replace them.

4. “PEOPLE HAVE NEVER BEEN GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO DREAM THAT ANOTHER PLACE IS POSSIBLE”: DRAWING ON PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE TO ENHANCE PLACE

Appalachia is often essentialized. As Chapter One explained, representations of the region are totalizing, depicting it as a zone rich only in natural resources, a collection of rural ghost towns, or a region filled with backwards folk who are hostile towards outsiders. 11 participants in a participatory photovoice study challenged such one-dimensional representations of place, capturing instead multiple Appalachias. Some supported dominant narratives but many more challenged them. The mountain metaphor laid out in Chapter Two emphasized the gap between technical expertise and community-based knowledges, and I apply it here to highlight a similar gap between the widespread notion that Appalachia either an economically, socially, and culturally depressed place that residents are either eager to leave behind or return to its supposed former glory, and more nuanced accounts based on lived experiences (Figure 7).

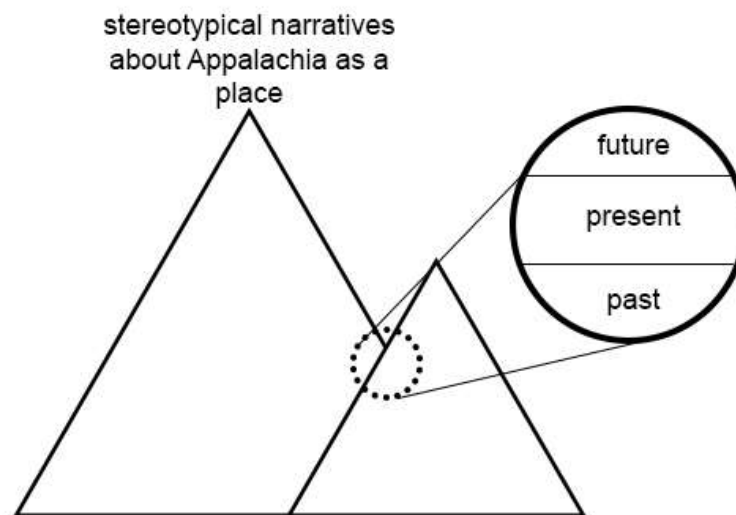


Figure 7: Visual depiction of one-dimensional stories about place in Appalachia

These more nuanced accounts not only provide intimate descriptions of public problems and their effects, but also illuminate stories that have been rendered invisible by dominant narratives. These hidden narratives often provide important context that can help us to understand why places are the way that they are, and in turn, craft forward-facing strategies that honor comprehensive understandings of place. Truly understanding what communities are experiencing

requires a trip down the metaphorical mountainside, and a metic framework that encourages us to expect the unexpected illuminates those experiences more clearly.

Throughout the study, participants took photos, wrote narratives, and verbally expressed the belief that past, present, and future are all intertwined in conversations about place in Appalachia. One of their research questions that we generated together during their orientation session was: “How do you see the past, present, or future of this place’s economy, culture, or society?” Their framing resonates with King’s (2011) understanding of being as interconnected across sites, times, and cultures through *pastpresents*. As I explained in Chapter Two, this dissertation project focuses on particular timespots, or moments where time and culture collide, allowing us to unpack narratives about particular aspects of a community. The callout in Figure 7 shows how a timespot might illuminate stories about place, as places capture past, present, and future simultaneously. By acknowledging multiple, often conflicting, representations of place, participants demonstrated the power of community knowledges rooted in place. Place-based knowledge frames place as a strength to draw upon in community organizing, rather than a weakness to be compensated for, because one must know a place in order to enrich it in ethical, meaningful ways.

This chapter discusses how participants captured place, drawing out connections between representations of past, present, and future that place embodies simultaneously. The layering of time within place provides a more nuanced portrait of Appalachia, challenging media representations that have shaped popular understandings of the region; thus, this chapter positions place as an important vessel for community knowledges and articulates an approach to community organizing that privileges place and by extension, those who dwell in that place. I focus on one particular case, where one participant, Mychele, took on creative placemaking projects to improve community life in Hazard, Kentucky. Mychele’s work represents an approach to community development that draws upon the strengths of a marginalized place and its people, presenting an alternative to traditional economic development practices that can cause harm via dramatic changes that fail to take into account a place’s unique qualities. Her work centers the experiences of real people in Hazard, highlighting moments of ingenuity and exposing unintended consequences of development practices that include gentrification. I supplement Mychele’s work with observations from other participants voiced during focus groups to emphasize the importance of place-based knowledge in times of transition. Instead of

seeking to essentially re-make their places, participants worked to enhance their communities by acknowledging and contextualizing little-known histories, critiquing harmful current practices and suggesting alternatives, and dreaming of futures that privilege people. Ultimately, participants demonstrated that place-based community knowledges might help them to pursue more inclusive futures.

4.1 Creative placemaking in Hazard, Kentucky

Located in southeastern Kentucky, Hazard was once a major producer of coal for the region. It became an economic hub for that portion of the state—boasting shops, a movie theatre, hotels—due to its placement in a large clearing and the dominance of the railroad, which brought supplies in and shipped coal out. This initial economic prosperity has helped Hazard weather a downturn in coal production, as it has fared better than many surrounding communities. Currently, its main draws are a massive medical center and a community college. There are no active coalmines now (you have to drive over to the next county if you want to work in an actual mine), but its 5,000 residents still feel the town’s deep connection to coal daily: many public officials have ties to the coal industry; “Friends of Coal” bumper stickers and license plates are seemingly everywhere; and the main event each summer in Hazard is the Black Gold festival, which necessitates shutting down Main Street for the entire weekend.

Despite this outward love for coal, the participant placed there, Mychele, describes Hazard as “a small town that’s full of good people that have been misplaced and marginalized by big industry.” Mychele grew up in Hazard and returned home through the fellowship. She was placed with Imagine Hazard, a community action group where her main task was to develop a community network through creative placemaking and revitalization. I chose to conduct a site visit to Hazard¹² for two main reasons: first, her project was devoted explicitly to creative placemaking in a downtown area, making it the only project in the fellowship with such a focused geographic mission; and second, Mychele experienced a significant amount of success in her work very early on in the fellowship, while other participants were still getting acclimated

¹² I must note that I have a personal connection to Hazard: my paternal grandfather worked for CSX rail lines and was the stationmaster for the rail yard in Hazard in the early 1970s. As a result, my knowledge of Hazard has been filtered through stories from my family—stories that characterized it as a small town with that loved three things: coal, Kentucky basketball, and keeping to themselves. (My grandmother often shared that it was her least favorite place they lived during Grandpa’s railroad career, because even though she was born and raised just two counties over, “those Perry folks could smell the Powell on her.”)

to their new lives. I suspected that Mychele, having grown up in Hazard, was able to tap into centers of community knowledge, and I was eager to learn how those centers shaped her approach to place-based organizing.

Early on in the study, I asked Mychele to define “creative placemaking,” given its status as a buzzword in the region: “Just thinking of new and different ways to implement ideas. Not just the same old, same old, been at it for years revitalization but like, really thinking of like, okay, how do we make this different, and how do we make it stick?” Her focus on ingenuity as a means to initiate lasting change surfaced throughout her project and meshed with Imagine Hazard’s mission statement, below.

We see a renewed and vitally engaging downtown Hazard that serves as a vibrant center for community life, creatively integrates our culture, built environment, and the natural world; and provides a beacon for new businesses as well as a strongly supportive environment for existing enterprises. Over time, we expect our revitalized downtown to contribute to sustainable livelihoods and to the patient building up of multiple forms of our community wealth.

This statement suggests that Imagine Hazard sees a renewed downtown as the product of creative resource use and the cultivation of multiple forms of wealth—a different approach than traditional economic development practices that focus primarily on economic wealth. Imagine Hazard is unique among fellowship hosts in another way, because before Mychele’s placement, the group had no official staff and depended on volunteer work. During the study, Mychele was the only paid member of the group. She worked out of the offices for the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky, which put her into contact with other people working in nonprofits, many of who were regular contributors to Imagine Hazard’s projects. Mychele had a range of responsibilities, including managing the group’s social media, organizing and running monthly meetings, and developing relationships in the community.

Learning more about her hometown and gathering input from community members who often haven’t had a voice in public dialogues were strategies central to Mychele’s work. Outsiders have been quick to dismiss Hazard as a has-been or cast it as a hotbed of unemployment and hard times, leading to proposals for development that would completely alter the fabric of the town. But Mychele chose to embrace Hazard, including painful elements of its past and its present difficult problems. She assembled an intimate knowledge of Hazard by

listening to community members' stories and began to craft a future that honors community members and their experiences—including marginalized people who have rarely had a voice in public matters.

4.2 Uncovering past stories to contextualize places in the present

At the start of our project, most participant photos that depicted place were focused on elements of the past, particularly those elements that reinforced dominant histories of Appalachia. Photos of museums, old buildings, historical markers, and artifacts were frequent subjects, emphasizing historical connections to different livelihoods and pastimes, including coal mining, farming, forestry, quilting, and even moonshining. While these activities have often been used to present Appalachians as backwards and ignorant, they evoked a sense of pride from participants as they reflected on their family histories linked to these practices. At the same time, participants problematized this emotional reaction: for example, Violet referenced her “mixed feelings” about coal heritage, given the coal industry’s exploitation of people and resources in the region, saying, “We shouldn’t be so prideful of it, you know?” Similar critiques surfaced throughout the study as participants captured places that held admittedly complicated, even painful pasts that challenged official histories and expanded notions of who counts as Appalachian. Media accounts of poor white people in the hills of Appalachia have not only redirected national conversations (as discussed in Chapter One), but have also obscured experiences of Appalachians that don’t fit that portrait. In our project, participants actively uncovered narratives of such experiences, especially in regards to the presence of black Appalachians, whose histories often go unnoticed. By sharing these narratives, participants highlighted important knowledges from their communities that ideally lead to more inclusive futures.

4.2.1 Seeking out little-known racial histories in Hazard

Nearly a third of Mychele’s photos were coded as depicting the past in some way (31 out of 97), suggesting that she thought about Hazard’s past frequently during her project. During the first several months of our project, this focus was especially heavy, presumably because of the building she worked in. The building that housed The Foundation (as she called it) was an iconic

part of the city's history, showing up in photos for most of the 20th century. Currently, inside that building, photos of Hazard's past are displayed on walls throughout—"so there's a lot of representation that still lives within it," she noted. In conversations about the past, though, Mychele tended to focus on narratives that shifted her understanding of her hometown by illuminating the presence of racial histories in Hazard that are often ignored.



Figure 8: Pool at La Citadelle hotel



Figure 9: 1988 Jesse Jackson presidential rally

During our first focus group, Mychele shared a photo of a pool (Figure 8), located at La Citadelle, a resort on a bluff overlooking the town. In the 1940s and 50s, it was a popular destination for coal barons, politicians, and even some celebrities trying to escape the public eye. La Citadelle's existence was a marker of Hazard's wealth, making it a point of pride for many residents. But before Mychele could explain the story behind the pool photo, another participant asked if it was "the" pool in Hazard. When Mychele responded affirmatively, the other participant said, "I know some stories about that, that they like—about they wouldn't desegregate it, so that they filled it up with concrete so no one could use it anymore." This incredibly ugly history is ignored in dominant narratives about the resort, but it is undoubtedly important in understanding relationships between black and white residents in the area; further, by ignoring this history, black residents of Perry County are erased from history completely.

This clearly bothered Mychele, as she shared another photo during our individual interview that showed a Jesse Jackson rally from his 1988 presidential campaign (Figure 9). When I asked her why this photo seemed important to her, she said, given the other photo she had shared in the focus group, "Hazard is not necessarily a town that I would expect Jesse Jackson to come and try to campaign at." She said that her surprise came from the history suggested by La Citadelle and the fact that almost every face you see on Main Street is white. But, she hedged this surprise by sharing with me that Hazard is actually "the most diverse place in eastern Kentucky, which I didn't know until I started working here." We have to take a moment and note what diverse in an Eastern Kentucky context means: according to estimates from the 2018 US Census, Perry County (as a whole) is 96.4% Caucasian, with 1.5% of its population reporting as African American. Mychele, citing the fact that Hazard's diversity was slim compared to more urban centers in the region, stated that she "just didn't expect, of all places in the world, for him to come to Hazard, Kentucky to campaign. And [the gym] looks packed!" Presumably Jackson's pro-union stance enticed a gym full of people to attend, and offered positive optics for his campaign and, perhaps less intentionally, Hazard.

In spite of this more positive reading of Hazard's racial histories, Mychele noted that racism very much "still exists" in the area. She cited several examples, such as Confederate flags being sold at the annual Black Gold festival, as well as moments of covert racism occurring in community spaces. Reflecting on her work in the community, she commented that she often heard the phrase, "We have traditional values here." She continued, "Okay, well, define that.

What does that mean? Does it mean that everybody has to be a Christian and everybody has to be white?...[I think] it's a code for being racist. Is that what you're saying to me? Is that what you're telling people of color in your groups?" Mychele linked this attitude to the low number of people of color participating in development work in Hazard. Though she said she didn't think that these sentiments were necessarily intentional, they were certainly "noticeable" and a problem, as they perpetuated harmful dynamics. By discussing the fleeting presence (and overwhelming absence) of people of color in representations of Hazard, Mychele pointed to the painful past that very few people consider—or are asked to consider, as popular media whitewashes the area. But through her explicit focus on these dynamics, Mychele brought these issues to the forefront in her work. Many of her efforts involved reaching out to people not typically involved in public projects, in hopes of "getting other groups of people involved" in decision making processes.

4.2.2 Illuminating overlooked histories of black coal miners

Like Mychele, other participants redefined the parameters of whose stories are included in histories of Appalachia. Popular narratives about Appalachia's history often center coal miners, who are most often depicted as white, middle-aged men. Participants, however, shared several counternarratives centering the experiences of black residents in the region—including African American coal miners who moved from southern states into the mountains for well-paying union jobs. Lynch, Kentucky is a coal town built by U.S. Coal and Coke. In the 1930s, the company employed 4,000 people and owned 1,000 structures in the town, housing people from 38 ethnic backgrounds (Wagner & Obermiller, 2004). When coal jobs began to decline, many of these miners moved out of the region and into larger cities in the Midwest for manufacturing jobs. This migration formed the Eastern Kentucky Social Club, which organizes yearly reunions of people connected to Lynch in some way or another and represents diversity in Appalachian history that is often overlooked.¹³ One participant captured an image of the building the Social Club operates out of (what was once the segregated black high school) in his travels around the region (Figure 10). This image took on more significance as our project progressed: our first focus group was held in what was once the building's cafeteria, and members of the club shared their family stories with us while we were there. By documenting cultural hubs of

¹³ Royce's May 2019 photo essay in *The New York Review of Books* provides a compelling current look at Lynch and its residents.

Appalachians who aren't represented in stock histories of the region, participants expanded understandings of who is considered Appalachian.



Figure 10: The Eastern Kentucky Social Club



Figure 11: Historical marker of The Block in Charleston

4.2.3 Reconciling competing histories about black communities

In addition to amplifying often-overlooked histories, participants provided context for histories of marginalized groups recorded in official narratives. This contextualization is important for vulnerable groups, as institutional histories often contribute to their continued disenfranchisement. During our first focus group, Phoebe noted that she took a lot of pictures of black places and neighborhoods, including the plaza where she worked. Her placement was with a nonprofit dedicated to tackling race-based socioeconomic inequality through youth organizing, so it makes sense that she spent a lot of time in community spaces. She shared a picture of a historical marker of The Block (Figure 11), which discusses the history of the area. When Phoebe shared this photo, another participant working in Charleston added that “part of the history of that [area] is that black people were pushed away from their homes when the interstate was put in; they were moved to developments that were up on the mountains which then...made it harder for them to get down to the city.” The marker does acknowledge that 1960s “urban renewal and interstate system” contributed to the area’s decline, but fails to explain that neighborhood’s origins. Charleston’s initial industry was salt mining, and in the early to mid-1800s, the primary laborers were slaves (West Virginia Geological and Economic Survey). The Block was where many descendants of those slaves lived, and so holds a deeply painful history that precedes the prosperity of minority-owned businesses the historical marker lauds. Phoebe called her boss’ choice to locate her organization’s headquarters in that area “strategic,” because of the fact that most of the property is still owned by black business owners. But “now it’s like, a center for the opioid epidemic, where you come any time of day, and you’ll see a lot of doo-dadders just sitting around in slow motion, doped up. So it’s hard to see it as once being a paradise.” The Block holds an immense amount of history wrapped up in pain and pride—while the neighborhood was once a thriving place for the black community despite its dark origins, it is now a place that showcases the byproducts of infrastructural progress negatively impacting already-vulnerable populations.

Historical markers surfaced again in the project, this time with contested—rather than incomplete—information. Because Baxter’s placement was with an agency dedicated to land reform in the region, they were particularly primed to notice issues of ownership and tenancy. When looking for a place to live during the fellowship, they viewed a house in an area haunted by the Hawks Nest Tunnel Disaster. As part of a hydroelectricity project in the 1930s, workers

tunneled underneath a nearby mountain to divert the New River; however, no safety equipment was provided to the miners, and many developed silicosis, a deadly lung disease. The number of people who died from these events is disputed: the historical marker at the site states 109 deaths; a Congressional hearing documented 476 deaths; but community records indicate between 700-1,000 deaths, many of which failed to be recognized by officials, assumedly for political and economic reasons (Spangler, 2008). Additionally, many of these workers were black miners, which undoubtedly contributed to the erasure of their presence in this narrative. In present day, Baxter noted the presence of pro-coal bumper stickers in the basement, including one that read, “I’m pumped for coal to liquid fuels!” (Figure 12). This sentiment is admittedly troubling, given the history of the area. However, Baxter also noted a challenge to this embrace of coal as they toured the house: previous renters had left a mug shot of Rosa Parks on a staircase (Figure 13). “To me, that’s resiliency; that was really symbolic...and I’m not sure who lived there before me but obviously they...wanted to leave this here for the next people and I thought that was really cool.” The past and present of a place coalesce here: renters left a picture of Rosa Parks on a staircase located in a neighborhood lived in by mostly people of color, marginalized by the same economic and political forces as in the 1930s. The placement of that photo, in that house, in that neighborhood, and its discovery by Baxter, invites resistance through an embrace of the histories of marginalized people.

Participants shared accounts of the past in order to contextualize the places they were working in. By challenging institutional narratives through their articulation of stories often unheard or ignored, they illuminated a different understanding of place that acknowledges multiple narratives and experiences. Ellie wrote the following in a blog entry soon after the fellows’ orientation tour in which they visited one another’s communities: “To think about what parts of us and what parts of history we are taking to the future, what we need to remember of the struggles of the past, to accept history as it is, without denying or dwelling on it.” And part of this work is to actively document the struggles of the past that are left out of mainstream narratives. Building a comprehensive understanding of the history of a place was important for participants’ local and regional work. Stories functioned as important entry points into place as participants learned about their host communities and began to assemble community knowledges that shaped their social justice work throughout the fellowship.



Figure 12: Pro-coal bumper sticker on furnace



Figure 13: Mug shot of Rosa Parks left on staircase

4.3 Documenting present patterns to promise more ethical futures

Often, our primary relationship to place emerges from how we interact with that place on a daily basis. Participants captured photos of the buildings they worked in, community spaces they frequented, and even their homes that they got used to as they acclimated to a new place. In their work, they encountered place-based development practices that privileged humans over place, leading to economic, social, and environmental problems. But they also captured moments where people worked *with* place, treating it as a vibrant aspect of life in Appalachia, rather than a resource to be extracted from, or a ruined plot to replace. These moments challenge dominant narratives that cast Appalachia as a barren wasteland with little to offer its residents.

4.3.1 Identifying and battling exploitation through community-led projects in Hazard

Mychele noted repeatedly that Hazard was facing deep-rooted problems, which she traced to a variety of causes, including an economic landscape where one industry dominated the town's livelihood. She described Hazard as "once a coal town, now a medical town," pointing to the presence of a massive medical center in the area that serves much of southeastern Kentucky. While this medical center seems like a positive community component, providing jobs and increased access to medical services, Mychele explicitly pointed to the medical center as an

institution that drains Hazard. During each site visit, I asked participants to engage in some participatory mapping. Drawing on their research questions, I asked them first to drop blue markers on places in their community that they see as strengths, and second, to drop red markers on sites that drain their community. Some markers in Mychele's map (Figure 14) are expected: libraries, parks, and business districts are all noted as strengths. But several surprises emerge in Mychele's labeled weaknesses, including the medical center and the police department.

She articulated two main reasons for her categorization of the medical center. First, the hospital employs a large number of traveling nurses who price out other occupants in area housing stock, worsening a housing crisis brought about by the coal industry's downturn and the opioid epidemic. Second, the medical center is part of the University of Kentucky Markey Cancer Center network and holds medical trials that residents of southeastern Kentucky are often recruited for. Because they often don't have the means to travel the two hours to Lexington for treatment, or don't have adequate insurance coverage, many people in the area enroll in research trials.

I always say that Hazard is the guinea pig of UK. They just put random people and random doctors and random things here to see if it works because we're such a condensed cancer county.¹⁴ Almost everybody is going to have cancer, like, it's inevitable, I think. Just anywhere in eastern Kentucky. So they just send people here to experiment. I couldn't tell you how many times somebody in my family, or like somebody else's family is like, "Oh, my grandma has cancer but they're trying a new medication that just came out." And it's like, I only see that here.

Mychele's casting of Hazard as a town that has been disenfranchised by industry undergirds this assessment, as she locates the same kind of disenfranchisement happening with medical trials. Though obviously medical care for cancer patients has many benefits, trials aimed at vulnerable populations exploit their circumstances (and often, their hope for a cure) in order to advance medicine—but also to fund pharmaceuticals and other big industries in the medical field. So community members might see the medical center's presence as even more insidious than

¹⁴ According to the Kentucky Cancer Registry, from 2011-2015 in Perry County, the cancer death rate was 249 deaths per 100,000 people, whereas statewide, the rate was 198 per 100,000 people, making the likelihood of cancer in Perry County approximately 21% higher than the state as a whole. Further, cancer currently kills Kentuckians at the highest rate of any state in the United States.

environmental hazards that go along with extractive industries, because instead of promising jobs, these trials promise life.

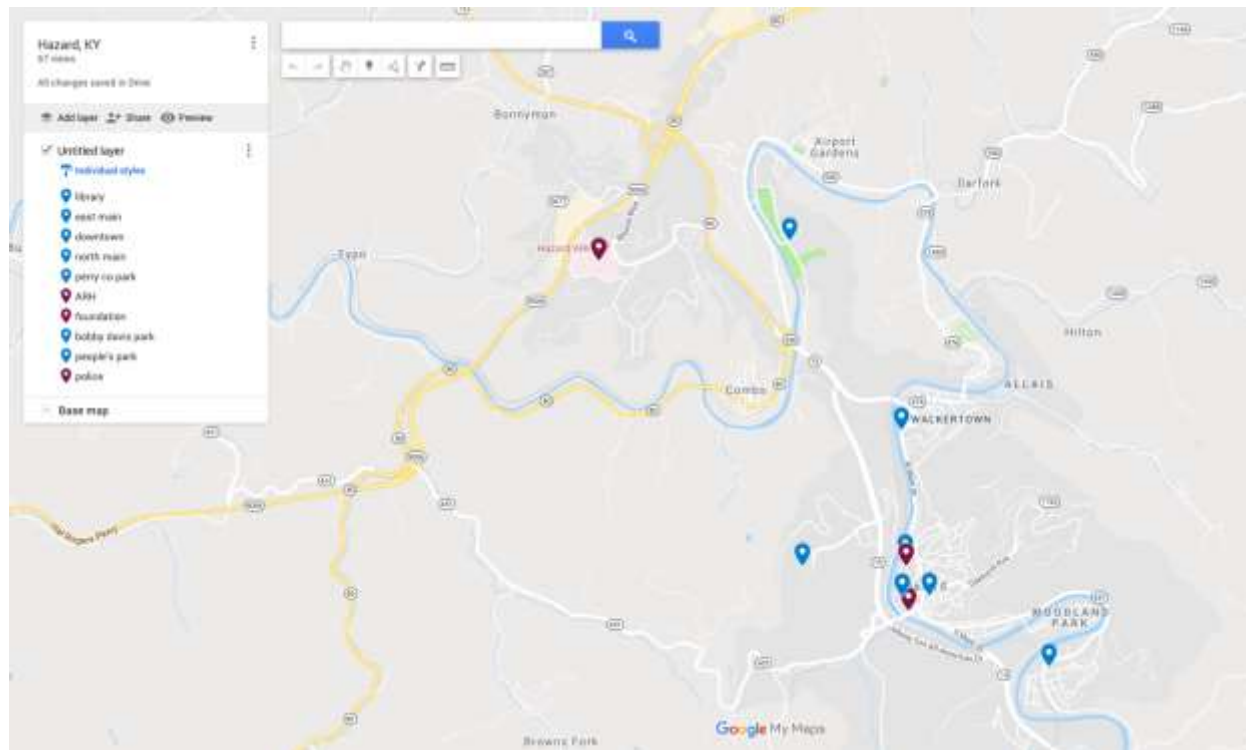


Figure 14: Participant map of Hazard, Kentucky

Place and health are undoubtedly intertwined, resulting in the need for certain types of care, especially in areas like southeastern Kentucky where populations have typically been underserved. However, Mychele took issue with what she saw to be predatory aspects of the hospital's presence in the community and unintended consequences of its presence like an increase in rental prices that actually worsened public health conditions. Other participants expressed a suspicion towards the similarities they saw between extractive industries and healthcare corporations. Violet, the participant placed in the New River Valley of Virginia, had similar feelings towards an increase in medical hubs across the region, "considering the reason we have so many health problems is because we got poisoned for so many years. So it's like, people come in here, and they make money on us, and they poison us, and then they're going to turn around and make money off of us for trying to fix us." Though we often think of medical care as inherently beneficent, participants demonstrated the complexities of increasing access to healthcare in rural areas.

To combat this extractive dynamic Mychele identified in Hazard, she worked directly with community stakeholders to document their actual needs and to identify resources already present in the community to meet those needs. Her largest project during the first half of the fellowship was the development of the Medical Mile. At the start of her placement, it was a plaza with a smattering of businesses and some doctor's offices. Outside developers had pitched plans to bulldoze it and re-develop the land to build a new shopping plaza or housing, but community stakeholders proposed using pre-existing structures for a health and wellness hub. Plans for the area included green space, murals, walking paths, an inexpensive fitness center, and office space for services like nutritional counseling. Rather than dramatically altering the layout of the plaza, organizers worked to use what was already there, making the project financially feasible and ultimately more innovative. The Medical Mile is an example of forward-thinking ingenuity built directly upon place-based knowledges, as stakeholders focused on wellness and prevention through community empowerment and the utilization of available resources.

Mychele's work with the Medical Mile points to the importance of place-based development that anticipates the unique needs of residents, and she took on this work with other projects. She felt that part of her job with Imagine Hazard was to increase resident agency in addressing public problems. But despite the town's size and Mychele's ability to draw on long-standing social relationships from her childhood, Imagine Hazard struggled to foster participation in their central focus: open community forums where residents could pitch ideas, bring up problems, and just be present with others in the community. Mychele tried for several months to persuade people to come to meetings, and had very little success. So, she took to the streets—literally. She spent two full days walking up and down Main Street, talking to people and asking them what would persuade them to come to an event. Mychele told me that people repeatedly expressed frustration with public forums because they felt that nothing ever came of those meetings. So, she felt that an event with a clear path of action would potentially encourage people to show. She ultimately decided to put her resources into planning a microgrant event called Hazard Soup where people could come to the meeting, pay five dollars, and get dinner. Anyone there could pitch an idea to improve the community, everyone there could vote, and the winner would walk away with that money to fund their project.

The event was an unprecedented success, as it raised 365 dollars and got citizens energized through direct action. The money went to a group of high school students who wanted

to open a coffee shop downtown to encourage entrepreneurship and professional development opportunities for young people in the area. And while only that one idea was awarded the money from Hazard Soup, the other three ideas pitched all moved forward in other ways: a mural project got picked up by another community organization; the person who proposed a program trying to place homeless people in work environments started coming to Imagine Hazard meetings regularly to see how she might develop that idea; and the pitch for a refillable water station got the attention of the AmeriCorps Vista, who took on the project and presented it to city council the following month. Two more Hazard Soup events were held over the next several months, with even more money awarded to area residents. Mychele's efforts to meet community members where they were, and to provide a platform where they drove change, offered a new approach to placemaking in the area.

4.3.2 Problematizing current place-based development practices

Participants captured moments in time that suggested unequal relationships between people and place, including those that depicted elements of extractive industries. Rosie, who has a rich past of working on environmental concerns in the Deep South, captured photos of coal mining equipment and damaged mountaintops (Figures 15 and 16). These types of images represent a means-to-an-end attitude towards the region—an attitude that has been displayed and perpetuated for decades by economic interests and deeply felt by people in these communities as the mountains around them are literally dismantled. Participants captured other scenes of human-place interactions that seemed, at least initially, less exploitative. During our second focus group, Ira talked about an old mountaintop removal site that had been lauded as an example of how land ruined by mining practices might be used for new purposes. A prison and an industrial park were located on the premises, but Ira noted that very few businesses were actually functioning, “so it’s just like empty buildings with empty parking lots, unfinished.” Near this human-focused environment is a game area stocked with elk, also partially built upon a former mine site. During her placement, Donald Trump Jr. visited the grounds and posted pictures on Instagram, which Ira shared with us (Figure 17) to highlight the publicity that the area had gained. Ira described it as “this really weird wildlife place,” reflecting on the fact that though it seemed to be a natural area, it was purely in the service of humans. Juxtaposed with the prison and an industrial park, it felt “really bleak.” While the prison and the industrial park do admittedly make use of land that

otherwise would lie barren, these institutions don't radically enhance natural aspects of the land, or quality of life for community members. Instead, this area is the product of place-based development practices that privilege financial gain for already wealthy corporate and political interests.



Figure 15: Coal mining infrastructure



Figure 16: Results of strip mining



Figure 17: Screenshot of Donald Trump Jr.'s Instagram account

4.3.3 Embracing practices that mesh people and places

Presumably considering the linkages between present harmful practices and possible futures, participants documented another type of relationship between place and people: one of mutual gain. Working *with* the land was a theme throughout our project. Rosie wrote in a blog that it was important to “honor local knowledge and the ways in which different groups of people use, enjoy, restore, and reclaim land.” Farming and gardening came up frequently with participants, as they encountered projects that sought to mesh futures of people and land. For example, some crops can be grown on abandoned land mine sites (including some varieties of grapes and hops used for brewing beer), and actually return nutrients to the soil. Several participants took photos of a hops farm (Figure 18) they visited on their learning tour at the start of the fellowship. Pictures of a community garden (Figure 19) and an apiary on abandoned mine

land (Figure 20) also demonstrate an awareness of how humans and place might work together. Such practices demonstrated the possibilities for communities to engage in generative relationships with place through practices that don't just challenge extractive habits, but literally transform land has been damaged by such habits.

Participants also pointed to the importance of places constructed by human hands to serve as community hubs. Throughout our project, participants noted the importance of seeking out community in their organizing work, rather than trying to build it (discussed more in Chapter 6). And on several occasions, participants referenced the local Wal-Mart parking lot as a significant place for community interaction. In a blog entry about the efforts of a local church group to recruit new members, Jackson wrote:

Wal-Mart is an area where lots of people from all over Letcher County come and the church in question knew that as locals. They had a packed tent for a long period of time, with people coming and going as they came and went from the parking lot. I'm not saying we should start staking claim to Wal-Mart parking lots, but just that this is a great example of where our priorities should lie: we should be meeting people where they're at, literally and figuratively, and building FOR them, WITH them, always keeping them the main priority.



Figure 18: Hops farm in Campbell County, TN



Figure 19: Residents working in community garden



Figure 20: Apiary on previous mining site

Oftentimes, it seems that organizers create events and hope that community members will attend (as Imagine Hazard had been doing before Mychele's placement). But Jackson points out that communities already exist in places, and that perhaps a more effective way to organize would be to seek out people in those places. Place takes on meaning because of our relationship to it, and that includes how we use it. As Jackson noted in our first focus group, "the people...are what makes a place a place to me." The ways that we use place in the present directly affect the possibilities that place holds for the future, and participants advocated for approaches to development that meshed people *with* place instead of valuing people *over* place.

4.4 Reconciling visions of the future with legacies of the past

Finally, participants captured a small number of photos that gestured towards the future. Obviously, we can't see a place in the future, but we *can* imagine it, and histories and current attitudes shape these visions. The logistical difficulties of depicting the future aside, participants suggested that the lower number of future-oriented photos was the result of an overwhelming discursive focus on the region's past. In our first focus group, one participant said, "Well, I can't imagine a future because I've never been given the opportunity." This sentiment surfaced once again in the second focus group: "[Thinking about what comes next] is something I'm really struggling with. So when I look at the past, present, and future, I see that all in one right there. It's all encompassing." Throughout the project, participants captured present practices with future implications: those linked with a return to harmful behaviors from the past that disenfranchised vulnerable people and places, and others that make space for ethical, sustainable futures that embrace all aspects of place and build upon community knowledges so that a new future might unfold—not one that flows directly into damaging patterns from the past.

4.4.1 Challenging marginalizing practices to envision a revitalized Hazard

Like other participants, Mychele leveled significant critiques against development work in the Appalachian region, calling many approaches "gentrification in disguise." Mychele believed that the desire to bring in money from external institutions and people often displaced members of the community, and she deliberately tried to protect vulnerable community members in her work. During her placement in Hazard, Mychele worked with members of likeminded

organizations on a five million dollar Abandoned Mine Land grant for revitalizing downtown Hazard, including efforts to make it more accessible. The grant application outlined plans for sidewalks beyond Main Street to make downtown more walkable, improvements to current sidewalk infrastructure, and public water fountains and bathrooms, including showers. It included figures on what, according to Mychele, was “our dream...enough money to see a wealth-sharing program on Main Street to prevent gentrification.” They also wanted to use that funding to hire a city developer to work on these projects full-time, and had secured support from the City of Hazard, which Mychele described as “totally invested.” She connected the need for these services directly to the affordable housing shortage in Hazard, revealing that there was a substantial homeless population in Hazard. In addition to not having many public services available to them, Mychele revealed through our mapping exercise (refer to Figure 14) that the police actively criminalized homeless people. Mychele’s vision for the future of downtown included spaces that were hospitable to transient members of the population, which would ideally curb some of that hostility.

Mychele also set her sights on ending practices contributing to homelessness in the area, including gentrification. She worried that traditional models of economic development, lauded by many in the region, would displace even more people from their homes, and exacerbate the relationship between police and the public—a worry not shared by every peer organization. She described some groups as having “weak points in places that are trying to do good.” Mychele spent a lot of time attempting to move well-meaning community members “past the idea of gentrification” though “they don’t think it’s gentrification.” Rather, she said, they see renovating buildings and raising rents as progress, because it brings in a different kind of tenant, and when “they hear ‘gentrification,’ they think, ‘That’s not what we’re doing.’” Mychele (and other participants) encountered many people in their work that didn’t seem to consider gentrification to be a possibility in rural towns, associating it instead with urban areas. They collectively felt that this orientation towards place—out with the old, in with the new—created troubling dynamics in development work. Mychele felt that most of the people she worked with in Hazard wanted to “do good, but what that good is needs to be defined.”

As a result, much of Mychele’s work was designed to get stakeholders in the same room so that they could collaboratively work out what moves would benefit the community. In addition to Hazard Soup events, Mychele took over organizing candidate forums for local

elections at the start of her placement, including four forums to be broadcasted over local radio airwaves for the sheriff, mayor, commissioner, and county judge executive races. Giving the community an opportunity to engage directly with candidates was a way for Imagine Hazard to encourage civic involvement and to foster ownership over events in the town. Mychele extended these efforts to smaller community forums that were held all over Hazard in efforts to engage different populations, including high school students. These forums placed community members in a position of power, asking them to drive the meetings and define what developing Hazard would mean to them. For Mychele, creative placemaking was just as much about the people as the place, and she worked to encourage pride in her town among fellow community members. Mychele wanted to see Hazard become the best version of itself, not a replica of other so-called successful small towns: “...Everybody wants all these bougie things and they don’t want the cute quirky little Mom and Pop store...And everyone models, look at Pikeville, look at Corbin, look at this place. They did this, they did that. But we’re not them. Every town is different.”

Contrary to the work of large-scale economic development, Mychele’s work directly involved community stakeholders, listening to their ideas about what should happen in their town. Her work drew on place as a strength, as something to enhance, rather than something to dramatically change. While she acknowledged the particular problems of her area, she addressed them in ways that came from the community, rather than best practices developed somewhere else. By crafting connections between different stakeholders, organizations, and resources, Mychele actively drew together Hazard’s past and present, in order to revitalize what was already there instead of replacing it. Mychele described revitalization as “CPR. I think that Hazard needs—I don’t think it needs all these new, new, new things, I think we need to build on what we have.” Mychele’s work presents an alternative to standard economic development practices that render a place devoid of its complex history and often further marginalize already-vulnerable community members—an alternative that directly engages community knowledges found through an intimate knowledge of place.

4.4.2 Calling out gentrification and re-branding efforts

Other participants noted the presence of gentrification in their communities, as well. Three of the eleven participants worked in Charleston, the largest city in West Virginia. At the start of our first focus group, participants brought up the re-naming of a neighborhood on the

western side of the city from “West Side” to “Elk City,” even painting the new name on murals in the area (Figure 21). Participants working in that area linked the re-branding to gentrification and the implications of that process. Baxter called the move “blatant anti-blackness” by people that owned property in that district, who included a lawyer who earned his fortune by defending gas and oil companies. Phoebe went a step further, saying that this re-branding was “a tool”:

Like let’s say a shooting happens at the One Stop by the Charleston Opera Guild, they’ll say: *Shooting happens on the West Side*. But let’s say, you’re holding an event giving out bookbags: *Carrie’s having an event in Elk City....* When something good has happened, they say Elk City, when it’s something negative, they say West Side.

Phoebe noted the rhetorical framing of one geographic area in multiple ways, and how that framing serves dominant interests. As she notes, Elk City is the name linked to progress and community, while the West Side—the name of the neighborhood historically used—represents crime and, though she doesn’t explicitly say it, black residents. Naming practices are just one of several efforts developers use to overhaul up-and-coming areas and displace cash-poor populations.

The influx of new businesses into the West Side (Figures 22 and 23) has pushed out not only residents unable to afford rent, but businesses that once served those residents. Baxter cited the presence of a bookstore with a liquor license as evidence of this process in our first focus group. The bookstore had taken the place of a Dollar General, and actually featured a photo of the old Dollar General in the window (Figure 24). Baxter said of the developers, “They’re so proud they took this community’s Dollar General away. You know they’re proud, they think that’s cool and hipster. So, you know, to me it’s just like, blatant gentrification.” While developers see a future of new businesses, new residents, and new money, these community organizers see the continuation of gentrification that disproportionately affects people of color and other marginalized groups.

Participants were not alone in their beliefs. In that very same neighborhood with the bookstore, posters with economic development messaging appeared. The posters focused on topics like placemaking, art, and public space. Baxter shared that they had seen the posters and shrugged them off as stereotypical development fodder, but later, noticed that someone had been tagging them (Figure 25). Some tags were:



Figure 21: Recently painted Elk City mural



Figure 22: Exterior of restaurant in West Side/Elk City neighborhood



Figure 23: Interior a restaurant/bar in West Side/Elk City neighborhood

4.4.3 Dreaming of futures that privilege place *and* people

Participants documented practices and attitudes that challenged these seemingly insurmountable events, even in neighborhoods where gentrification was actively driving residents away from their homes. Carrie shared that on the West Side, there was a gallery owner that “understands that gentrification has happened and...she has a desire to lessen that gap.” The gallery owner told Carrie that she noticed people from other areas of the city come to her gallery, but that very few residents of the neighborhood ever visited, presumably because they didn’t see it as a space meant for them. The owner told Carrie she wanted to change that, and asked Carrie what the community might need. “Is a plumber needed? Is a welder needed? What can be offered at her space to make it useful for people in the community?” Though the gallery owner benefited from the gentrifying of the neighborhood, she did express a desire to serve people in the neighborhood, which does suggest a collaborative, generative future—a future that showed up frequently in participant responses. They took many photos of community gatherings, especially gatherings where young people were asked to take leadership roles in discussing what they wanted to see in their places (Figures 26 and 27). As Jackson suggested throughout the study, places took on significance when they were filled with people, especially people committed to moving Appalachia into a future that honored community knowledges.

Intergenerational gatherings proved to be an important type of assembly for several participants, because they provided opportunities for sharing knowledges across community members. Carrie, who worked largely on issues related to the opioid crisis, spent a lot of personal time on a series of open mic nights. The event hadn’t been very successful in previous years, but at the urging of Carrie and others, the hosting group made them a monthly occurrence. This stability seemingly encouraged involvement and represented the types of cross-sector collaboration that the fellowship was organized around. In our first focus group, Carrie revealed that her interest in the open mic nights was primarily due to the attendance of two young people whose mothers’ absence were linked to the opioid epidemic. She said that she felt it was valuable for these young people to be in “an intergenerational space” and “to have the support around their talents, and a place to go where they can be expressive to themselves.” In a later blog entry, she wrote, “Creating a safe space, securing long-lasting relationships, having a growth-mindset—these are just a few of the actions that will help transition us into a new Appalachia.” Explicit efforts to create spaces where vulnerable community members might be heard offers a

way to document their stories and weave those into development practices, promising more inclusive, vibrant futures.



Figure 26: Gathering of high school students in southeastern Kentucky



Figure 27: Youth organizer gathering at Highlander

4.5 Arranging place-based community knowledges that capture the nuances of Appalachia

Navigating their community development projects required participants to assert their intimate knowledges of local places. Even at moments when negative depictions seemed to hold true, as they encountered the realities of the opioid epidemic, racial and class disparities, and environmental hazards, participants asserted the value of place-based community work. Rather than glossing over these issues or trying to move those problems out of sight (as gentrification does), participants delved into the past, took stock of the present, and envisioned futures that would embrace place and position it as part of the solution to these problems—rather than the cause. By viewing place as a resource for community development, participants illuminated stories that challenge one-dimensional depictions of Appalachia. As one participant explained it: “There’s complication and nuance here that I think is never represented in media.” Participants assembled narratives detailing typically unheard experiences and identities, suggesting the possibility for such work to reframe power relations in a region that has long been occupied by external institutions, and to invite participation from residents whose stories often go unheard.

Mychele’s approach to creative placemaking demonstrates that a place can be enhanced, rather than replaced, *especially* when community members are involved in decisions about the future of their homes. Even as she acknowledged troubled histories and seeks to alter negative trends resulting from those histories, she built on the strengths of Hazard. She wasn’t attempting to shape Hazard to fit the mold of other cities in the region that have experienced economic success post-downtown revitalization. Instead, she was trying to craft a new mold by bringing in community voices and aligning those with the town’s character. Embracing the uniqueness of a place seems especially important when that place has been disenfranchised, but something that can be difficult in the face of wicked problems. Mychele traced her decision to initially leave Hazard for college to her belief that it was a “life-sucking small town.” But after being away for a few years, she felt compelled to come home. “It was kind of like a calling—like I need to go home and make Hazard better, Hazard is hurting. It’s almost like your kid.” Of course, just because she returned home, didn’t mean her task was easy. “I didn’t really realize how deep the problems were. I knew it was bad but I didn’t realize how bad it was and it’s just kind of like, I have a lot of regret not starting this work sooner.” Mychele responded to current needs by positioning Hazard and its history as a resource, rather than embracing efforts to completely recast Hazard in the likeness of other places, or return it to a previous iteration.

Unlike outside interests that often scapegoat Appalachians and Appalachia itself, participants positioned place as a hub of collective strength. Place served as an entry point for collecting and sharing community knowledges, as it offered an instant connection for community members. These community knowledges, however, didn't always mesh with overarching narratives about Appalachian history, or even one another; thus, a metic framework that acknowledges the value of contested, complicated stories offers us a way to reconcile in a world that is constantly moving, constantly shifting, and constantly inviting us to engage in savvy, creative ways. In this chapter, I argued that participants' embrace of place, with all of its imperfections, presents a more comprehensive understanding of Appalachian communities built on community knowledge. Stories about place that emerge from the mountainside are more nuanced, complex, and comprehensive than the stories resting on the mountaintop. Chapter Five examines stories about technological progress, investigating how organizers harness everyday technologies to foster community-focused growth and challenge exploitative dynamics that serve those already in power.

5. “IT’S NOT GOING TO BE GOOGLE SHIT”: SUBVERTING SILICON HOLLERS BY CRAFTING COMMUNITY-FOCUSED TECHNOLOGY NETWORKS

For the last decade, murmurs of technological advancement have echoed across Appalachia as stakeholders have searched for ways to increase economic and educational opportunities in rural areas. As Chapter One pointed out, this excitement has led to a new moniker for areas in the region that seek to become hubs of technological innovation: Silicon Hollers. At first glance, these projects seem to offer a great deal of promise to people in the region, offering economic and technological infrastructure that includes high-paying jobs; however, 11 participants in a participatory photovoice study challenged this popular narrative by questioning whose interests it actually serves. I again use the mountain figure from Chapter Two to illustrate the gap between Silicon Holler narratives and accounts of technology use on the ground in Appalachia (Figure 28).

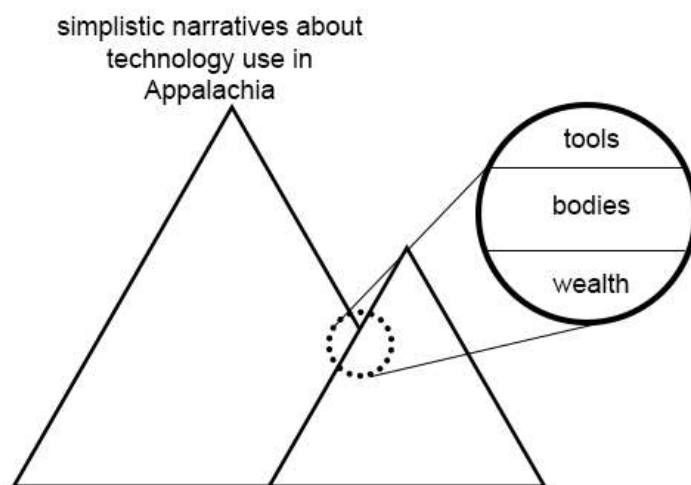


Figure 28: Visual representation of dominant narratives about technology in Appalachia

Participants’ everyday experiences with technology provide more nuanced accounts of how large-scale technological progress in the region has disenfranchised communities, calling for an alternative approach to technology that privileges community growth rather than corporate gain. Though narratives lauding immense technological growth through coding programs and other

ventures are highly visible, traveling through hills and hollers reveals more realistic relationships between communities and technology—some generative, some damaging.

Participants repeatedly dismissed Silicon Holler stories as convenient narratives peddled by powerful political and economic forces, rather than an accurate representation of what might actually benefit communities in Appalachia. The perpetuation of this narrative obscures community voices and knowledges that, if we listen, reveal that the era of Silicon Hollers threatens to repeat history. Formulated during the initial meeting about our project, participants' second guiding question was, "How might various forms of wealth be converted into people power?" This question led to reflections on how technology has historically been used by wealthy institutions to wield power over laborers, and urged participants to consider how social, cultural, and intellectual wealth might supplement their work, technological and otherwise. Participant photos and responses capture important understandings of technology that are not being heard or listened to by dominant institutions making decisions about Appalachia's future, but are guiding the work of community organizers on the ground. Figure 28's callout shows how narratives about technology in Appalachia might surface at the intersection of wealth systems, tools, and bodies. Participants' work reveals that technological use determined by community stakeholders, rather than political and economic elites, is one way that multiple forms of wealth might manifest into power as communities cultivate, document, and share knowledge.

In this chapter, I examine how participants engaged technology during their placements, positioning wealth, tools, and bodies as components of technological systems. By naming these components, this chapter contextualizes technology use in participants' community development work, as organizers enacted material changes in their communities while subverting seemingly ubiquitous Silicon Holler narratives that position technology as the region's savior. I provide an extended example through the work of Ellie, who facilitated several digital justice projects in East Tennessee including the cultivation of a community-owned internet cooperative. Ellie's work showcases an alternative future for rural communities in Appalachia that empowers community members and their knowledges, rather than placing them at the mercy of technical experts. I supplement this investigation of Ellie's work with reflections from other participants who also utilized technology in their projects and encountered Silicon Holler narratives. They acted as stewards for their communities, utilizing technology in ways that assembled and distributed community knowledges to aid people in addressing public problems. Ultimately,

participants demonstrated that technology *can* be part of a sustainable, equitable future in Appalachia, rather than a tool wielded by economic interests.

5.1 Establishing community-owned internet infrastructure in East Tennessee

Each of the 11 participants in this study engaged technology at some level in their projects, but only one focused explicitly on increasing access to digital technology in their community: Ellie. Her placement was with Improving Economies Tennessee (IET), an organization based in East Tennessee and dedicated “to develop and establish, not only sustainable, but practical, long term, land-based economic projects with rural East Tennessee organizations” (“Task Forces: IET”). IET is part of a larger network of organizations and has a wide-ranging mission that allows them to focus on whatever efforts seem to be needed at any particular time. Ellie was asked to work on issues related to internet access in an area that straddles Sevier and Cocke counties. This geographic area is interesting: Sevier County is home to Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge, which both have significant tourism industries; Cocke County, just over the mountain, is relatively untouched by any major industries and offers few economic opportunities for residents. Ellie spent a lot of time organizing in Cosby, a small town in Cocke County, which she described as “Gatlinburg’s uncool little brother.” Many residents travel to tourist hubs in Sevier County to work in hotels, suggesting the need for employment opportunities closer to home. Organizers felt that increased access to affordable internet could potentially increase economic opportunity. Ellie focused on two different projects: a municipal broadband project in Cocke County, and a small, cooperatively run internet structure in Cosby¹⁵ (which she described as the project she was “most excited to be working on”).

This case was unique for several reasons, including its explicit focus on building technological networks and its parallels to other similar types of projects in other rural areas across the globe. As noted above, Ellie’s was the one placement explicitly focused on increasing internet access for communities, setting it up as an important component of larger discussions in the region about technological access—especially in light of the Silicon Holler frenzy, which Ellie encountered on a regular basis. Additionally, Ellie’s relationship to place was different than some of her counterparts. While she had a history of organizing work, she was one of two

¹⁵ Despite their close proximity, Tennessee state law prevents utility companies from operating outside their footprints, which are often established according to county lines. As a result, there were separate initiatives.

participants not originally from Appalachia. She did, however, go to college in the region and remained there after graduation, a period of time in which she was very active in environmental activist groups. Additionally, she did not live in Cosby. She lived outside of Knoxville and commuted the 40 minutes to Cosby several days a week. As a result, Ellie had a very different set of experiences than Mychele (as discussed in Chapter 4), even as they both worked to build social relationships in their placements.

By harnessing community connections and technological tactics, Ellie and fellow organizers worked to build infrastructure that provided a platform for growth that emerges from and benefits local communities. This approach confronts Silicon Holler efforts, which *might* benefit local communities in some ways: however, these efforts, at best, bring in external wealth that is then filtered out of the community, and at worst, exploit workers in this communities as they offer low-paying jobs to people who have few other economic options. Ellie's efforts to develop a cooperatively run internet network in Cosby required her to work directly with community members and listen to their needs and hopes for increased internet access. Ellie consulted community knowledges in a period of transition, gesturing towards more equitable, vibrant possibilities for technological infrastructure in Appalachia.

5.2 Identifying centers and gaps of wealth

Given the fellowship's focus on securing a just economic transition for the region, participants were focused on how wealth factored into their projects. First, they articulated a link between money and technological access. Second, they pointed to an undergirding relationship between economic wealth and technological infrastructure: in a capitalist system, technological advancements serve the ruling class, using the labor of working-class bodies to fuel that advancement. And while participants expressed the hope that eventually, this system would be replaced with structures that didn't feed off of inequality, they also understood the impossibility of dismantling a capitalist economy. As a result, they actively sought out forms of wealth not directly linked to capital and positioned those as central to community wellbeing. They also identified gaps of wealth that brought about material consequences for their communities. By locating value in community-held forms of wealth—cultural, social, and intellectual—participants presented an alternative approach to engaging technological networks, one that

values people as *people*, rather than labor sources, while still acknowledging links between technology and economic opportunity.

5.2.1 Establishing the need for increased internet access in East Tennessee

Both of Ellie's internet-focused projects that Ellie began because of discussions among community members about the need for reliable internet access in the area. Though Ellie had a long history of organizing, including work in the state on municipal internet policies, she stated that one of the reasons she wanted to work with IET was because the group was not made up of self-described "techhies." Instead, they pursued the issue of reliable internet because "it was really pressing." In fact, the focus on digital access originated with rural older women, a group not typically credited with engineering major technological infrastructure. "They were just like, 'We need this. We can't do anything without it. I don't care if we don't know what we're doing, we're going to have to learn.'" Ellie called the desire of these women to take on a massive enterprise "real inspiring...[they thought] if we can learn this, than anybody can." From the very beginning of this project, organizers showed a concern for setting up an accessible internet structure that community members would understand and be a part of.

After realizing this need, IET members began to reach out to the community at large in order to gauge their experiences with internet access. They found two primary obstacles for community members. First, the cost of internet access was a major barrier for residents in rural areas. When traditional internet service providers do expand into rural areas, their rates are often cost prohibitive for residents, because competition is low and providers can keep their rates as high as they'd like. Since population density is a major factor in the expansion of service areas, less populated places often have fewer options. Often, remote areas only have satellite service providers, which are slower than broadband or fiber (Federal Communications Commission). One of the first images that Ellie captured was of a provider map, which showed only one provider in most areas, with none in others (Figure 29). Ellie explained that this one provider was a satellite company, which was both slow and costly. She said that people were paying close to \$200 a month. "People are spending a ridiculous amount of their income on internet, if they're paying for it at all. And it's not really a luxury anymore, it's something people—you need it to file for unemployment, you need it to apply for a lot of jobs, you just really need it."

The second major obstacle was related to the first. If the cost of internet was too high for a household to afford, they could go to a public space to use it; however, for many residents, the nearest local library would typically be 45 minutes to an hour drive. Additionally, libraries typically have time limits on their devices that connect to the internet, shaping a residents' experiences and options for using the internet. So, organizers saw a significant need in this area of Tennessee for affordable, accessible, reliable internet in private spaces.

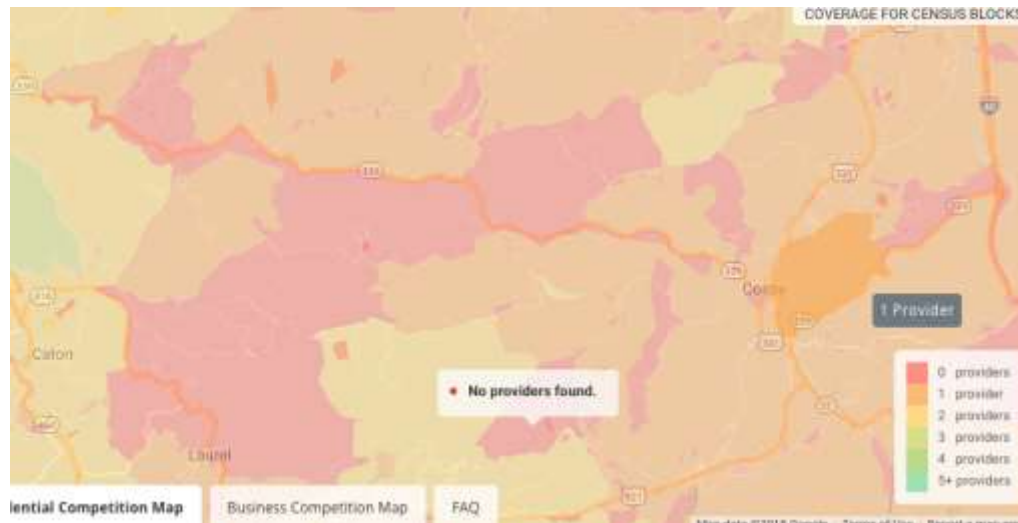


Figure 29: Internet provider map of Cosby area

5.2.2 Identifying strengths in Cosby that might foster technological growth

Ellie was well aware of the links between economic prosperity and technological access. While the network that she was working to establish had received some support through grants and would undoubtedly be less expensive for residents than current internet options, she knew that tapping into areas of social and cultural wealth in the area would help her in her efforts to build the network. These areas of wealth surfaced during our participatory mapping session during my site visit, where I asked Ellie to mark elements of the community she saw as strengths and those she saw as draining the community (Figure 30). Interestingly, there was a clear divide in Ellie's map between cultural and educational institutions (strengths) and purely economic endeavors (weaknesses). Ellie categorized community centers, libraries, and schools as strengths, a stance presumably related to her experiences working with teachers and librarians excited about the possibilities for community-controlled internet. But she described businesses, including several rafting companies that were dumping waste into the nearby Pigeon River and a church

related to one of those businesses, as draining the community. According to Ellie, those economic centers negatively impacted the community. The rafting company was actively polluting the river, and the church was openly homophobic and xenophobic. She also bent the prompt a bit, and created a third category of “mixed,” tagging the Great Smoky Mountains National Park as encapsulating a bit of both. For Ellie, and her mission of increasing internet access, economic growth was not the ultimate goal—unlike Silicon Holler narratives—and resulted in her identification of education and cultural hubs as pillars of wealth in the Cosby area, rather than economic presences.

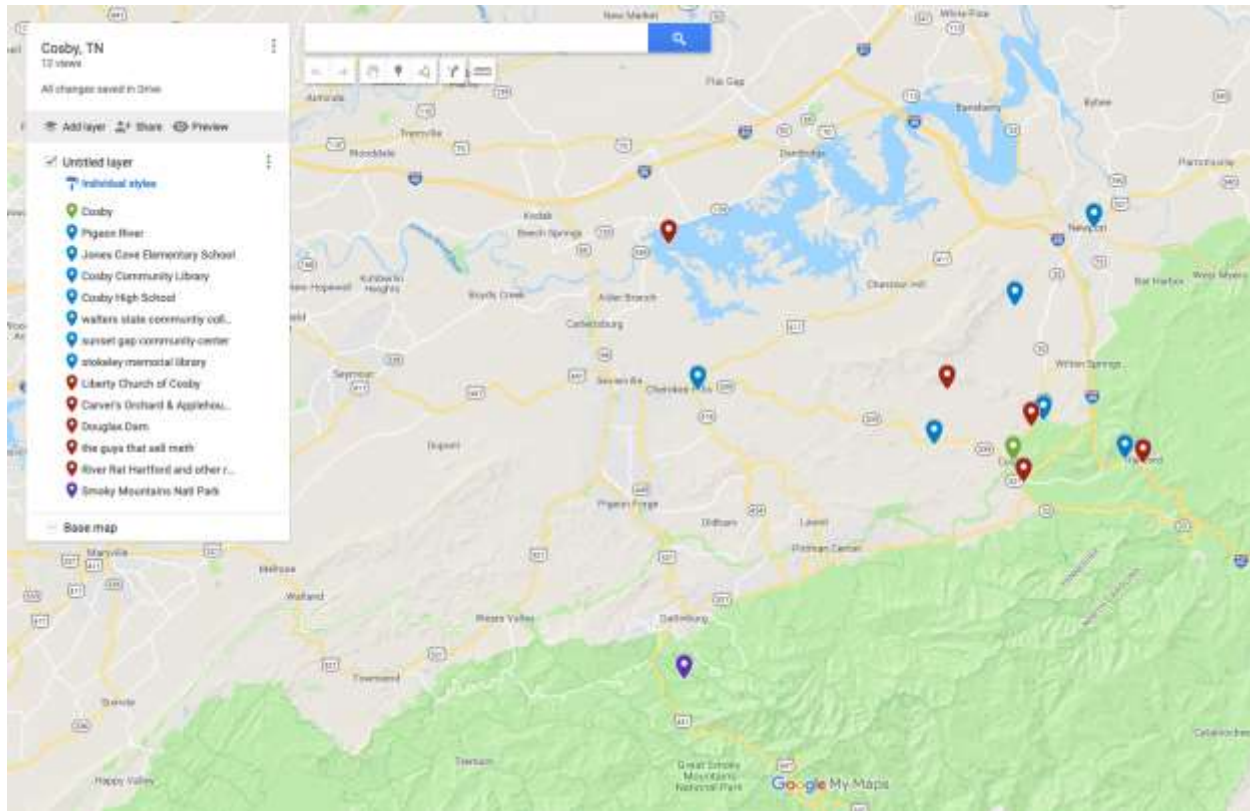


Figure 30: Participant map of Cosby, Tennessee



Figure 31: Former mine now open as tourist attraction



Figure 32: Bumper sticker lauding pipeline projects



Figure 33: Sticker on store of business that reads in Spanish, "Friends of Coal"

5.2.3 Noting economic disparities and their effects

Other participants captured evidence of economic wealth's dominance throughout the project. Appalachia's long history as a major provider of coal and natural gas to the rest of the United States has resulted in an almost pervasive presence of markers signifying this relationship, which participants documented (Figures 31-33). Each of these images depicts a seemingly simple moment, but actually represents the dominance of economic wealth and its linkages to technological infrastructure. Participants included natural resources in this equation, as they felt corporate and political interests saw land as a financial resource, especially land that could be mined, harvested, or built upon. While participants—especially those whose placements dealt with natural resources—were quick to discuss land's inherent value, they were equally as quick to identify linkages between land and money. Leigh was initially placed with a group trying to establish an ecotourism hub in southwestern Virginia, and expressed frustration with that organization's oft-repeated phrase “natural wealth” because of its use to describe resources meant to generate capital that would most likely fail to serve members of the local community. Describing their organization's approach, Leigh said:

[The idea is that] We can promote and get a lot of people to come in and use [these mountains and rivers], and people can discover you and then your downtown will be booming and we'll fix your town and all this will trickle down into the poor communities. Like that's what they see wealth as—assets, what is that? And that will equal wealth, and wealth always goes back to money.

Leigh was frustrated with this line of thinking, because they felt that it was unrealistic to expect that poor communities would see any sort of economic benefit other than seasonal, service-industry jobs. Viewing mountains and rivers as a means to making money results in further alienation for communities that development projects were supposedly designed to help, and widens economic gaps in communities.

This overwhelming focus on financial wealth, participants suggested, created a system that not only placed communities in precarious positions and contributed to unsustainable attitudes towards natural resources, but also re-inscribed systemic inequalities—inequalities signified through infrastructure. In her placement, Ira worked with different groups to document an ongoing water crisis, spending a lot of time listening to citizens discuss how they felt government and corporate interests had failed them. In our first focus group, Ira shared a photo

of what she called “the highway to nowhere” (Figure 34). This highway, a product of a political relationship between local authorities and coal companies, was originally built in anticipation of more mines. Its construction caused community outcry, as it required the relocation of the local elementary and high school. And, making matters worse, those mines were never opened. “I think this highway project is so tied to corruption and those issues in the county which seem to be pretty central in people’s everyday experience of their lives, is like, dealing with these people in power that are making decisions about where to spend money and what projects to invest in.” Economic disparities have material and psychological consequences for communities, as residents increasingly feel disenfranchised by those in power. In Ira’s case, the needless relocation of the high school was made even more egregious by its new location near polluted water sources; getting water to the high school has proved to be difficult because of monetary and infrastructural gaps. In Ira’s case, a preoccupation with economic wealth (and by extension, keeping primary wielders of that wealth happy) has resulted in material difficulties for her community.



Figure 34: Dead-end road in southeastern Kentucky

5.2.4 Identifying alternative forms of wealth located in communities

Our project was filled with examples like Ira's dead-end road, suggesting just how entrenched unequal economic dynamics are in the region. While participants certainly tried to subvert these dynamics as much as possible, they knew that changing the system would require large-scale reform that they didn't have the capacity to initiate. And given the fellowship's ultimate goal to foster "a thriving and sustainable economy generating multiple forms of wealth," casting more expansive definitions of wealth was a central concern for participants. And they delivered, cataloging stores of cultural, social, natural, and intellectual wealth. As participants identified these different types of wealth, the traditional power of capital somewhat lessened in their daily lives as they considered alternative ways of approaching problems that privileged resources not controlled by economic monopolies. In both focus groups, Baxter reflected at length on how an alternative understanding of wealth might be useful in community organizing work across the region. They described a shared marker across different types of wealth: "resilience and resistance to things that are out of our control." For Baxter and other participants, community strength came from the capacity to endure difficult circumstances, including a dearth of economic capital.

Technology is an important aspect of Appalachian history. It has enabled economic growth and has been engrained into community understandings of the region and its role. Participants illuminated how technology is bound up in larger, economic systems, supporting the idea that technology is never neutral. Identifying alternative forms of wealth is a rhetorical, political act—and participants provided a laundry list of different types of wealth they saw in their communities, each focusing heavily on the capacity for people to come together and engage in ethical, careful change, even within a fundamentally exploitative capitalist system. Ellie's work in East Tennessee provides a model for communities hoping to bring together different kinds of wealth to foster technological growth. Such efforts are subversive in nature, as they re-articulate relationships between power, technology, and people, and privilege the knowledges of marginalized people who stock these systems.

5.3 Responding to community needs via technological tools

Tools are often the most visible aspect of conversations about technological development. While participants didn't dismiss new technologies outright, they certainly entertained a more realistic view of what technological advancements might offer communities in Appalachia. Rather than signing on to the belief that an increased presence of high-tech ventures would transform the region into Silicon Valley 2.0, they focused on how everyday technologies could connect people in their communities. In addition to technologies that might seem obvious in a discussion related to economic growth (i.e., industrial machines, agricultural implements), participants pointed to tools that mediated knowledge gathered from different communities, including maps and social media platforms. Using these tools, they gathered and shared community knowledge that inspired collaboration across members of their towns as communities grappled with issues like water supply shortages and unjust land ownership patterns. Participants embraced everyday technologies accessible to community members, rather than relying on elites, in order to organize in their communities.

5.3.1 Developing a community-owned mesh network in Cosby

Ellie knew from the start of her placement that part of the difficulty in increasing internet access in rural Appalachia is the mountainous landscape of the region, where people are distributed across physical space. Wired connections can be costly, time-consuming, and difficult to organize across distances, so other options, including wireless mesh networks (WMNs), are being used in rural areas with increased frequency. WMNs are often designed and owned collaboratively, positioning internet access as a platform for not just technological connection, but community involvement. WMNs allow users to rent data from a local data center, pick up that data with a tower, and then share that data through “nodes” or antennae placed around the community, often on people's homes. As long as those nodes don't have anything bulky that can disrupt their communication, signals can be shared. IET had access to a community-owned tower that drew wireless backbone from Knoxville via the public 11 GHz spectrum, which allowed them to begin crafting a mesh network (Figure 35). WMNs are especially useful for users that seek increased reliability, low installation costs, large coverage areas, and automatic network connectivity (Gungor, Natalizio, Pace, & Avallone, 2008)—undoubtedly useful in areas with

significant shifts in topography. Ellie saw value in the increased reliability of such a network: “And so [the signal] can keep going all the way through a neighborhood or down a holler, and they’re kind of connected to one another. So if one goes down, it’s not centralized.” In addition to these functional affordances, mesh networks differ from traditional structures organized around internet service providers, because it shifts users from consumers to stakeholders. As contributors to the network, they gain agency in making decisions about the network, including managing it (Centelles, Oncins, & Neumann, 2015; Shaffer, 2011).



Figure 36: Internet tower on Highlander grounds



Figure 35: Public meeting about internet cooperative

IET hoped to establish a cooperative structure for the network in Cosby, enhancing the network’s collaborative structure. The cooperative model was unique for the area, and organizers were aiming for complete member ownership, where each member would pay a small fee each month to account for maintenance and training. Additionally, organizers planned for a

governance board comprised of elected community members, who would oversee the cooperative, as well as a community-based taskforce that would be equipped to set up and repair equipment. During the development of the network, they held several public meetings, sharing other models and working with community members to decide on an approach that would suit their needs (Figure 36). This sort of control over a major utility is rare, especially for people in rural Appalachia who have historically only had access to technologies provided to them by industrial interests. Cooperatively owned and run WMNs present a community-focused model of internet access that positions tools, ownership, and people in collaborative structures instead of exploitative systems.

5.3.2 Going low-tech by using maps to depict relationships

Maps were constant throughout our project. In addition to representing relationships to place, maps are a technology that has been used for centuries to organize human activity. Participants took pictures of maps depicting a range of relationships, including topography, population, and natural resources (Figures 37 and 38). Seven participants took at least one picture of a map during the project, but maps showed up consistently in the collections of the two participants working explicitly on land equity in the region. In our first focus group, Rosie, working with a land trust in East Tennessee, said that maps would be “a good part of my fellowship and the project.” She continued, describing a map of abandoned land mine sites as “really helpful,” and said that the maps would be something she would be “playing around with” as she became more familiar with her placement.

Participants also captured maps of more dynamic relationships, often created alongside stakeholders in their communities: assets to be used for community growth, hubs for collaboration, and pressure points for future action. Figures 39 and 40 show maps that participants and fellow organizers created and amended through collaborative mapping sessions. These maps demonstrate areas of concern for organizers and helped them to strategize ways to address different problems. Maps provided a platform for cataloging the different forces they were contending with in their placements, as well as a way to document changes over time. Though maps are ubiquitous and available on digital devices, participants demonstrated the continued utility of paper maps and physically creating or marking them up, serving as

collaborative hubs for strategizing. Asset and mind mapping were major components of participant work, as well (Figure 41).



Figure 37: Map of strip mines and environmental hazards in Martin County



Figure 38: Map of counties in West Virginia



Figure 39: Drawn out map of community resources in Clearfork Valley, TN



Figure 40: Amended map of areas with water concerns in Martin County

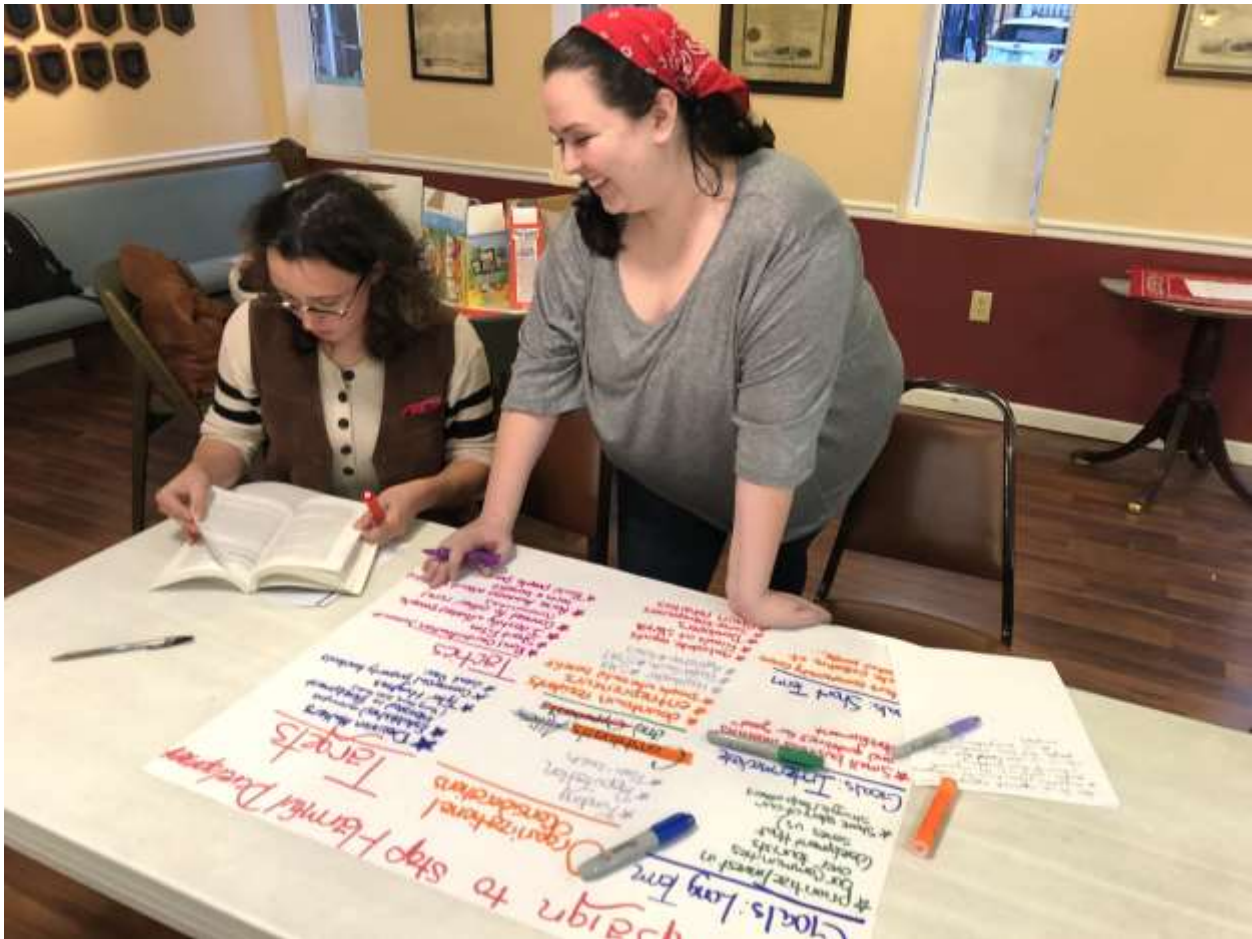


Figure 41: Community organizers creating a concept map during professionalization session

5.3.3 Using social media to share information and craft connections

Participants' social media use was an integral aspect of their organizing work. While participants took pictures of print media sources that factored into their experiences (i.e. newspaper articles about their projects), there were significantly more screenshots of Facebook and Instagram posts. Ira, who both took the most pictures of traditional news sources and uploaded the most screenshots out of the group, reflected often on the ways that information was shared with her community as they dealt with an ongoing water crisis. While Ira shared some screenshots from Facebook that directed users to traditional news outlets (Figure 42), her portfolio included many more that revealed interactions between community members. There were multiple Facebook pages that community members went to for updated information during her placement, including Martin County Concerned Citizens and Martin County Water Warriors. These pages allowed any follower of the page to post, so residents shared information with one

another about media coverage, organizing meetings, and even their own water situations (Figure 43). A community hub proved to be significant for Martin County, since so much of Ira's work revolved around interpreting information from technical and legal experts. Having a digital space for residents to gather and share information located power in the community instead of in experts.



Figure 42: Screenshot of Facebook post directing users to print newspaper



Figure 43: Screenshot of Facebook post asking about water quality

In addition to serving as a platform for conversation with community members, Ira revealed that reporters used those pages to schedule interviews with activists. Ira said, "It's just like so much media reporting and it seems like it takes so much [from community organizers]... They're like, 'We're just getting your issues out in the public.' And it's just like, *What is that doing?*" In questioning the effectiveness of traditional reporting, Ira suggested that direct communication with community members through social media was more effective because it offered a quick, direct route to an audience. By deploying social media platforms to solicit and share information, community members are using technology to create their own response systems, rather than relying upon outside forces.

Just as social media pages were part of the official work of several participants, they also functioned as a way to learn more about their host communities, and to connect with one another

during their placements. Participants also created a community around the fellowship, creating two separate hashtags to document their work through Instagram: #appfellows for their official presence, and #appfellers as their “turnt up hashtag.” Participants saw their connections to one another as having multiple purposes, as they built coalitions across causes and communities, and became friends with one another. This became especially important as the fellowship wore on. Technology took on a more meaningful, embodied role in the lives of community organizers, rather than existing as purely functional in nature.

Regardless of their form, technological tools facilitated connections between participants and their communities; further, none of these tools were particularly cutting edge. Juxtaposed with the media frenzy surrounding Silicon Hollers and dramatic advancements in technology in the region, these everyday uses of technology seem unremarkable; however, they represent a commitment from participants to address the needs of their communities in effective, accessible ways.

5.4 Building people-powered connections while challenging exploitative labor dynamics

While overarching narratives about technological advancement in the region privilege technologies or larger systems, participants focused on the role that people play in community growth. This focus allowed them to focus on labor issues, illuminating how bodies enable technological development through intellectual and physical labor, and as a result, are often cast as tools often exploited by more powerful entities. Participants urged one another to pay careful attention to the relationship between technology and bodies as their projects unfolded, so that they could avoid falling into patterns that have plagued the region throughout history *and* work towards people-focused technological progress that honors Appalachian knowledges.

5.4.1 Bolstering infrastructure through technological literacies in Cosby

An important component of IET’s efforts were to engage community members at every stage of the process, so that the network would have advocates across the service area interested in maintaining it and using it for community development. This approach meshed with the notion of technology stewardship, which requires a balance between sticking to the familiar and adopting new technology for its own sake, so that communities might embrace technology in

useful ways (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009). IET worked to establish a culture of stewardship through demystifying internet access, training members of the community in maintenance, and actively planning the program's future.

While Ellie noted the excitement of community members familiar with issues surrounding internet access, like librarians and teachers, she felt it was important to get buy-in and understanding from others who weren't as familiar with internet. In fact, a lot of people she came into contact with while trying to generate interest in the cooperative thought that she was a sales representative for a traditional internet service provider. As a result, Ellie felt that part of her work was to demystify internet access for community members. "I think internet is one of these things that we've been taught, it drops from the sky and you pay the bill and it comes to you and you don't really have to do any work for it." Ellie and other members of IET wanted to encourage residents to see themselves as an integral part of the structure providing internet, so that they would have a more comprehensive understanding of how internet access comes to be. They hoped that this level of education would increase overall community investment, as well.

As they strategized their approach, IET talked to other organizations that had set up mesh networks in their communities, including groups in Detroit, New York City, and India. Initiatives that focused on educating cooperative members on how to create and maintain networks inspired Ellie and fellow organizers, as they saw a lot of value in training community members to advocate for, build, and maintain community wireless networks—especially in rural areas. Ellie expressed hope that the cooperative in her town could invite participation from different age groups: "It would be super cool—to pay [and train] high school kids," which would help them develop their own skills, earn a fair wage, and contribute to their community. By putting the future of the network directly into the hands of younger folks in the area, IET hoped that the cooperative could become a self-sustaining program.

Ultimately, Ellie hoped that the cooperative would eventually do more than just own and operate the WMN. She said that her ideal future for the program would "involve education components," including popular education style workshops, incorporation of media justice concepts, and other things "tangentially related to the internet, like teaching kids how to make music with programs and Photoshop." With this hope, Ellie suggested that the internet is a means to cultural production and preservation—not just economic opportunity. Of course, Ellie understood the importance of economic opportunity, and its linkages to internet access. But she

located internet access in a more complicated web of power and agency, and problematized the simplistic notion that internet access always inevitably results in economic prosperity—a notion that many in Appalachia seem to have adopted.

IET felt that increasing access to internet on a functional level was not enough; in fact, to really transform or empower a community, the community needs to own it on other levels. “I want people to realize that the internet is not magic...a lot of people just don’t know how it works. And the first step to you know, power, right, is understanding and knowledge—that’s a little bit of a cliché, but it’s true.” By placing control of the network in the hands of the community through education, IET hoped that the cooperative would foster growth in multiple ways for community members.

5.4.2 Using increased internet access to address other problems

Social connectivity in rural areas is important for residents’ personal, political, and economic lives, and internet access can enhance this connectivity. Ellie suggested that these connections were especially important for members of rural communities who felt disconnected from people in their geographic locations, including young people, people of color, and queer folks. Ellie was adamant that anyone who knew of her work would also know why she was pursuing it: “I’m doing it for the lonely queer kids who don’t know where to go or what to do, and for...people that want to see how big the world is.” For Ellie, providing contact with digital communities was just as important as enhancing local community structures. This was potentially even more important for marginalized residents who might not have other people that share their identities in their immediate geographic circles.

Ellie suggested that increased levels of social connection could have material implications for rural areas dealing with community-wide problems, as well. She felt that a lot of the issues unfolding in rural areas during her placement, including opioid abuse, were “about loneliness, and people feeling isolated and apart from each other.” (She marked “the guys that sell meth” as a draining element on her map in Figure 30). Reducing loneliness, Ellie hoped, could possibly reduce levels of addiction:

People are addicted—especially the kinds of drugs that people are on right now are loneliness drugs. These are not drugs you do with other people. They are drugs you sit in your room and you do alone. And that’s why people say [to] always do it with someone

else in the room—because that’s how people overdose, they just do it alone and they just die alone. And I know this is really dark but...I don’t want people to be alone like that. Ellie is not saying here that reliable internet access is the solution to the opioid crisis. In fact, she explicitly said that “you can’t draw a direct line” between her work and stemming drug abuse. She did, however, point out that human connections are important for building communities that are resilient in the face of overwhelming circumstances, especially in rural areas where it can be difficult to notice when someone “falls off the map.” Access to information and companionship through digital channels, in addition to the increased sense of community that a cooperative model might produce, can assist communities in addressing difficult issues shaping their lived experiences because it creates strong social bonds.

By incorporating educational and social components into the cooperative, Ellie and other IET organizers hoped to empower communities so that they could avoid finding themselves at the mercy of the tech industry. She referenced the “power of Silicon Valley that hangs over everything,” going on to say that “subverting that feels really important....the technocrat class shouldn’t own everything, they shouldn’t be in charge of everything.” This subversion comes in a range of ways, including the development of collaboratively owned networks, as well as efforts to de-mystify technology, making it accessible to everyday people.

5.4.3 Critiquing economic practices that frame bodies as resources

Historically, extractive industries have prevailed in the region because of the manual labor of Appalachians in vast technological infrastructures. The history of labor politics in the region is beyond the scope of this project, but that complicated history undoubtedly shaped the contributions of participants. Carrie grew up in a family of coal miners, and, seeing the difficulties that men in her family had in that profession, she decided at a young age that she would never marry a coal miner. But, as she shared in a blog entry, that happened. After she got married, “the money called to [her husband], and like a receptive lover, he went. He just couldn’t say no. I became a coal miner’s wife, and neither of us was ever the same.” Carrie goes on to reflect on the ways that the industry’s demands affected her family, including how her husband was content to be a coal miner because of his relatively high wages. “So much of what went wrong in my marriage went wrong because my then-husband was being exploited and made to think that he had the good life. No, scratch that—he was made to think he had the best life.” This

notion of living the best life is directly linked to the glorification of the coal industry in the region, made apparent by the amount of pro-coal messaging participants captured during the project, including in museum exhibits and other historical renderings of the industry. Interestingly, in these renderings, human bodies often only show up in the form of coal miners (Figures 44 and 45), emphasizing the relationship between bodies and coal extraction—coal miners and company. This cultural pride, combined with messaging like “Coal keeps the lights on” and the high-paying nature of many coal jobs, is a distraction from the historically exploitative and hazardous nature of coal mining. Additionally, it obscures the domination of laboring bodies, because it presents them as willing agents.



Figure 44: Human forms shown in coal mining tourist attraction



Figure 45: Models of coal miners in museum about Appalachian history

5.4.4 Exposing Silicon Hollers as King Coal, Version 2.0

The promises of Silicon Hollers seem to offer a different dynamic for these communities, though, as an increase in technological infrastructure brings about increased opportunities for education, employment, and cultural exchange. The connections between “staunchly blue-collar” jobs (of which most participants expressed familial or personal ties to) and bodily labor are clear; with tech-focused jobs, though, these connections appear murkier: what counts as work becomes less clear, inviting exploitation of a different kind. Clocking in and clocking out of a coal mine invites clear boundaries between work and home. Developing mobile applications from a desktop computer in your living room does not. In spite of the widespread embrace of jobs devoted to the technology sector, which promise upward economic mobility through an influx of white-collar jobs, none of the participants seemed convinced by this narrative. In fact, throughout

our project, they voiced their apprehension at the efforts to recruit tech ventures to the region, because of what they deemed false promises aimed at a group of people “who will do work for no money because they desperately need it.” Violet delivered a particularly scathing review of the Silicon Holler frenzy, contextualizing it in the overarching history of the region’s economic struggles.

People in Appalachia worked their ass off for coal and gave everything to coal. And that was fucked up. That was an abusive relationship that happened, and they’re trying to recreate it, and this time...instead of going down into the hole in the coal mine, you’ll go down into the hole of the basement of this warehouse where there’s a super computer and you’ll just be in cubicles typing away with dead eyes. That’s what it’s going to be. It’s not going to be Google shit, it’s not going to be, like being an exec at Google where you can go on a jog at your inside track....It’s going to be people in the basement of a warehouse with a brewery on top and people are going to be—and the rich people are going to be drinking beer and enjoying shit on top of their heads, and having meetings about how they revitalized the region and then under the floor, literally under the floor, there’s going to be all these people coding.

Violet completely dismantles the prosperity narrative that Silicon Holler promises, arguing that a technology-focused economy will merely repeat the “abusive” dynamics of the coal industry (linking up with the cycle of Appalachian development discussed in Chapter Four). She asserts that rather than providing an Appalachian labor force with jobs that transform their social and economic status, labor intensive jobs will just be replaced with “rebranded” jobs that “won’t be cushy, white collar jobs anymore” because of *who* is doing those jobs—Appalachian people in rural communities. And these people won’t have the same experience of the tech industry that workers in Silicon Valley have. Instead, they will be fulfilling the same economic roles as their family members did in the coalfields, and tech tycoons will be enjoying the fruits of their labor, just as coal barons did.

The future Violet outlines above is bleak. But participants’ work actively challenged this future on material and rhetorical levels through their framing of people as a resource with agency, instead of a resource to be used up and cast aside. Participants expressed a desire to see the privileging of people as an asset in our first focus group. Phoebe said that to do this, instead of focusing on “the land or the stuff in the area,” organizers should “[create] a pipeline of

people...you provide them with this support systems so that they're able to...one day take over your job... when you have people working in the community that are attached to the community [they] can go so far." Here, Phoebe advocates investing in people, instead of external elements. Casting people as an asset held accountable to communities, rather than corporations, results in the type of "people power" that participants asked about at the start of our project.

5.5 Engaging sustainable technological growth through people power

Overarching narratives about technological progress in the region flatten relationships between elements of technological networks. Rather than emphasizing the importance of communities and individuals in those communities, these narratives privilege digital tools, positioning them as the primary actor in stories about progress, and subsequently obscuring the dominance of economic wealth (and those who wield it). Perhaps more insidiously, these narratives misrepresent the role of bodies in technological economies, as well, relegating them to supportive roles and robbing them of agency. But as participants pursued their organizing work, they cataloged technological networks in ways that highlighted wealth, bodies, and tools. Further, their work articulated the value of cultural and social wealth, working bodies often exploited by economic systems, and everyday tools that could be used to foster dynamic changes in their communities. In this chapter, I argued that participants subverted, critiqued, and actively resisted Silicon Holler narratives by using technologies to craft relationships based on sharing community knowledges. They cared for their communities and laid the foundation for an Appalachian future not tied to the whims of Big Tech.

Ellie's work in East Tennessee exemplifies the reality that technology is undoubtedly *part* of a sustainable future in Appalachia, not *the* future: "I don't think the economy revolving around [technology] is necessarily a great idea...what it ends up being is technocrats from elsewhere coming in and moving here." This nuance is what is missing in Silicon Holler conversations—Ellie pointed out that the influx of "high tech" jobs that would come to rural areas would not be "good jobs, it's going to be call centers." She continued, "beyond just the fact that they don't pay that good, what kind of a life is that?" Instead, she and other participants continually asserted that people in Appalachia deserve lives that extend beyond their roles as workers. The reality of pursuing this future, however, is admittedly difficult, as money and

economic success largely drive technological expansion, even when it comes to grants awarded to nonprofits.

For example, during this project, the Southern Connected Communities Project (SCCP) was awarded a \$400,000 grant to support the upkeep of their internet tower and accompanying infrastructure. SCCP is associated with IET and Highlander, so Ellie knew her work would benefit from this grant. But, she reflected, “I could never get that amount of money for anything else I was doing, for environmental work, for like, working with education, kids, anything.” Money, she concluded, went to technology-focused projects. “So how can we make that into a Trojan Horse where we are bringing money into our communities because that’s just the way you can get it?...How are we partnering with institutions that are already working in the community that are underfunded?...How can we be clever about it?” Ellie’s call for tactical interventions in communities, using technology as both a tool and a means for monetary support, resonates with a metic framework for community knowledges, which advocates adaptive and innovative collaboration amongst community members. Most importantly, it offers an example of how organizers might harness social, cultural, and intellectual wealth into people power.

This chapter argued that participants’ commitment to curating community knowledges empowered the communities they were working in, and honored the labor that people engaged as they shared information with one another. By using technology to bolster community growth, instead of using community growth as a reason to engage technology, participants took on adaptive, tactical work to address material community concerns. Chapter Six looks at one final narrative—that Appalachians happily depend on outsiders for progress—and exposes how community-focused action might overcome institutional barriers.

6. “WHO AM I FIGHTING FOR? WHO AM I ACCOUNTABLE TO?”: CENTERING COMMUNITY NEEDS AND QUESTIONING INSTITUTIONAL EFFICACY

Chapters Four and Five provided multiple counternarratives to two dominant renderings of Appalachia: as a place filled with people yearning to return to the halcyon days of coal’s dominance, and as a region on the verge of a technologically-driven transformation. This chapter challenges one final narrative—that Appalachian communities’ success depends on interventions from government and nonprofit entities. Frustrated with continuous intervention from outside interests, 11 community organizers in a participatory study used photos, written narratives, and spoken responses to catalog moments of institutional obstruction and community-based resilience in the face of those blockages. The gap between notions that institutions are the saviors of Appalachian communities, and participant accounts that position community-based activism as ultimately more beneficial is visualized in Figure 46, below.

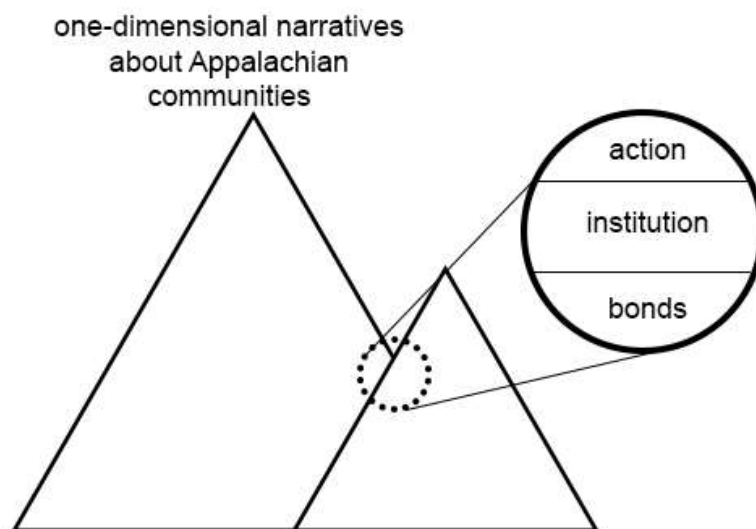


Figure 46: Visual representation of simplistic stories about Appalachian community

Participants provided accounts that pointed to tensions between institutions and organizers, even when institutions were well meaning (as many of them are). Some participants suggested that these difficulties emerged from the desire for organizations to “build” community, rather than to work with community structures that already exist. Taking great care to center the experiences, needs, and futures of people in the communities they served, participants drew upon the power of

communities formed around shared responsibilities—to one another, to their towns, and to the region at large. Chapter Two’s metic framework for community knowledges illuminates how knowledge is vested in collaborative, community-based spaces, rather than relying upon institutional authority.

By advocating for action organized around community-determined needs, participants bypassed institutional politics that hinder effective work. This chapter is linked with perhaps the most evocative question that participants crafted in our orientation session: “What is the connection between building the world we want, and challenging and resisting harm?” For participants, one connection that emerged was to honor community histories, voices, and needs. Participants saw their community development work as bound by ethical concerns: though they were working within systems they found to be fundamentally exploitative (as discussed in Chapter 5), they felt that their work could, at the very least, make the daily lives of those most marginalized by these systems a bit easier. The callout in Figure 46 provides one way to unpack stories about community, by considering intersections between social bonds, institutions, and action. Participant accounts draw on these intersections, presenting Appalachian communities as resourceful, rather dependent upon outside interests to save them.

In this chapter, I present participants’ reflections on community, examining them through the lenses of social bonds, institutions, and community action. This chapter focuses on Violet’s work in southwestern Virginia, where she partnered with a university and a local food bank, to demonstrate how organizers might privilege community voices even as they represent the institutions that often silence those voices. Violet’s approach to navigating institutional-community relationships was to build upon shared bonds with members of the public (i.e. rural identity, working-class background, passion about particular issues), even as she represented institutions that inspired suspicion in community members. Her work presents an approach to organizing rooted explicitly in listening to community members and addressing their needs—no matter how big or small. As in previous chapters, I augment this discussion of Violet’s work with reflections from other participants to demonstrate how pervasive these dynamics are across the region. I argue in this chapter that by engaging already-established community connections, organizers can honor lived experiences, circumvent static institutional powers, and position Appalachia as a place filled with radical compassion, resilience, and strength—subverting depictions of the region and its people as ignorant and in need of saving from outside entities.

Ultimately, participants demonstrated that centering community knowledges, regardless of institutional pressures, was the most effective way to meet community needs and bolster organizing efforts across Appalachia.

6.1 Connecting with community members in the New River Valley

Violet worked with two separate host organizations in the New River Valley—a geographic area in southwestern Virginia that contains the cities of Blacksburg, Christiansburg, and Radford, as well as much smaller rural communities. Violet grew up several hours away in southwestern Virginia and identified closely with many community members she came into contact with because of their shared identities as “rural working people with a long lineage that traces back to coal.” While several participants worked with multiple host organizations that collaborated on one major project, Violet’s placement was unique because she worked on completely separate projects for her two hosts. For the first part of her fellowship, most of her time went towards working as a teaching assistant for an Appalachian Studies course at the local university. In that role, she helped students contribute to an ongoing research project on environmental effects of a local artillery production facility. She also spent some time working with her other host organization, Food and Friends, Inc., a local food bank. In addition to participating in weekly food distributions, she cultivated networks with locals in preparation for the opening of an industrial kitchen open to local food entrepreneurs interested in expanding their operations. Cottage laws in Virginia allow people who cook and bake out of their homes to sell directly from their homes or at local farmer’s markets, but they cannot, for example, ask a local store to stock their goods. By opening this commercial kitchen (and allowing community members to use it for a small fee), the organization hoped to assist locals in expanding their customer base so that they could make more money from their work.

Violet’s placement provides an interesting contrast to the cases outlined in Chapters Four and Five, for two main reasons. First, Violet had to balance the needs of two separate host organizations and worked on two very different projects during her placement. Second, though all of the participants focused on community building in some capacity, Violet’s projects centered explicitly on gathering community knowledge as part of planning for future projects. Additionally, the New River Valley is a unique area that features intellectual and monetary wealth brought to the region by a major research-intensive institution, as well as rural areas with

high levels of food insecurity. As a result, Violet witnessed very different aspects of that area, presenting a more complicated portrait of life in the valley. This left her thinking about the status of organizing work across the region and how she and other organizers could more effectively tap into community ways of knowing that already exist, instead of trying to build infrastructure from scratch in every project.

During her placement, Violet experienced the difficulties of managing relationships between institutions and the public. As an institutional representative, she felt the tensions within these relationships, even as she identified more closely with community members than her host organizations. But by listening to community members and privileging their immediate needs, Violet positioned people—not institutions—as arbiters of community knowledge. Though this might initially seem innocuous, Violet’s approach is a political act, legitimizing knowledge that emerges directly from Appalachian people and placing that knowledge at the core of organizing work.

6.2 Drawing on social bonds to foster community relationships

From the very start of our project, participants were keenly aware of how their lives were connected to one another—through their membership in the fellowship, their shared orientations to organizing work, and their identities as Appalachians, along with other similarities that surfaced along the way. Different scenarios exposed different kinds of connections throughout the project, linked to location, identity, commitments to addressing particular problems, and membership in larger movements. But regardless of how these connections might be classified, they each conjured up shared responsibilities, or bonds, that served as building blocks for groups of people. The presence of multiple bonds, many of which overlapped and complemented one another, allowed participants to articulate different configurations of community that served their immediate goals. Further, these shared bonds provided participants with a platform to gather and share community knowledges, which in turn, strengthened bonds between participants and their host communities.



Figure 47: Group of organizers gathered on orientation tour



Figure 48: Canteen at Highlander during a retreat weekend

6.2.1 Establishing shared identities and entering communities in the New River Valley

Building connections with residents of the New River Valley was perhaps the most central component of Violet's placement, as she worked to develop relationships with community members involved in the local food scene and alongside faculty and students doing environmental research. But even for Violet, one of the most outgoing participants, this work was challenging, because of her newness to the area and the difficulties of entering into longstanding social networks. Still, her photographs echoed her placement's focus on community; her pictures throughout the project were overwhelmingly of people and social gatherings (Figures 47 and 48). In fact, out of the 55 photos she shared for the first and second focus groups, 46 featured groups of people. Social relationships were incredibly important for Violet for her work and her identity as a community organizer.

Violet identified the presence of different communities within the New River Valley, but she also talked extensively about how these communities layered upon one another. "I'm part of a lot of different communities and I feel really happy about that." She went on to say that some of those communities were place-based: her hometown, the New River Valley, Appalachia, and the South. Violet felt that Appalachian organizers "need to be connecting with people, especially in the Deep South, especially in the Black Belt...we desperately need to be working with those folks," because of the concerns people in those communities share. In addition to place, she also noted sexuality, gender, and class as markers of community. Repeatedly, she said that she saw

herself as a worker, and that “a really integral part of my identity is seeing myself in solidarity with other workers.” Her family’s background helped her to “get on even ground with people,” since she could share stories of her dad’s time as a coal miner and then a Coca-Cola delivery driver, or tell people that she was from coal country. This identification was important for Violet in her placement, as she spent a lot of time with working-class people in attempts to learn about their needs.

Drawing on her own identity and experiences guided her in crafting connections with community members in both of her projects. For her work with the industrial kitchen, Violet tried different strategies to engage with locals, going to farmer’s markets to talk to them (which she admitted didn’t always work very well, because they were trying to sell their goods), and talking to contacts that she had been given by her organization. In our first focus group, she recounted a meeting she had with a woman who had emigrated from Italy and sold homemade pasta. Violet described it as an art that’s losing people, “kind of like quilting and some of our crafts, fewer and fewer people are doing it.” She connected to that woman through a focus on craftsmanship, as well as her own familiarity with Italian food. (Violet’s husband is from Italy). Her work at the university involved her in community-based research about the environmental impact of a local artillery production facility. She described her role as facilitating that project for students, allowing her to “hear community concerns and people’s stories and perceptions” of the plant. Though the two projects were different and had different ends, Violet identified the people she talked to as part of one larger community. “They feel really similar, it’s just that I’m talking with them about different things. So I guess the way I cope is just trying to find the connections and roll on those.” Throughout her work, Violet returned to the importance of shared responsibilities and experiences as a way to build meaningful connections with others. Though she saw differences between herself and residents, she focused on similarities to engage them in meaningful ways.

6.2.2 Tapping into social bonds built upon place

Perhaps the most visible type of community bond that surfaced in our project was that which emerged from people sharing a location. Physical place was a significant force in shaping relationships between stakeholders, first because of the regional focus of the fellowship, but also because participants were placed in specific communities. As noted in Chapter 4, place was a

constant presence throughout our project, seeping into conversations about technology and community. Photographs capturing moments of community often simultaneously displayed elements of place, referencing the tight linkages between the two. These images included recreational events like concerts (Figure 49), as well as more serious moments like town halls held to strategize community responses to public health concerns like the opioid crisis (Figure 50). Gathering spaces were important for recognizing and strengthening these community bonds. Ellie noted the significance of formal and informal spaces, including a diner she frequented, as she had “been eating a lot of French fries there lately.” Along a similar vein, Rosie said that some of her most important work was “getting to know people in the community” by attending different events in her area. Place offered participants a way to tap into existing communities because sharing space means sharing concerns and knowledges. Participants emphasized throughout the project how important it was to engage with community structures already in place, instead of trying to “build” community. Ellie shared the following in our second focus group: “You can’t have the pretention [to think you’re building community]. You sort of have to be where the community has already built itself. Is it the Walmart parking lot where all the teens hang out and do sketchy shit, or is it the football games?...How can you tap into that to see what needs to get done?” Ellie notes that bonds between members of the community already exist, because they live their daily lives alongside one another.



Figure 49: Outdoor summer concert



Figure 50: Town hall meeting about opioid epidemic

6.2.3 Connecting with one another through shared identities

For several participants, however, their communities felt “abstract” (Baxter, Focus Group 2), because they were working in multiple towns across the region or living in a different municipality than their placement. And for others, they felt that while they were bonded to others because of their shared location, they didn’t hold other types of bonds in common. In scenarios where place failed to form strong bonds, identity provided platforms for building relationships. Repeatedly throughout our project, participants referenced their race, class, gender identity, and sexuality when talking about the connections they felt between themselves, their work, and their communities. Often, these identities emerged in conversations about how they saw themselves as different from other people in their communities. Jackson, reflecting on the recent success of an artist from his hometown, noted that though their experiences and some views were “wildly different,” he felt that there were a lot of commonalities between them, as queer cis men in Appalachia who had grown up poor.

...Neither of us really felt like we fit completely where we live. And do we fit anywhere else? Like, [I’m] thinking about the intersections of what it means to be Appalachian, to be from here, and what it means to be the other intersections of our identities too...how one can color and influence the other and the ways that we’re allowed to exist, and how some of us are allowed to exist more than others.

Jackson points to the complexities of marginalized identities that intersect (in his case, queer, poor, and Appalachian), and how these identities have material implications for those communities. Additionally, he references intersectionality to describe the degrees of “how some of us are allowed to exist more than others,” pointing to different levels of oppression and privilege that come along with particular identity markers. While identity markers create bonds between people, they also can signify gaps; as a result, drawing and building upon shared bonds was important for participants in building connections with community members and organizers across the region.

6.2.4 Coming together to address public problems

Shared problems connected organizers with community members as well. Pictures and reflections referenced a range of issues that brought people together, including substance abuse,

addiction and recovery; environmental hazards; water shortages; and advocacy efforts for marginalized groups within the region, including black and LGBTQ+ youth. Phoebe and Carrie, both working in West Virginia, focused on youth organizing as part of their placements and ended up participating in a lot of the same events. One of the first community forums they attended focused on the state's foster care system (Figure 51). The forum itself was organized and run by young people in the community who were concerned by the foster system's failure to place children in single-parent homes, sending them instead outside of West Virginia or even, in some cases, having Child Protective Services workers living with children in hotels. (In fact, around the time of the forum in late 2018, the federal government threatened a lawsuit against the state because of these practices.) Phoebe and Carrie were both in attendance, and Carrie said that she felt the forum "was definitely an event where the youth were empowered together to stand up." This forum is an example of how multiple bonds fostered action, as many attendees shared identity markers as well as a concern for the foster system in West Virginia. According to Carrie, "social connections" are key for communities battling wicked problems, especially for those living with their effects daily, because those connections provide a starting point for collaboration.



Figure 51: Youth-led public meeting about foster care system in West Virginia

Bonds driving participants' work took many different forms. While official groups or institutions were built upon some of these bonds, other bonds existed entirely outside of these spaces. Regardless, shared bonds and experiences that participants discussed throughout the project anchored them to not just their efforts as community organizers, but to their identities as

Appalachians working to improve the circumstances of people they cared about. These links also provided them with channels through which they could honor the contributions of multiple stakeholders by collecting community knowledges that demonstrated the collective wisdom of communities in the face of difficult problems. The responsibilities they shared with others around them were the building blocks of participants' work as they navigated the complex relationships between themselves, their hosts, and the communities in which they were placed—especially when organizational and institutional politics raised barriers.

6.3 Navigating institutional politics and community motivations

Participants drew on the bonds they shared with others, fostering feelings of resiliency as communities came together to address common problems. Ideally, these bonds would strengthen (and be strengthened by) official organizational structures as structures responded to real community histories and concerns, and in some cases, this did happen; however, official structures were often too bogged down by outside concerns to honor and utilize community knowledges, or just didn't engage with them at all. As a result, participants tended to focus on the difficulties that resulted from official structures not honoring these bonds. For example, while business ventures, government entities, and even nonprofit organizations *appeared* to share bonds with community members, these bonds were weakened or even severed by institutional politics. Even in scenarios where organizations had the best intentions, their efforts were often troubled by other concerns that typically emerge once movements become systemized. Institutions emerged as yet another obstacle for participants to handle during their projects.

6.3.1 Mitigating tensions between institutions and residents of the New River Valley

Because Violet worked with two separate host organizations with very different approaches to community work and levels of support, she was especially attuned to the role of official structures in communities. Shifting between her work in a small, nonprofit organization and her role as a representative of a large research-focused institution revealed the difficulties that come along with any sort of institution-public relationship. In the map that Violet created during my site visit, this focus on institutions shone through (Figure 52). She marked

community-focused places like the farmer’s market and a community foundation as centers of power, and marked the local artillery plant and a mobile home park—that had recently been sold to a new landlord who raised lot rents, resulting in the displacement of residents—as drains on community wealth. Similar to Ellie’s map, Violet’s map features a “mixed” category for Virginia Tech, gesturing towards the complex relationship that the university has with the surrounding area. But Violet’s map was different from Mychele’s in Chapter 4 and Ellie’s in Chapter 5 in one key way: while Mychele and Ellie marked both institutions and more informal gathering places (i.e. “the guys who sell meth” on Ellie’s map), Violet only marked locations of organized institutions, suggesting that she saw them as dominant forces in the Valley.

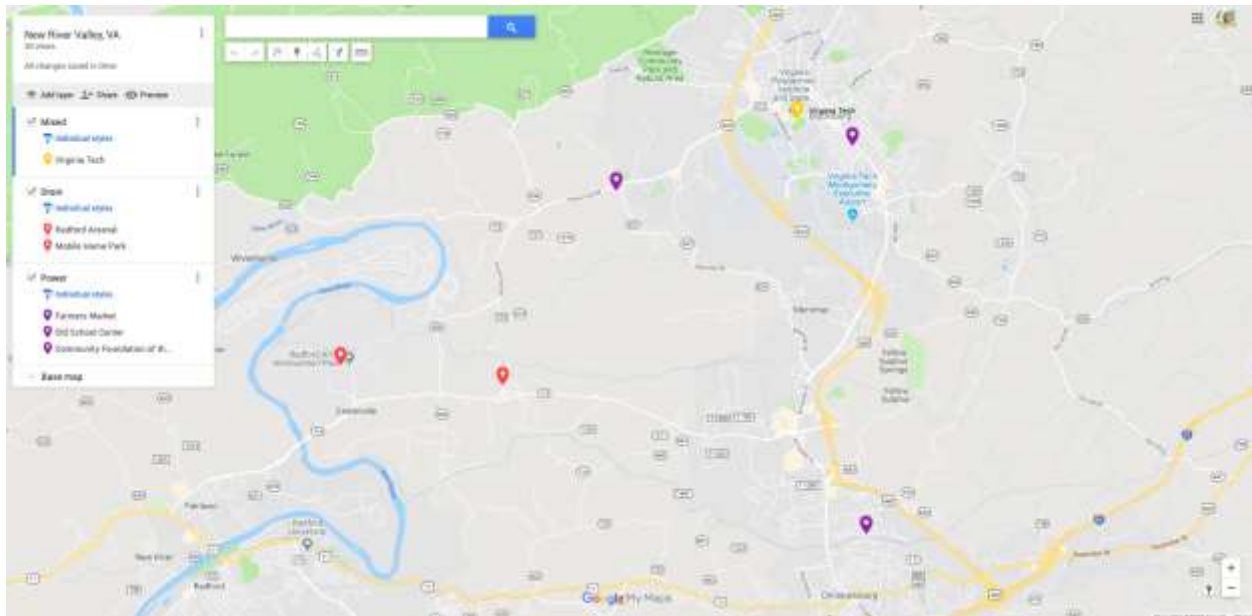


Figure 52: Participant map of the New River Valley in Virginia

In creating connections for the industrial kitchen, she ran into issues as multiple groups collaborated on the project. Food and Friends planned to locate the kitchen in an old elementary school that had been converted into apartments—some rented at market cost and others on a sliding scale for low-income folks (since affordable housing can be difficult to find due to the presence of the university). In addition to the commercial kitchen, there were plans for a small store space where local entrepreneurs could sell the goods they made in the kitchen, as well as a small restaurant and brewery owned by a local family farm. Violet thought this was a good use of the space, and a good way to supplement the expenses of the commercial kitchen so that it could be affordable. “It’s really cool to have the idea of fresh food really close to senior citizens

who may not be able to access it otherwise, but also, you got a brewery in there—of course you’re trying to draw the college kids.” It seemed to Violet that nearly every decision factoring into the kitchen’s design was touched by the presence of the university, and because of the multiple groups collaborating on the kitchen project, her own efforts with Food and Friends were tempered by those stakeholder’s agendas as well. This resulted in stakeholders each focusing on what *they* thought the kitchen should have, instead of responding to the data that Violet had gathered by talking to the people that would actually be using the kitchen. This scenario alerted Violet to a gap between the community and agencies presumably in service of community members.

While she anticipated being more welcomed by the community at large in her role with Food and Friends, she actually found more initial acceptance through her association with the university. This surprised her, given the complex relationship that large research universities typically have with the surrounding community, but she also understood that its presence was a point of pride for residents. Violet stated towards the beginning of our interview, “the university extracts a lot from this community,” but the community “is really proud to have something in their backyard that is the topic of conversation nationally...even though the relationship is complicated.” This tension was heightened in Violet’s environmental work. While Violet tried to position the university as “the buffer” between those who were “very heated” about the artillery production center (environmental activists, city council), and those who were “really happy and proud to have it” (workers and families of workers), community members still saw the university as the primary motivation behind the environmental study.

When she went out to talk to community members about the artillery production plant, many people supported its presence wholeheartedly, because their livelihoods were tied to it and they felt like their work was patriotic, as the plant had contracts with the military. Others, Violet felt, were afraid to say anything too critical because of the very same reasons. People who did speak up gave careful responses like, “I want them to be accountable to the community,” “I don’t want my kids to be polluted,” and “I don’t want the air to be poisoned.” These are more cautious critiques, reflecting the fact that people wanted to avoid being, in Violet’s words, “socially punished,” or accused of “not being American, not being patriotic” (since the Arsenal produced materials used by the U.S. military). So even though Violet’s task in this environmental research was to solicit stories and opinions from the public, her work was made difficult because of the

powerful institutions that community members faced: the university and the factory, which were both tied up in complicated webs of power.

6.3.2 Working with government agencies

In addition to casting the private sector as largely exploitative in communities where they worked, participants viewed federal and local government with equal hesitance. Participants largely dismissed federal agencies supporting economic development initiatives, as those agencies peddled prosperity narratives (discussed in Chapter 5), but they did express more faith in local levels of government. Several participants referenced working with local officials in their projects, and during our first focus group, we talked about ways to engage with municipal government. When I asked them if they felt like they were able to access those spaces, Violet said that she felt those structures were “bogged down with bureaucracy,” plagued by “paperwork and power play and politics,” all of which slow down changes that actually impact communities, and only serve those already in power. Referencing the often-repeated mantra of if you want to change something, get involved, Violet said the following about running for city council:

People can't see themselves in those positions because of who's been in those positions historically, first of all. But second of all, there's all these qualifications or ideas about qualifications of what you have to be to be on city council. I see [young] people who are on city council...and I'm like, that could never be me. I don't want to be up there, I want to be *here*. I want to be on the ground with people.

In this moment, Violet directly calls out cycles of power. The notion of what it takes to be a city councilperson is informed by who has held those positions in the past—and those people have usually been white, middle-aged businessmen. When younger people or anyone from a marginalized group looks at city council, they think, this isn't the place for me. Leigh echoed these thoughts, calling young people who do engage with these old systems “perpetually tokenized,” as the establishment holds onto old structures defined by “nostalgia.” Rather than seeing governmental bodies as hubs for civic engagement, participants felt that local governments encouraged engagement for a select, already-privileged group, and so they tended to locate their efforts outside of these structures.

6.3.3 Handling the often-insular nature of nonprofit culture

Perhaps unsurprisingly, participants had lots to say about the role of nonprofits in community organizing work since they were each linked to a nonprofit in some way. One of the main critiques about nonprofits that emerged was the insularity of the nonprofit world. Phoebe, who had worked in the nonprofit world in Charleston, said that even though she was placed with a new organization through the fellowship, it still put her “in the same places and rooms with people I had known before.” She continued, saying that she noticed a lot of “sitting around and talking about things” in the nonprofit community, “but what’s being done other than these nonprofits having all these conversations?” Phoebe was frustrated by the insular nature of these conversations, and the gap between what nonprofits in her sector wanted to do and what was actually being done. She asked during our second focus group how this talk was going to translate into action “for the people that really need it.” Leigh echoed this sentiment, sharing photos of a meeting they had attended in their original placement with a group developing an ecotourism hub in Virginia (Figures 53). Organizers of the meeting gathered representatives from 19 counties. They were all white and over 30—except for Leigh, who was in their mid-20s. The purpose of the meeting was to brainstorm approaches to engaging what they called the “creative economy.” Leigh explained, “a lot of the things they were excited about were things that were not accessible to people—things that I don’t feel I could have engaged in, that I just don’t think are serving the poor communities.” Phoebe and Leigh both provided examples of how nonprofits might fall into cycles that fail to engage with community members.



Figure 53: Strategy meeting about creative economies

Participants noted other patterns in nonprofits that signaled a gap between nonprofit visions and their actual impact. Carrie worked with an organization devoted to family-based

activism in the face of the nationwide opioid crisis, and this organization often collaborated with other groups. In our first focus group, she shared an account of a lunch meeting with representatives from a group in her community who only wanted to work with other faith-based organizations. Reflecting on how limiting that mentality seemed to her, Carrie mused that there were “so many different communities within a community...and then you have communities that set up those barriers themselves about not wanting to work within you know—a community.” Carrie shared a photo of that organization’s tagline, which is “We are one” (Figure 54). Reflecting on the irony of their external image and their internal politics, she said, “They want that unity in the community, but only on their terms.” This selective building of communities ultimately dehumanizes those that don’t fit into certain social parameters, fracturing a collective sense of community and failing to harness the power of different types of people with diverse skillsets and knowledges.

Funding emerged as another indicator of the often-insular nature of nonprofits. Jackson, who was working to build a peer network across southeastern Kentucky, compared the funding he received for his network to the funding a larger group had received over the last 30 years. He had recently learned that the majority of the money that organization received went to groups that had sat on the board for the last several decades, prompting him to think ask, “Who does that [money] get to, and who directly benefits from that work and from that network?” He continued, “Who benefits...from work in this sector in general? Is it mainly communities, or is it in the name of communities for another certain group of people, like for nonprofits, for organizations? Where does the wealth that we generate in this sector go?” While Jackson (and other participants) understood firsthand that nonprofits need money to function, they were frustrated that large sums of money didn’t seem to fund direct action in the communities they claimed to serve. As a result, participants viewed the funding structures of nonprofits, and their dependence on this funding, as a hindrance to the good work that they could be doing in their communities.



Figure 54: T-shirt with slogan for advocacy group focused on addiction

6.3.4 Struggling to engage with community knowledges through nonprofit work

Finally, there were several scenarios in which the nonprofit that a participant was working with served as a barrier to engaging with the community in meaningful ways. Baxter was charged with sharing findings from a land study of ownership patterns through public workshops. They shared in our second focus group that they had added slides at the end of a presentation about how to actually organize around land reform, but had been told to take those slides out. Baxter was frustrated with this feedback, because they saw a disconnect between the history and statistics about land ownership and what people in the community could actually do with that information:

That's the only tangible skill that people could get from the workshop, you know what I mean? I don't feel good to be...bringing research to these people who know the land's fucked up, do they have to know all the science about why? I'm not saying I totally don't believe in [sharing the technical information with them], but it feels like I'm telling people in [the county] what they need, instead of listening to them.

Baxter felt like these workshops were one-directional and didn't engage with community members. Even worse, the design made them feel like they were prescribing actions instead of listening to community members and honoring their experiences. Rather than drawing on the

bonds that existed between community members and organizers, Baxter felt that this institutional approach weakened those bonds. Additionally, this approach privileged expert knowledge over community knowledges.

Ira experienced a similar dynamic in her placement, as she worked with community responsibility groups organized around a water crisis. In addition to encouraging activism, she supported litigation efforts in an official investigation. Ira asked, “What’s best case scenario out of this investigation? Like, what happens when people talk about [these outside groups and people] as this godsend? That sort of dynamic makes me nervous. It’s like, Okay, wait, what happens when that’s over? What power have we built here when it’s so based in expert knowledge?” Ira’s reflection is perhaps one of the most meaningful critiques of good-natured efforts of community organizers trying to solve difficult problems. Ira calls into question the efficacy of expertise, a powerful rhetorical move that strengthens her own effort to generate community-based knowledge that enacts change and improves the circumstances of people’s everyday lives. Her work enacted this, as she worked with others on community-based oversight systems that monitored the water supply and aggregated official notices about the crisis, locating agency in the community, rather than scientific and policy experts who would only be present in the area for a short amount of time.

Citing a range of difficulties they traced to institutional structures, participants were apprehensive about building their efforts entirely within such structures. Though they undoubtedly received support from some institutions, especially nonprofits, they also were discouraged by the realities of that sector. Participants ultimately suggested that rather than serving as a hub for community, community often existed outside of these groups—or even in spite of them.

6.4 Identifying and addressing community needs through art, action, and activism

Though participants critiqued practices of organizations that rendered official structures slow, unwieldy, and sometimes detrimental to social change, they still found ways that change could be enacted in their communities, sometimes alongside institutions. The most exciting insights came from conversations about what participants were actually doing in their communities—not necessarily the everyday ins and outs of their placements, but rather, larger projects they took on, collaborations they stumbled into, and cooperation between community

members that they witnessed. This work stirred hope in participants even as they experienced frustration with the difficulties that accompany rural organizing. This work also explicitly embraced community knowledge; whether these actions shared community experiences, amplified community concerns, or leveraged community resources for the benefit of people within that community, they all honored the bonds that linked people together, and addressed the struggles that communities in the region face. These actions were enhanced by knowledges from communities, demonstrating the capacity for Appalachians to enact ethical, sustainable changes and work towards a just future.

6.4.1 Articulating community concerns in the New River Valley

During our project, participants noted how common narratives about Appalachian people actively working against themselves were, i.e. people in these communities are stupid, how can they continue to vote against their own interests, how can they continue to work for unethical industries, and so on. Violet felt these critiques deeply, as she had grown up in a coal community and knew firsthand why Appalachian communities continued certain practices—practices that might look ignorant to outsiders. They were concerned with meeting their daily needs. She shared the following example about her best friend from her hometown, whose father worked for a coal company.

I wasn't thinking, *Oh, Katie's dad is polluting the mountain.* I was thinking, *Katie's dad has a job and he gets up at 4 a.m. to go to his job. And Katie's mom is disabled and that's how they make a living.* And they make a good living, he makes good money, he's like an engineer, he's an engineer with a community college degree.

No matter the location, people do what they have to do to put food on the table for their families, and in certain areas where economic or educational opportunities are limited, potential job paths are also limited. Violet noted that privilege played a big part in these critiques and some of what she saw unfolding in the New River Valley. The people who had initiated conversations about the artillery plant and showed up at city council meetings were mostly people associated with the university or people who worked white-collar jobs in town. Violet said that they could “afford to be invested in politics in this way.” And while she said that kind of involvement wasn't necessarily a bad thing, “it's complicated because the working-class people can't really engage in that way and don't want to. People are exhausted.” Even if people are all living in the same geographic area and are therefore members of a community in that way, there are other types of

membership that shape how much someone can get involved with particular causes. She carried this understanding of how material needs shape civic and community involvement into her work in the valley.

Violet noted that a particular group of residents in the valley was at-risk for negative health and environmental effects from the artillery plant: a primarily black community living downwind and downstream from the plant. This neighborhood was lived in mostly by descendants of enslaved people who had worked on a plantation by the university. Violet stated that the community's location—and increased health risk—was because of a racist history, and that she wasn't "going to pretend that it wasn't. It's good for me to see that, and it's good for me to name that at the very least." But this group was absent from most of the conversations about the artillery plant and its impact, and Violet felt their absence was a problem, saying, "We need to organize *with* them, understanding that they need to get their story out...I need to support them getting their story out and my place is also not to pretend, even though I'm pretty close to the Arsenal, where I live [that my stake is the same as theirs]." Noting these differences, she felt, helped her to be a "better comrade to them...to understand that I don't have the same experience." Instead of collapsing differences or lumping all stakeholders into the same group (which happens quite a bit when dealing with environmental issues), Violet advocates for a nuanced, contextual understanding of all community members involved—just as Mychele did in her work, discussed in Chapter Four. By asking for and listening to community stories, organizers beholden to larger institutions can make room for multiple accounts that preserve community knowledges.

6.4.2 Addressing immediate needs in southwestern Virginia (and beyond)

While people in precarious situations would presumably like to see major structural changes in their lives, they are caught up by immediate concerns. Violet's work with food distribution (Figures 55 and 56) was one way in which those immediate concerns were being met. Local businesses, farmers, and individuals donated to the pantry. Every Monday, she would go to the Food and Friends warehouse and sort food, and then deliver it to a local apartment complex with low income and senior housing. While it was located in a community space at that complex, anyone could attend. "It really makes me think about abundance...abundance means you have enough to share, and I think that every time we do the food distribution and we get

there and we put everything on the table and we're about to have people come through...it always blows my mind when we pull it together." For Violet, the food distribution demonstrates the capacity for a community to provide for its own, helping people meet their most pressing needs. She felt that her work with the environmental research could make a difference in people's daily lives as well. "I'm trying to meet people's immediate needs while doing some of the structural work as best I can, and if like, their immediate need is for this place to stop pumping out pollution...the least I can do is try to get that to stop so that their kids can breathe easy and live so that these people don't die of thyroid cancer at younger age." By addressing issues voiced by community members, Violet hoped to curb harmful dynamics that tend to give power to outside forces that then determine what these communities need.



Figure 55: Display of fruits and vegetables available at weekly food distribution



Figure 56: Display of baked goods donated to distribution

The gaps between what communities actually need and what sorts of projects are unfolding in the region was a constant presence throughout the project. As part of her work with the university, she attended a conference with students where they presented on their research. While at the conference, she saw an overwhelming number of presentations on the future of the

region, each with projects that did not seem to account for working-class or poor people. She shared one particular example of an ecotourism project: an idea for a state park in a remote area of Tennessee focused on astronomy tours and stargazing. Sure, she said, it would create a few jobs, but it doesn't represent the kind of development that can create meaningful lives for communities at large. Violet said that she had asked the group presenting on that idea what the community thought about the project, and they said that a group of local amateur astronomers fully supported the park idea. "Well, duh, the amateur astronomers want it! They're people who have the time and energy to have hobbies like that." Again, Violet links privilege to the capacity for having time for not just hobbies, but for getting involved in any community effort and having their ideas about what the region should be like heard.

Rather than lofty, sexy ideas for recruiting people to the region, Violet advocated listening to community members and responding to their needs—especially those that threaten the wellbeing of residents. She noted that needle exchanges, harm reduction centers, and safe injection sites were all needed in the face of the opioid epidemic, but because those were undesirable to those not actually *dealing* with the fallout from opioid abuse, efforts to provide those services were thwarted. Instead, people tried to bring in attractions like breweries.

I don't want an ATV trail. I don't want a pipeline. I don't want a prison...I want a natural burial ground so I don't have to save money to bury my parents or take on debt to bury somebody I love, especially in the middle of an opioid crisis when people are dying.

Again and again, Violet expressed her frustration with the repeated silencing of what communities actually need or want, in favor of projects glorified by people in power. Returning to the example of the state park in Tennessee, Violet noted that a way to find out what people actually need would be to actually go into the community, to a football game or to the local mall, and ask people questions. "Y'all have all this money, but instead you're talking to park rangers and amateur astronomers—who are people, but of course they have a different stake. It's like asking the new warden of the prison they're going to build what he thinks about it." In her own work, Violet took great care to actually talk to a range of community members, and to document their experiences so that she could share those needs and desires with others in the organizations she represented.

Throughout her time in the New River Valley, Violet was tasked with navigating complicated community relationships as a representative of two very different institutions.

However, guided by her own experiences and histories, she sought to gather insight from community members who often weren't represented in official renderings of the community, ranging from older people who were place-bound, to residents of black neighborhoods who weren't typically asked for feedback on public issues. By privileging people and honoring their stories, Violet sought to strengthen community bonds that could serve as a platform for action in the future, as people in her host community tried to make it a safer, better place to live. But Violet always noted the ways that institutional power was wielded in these communities, and she felt that her attention to that made her work more complicated, in some ways. "There's this change...within your relationship to community when you start demanding more from the people who have power...For me it's been a huge shift and because I no longer want to be nice about it." By demanding more from people in power, through harnessing community strengths and holding stakeholders accountable, this case demonstrates how community organizers might begin to address wicked problems.



Figure 57: Small colorful mural



Figure 58: Example of quilt artistry



Figure 59: Art focused on coal mining in gallery

6.4.3 Expressing community realities through art

Artistic expression was a major theme throughout the project, as participants cataloged creative projects (Figures 57-59) of traditional and contemporary varieties. Carrie's involvement in open mic nights was discussed in Chapter 4, as she felt they served as a hub for building futures in the region; however, the open mic nights were important spaces for sharing community experiences. Carrie talked about two attendees who were frequent performers. They were both young people whose mothers were not in their lives, and their art often reflected their experiences resulting from that absence. While their art emerged from deeply personal experiences, others in the community could relate to their work because of their shared stake in addressing the opioid epidemic. According to Carrie, when young people "get up on stage and share their stories, their talents, their fears, and their hopes, and they have people actively listening to them, it strengthens their connections to community and helps them find value in being part of a group." In addition to building these social connections with people most effected, which are a direct challenge to the opioid epidemic, Carrie noted the location of the open mic nights: a space connected to a coal museum. "During a state of transition... a lot of stuff might just be moving towards museums and the memory of things and capturing that culture. But

we also know we have to go in a different direction. And a part of that is in these small communities supporting arts, culture, music, things like that.”

Jackson talked about art throughout the study, saying that “art is powerful and is inherently political...it is used to achieve certain ends.” But Jackson (and others) pointed to the coopting of art as an economic enterprise by outside interests. While an artist selling their work is obviously positive, participants noted the explosion of discussions about the creative economy in the region, and how that would bring new economic prosperity to Appalachia. And just as participants challenged similar narratives about tourism and technology and the medical fields, they critiqued this one as well. In our second focus group, Jackson pointed to the “sanitation” of art in these discussions, which “takes the teeth out of it.” Making art a commodity rids it of its transformational possibility, and reinscribes exploitative systems participants were actively working to disrupt. Jackson later expanded this notion to all community work, saying that, “When we take the political aspect out of community work, then it just continues to serve the state. It doesn’t serve the people, it serves the state.” Participants saw that art, with its capacity to connect the artist to the audience, could be a catalyst for more expansive action *if* its creation was free of institutional motivation.

6.4.4 Fostering safe spaces for expression and collaboration

Carving out space where people could make art together was another way that participants saw possibilities for community action, especially when working with youth. Official structures successfully supported these efforts, demonstrating that organizations can unite bonds and actions. Several participants were a part of a music summer camp in southeastern Kentucky for girls and gender non-conforming and trans youth, focused on helping campers “gain meaningful life experiences of problem solving and social justice awareness in a creative, supportive environment” (Girls Rock Whitesburg announces 2019 camp dates). In our first focus group, Mychele said that the experience was “just incredible,” working with young people ages 12-18 who were performing songs about “real issues going on,” including consent and immigration policies (Figures 60-62). While the camp taught attendees about music from a functional perspective, it also provided a platform for young people to work through their thoughts and emotions about complex public issues. This was potentially formative for young people, because their experiences weren’t necessarily being honored in their daily lives, as

femme youth in a rural area. The Girls Rock Camp provided a space for community to come together and build upon the bonds that already existed between campers—whether they were initially apparent or not.



Figure 60: Group of instructors and campers at music camp at Appalshop



Figure 61: Practice session at camp



Figure 62: Small session focused on guitar

Another example of this kind of space came early on in the fellowship, when Highlander hosted a youth retreat that participants facilitated. They collectively agreed that the highlight of the retreat was a talent show and dance party. Violet connected these moments with previous gatherings at Highlander, saying that she had seen pictures of people square dancing but in the future, “people are going to look at these pictures of us in this pavilion like, twerking and stuff,” and have the same emotional connection. Violet said, echoed by others, that this was the kind of space she wanted as a queer young person, because there had not been many welcoming, safe spaces for her to visit. “I was really overcome with gratitude and love for that space and it was so healing...it’s one of those moments where you really are like, okay, this is a moment where I know I’m doing, where I know I’m on the right track.” Providing a space for people to connect on an individual level and to learn about how they are bonded to one another through their identities, or beliefs, or concerns, is foundational for fostering community action. Talking about the Girls Rock camp, Baxter shared that they had a lot of “pain and resentment” about their time in Whitesburg trying to organize. “Where was this support for femme folks that were playing punk music in 2014 when I was doing it? I quit playing music for that reason, very literally.” To Jackson’s point made earlier, art is powerful because of its capacity to connect the artist directly to another person. Instead of an engineered connection crafted by some larger organization, art can link one individual to another. And without spaces that support those types of organic connections and collaborations, particular actions might never unfold.

6.4.5 Mobilizing through mutual aid and protest

While these community gatherings were important hubs for sharing community knowledges, participants documented other events that dealt with more immediate community needs. Several participants were involved with service and direct action, documenting moments where social services assisted communities, but also when communities took it upon themselves to help one another. Baxter shared a photo of a distribution center that opened up in a small town in North Carolina after Hurricane Florence (Figure 63). Though the center wasn’t in their host community, they included the pictures because they thought that mutual aid was an important strategy moving forward in Appalachia. “It’s something that me and a lot of friends have talked about, like how can we do this in West Virginia? Because I spent a little time [in this town] and it’s a really poor community where there’s not a lot of monetary wealth, you know?” Baxter

continued that it made them think “about what I need to be doing at home,” since they had witnessed people coming together “in a really poor place in a state that’s still wealthier than [mine].” The distribution center represents the type of work that participants wanted to do themselves: driven by community need, adaptive in changing situations, drawing on resources contributed by residents themselves, and strengthening the bonds between different members of the community.



Figure 63: Community-run distribution center in western North Carolina

Though the distribution center came about as the result of a tragic natural disaster, it represents the capacity of rural communities to take care of themselves in these situations, instead of waiting on outside forces to come in and dominate relief efforts. It also emphasizes the importance of addressing the material circumstances facing Appalachian communities in ways that emphasize the strengths of people and the bonds that they share. Others saw this dynamic in their own host communities, as well. Rosie described part of her community as “forgotten,” having gaps in social services. The community, however, addressed these gaps, as Rosie described: “People just like show up for each other and take care of each other...even with complicated community dynamics and drama...even when people really dislike other people in the community, they still show up.”

Other actions documented were direct challenges to injustice, built upon the responsibility that communities felt to either members of their own immediate community, or to people they felt solidarity towards. In fact, participants often took part in protests or counter-protests about different issues in the region, including immigration and LGBTQ+ rights (Figures 64-67). They attended these protests of their own volition, as neither the fellowship nor their

individual placements required them to organize outside of their official duties. But *all* of them did, demonstrating their commitment to social justice in the region, especially as they focused on issues related to race, sexuality, gender identity, class, immigration status, and reproductive justice. Participants were their most overtly political selves in these spaces. While they enacted change through their work, in protests, they demonstrated their beliefs. Violet wrote the following in a blog entry about midway through the study: “In workplaces, kitchen tables, streets, and churches around the globe, people gather - kind of like I do when I see my cohort - to heal, strategize, and disrupt. These are the places where it’s happening.” Here, Violet locates power in the collaborative nature of healing, strategizing, and gathering, saying that people take on this work around the region and the world. And though protests and movements typically contain the mass of many bodies, individual connections drive actions and are what hold us accountable to one another.

Participants documented actions that privileged communities and responded to their needs. The ways in which participants felt anchored to communities—whatever shape those communities took—allowed them to engage their work in smart, often unexpected ways, drawing on the strengths of the people, places, and resources around them instead of waiting for rescue from the outside world. Instead of leaning into romantic representations of community, participants forged their own understandings that embraced the knowledges shared by those communities and sought to build upon them.



Figure 64: Antiracist banner



Figure 65: T-shirt at ICE protest



Figure 66: Banner held up at a white pride counter-protest

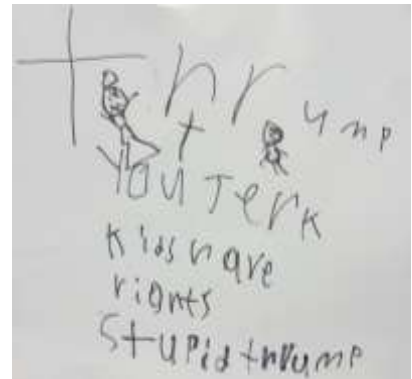


Figure 67: Sign made by child at ICE protest

6.5 Operationalizing community; privileging community knowledges

Appalachian communities and their needs are often misrepresented. Whether this misrepresentation is at the hands of well-meaning community organizations or external economic interests, the effects are largely the same: the continued avoidance of acknowledging what problems Appalachian communities face and what they need to deal with them. Participants

in this project sought to catalog nuanced accounts of their communities, providing residents with the opportunity to share their own experiences on their terms. This chapter positions bonds, or shared responsibilities, as the foundation of community action, and recognizes the role that organized structures have in facilitating action, or, based on what participants experienced, their role in hindering action. By building on already-strong community relationships, rather than trying to create new ones, participants engaged with residents in meaningful ways, demonstrating their shared accountability to one another's wellbeing. They then used these connections to circumvent institutional forces, when necessary, fostering community-driven expressions of experience. Participants demonstrated the radical compassion and resilience that exists within Appalachian communities.

During the study, participants named many types of communities, organized around location, interest, identity, and career, many of which overlapped. They also speculated on the nature of community, sometimes expressing frustration with the ubiquity of the term. In fact, it seemed to function as a god-term that could be used by just about any entity to brand their work—even if the work wasn't *actually* community-focused. Joseph (2002) cautions against an uncritical embrace of community, writing that, "Fetishizing community only makes us blind to the ways we might intervene in the enactment of domination and exploitation" (p. ix). Noting the connection between community and embedded institutions, she continues: "fundamental practices of modernity...depend on and generate community" (p. xxxi). These practices of modernity include capitalism—a system that shaped the work of participants, for better or worse, as detailed in Chapter 5. Participants were aware of the spaces their work occupied, and how they tried to meet the immediate needs of people disenfranchised by larger systems.

Regardless, participants felt that seeking out community was "part of doing good work." While they witnessed many groups that operated on "an idea of what a community should be," Jackson advocated for "intentionally working with community folks...and finding what those communities are, and where they intersect, and how they don't." Working in the New River Valley, Violet did just that: she was careful to examine the ways that different stakeholders aligned, and to use those connections to gather insight directly from community members—especially those that often didn't get the chance to share their experiences. Violet explained her commitment to community work with one word: solidarity. "Like, who am I fighting for? And who am I accountable to? That's how I view community: who I care about, you know? And who

cares about me? Or even if I don't feel like I'm getting the care that I deserve...I still feel accountable." By actively inviting, assembling, and sharing community knowledges (which are often complex, contrary, and complicated), community organizers, technical communicators, and other stakeholders devoted to addressing wicked problems provide a platform for solutions based upon lived experiences, and open to ingenuity. This, perhaps, is one way to build the world we want while resisting harm.

EPILOGUE: HONORING COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGES IN APPALACHIA—AND BEYOND

As with most dissertations, this one started in a very different place than it has ended. I began my research by focusing on techno-centric projects that bolster Silicon Holler narratives participants disputed in Chapter 5. But the more I talked to people associated with these projects, the more I saw the same unidirectional economic development practices that have plagued the region for decades. Many of these projects positioned technology—and by extension, funds and people backing that technology—as the primary concern of development, instead of the people actually living in Appalachian communities. This realization set me on a different path, which led me to the participatory photovoice project with members of the transition fellowship. And what emerged in my work with participants was not any one particular finding, or adherence to the theoretical frame I had so painstakingly developed before our project began, but an embarrassingly obvious conclusion: community knowledges are largely not valued in professional, technical, or academic contexts. Community members 1) know this and resent technical experts for it and 2) feel the material implications of this dynamic.

My initial focus on laid-off coal miners learning how to code is a symptom of a disconnect between technical expertise and community knowledges, visualized by Chapter Two's mountain metaphor. I had good intentions, but couldn't see what was unfolding on the ground. Participants identified this dynamic repeatedly throughout the study as they talked about development projects unfolding across the region, many of which they felt were either wasted efforts or actively harming already-vulnerable populations. In our second focus group, Jackson stated: "I think there's a severe disconnect between what is actually going to help and what sounds like a good idea. I feel like a lot of this is just vague enough, and just inspiring enough to feel hopeful, and that's enough for some people. And it's not for me."

Though I ultimately secured a more nuanced look at life in Appalachia through my partnership with participants, the realities of Silicon Holler stories aren't actually that obvious. On May 12, 2019, *The New York Times* published a story about a nonprofit in West Virginia that promised high-paying jobs to residents who enrolled in coding classes. Mined Minds, which had previously received glowing praise from a variety of directions, failed to deliver on its promises, and is now being sued by more than 25 former students. These events—external interest comes

into the region, promises wealth and success, extracts value from communities, disappears and fails to see things through—echo a pattern long endured by Appalachians. I want to share an excerpt from this article, because it resonates with the words of participants shared throughout this dissertation: “‘They’re coming here promising stuff that they don’t deliver,’ said Mr. Frame, his hands and face still gray with coal dust. ‘People do that all the time. They’ve always done it to Appalachians...it repeats itself...It’s like a never-ending cycle’” (Robertson, 2019). The story this article tells is jarring to many—but not to the West Virginians quoted in Robertson’s piece, or to other Appalachians reading it and thinking about the ways that their communities have been exploited by outside interests.

Participants in this study documented their organizing work and compiled community knowledges as they addressed wicked social, economic, and environmental problems. Rather than accepting simplistic narratives and expert opinions, participants challenged one-dimensional renderings of their communities by asserting their own intimate knowledges, and in so doing, met needs voiced by community members instead of external powers. By examining stories about place, technology, and community told by Appalachian community organizers, this project privileges knowledges that emerged from lived experiences. In this brief closing section, I will discuss three lingering concerns: how we might support the work of organizers in rural areas that are consistently disenfranchised by corporate interests; how a metic framework for community knowledges might be even more powerful in community contexts; and how scholars interested in participatory research must continue to interrogate their methods and motivations to avoid extracting resources from marginalized communities.

Supporting rural organizing work

While some participants had previous experience with community organizing, all of them faced difficulties doing this work in rural areas—even the participants who were placed in their hometowns. In addition to the difficulties that often well-meaning nonprofit and political institutions introduced for organizers addressed in Chapter 6, participants voiced their concerns about the overall sustainability and impact of their work. Isolation, structural longevity, movement cohesion, and emotional labor were all aspects of rural organizing work that participants pondered during the project.

In our first focus group, held just two months after the fellowship started, participants were still excited about their projects but were clearly still adjusting to their placements. Much of that discussion revolved around the struggles they faced in their daily work lives, including how isolated many of them felt in their placements. After sharing photos of hiking trails and forests, Ellie explained her lack of photos depicting people, saying that, “reflection is just as big a part of the work as talking to people, you know?” A few moments later, she continued, more softly, “but this work is really lonely sometimes, and we do a lot of it on our own, even if it is with folks.” Months later, when the fellows were halfway through the yearlong program, our conversation quickly returned to the isolating nature of rural organizing even though participants had built up their social networks. They were tired and, in many ways, discouraged, as the realities of organizing in rural communities where populations are distributed across large distances were perhaps more tangible than they had been earlier in the study. At these moments, the fellowship itself became a source of strength that propelled their work. “I get to be reminded when I’m hanging out with people, like hanging out with y’all, or when me and Leigh talk on the phone, I get to be reminded that I’m not alone in this work” (Violet, Focus Group 2). Social networks emerged as important in ensuring the longevity of individual placements, as well as organizing work as a whole.

Again in that second focus group, as participants began to think about the future, they expressed concern with establishing infrastructure in their positions, given the history of people coming to the region and leaving after a project ends. “There are programs and initiatives that have good momentum or get to a certain point and then fizzle out, or things that folks get behind and then at the drop of a hat can’t anymore, can’t exist for not having funding, or not having capacity,” Jackson said. “What does stability look like for me and my work?” Fellows were only guaranteed employment with their host organizations for a year, and while it was possible that some would be able to stay on in their communities in some capacity, other participants would have to move on. Additionally, to stay on in their communities would mean to take a position at a nonprofit, where they would be making very little money after a yearlong fellowship that was also not lucrative. Thus continuing their projects required personal sacrifices for participants, and many had families to provide for or loans to pay off. They struggled to find ways to ensure that the work they had done in their placements would continue once they left, and this was disheartening to the group as a whole.

Undoubtedly aided by the fellowship's focus on intergenerational organizing, relationships between young members and movement elders were a frequent topic of conversation in our focus groups as participants attempted to build cohesive social structures (presumably in light of their concerns about sustainability). Several participants articulated gaps between older and younger members of groups. "I feel like there hasn't been super intentional efforts to bring younger folks in and train them to carry on that sort of stuff" (Rosie, Focus Group 2). Baxter saw this gap in a slightly different way, pointing to the marginalization of older people within movement structures.

I think we're really failing our movement elders. There should be space for somebody whose husband is sick so they can't leave the house, you know? It almost feels like we glorify their achievements but then, we want to include them, but we don't *really* include them, you know? It feels fucked up and I don't know how to—I don't know. I've been trying to take their stories because they want to tell them, but also, it doesn't feel good to just take something from them. Like I want to know what I'm bringing to them, too. Though there are shared bonds between older and younger people working towards the same goals, Baxter and Rosie expose the gaps that sometimes make this work difficult, or even unsustainable. Finding ways to engage reciprocity within movements proved to be important for participants as they tried to build structures for engagement that would outlast their specific projects.

Participants also had a lot to say about the emotional aspects of organizing work. There were several conversations I had with participants throughout the course of the study where they shared difficult details about their experiences, revealing how deeply responsible they felt in their roles as advocates for members of their communities. This concern filtered into their conceptions of work. Violet pondered what types of activities counted as hours towards her workweek: "Like do I get to count hours for how much time I spend awake thinking about this shit? And like, I'm worried about this economy and people, and worried about my home. Do I get to count hours for that?" Violet's questions resonated with the rest of the group, as they shared their own questions. Participants shared that organizing work is all encompassing. And being a paid organizer required them to reconcile receiving compensation for their work with their shared belief that capitalism was largely responsible for the problems they were trying to address.

Finally, participants suggested that the difficulties of rural organizing emerged from the fact that most resources on organizing work originate from work that has happened in urban areas. Participants said that despite the training that Highlander gave them, there weren't any specific models or blueprints for the type of rural organizing work that they were taking on. Ellie described it as "total chaos...I felt that word deep inside me." When working with community organizers, PTC scholars should keep these stressors in mind and work alongside community organizers to establish infrastructures that preserve their work and increase the likelihood of someone picking it up after they've moved on. Also, as participants pointed out, rural organizing brings up different concerns than it does in more densely populated areas. More research needs to address the specific affordances and constraints of community organizing in rural areas, and scholars should strive to produce resources to aid organizers taking on that type of work.

Moving a metic framework for community knowledges into community hands

Metis, or embodied, rhetorical knowing, has been a fruitful lens throughout this dissertation project. Originally, I used it to unpack how Appalachian stakeholders have embraced elements of their communities that contribute to their marginalization (i.e., organizers growing crops on abandoned landmines, or activists re-claiming the moniker of "hillbilly" through art and music). But as our study progressed, I was struck by how metis seemed to grow and change alongside participants' organizing work, and at the conclusion of this study, I am thoroughly convinced that metis is a powerful framework that offers academics and organizers a way to uncover and value community knowledges.

But before I speculate on that, I want to reveal a bit about how metis found its way into participants' minds of seemingly of its own accord. The original title of my project was "Mapping Metis: Tracing the Work of Regional Transformation in Appalachia" and I intended to use metis as the primary theoretical concept in my dissertation. While I was designing the orientation session where participants would create their own research questions (outlined in Chapter Three), I debated whether I wanted to explain my theoretical approach to their community development work. Ultimately, I decided to gloss over it, for two reasons: one, to give us as much time as possible to articulate research questions; and two, to avoid shaping their approach to the project in my own image. However, I hadn't thought about the consent forms, which bore this study's original title. As one might expect, a participant asked me, "So, what is

metis?” Soon, I found myself explaining the concept, telling participants about the trials of Zeus’ first wife, the embodiment of metis in foxes and octopi, and the possibilities that metis affords the underdogs of the world. Rather than being bored, the people in the room seemed as intrigued as I had been when I first heard of the term in a classical rhetoric seminar years before. “Can you send us readings on this?” someone asked.

The following week, I thought a lot about whether that conversation was useful for them, or just served to further cement my role as an academic outsider. I believed wholeheartedly that metis could frame the work of these organizers—but would they? Charice, who managed the fellowship, assuaged my worries. On a phone call several weeks after our orientation session, she told me that while the fellows were in Hazard on their learning tour (which I did not attend), Ira asked the group, “What is the metis of this place?” According to Charice, a robust conversation ensued, with the fellows reflecting on the different elements that made that community unique and resilient. This proved to me that metis was not only a theoretical framework steeped in rhetorical history, but a useful lens for practitioners on the ground.

While participants didn’t wholeheartedly adopt metis as a frame, this series of events suggests that metis might be an apt framework to employ in community organizing contexts, where organizers are required to tackle embedded problems from various perspectives. According to Detienne and Vernant, metis “always appears more or less below the surface, immersed as it were in practical operations, which, even when they use it, show no concern to make its nature explicit or to justify its procedures” (p. 3). Of course, the fact that metis often lies latent is part of its allure; at the same time, its location just under the surface makes it powerful for people facing entrenched power dynamics. In Chapter 2, I outlined a metic framework for community knowledges that linked metis’ embodied, adaptive nature to community knowledges, which shift and change in often unpredictable ways. This framework could be useful for community organizers, especially those in rural areas or with little experience, as it could help them to see their efforts as cohesive, not scattered.

While scholars have recovered metis through theoretical means, highlighting its feminist origins that run contrary to traditional notions of the ancient world, organizers might uncover moments of metis in their work that privilege the wellbeing of communities and challenge unjust institutional power. By employing metis as a framework, we can re-frame narratives surrounding the work of organizers as they address wicked problems that cannot quickly or easily be solved.

Metis acknowledges the messy work that we engage as we better our communities, and provides us with a sense of direction as we adapt and adjust our efforts. Rather than appearing as unorganized and sporadic, a metic framework encourages us to see organizing work as adaptive, creative, and dynamic. This could be a powerful tool for communities that have been repeatedly subject to the whims of external, extractive forces.

Confronting extractive research practices through participatory work

As our field continues to push the boundaries of what technical communication work looks like (and who is doing that work), we are called upon to devise nuanced, careful approaches to examining such work—especially when that work is being done by or in the service of marginalized communities. This project has also demonstrated the value that participatory projects can provide to both academic researchers and community members, fostering collaborations that engage deep reciprocity and ethical movement towards shared goals—all while honoring community knowledges in scenarios where technical or academic expertise is typically held as the ultimate authority.

Participatory projects offer a mode of engagement that provides space for communities to articulate their needs, on their terms—an approach that undoubtedly matches social justice approaches in our field. However, it is not the only way that we can do this work, and, like any methodological approach, it has drawbacks. First, due to their unpredictable nature, PAR projects don't fit into traditional notions of replicable, aggregable, and data-supported scholarship (Haswell, 2005), and offer challenges for academics as we are increasingly required to articulate our value across disciplinary and institutional boundaries. Second, PAR projects are incredibly difficult to execute and largely subject to serendipity. I'll be the first to admit that I lucked into my collaboration, and that there were many moments where the collaboration could have fallen apart. It took countless hours to plan, execute, and manage, on both academic and community sides, and this labor has to be acknowledged for a reciprocal relationship. I did as much organizational work as I could, documenting conversations, putting together one-pagers about the project, writing up procedural documents, and handling the collection and storage of data. Academics engaged in community-based research find themselves in delicate power ecosystems that have to be carefully navigated; otherwise, we risk playing into tropes that reify power

imbalances, like “the hero narrative” (Spinuzzi, 2003) or “the missionary activist” (Cushman, 1996).

Even in participatory projects that attempt to avoid these pitfalls, the presence of an academic is not easy to ignore—and I was hyper-aware of this throughout the project. Though participatory projects are generative by design, it is undeniable that as academics hoping to publish on our research, we benefit from the work of participants. I sat with this tension throughout our project, which became palpable multiple times. For example, during our first focus group, one participant brought up his frustration with journalists and academics that come into the region and take intellectual property to “store it away in the Ivory Tower.” He said:

There’s this dichotomy too where like, obviously we have shit to say. We have knowledge that other folks don’t, that folks want from us. But at the same time, people from the mountains are supposed to be stupid or backwards or ignorant or whatever, and behind the times.

As a result, information is taken from these communities, “distilled through this filter of power,” and then credited to the outsider who gathered the information. Jackson suggested that this imbalance was especially egregious, given the invisible work that people in Appalachian communities do on behalf of these outsiders, and how “the labor we have to spend increases when folks don’t do their homework, and come here and come here expecting us to have all the answers and the direction for them.” These comments felt particularly pointed, and though he said moments later that this wasn’t a “passive aggressive” way to tell me he wasn’t happy with my presence as a researcher (given that he was working towards his own advanced degree), I have thought about that focus group literally every time I sat down to work on this dissertation.

Jackson did express a belief that ethical research was possible: “it’s the way you go about it, making sure that there is that reciprocity, that there is some sort of mutual benefit that is super important—but that is never done.” I held this closely throughout the project, heartened by the generosity of participants, my efforts to include them in research and to support their work beyond the scope of our study, and the words of another participant when I voiced my fears to the group: “We need allies everywhere.” While I don’t think this comment absolves me from the ethical concerns that we have to grapple with when we conduct research alongside communities, I do think it urges us to frame our work as collaborators, partners, and allies. We must pursue these difficult questions that unsettle our very positionalities as researchers, as we search for

models that benefit community efforts more than they capitalize on them. I believe that academics should use their privilege to bolster the efforts of organizers not only through research, but by developing tangible resources for their work, partnering with them to secure funding for their projects (as Ellie suggested in Chapter 5), and engaging in activist work alongside them.

Looking to the future

While participants engaged in meaningful work throughout their placements, their experiences were collectively difficult because there are no easy answers to wicked problems facing the region. However, their work suggests that one way to start is to honor the knowledges of communities living the realities of those problems. During my site visit to the New River Valley, Violet and I talked at length about what she would like to see in the future of the region, and how wicked problems like gentrification, opioid addiction, unemployment, environmental degradation, high cancer rates, and so on, might be addressed. She said:

I wish I knew what the answers are, but I would also just love the space to find out. I would love to have the supported space to find out what the answers are, just to work with other people and struggle with other people about what the answers are, and their immediate needs that need to be met. I would love to see everybody fed. I would love to see everybody have a good house. I would love to see people not at the mercy of slum lords...I would love to see people have jobs that they like and that they get paid for and whatever. I would love to see children with coats in the winter. I would love to see people out of jail.

Violet's desires reflect those that she has heard voiced in her own communities, and suggest a direction for community development work going forward. And while her list starts with immediate needs, they build into dreams for what the future of Appalachia might look like, if systems—corrupt at worst or broken at best—are reformed so that they serve communities, rather than exploit them.

Ultimately, this dissertation project argues that we should more emphatically seek out, amplify, and honor community knowledges. We should more carefully examine relationships between community, technology, and place, especially as organizers craft connections between available resources to solve problems in the face of often-dire circumstances. Perhaps the most

transformative outcome of our project was the creation of a tightknit collective, bound to one another through work, comradeship, and an embrace of the reality that, as one participant put it, “there is wealth in the struggle.”

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APPENDIX A. PHOTOGRAPHY PROMPTS

1. What does a typical day in your host community look like?
2. What represents the past, present, or future of this community?
3. How would you capture any of the following concepts: wealth, people, power, community, progress, transition, harm...?

APPENDIX B. FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. How did you organize or categorize your photos? What trends or patterns did you see?
2. Pick two photos: one that tells a story you would expect; and one that tells a story you did not expect. Tell us both stories.
3. What kinds of wealth do you see represented in your photos?
4. How do you see past, present, or future represented in these photos?
5. What do you think your photos reveal about building community?

APPENDIX C. HEURISTIC FOR CASE SELECTION

	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Gathers, curates, and shares knowledge emerging from community members</i>	Project has limited aspects of knowledge-building	Project draws upon community knowledges, incorporating them into work	Project gathers and shares knowledge in ethical ways	Project assembles and distributes community knowledges in ways that empower community members for further action
<i>Addresses issues of power and privilege in communities</i>	Project fails to address power and privilege	Project has possibilities for addressing power and privilege	Project invites opportunities to intervene in issues related to power	Project demonstrates actual interventions in unjust power dynamics or practices
<i>Engages place (local and regional) in multiple ways</i>	Project has limited links to place	Project's connection to land or cultural place is emergent	Project's connection to either land or cultural aspects of place are established	Project's local and regional connections to land and cultural aspects of place are established
<i>Increases access to technology and/or technological skills</i>	Access to technology is not enhanced by project	Project has technological aspects and/or technological skills are used	Project increases access to technology or develops related skills	Project focuses explicitly on increasing access to technology and fosters related skills
<i>Creates connections between people, institutions, or opportunities on multiple levels</i>	Project does not create connections or collaborations	Project creates connections between one or few community entities	Project links a range of components of community to one another	Project creates strong, sustainable connections between community resources

APPENDIX D. INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your role here. What does a typical day look like? What are your big goals?
2. How does your work here affect the local community?
3. How would you describe your community to someone who has never been here?
4. How has this area changed over time?
5. What do you think is the relationship between place and community?
6. How do you define community? Are there multiple communities you work with?
7. Has the fellowship influenced the way you view your work, or your home?
8. What have you learned about community organizing in a rural area?
9. What do you make of the narratives floating around about an “Appalachian Renaissance” and “Silicon Hollers”? How do they shape the work you’re doing?
10. What does the future of this community look like to you?
11. Let’s look at the photos you’ve taken since the last focus group. How have they changed from the ones you took at the start of the project?
12. I’m going to ask you to group them again, like in the focus group. Your original tags were (see below); would you change these now?
13. Pick two photos: one that tells a story you would expect; and one that tells a story you did not expect. Tell me both stories.
14. Are there any photos you wish you’d taken?
15. Do you think that taking these photos has shifted the way you think about your work?
16. (Map) Can you mark centers of wealth (broadly defined) in your community?
17. (Map) Going in the opposite direction, can you mark areas that drain community wealth?