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On a late August afternoon in 1996, I pulled off Route 52 in Mingo County, West Virginia, into the tentatively defined gravel drive in front on my great uncle's house. I had watched the small house change over the years as the modest four-room company house with only a hand pump to provide water gradually accumulated additions and luxuries. While each visit throughout my life may have revealed some subtle change to the house and surrounding land, nothing could brace me for the shock I received upon rounding the hillside into the drive that summer day. Part of the mountain behind the house was missing.

The usual long embrace and salutations that accompanied my visits to Uncle Thurman's home were cut short by my dumbfounded statement. "What happened to the mountain?" was the only thing that I could manage to say with any degree of articulation.

"They're blasting it off and long-walling underneath us," responded Josephine, my great aunt. "If they don't blow us up, I reckon they'll sink us."

Admittedly, it had been two years since my last visit to their house. Graduate school had drawn me away from usual summer gatherings and family reunions; ironically, it also brought me back to this place to scrutinize the political economy of West Virginia for my dissertation (Cook 1997). However, this new, rude revelation changed the course of my studies. As the weekend on Pigeon Creek progressed, everything was changed. As usual, my uncle lifted his wiry frame off of his porch swing now and then to pump his Daisy BB gun and give his milk cow a friendly warning that she was too close to the road. As usual, the cus-

tomary corps of weekend house guests snored away in the spare room or on sofas as the police scanner buzzed with news of car wrecks and petty fires all night. As usual, Uncle Thurman pulled out the old photos of our great-great-grandparents and reinforced our knowledge of who we are. Unfortunately, the routine was disrupted by periodic blasts that shook the house so hard that the floors exhibited four or five inches of play and glasses toppled in the cabinets.

What was worse, the land that I had grown up knowing as a symbol of rootedness and family unity was going away. As I had grown older, Uncle Thurman's little six-acre tract grew proportionately smaller, but it never lost its situated charm. Somehow it extended beyond its legal boundaries into the mountains beyond, where I remember my cousins building the largest tree house—real or imagined—that I have ever seen, and where we used to chase Uncle Thurman's ponies with the understanding that we could ride them if we could catch them. Now on the mountain beyond, there was nothing to sustain so much as a rabbit. "He'd have to tote his dinner with him," my uncle remarked.

With this singular experience, my academic path changed profoundly and permanently. Here, I discuss that change and the existential factors that may drive academics (in this case, anthropologists) to assume a decisively activist role. Specifically, I discuss my own work as an anthropological activist in dealing with the mountaintop removal (MTR) surface-mining debate in the Appalachian coalfields and how that role has evolved to refine my understanding of collaborative theory and praxis. Notably, I assume the position of a "native" anthropologist trying to make sense of the balance between "scientific" research and moral obligation. Although a vital component of my decision to assume an activist position has been a personal attachment to place, it is difficult to articulate that attachment in a brief space without obscuring methodological arguments. Therefore, my primary focus is on the evolution of my approach to collaborative/activist anthropology and to expand on existing arguments concerning the potential contributions of such methodological pursuits to the discipline.

Activist Anthropologist or Anthropological Activist?

In 1977 Paul Rabinow prescribed a tenet that has become, at least in theory, a staple of anthropological practice today: "We can pretend

that we are neutral scientists collecting unambiguous data and that the people we are studying are living amidst various unconscious systems of determining forces of which they have no clue and to which only we have the key. But it is only pretense" (1977, 152). It is hard to imagine that our predecessors could find this concept of intersubjectivity—the notion that fieldwork is an interaction between living, sentient agents—such a novel idea, and it is all the more unbelievable for the anthropologist whose ties to a research community (or a significant portion thereof) are defined by kinship and platonic relationships with the other agents in the ethnographic equation.

My vested interest in the mountaintop removal debate is clear; academic credentials notwithstanding, I entered the dialogue with an emotional affinity for the alleged victims of this practice. On the other hand, that realization ultimately gave me an advantage, I believe, as I came to understand a degree of professional responsibility. Many anthropologists have deliberated the breech between being a "participant observer" and understanding the emotional experiences that can only be understood within very specific cultural matrices (Lassiter 2005, 99–104). Initially, however, my genealogical connection to the campaign to stop mountaintop removal gave rise to a certain professional arrogance on my part because there existed no struggle to understand how emotional dynamics might drive "subjects" to engage in certain extreme activities (although I have yet to hear of anti-MTR activists, grassroots or otherwise, engaging in overtly violent forms of resistance). However, as an anthropologist, I found that my emotional tie to the crisis helped me to critically examine the force of emotion "with a view to delineating the passions that animate certain forms of human conduct" (Rosaldo 1989, 19). I considered myself (and to some extent, still do) to be a "native anthropologist"—a concept that has yet to be fully problematized (Clifford 1997; Kuwayama 2003; Medicine 2001; Trask 1999; Weston 1997). However, as I will discuss, because of my position within the academy—that is, situated primarily *without* the communities of ethnographic interest—I found it difficult to assume true "native" authority because, as Narayan points out, "the very nature of researching what to others is taken-for-granted reality creates an uneasy distance" (1993, 682). To be sure, I found that my reception even among close relatives when breeching the subject of MTR could become politely distant or subject to a measure of scrutiny intended to determine the extent of my sincerity or naïveté.

Nonetheless, my entry into the MTR debate was framed not only by vested familiar ties to the crisis but by the very activist spirit of some of the foundational works of Appalachian studies (e.g., Lewis, Johnson, and Askins 1978; Gaventa 1980; Fisher 1993), which in turn had a profound bearing on my prior and existing research concerning the political economy of the region (Cook 2000). Thus, I entered the debate with the simple assumption that I was an academic whose training in the study of human cultures made me particularly suited to add an air of professional "legitimacy" to the voices opposing MTR—an admittedly paternalistic stance in retrospect. It was also a stance that beckoned some very humbling experiences in the field, and as I will describe, inaugurated introspective concerns about not only who I purported to represent as an anthropologist but the very medium that constitutes ethnographic text.

As I will illustrate, my initial involvement as an organizer-activist in the MTR debate was tempered by a realization that I was in danger of abandoning my role as an anthropologist entirely in the name of justice, when in fact, prevailing currents in anthropology offer a critical means to that end. While the polarity of activism and anthropological research will seemingly always be a point of contention, a growing number of ethnographers see cultural critique itself as a form of activism because such inquiries often explicate the epistemological roots of power struggles (Hale 2006; Speed 2006; Simonelli 2007). Specifically, in terms of our role as advocates in human rights issues (and the MTR crisis is very much one of human rights), Wendy Brown and Janet Halley argue that the critical analytical tools of our discipline provide the very means by which we may challenge the reductionist tendencies of predominantly Western legal systems to delineate culture and identity in the law as "a stable set of regulatory norms" (2002, 24). In this context, activist anthropology is as much a contribution to the people with whom we work as collaborators and advocates as it is to the discipline itself. "In the phrase 'activist anthropology,'" writes Charles Hale, "*activist* is an adjective. To me, the word conveys an intention to modify anthropology, to transform the conventional practice in methodological terms" (2007, 105). Specifically, Hale argues that the practice of activist anthropology involves "a basic decision to align oneself with an organized group in a struggle for rights, redress, and empowerment and a commitment to produce knowledge in collaboration and dialogue with the members of that group" (2007, 105).

Hale's definition is in many ways in line with larger disciplinary currents regarding collaborative ethnography. However, the practice of activist anthropology as he defines it beckons deeper questions of representation and suggests that in many such cases the anthropologist finds himself or herself under greater restrictions vis-à-vis community scrutiny than those merely seeking to develop a more collaborative approach to cultural interpretation. In other words, activist anthropology is necessarily collaborative, but the boundaries of such collaboration may well be concentrated around very specific research agendas, whereas collaborative *ethnography*, as an *ideal* form of inquiry, may pursue more holistic but generalized visions of given communities. As I illustrate, these constraints—complicated by the divergent voices I sought to engage in dialogue over the MTR debate—served to hone my approach to activist anthropology.

The Predicament of MTR

Mountaintop removal is a method of surface mining that entails the literal removal of up to 800 feet (and in at least one instance, 1,000 feet) of a mountain's top to gain quick access to the coal deposits that lie beneath it. Core drills are used to set deep explosive charges that typically result in a force one hundred times greater than the 1995 Oklahoma City federal building bombing. As a result, layers of rock and soil, or "overburden" in industry terms, are loosened and scooped away with crane-like machines called "draglines," some of which have the capacity to move the equivalent of twenty-six Ford Escorts two hundred yards away in a single scoop. Excess soil and waste are dumped over nearby hillsides, forming so-called "valley fills." Although valley fills are supposed to be carefully terraced and engineered with water diversion ditches, they frequently bury both intermittent and permanent streams. According to the most recent figures available, more than 1,200 miles of streams have been buried in the Appalachian region, and possibly as many as 700 miles in West Virginia alone (EPA 2004, 4; OHVEC 2008; OSMRE 2007).

Industry officials and certain policymakers (most conspicuously in West Virginia, where a majority of legislators and executive officials have direct ties to the coal industry) argue that there is no evidence that MTR is harmful to the environment. They argue that the resulting flat

land is necessary and good for development in an area lacking an adequate infrastructure for "sustainable development."[1] When opponents pose formidable threats to certain operations through lobbying and public protests, industry officials often threaten (and sometimes execute) layoffs, an action that has divided coalfield citizens and created rifts in the miners' union.

Environmentalists, on the other hand, often focus their opposition to MTR on water quality issues, arguing that common sense dictates that burying the headwaters of streams causes irreversible damage to regional ecozones, and that the sheer act of blasting away layers of mountains permanently removes vital layers of once pristine aquifer. The most gripping voices of opposition, though, are those living in proximity to these mines. Not only are they concerned about the aesthetic quality of their surroundings, but many fear the loss of their heritage, which stems from the land. Many coalfield families have lived in their respective communities (or in the general vicinity thereof) for at least seven generations, and thus continue to derive the core of their familial and individual identities from being situated in that locality. Likewise, while any form of strip mining increases the possibility of flash floods, the problem has compounded for residents living close to mountaintop mining sites, although the standard industry legal mantra in cases of damage to property and loss of life caused by mining-related flooding is that such events constitute an "act of God."[2] Coalfield residents also complain that blasting from mountaintop operations creates an excessive amount of dust in their communities and has caused many residents' wells to go dry or become contaminated. And there have been a number of instances when rock from these blasts (called "fly rock") has fallen into people's yards, sometimes damaging property.

A related concern is the increasing presence and size of coal slurry impoundments that hold wastewater and other toxic chemicals used to clean coal before shipping it. While such impoundments are not exclusive to mountaintop mining operations, the latter produce a greater amount of coal at a faster rate than underground mines, and hence, greater volumes of waste. A prime example is the Brushy Fork Slurry Impoundment near Whitesville, West Virginia, where the largest slurry impoundment built to date—holding a record 3.5 billion gallons of toxic slurry—looms directly above Marsh Fork Elementary School. This school has been the focus of a great deal of controversy for years

because of a coal processing plant that was built less than one hundred yards away and has been credited with a significant increase in respiratory illnesses among students. Local residents and their allies fear that the possibility of the slurry impoundment collapsing is likely, and that no emergency evacuation plan can prepare for the disaster that would ensue. These fears are certainly not unfounded because one of the worst human-made disasters in West Virginia (and national) history involved the collapse of a slurry impoundment along Buffalo Creek in Logan County in 1972, resulting in a virtual tidal wave that killed 125 people and left 4,000 homeless (Erikson 1976). Subsequently, slurry spills have become commonplace, despite greater federal regulation on impoundment construction. In fact, perhaps the greatest environmental disaster in North America occurred when a slurry impoundment that had been haphazardly constructed on top of an abandoned underground mine collapsed in Martin County, Kentucky, and sent more than 300 million gallons of sludge charging toward the Big Sandy River—and ultimately the Ohio River. Needless to say, all aquatic life along 110 miles of that stream was extinguished. Miraculously, no human life was lost, but many homes were destroyed (EPA 2004).

In 1977, after years of pressure from grassroots activists from throughout the United States and from a handful of concerned policymakers, Congress passed the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA). Prior to that, there was no legal apparatus to regulate surface mining. Although some opponents of unchecked surface mining regarded SMCRA as a victory, it was not what most activists who had lobbied for federal intervention wanted (indeed, many had sought an all-out ban on the practice). The major provisions of the act called for the establishment of the Office of Surface Mining (OSM) as a regulatory agency under the U.S. Department of the Interior and required all operations using surface mining methods thereafter to restore mined sites to their so-called "approximate original contour" (AOC) after mineral extraction.

However, two major loopholes in SMCRA are at the core of the current legal crisis in the Appalachia coal belt, which spans West Virginia, southwest Virginia, eastern Kentucky, northeastern Tennessee, and western Pennsylvania. The first is a provision allowing state environmental agencies to assume primary responsibility for regulating surface-mining activities within state boundaries. The second is a provi-

sion that essentially exempted mine operators from the AOC rule if the task of exposing mineral deposits renders AOC restoration unfeasible. In such a case, mining operators are to request a "variance" when applying for mining permits and to submit a detailed post-mining development plan for factories, schools, shopping centers, industrial parks, and so forth on the resulting level land, or to contribute substantial funds for post-mining development on the sites they wish to mine. Recreational areas and wildlife reserves were not included as acceptable forms of post-mining land use under the provisions of SMCRA; however, many companies in Kentucky and West Virginia have pursued this tenuous and inexpensive reclamation option (which often simply involves hydroseeding stripped lands with a grass that will grow on the nutrient-depleted rubble and help prevent further erosion but nothing more to promote the regeneration of native species) with no opposition from state regulators.

Ironically, perhaps the greatest catalyst for the expansion of massive mountaintop operations was the Clean Air Act of 1990. By imposing more rigorous environmental standards for coal-burning plants—especially utilities—Congress unwittingly boosted the market for the low-sulfur, clean-burning coal that underlies most of Central Appalachia. To compete with other producers of low-volatile coal (including Wyoming and Australia), eastern operators immediately sought the quickest possible means to gain access to coal seams. Mountaintop removal was the answer.

Armchair Activism, Reflexive Organizing, Ethnographic Introspection

While an impressive thrust of investigative journalism brought the MTR crisis into the limelight at the turn of the twenty-first century (Loeb 1997; Ward 1998–99), Shirley Stewart Burns (2007), in the only comprehensive scholarly work about the surrounding debate, succinctly chronicles the rise of grassroots opposition to MTR in the mid-1990s through such organizations as the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition (OHVEC), the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy (WVHC), and the Coal River Mountain Watch (CRMW)—an organization, though funded by a mainstream environmental organization known as Appalachian Voices, that is composed almost exclusively of residents of the Coal

River basin who are directly and adversely impacted by MTR. In fact, it was in cooperation with Stewart Burns that I became directly involved with these organizations when we organized a session on MTR for the 1999 Appalachian Studies Association (ASA) meetings. Previously, I had devoted quite a bit of time to penning letters to editors of regional newspapers, opinion editorials to the same, and memoranda to various policymakers. The gathering at ASA was significant not only because it afforded me exposure to a diverse array of individuals and organizations opposing MTR but also because for most of us, it was the first time we had gathered in the same space. Indeed, our panel was but one of two major sessions devoted to the crisis, and as the final MTR session concluded, I proposed coordinating a gathering of all parties interested in reforming surface mining and ending MTR entirely. While it was not my intention to become the key organizer of such a gathering, I seem to have momentarily forgotten the unwritten maxim of my own mountain culture—that to suggest is to volunteer.

Hence, with the priceless assistance of Janet Fout and Laura Foreman of OHVEC, I embarked on a four-month mission of letter writing, phone calling, and budget crunching that challenged all of the conventional skills I had accrued through my training as an anthropologist. My vision was admittedly ambitious: (1) to form a grand coalition of all grassroots and mainstream environmental groups and communities seeking relief from the intrusions of MTR; (2) to facilitate dialogue with policymakers who could conceivably affect surface mining reforms; (3) to develop practical visions for sustainable post-mining economies in the Appalachian coal belt; and (4) to provide a mitigating presence for dialogue between mine operators, their employees who stood to lose jobs with the closing of surface mines, and pro-coal policymakers and lobbyists—most notably the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). What I found almost immediately was that the last goal was the most unrealistic for the time and will remain so until the third goal of building sustainable economic alternatives to mining offers some promise for those beholden to a single-industry economy. And that goal, in turn, was rendered problematic by the recalcitrance of policymakers toward change in a state and region whose political economy is based on mineral extraction. This became woefully apparent during the first evening of the Interstate Summit for the Mountains, as our gathering was called, when a large group of participants arrived

bruised and battered from a confrontation with local officials in Logan County, where they had participated in a march commemorating the historic drive to unionize southern West Virginia mines in 1921.[3]

Nonetheless, the first Interstate Summit for the Mountains provided me with important lessons in the art of organizing and the unpredictability, fragility, and volatility of human nature. In addition to representatives from the aforementioned organizations, a number of social scientists from the University of Kentucky and Marshall University were on hand, as well as representatives from Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC)—a well-established grassroots organization that was initially fueled by the drive to halt surface mining in the 1970s—the Citizens Coal Council (a national mining reform lobby), and representatives from older anti-surface-mining coalitions (including former West Virginia House of Representatives delegate Ken Heckler, who was the key legislative proponent behind SMCRA). Although my interest in the gathering was personally and morally motivated, the prospect of being able to bring some of the theories and methods of applied social sciences into play was also an attractive possibility.

The field of Appalachian studies has consistently provided a crucible for the development of participatory research models, some of which date back to the formation of the Highlander Folk School in the 1930s, which eventually became the Highlander Research and Education Center (Horton 1993; Gaventa 1991, 1993; Gaventa, Smith, and Willingham 1990; Couto 1999; Halperin 1998, 2006). While contemporary participatory research models are often genealogically linked to Paolo Freire's landmark *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), approaches vary. Until recently, most models have focused explicitly on confronting skewed development patterns in oppressed communities (e.g., Friedmann 1992). It was precisely such models disseminating out of Appalachian movements (in the spirit of Friere) that initially motivated my research prior to and during my first years of involvement with the anti-MTR movement (especially Gaventa and Lewis's [1991] model based on their tenure with the Highlander center). However, the operative concept in participatory research is community empowerment, a concept that recognizes "people themselves as the only effective agency for change" (Veltmeyer 2001, 3). Indeed, in organizing and cofacilitating the summits, I was unwittingly privileged to be part of a larger academic paradigm shift resulting from recognition that the ultimate goal

of participatory research is to create community narratives (as opposed to scientific metanarratives) for understanding and coping with the problems confronting specific communities—narratives that may take the form of storytelling or artistic expression but are narratives no less legitimate than those produced by outside professionals (Banks and Mangan 1999; Cornwall and Jewkes 1995). It was a shift that came also from recognition that for outside professionals such as myself, sometimes our very limited role is to serve as one of many agents linking community social capital to outside resources (see Flora et al. 2007).

The last realization became woefully apparent as the first Summit for the Mountains unfolded that late August weekend in 1999. We convened at the Appalachian South Folklife Center, a facility originally created to help grassroots organizations mobilize. Unfortunately, the chasm between professional environmentalists and academics on the one hand and grassroots citizens on the other became clear after the first morning sessions: the grassroots voices were being compromised for the sake of academic debates. While the professional environmentalists serving as key facilitators did an admirable job of orchestrating creative venues for articulating community problems (e.g., through small group plays and presentations), there was a collaborative disjuncture between residents of endangered communities and institutional voices. At times, some of the discussions digressed into academic debates, which although valuable, were out of context in the company of grassroots citizens whose agendas were guided by sheer pragmatism. As a key organizer, I was compelled to refrain from excessive comment simply because I felt uncomfortable doing so. It became clear to me that the role of the "outside" consultant or professional in any participatory research scheme was only to facilitate on a very limited and flexible basis and ultimately to "hand over the stick" and urge community members to take over, set research agendas, and take the lead in collecting, compiling, and analyzing data pertinent to their concerns in whatever form (Chambers 1997).

While the first Summit for the Mountains did succeed in creating a network of anti-MTR activists that aggressively and—in the short run—successfully lobbied Congress to uphold certain court-sanctioned reforms in valley fill restrictions (Cook 2001), it also brought about a shift in the composition of future summits. Grassroots leaders played a stronger role in organizing subsequent gatherings, and the presence of academic representatives was conditionally limited. I voluntarily receded into the background of organizing this gathering until I was

able to leave the organizing committee without inviting resentment or the feeling that I had shirked responsibilities. Meanwhile, each subsequent summit became more focused on narrowing the chasm between professional environmentalists and grassroots activists and heightening the participation of the latter. This proved to be a very important development in many ways. First, the ensuing participatory model did afford grassroots activists and their constituents a greater degree of confidence and willingness to speak out publicly against MTR when many had been met with coercive threats for doing so. In fact, these gatherings often focused on training grassroots citizens to effectively influence the political processes that had an impact on them, whether through tracking new mining permits, filing complaints with the state department of environmental protection, testifying in public hearings, or organizing mass lobbying efforts in the state capital and other political centers. As Melissa Checker (2007) points out, the legitimate concerns of grassroots citizens are often alienated or, at best, obscured by mainstream scientific discourse that is usually directed against their interests. In this case, the training that the summits and related venues provided coalfield residents offered a competitive edge to local discourses regarding MTR, as evidenced by the fact that Julia Bonds, an activist with CRMW, received the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2003, the highest award in the nation for environmental activism.

The summits also made professional activists more keenly aware of the extent to which coal mining is ingrained in the culture of southern West Virginians, and that any opposition to mining is bound to be interpreted as an affront to local culture. This lesson constituted another layer of humility for me when I made a blanket statement at the third summit in the fall of 2000 implying that our nation needed to end its reliance on coal once and for all. Patty Adkins, a potential activist who had survived the Buffalo Creek tragedy of 1972 (she was twelve years old at the time), rose to her feet and succinctly rebuked me: "How are you going to tell that to all of our fathers and brothers working in the mines, who are proud of their heritage? That's all we've known for a hundred years, and that's our history. Who the hell do you think you are?"

Feeling the blood rushing through my face, it took me several seconds before I could issue the words, "you're right." And I knew better. Unfortunately, my life of brokering the complexities of the MTR debate had led me to challenge those from beyond the region to real-

ize how their consumption patterns affected those within the region to the point that I had become engaged in a de facto rhetorical campaign against all coal mining. I had fallen into a myopic trap inherent in the middle-class roots of mainstream environmentalism (Checker 2004), one that obscures narrowly tailored environmental agendas for working people (White 1996). I also realized, as did Lila Abu-Lughod (1986) in her complicated efforts to gain acceptance into a Bedouin community in the 1980s, that the anthropologist's assumption of native status can be a self-inflicted booby trap. Subsequently, Patty and I became the best of friends and agreed that the question was not one of halting mineral extraction, but how to prepare for that inevitability. Nonetheless, that more than any moment made me realize that my goals as an anthropologist involved in the MTR debate were too ambitious—that rather than expecting to provide a mitigating link between disparate voices, my rightful and modest role in the anti-MTR movement would be one of opening ethnographic conduits for grassroots voices to air their realities without the hermeneutic fog that often covers the ethnographer's lens. I found myself in search of a more collaborative methodology and epistemological trajectory.

Toward an Ethnography of Mountaintop Removal?

On a chill morning in late April 2000, I accompanied twenty-two students taking my Appalachian Communities class to Kayford Mountain, West Virginia, where grassroots activist Larry Gibson has been defending the last fifty acres of his ancestral farm from the MTR operations surrounding his home on all sides. This was the first of many such trips.

Larry welcomed everyone with a single request: "I want you to think of something that means so much to you—that you hold so dear in your circle of life—that you would give your life for it."

Most of my students had never given this question much thought. Likewise, most had never heard of mountaintop removal until taking my class and had assumed that my vivid descriptions constituted just another act of classroom hyperbole until they saw the magnitude of the operations around Larry's home. Kayford Mountain was once the shortest mountain in the portion of the Coal River basin occupying the Kanawah–Raleigh County line. Now it towers over a moonscape of barely rolling hills.

"The coal company's offered me over $200 million dollars for this place," Larry explained, "and I told them what I'll tell you: the land ain't for sale. You can't put a price on it."

That phrase had been—and continues to be—Larry's mantra since I first met him in 1999, and I began to realize after the first trip with students to his mountain that it provided the operative phrase for a unique ethnographic perspective on communities coping with MTR, one that would transcend questions of regional identity politics and explicate the workings of groups engaged in cultural activism.

Faye Ginsberg (1997) has described "cultural activism" as a process by which groups use art forms such as music to advance culturally relevant political agendas. Such a perspective acknowledges the immense diversity within specific groups rather than reifying images of "identity politics," and that cultural activists are actively "working to change [oppressive] discourses and to stake their claim in an ever evolving public sphere" (Checker and Fishman 2004, 2). Accordingly, anthropologists who embrace and work in conjunction with this perspective realize, as Checker and Maggie Fishman point out, that "cultural activists often do not work through political channels, but develop their activism around cultural forms that are more immediately available to them" (2004, 4). Such cultural forms may include music, storytelling, and oratory, all of which have been used by grassroots activists to disseminate information on MTR.

In pondering fieldwork at home, George Spindler and Louise Spindler argued that "when we write about our own cultures we are ourselves expressions of what we are writing about" (1983, 50). Although this dictum seems straightforward, my concern was with how accurate my expression might be. To the extent that I could admit to "being native," I was once removed. I could enter and exit the coalfields as I pleased. I did not have to contend with blasting, contaminated flooding, threats from surface mine employees, and related nuances except when I was *visiting* the coalfields. Most of my own relatives, whose plight prompted me to get involved in the anti-MTR campaign in the first place, were reluctant to even talk about MTR for fear that county officials would associate them with "subversives" and take coercive action. I realized that whatever I had at stake, my relatives and the rank-and-file victims of MTR had more at risk, and that I must submit to an agenda set by those victims. Thus, my deep friendship with Larry Gibson increasing-

ly evolved into a collegial partnership, which, I argue, has developed into a fluid, if unorthodox, approach to understanding MTR through an ethnographic lens.

Indeed, scholarly works on MTR have been limited to a handful of law review articles (Hasselman 2002; McGinley 2004) and some lighter creative renderings that lack a critical analytical edge (Reece 2006; Johansen, Mason, and Taylor-Hall 2005), as well as a journalistic account of a long-running court battle to ban valley fills (Loeb 2007). The only truly critical work is that of historian and coalfield native Shirley Stewart Burns (2007), who, to her credit, incorporates a significant amount of ethnographic material in her work. Likewise, ethnographer Bryan McNeil (2005) has conducted extensive research in collaboration with the Coal River Mountain Watch that promises to yield an innovative manuscript chronicling CRMW's environmental activism defined by a history of labor organizing. These works, however, are exceptions to a surprisingly sparse field.

Ironically, there is no paucity of ethnographic data from grassroots organizers and their families confronting MTR. Scores of documentaries and full-length interviews have been recorded by interviewers from all over the world, including numerous interviews complied on CD to raise money for OHVEC and CRMW. What this reveals is that the people in prospective research communities are more than willing to talk, but that they insist on conveying their realities in their own words, on their own terms. Stated simply, this is a key objective of collaborative ethnography.

Certainly, as Les Field and Richard Fox (2007) point out, ethnographic research has always entailed an unavoidable degree of collaboration with research communities. However, the current dialogue emphasizes not only "multivocality" (e.g., Tedlock 1983; Lawless 1992), it is also, as Luke Eric Lassiter (2005) argues, an "approach to ethnography that *deliberately* and *explicitly* emphasizes collaboration [with native consultants] at every point in the ethnographic process, without veiling it—from project conceptualization, to fieldwork, and, especially, through the writing process" (16). The emphasis on collaborative *text* is at once promising and challenging, for as Joanne Rappaport argues, "such writing does not purport to transgress the boundaries between applied and 'pure' research. Rather, its fundamental goal is the production of a new kind of ethnography geared largely to a scholarly readership—

that is, a new kind of pure research" (2007, 22). Rappaport proposes a method that entails "co-theorizing" with community collaborators to address real problems, if we are to admit to a truly engaged ethnography. Drawing on Donna Haraway's (1991) concept of "situated theorizing," Rappaport argues that the "ultimate objective . . . is political, not intellectual . . . [a practice in which] not only does intellectual practice emerge out of the theorists' ethnic positioning but, more importantly, political activity is guided by their research" (27).

With these positions on collaborative praxis and writing in mind, the most pressing question is, what constitutes a legitimate ethnographic *text*? If we truly embrace native and community collaborators as "co-intellectuals" (Lassiter 2005), then they should play a plenary role in determining what media may be regarded as the ultimate ethnographic expression. With this in mind, I have sought for the past eight years to affect an ethnographic method that represents the realities of anti-MTR community activists and their neighbors in the most direct context possible—the field.

This, of course, is the obvious and preferred medium for anti-MTR activists to convey their concerns to an uninformed public, although it is not always practical. However, from the first time that I accompanied students to Kayford Mountain and adjacent communities, I noticed a measurable difference in the degree to which that experience affected them compared to those who, at best, became aware of the issue through graphic documentaries. Indeed, at least two of my undergraduate students went on to pursue graduate careers in law and sociology, producing research focusing on this issue (Keaton 2005; Williams 2007). After observing this difference, I conferred with Larry Gibson and Maria Gunoe—a coalfield activist from Bob White, West Virginia, whose ancestral home has been plagued by numerous floods from an MTR site above her home—to develop a critical ethnographic model for conveying the realities of those confronting these destructive mining practices and the political economy that sustains such practices. To that end, my students have been as much a part of the collaborative process as coalfield residents themselves, although the role of the former has not been as consistent.

The practice of engaging students in field studies for pedagogical and applied purposes is as old as the discipline of anthropology itself. While numerous anthropologists have written about this practice and

its manifold goals and variations (e.g., Baer et al. 1995; Bakalaki 1997; Mazur-Stommen 2006; Upham, Trevathan and Wilk 1988), there is a growing emphasis on community empowerment through student engagement while simultaneously encouraging and preparing students to embrace their education to become active agents of change in the real world. (e.g., Nichols 2004; Hathaway and Kuzin 2007; Lassiter et al. 2004; Rodriguez 1996). Student engagement of this nature is important precisely because of its potential to address community agendas for the long term—that is, it wields the potential to spawn a generation of citizens who may be actively cognizant of the issues confronting specific communities or localities and will seek to remain part of the process of addressing these issues proactively over the long term rather than studying them for the short term. This kind of multifaceted collaboration is both invigorating and complicated, and requires a sincere commitment from all parties involved. Thus, it becomes very difficult to sustain such commitment from large groups of students. On the other hand, if such a model is successful at engaging students, I argue that it can be a valuable means for engaging larger publics.

For the past five years, my Appalachian Communities class has served as the "pilot" audience for developing this model, but we are beginning to work in collaboration with a student organization called Mountain Justice to develop a template for public field trips and symposia. Essentially, I begin in the classroom by presenting students with introductory material on Appalachian culture and globalization. This is followed by concise readings and documentaries that explain MTR and convey the complexities of the issue (e.g., national dependency on coal-powered electricity, potential job loss resulting from the closure of mines, and so forth). This preliminary material serves as a metanarrative for the actual experience of visiting communities and landscapes affected by MTR.

However, before making the journey, I require students to generate a set of research questions to help them understand the intrinsic concerns of those fighting to maintain their homes. On one occasion, in 2004, as my students and I ascended Kayford Mountain with Larry Gibson, one student asked Larry if he opposed all coal mining. Larry abruptly stopped and asked everyone to gather around him. He proceeded to devote several minutes to listing the historical atrocities for which the coal industry could be credited, all the people he had known

who were injured, had lost loved ones in the mines, and had suffered from black lung disease. He succinctly ended this eloquent act of oratory by stating: "You ask me if I'm opposed to all coal mining? The answer is yes!"

The trip into the coalfields provides a physical context that is foreign to most students, who find it hard to believe that the depressed lines of homes along Cabin Creek Road—on the way to Kayford Mountain—are commonplace throughout the state's nine southernmost counties. On one occasion a student innocently compared the region to the Third World. Larry's response was swift: "We're not the Third World. We're right here in your own backyard. And we're not just sitting by and watching this place get exploited. The coal companies can keep on doing what they're doing, but they can't keep us from fighting."

With that, Larry succinctly stated the problems with imposing colonial models on the Appalachian region for the sake of explaining underdevelopment—a trend that was quite popular in the formative decades of Appalachian studies (e.g., Lewis 1983). In sum, he made it clear that he and his neighbors were active agents in a political context pitting local culture against material wealth.

Equally as important as the field experience is the follow-up discussion, which usually involves Larry Gibson or Maria Gunoe coming to the classroom. This is important because the coalfield activists willingly place themselves in a vulnerable position—that is, they leave the context of their home territory and find that some students may be more willing to ask difficult, potentially loaded questions that they would not ordinarily ask in the context of the coalfields. In one instance a student asked Larry and Maria if they were being selfish by trying to deny energy companies access to the coal that keeps the rest of the nation supplied with energy. Maria was blunt: "I don't owe anyone anything. My family and I worked hard for what we have, to keep our land. We live in the richest state with the poorest people. We don't get anything, *anything*, for all that coal they pull out of our state. I don't think we owe anyone a damn thing!"

The important point to emphasize here is that MTR activists like Maria are willing to put themselves in tight situations in order to convey the urgency of the situations they seek to alter. In fact, they insist on it. It is in this manner that we continue to develop an organic model for an interactive and engaged ethnography of mountaintop removal. As stated,

we are currently working with the student organization Mountain Justice to make this model viable for a wider public. Our institution is close enough to MTR sites and affected communities that we can comfortably travel there and back in one day and can viably arrange overnight lodging at community facilities. We are also privileged to live in a community that is, by and large, eager to learn—that is, to take advantage of public programming offered under the auspices of our university. Mountain Justice has had overwhelming success in drawing non-university participation in fieldtrips to coal communities, and with that in mind, our next step is to offer extended symposia to the public that would incorporate the aforementioned model based around a field experience.

The shortcomings of this model are obvious—namely, that it cannot be applied universally to all cultures or crises. However, it does offer a challenge to the way that we conceive of ethnographic text. At the same time, it points to the profound significance of collaborative *ethnography* as an important model for research and praxis. Collaborative ethnography, as Lassiter defines it, is an *ideal*. It may be difficult, if not virtually impossible to pursue each component of this definition in an unimpaired and holistic manner, but it recognizes first and foremost that the constituents of research communities are intellectual agents, and it establishes a set of flexible boundaries that require all other parties involved in the collaborative process to share in the native intellectual process rather than to pursue or impose a divergent path.

Conclusion

On the day after Thanksgiving, 2005, my wife and I wove our way down Route 52 through McDowell and Mingo counties to my Uncle Thurman's home on Pigeon Creek. My visit was one of urgency since Uncle Thurman had terminal lung cancer and was expected to live only three more months. Up to that point he had been reserved in his comments about the coal industry and MTR, possibly fearing retribution from county tax assessors with major interests in the operations surrounding that valley. On that day, however, he opened up with little provocation: "I never met a coal operator that wasn't crooked as a snake. They's every one of them filthy!"

Five minutes later his son and my cousin's husband came in the door.

We exchanged our customary greetings, including inquiries about what each had been up to. Both informed me that they were gainfully employed with Mingo-Logan Mining Company—the Arch Coal subsidiary that had wreaked havoc on the ridge above their house a few years ago. I could only nod. I think we all understood the awkwardness of the situation, and none of us felt like we were in a position to argue.

Indeed, my personal interest in the crisis and the concomitant anecdotes lend testament to the crisis of late capitalism. Traditional notions of community are challenged on a daily basis by globalization, and much of the scant ethnographic research on Appalachian communities falls short of acknowledging the magnitude of these changes (Hicks 1976; Beaver 1986), with few exceptions (e.g., Anglin 2002; Keefe 2005). Even Kathleen Stewart's (1996) treatise on the impact of late capitalism and neoliberalism on a coal community in Raleigh County, West Virginia, fails to dispel static images of the region and tends to underemphasize the deliberate nature of community agency as opposed to external forces. In fact, in a field such as Appalachian studies that has often been plotted along an activist trajectory, only now are a handful of scholars explicating the contradictions of Appalachian identity politics and calling for a redirection of research agendas that problematize the entire concept of "Appalachia" and aim to address *local* realities and agendas in proactive ways (Reid and Taylor 2002; Smith 2002).

Mountaintop removal is an acute manifestation of globalization, as McNeil (2005) makes quite clear in his provocative research. However, the challenges that this widespread mining practice imposes on communities offer a compelling vision of local epistemologies and activism when juxtaposed with other currents in ethnographic research, particularly the relatively recent emphasis on the anthropology of place (Rodman 1992; Feld and Basso 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). On one level, the local movement against MTR epitomizes specific places as sites of power struggle (Rosaldo 1980). However, the sheer refusal of community leaders like Larry Gibson and Maria Gunoe to leave their ancestral homes evokes a greater consideration and scrutiny of materialist arguments concerning the practicality of human attachments to place, and serious political considerations of the right to be rooted. And it is precisely such existential understandings and sensibilities that are most challenging to ethnographers in their efforts to convey other realities.

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Notes

1. Economist Herman E. Daly (1997) has devoted much of his career to a compelling scrutiny of the oxymoronic concept of "sustainable development," or what he terms "an impossibility theorem."

2. The phrase "act of God" first came into use as a quasi-legal buffer for mining companies to cite natural disasters instead of industrial negligence in fatalities and damages caused by mine-related flooding when in February 1972 an illegal coal slurry impoundment collapsed along Buffalo Creek in Logan County, West Virginia, after a period of torrential rains. The ensuing wall of sludge claimed 125 lives and left 4,000 homeless. Pittston Coal Company officials not only refused to claim responsibility but did not bother to express concern for people in the disaster zone. In coining the phrase "act of God" in reference to this disaster, company lawyers unwittingly created a first line of defense for mining companies faced with similar situations that echo through the West Virginia mountains on an annual basis (see generally Erikson 1976).

3. The participants in this reenactment were commemorating the 1921 Battle of Blair Mountain, which resulted from more than a decade of violent labor strife in the southern part of the state known as the West Virginia Coal Wars. In 1921, more than 10,000 miners organized a well-trained army and marched from Charleston into Logan County with the intention of liberating thousands of miners in the state's southern counties who were held captive in systems of debt peonage by heavily armed mine guards and corrupt local law enforcement. The ensuing clash at Blair Mountain saw four days of continuous gunfire along a ten-mile front, which became the largest armed confrontation on American soil since the Civil War. The battle was halted by intervention from two divisions of the U.S. Army (see Savage 1990).

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