

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Resource Wars: An On the Ground Understanding of Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining in Appalachia, West Virginia

by Nicole Fabricant



STUDENTS HIKING TO SEE AN ACTIVE SITE OF MOUNTAINTOP REMOVAL COAL MINING, KAYFORD MOUNTAIN, 2015  
PHOTO: ALEXIS ADELSBERGER

This article sketches student responses to directly witnessing the tragedy of mountaintop removal mining (MTR) on Kayford Mountain in West Virginia, where we began traveling in 2011. This engaged anthropological curriculum is part of Resource Wars of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, an upper-level anthropology course at Towson University examining global political and economic shifts such as privatization, liberalization of borders, and deregulation, which have wreaked havoc on our built environment and affected access to critical resources in Latin American and the US.<sup>1</sup> We link critical resources to intensified practices of mineral/resource extraction, using case examples from the Niger Delta, West Virginia, and the Ecuadorian Amazon. As well, we consider how community members and social movements have organized to reclaim “the commons” and rethink social and productive economies. We move from land, food, and water to coal, gas, and oil as key extractive industries. Our trip to West Virginia follows significant exposure to theories of global political economy, environment, and natural resources: students have grappled with David Harvey’s *Spaces of Global Capitalism* and written about the political economy of land, food, and water. In collaboration with Keepers of the Mountain, a grassroots organization seeking to educate and inspire people to end mountaintop coal mining, the engaged curriculum exposes students first-hand to the human, social, and environmental consequences of coal extraction, and seeks to move them from learning, listening, and documenting to active engagement.<sup>2</sup>

***These links between Big Energy, extractivism, and the climate crisis emerge in my classroom, but for students it all feels somewhat abstracted from daily life. Traveling to Coal Country exposes them first-hand to the relationship between macro economics and micro realities and establishes connections between our consumptive lives in urban centers (energy demands) and those living in communities in West Virginia (productive zones).***

In this article, I address how students move from passive witnessing to active civic engagement, with special attention to the visible and the invisible. The visible represents what we see and hear from community activists who live close to active MTR sites, while the invisible is what happens to working-class students as they transform from passive listener to active learner. Many anthropology majors at Towson University work jobs in the service sector (some work 35 to 40 hours a week) and most are full-time students.<sup>3</sup> Spending time on Kayford Mountain provokes a shared vulnerability and heightened consciousness, encouraging them to transcend individual histories and envisioning a collective struggle. I believe this sense of vulnerability and even discomfort allows students to connect to one another and to the residents of West

Virginia, and to begin to move towards a shared activism. However, my article ends by recounting a terrifying learning experience in 2013, which complicated this model of collective vulnerability and led us to new questions and further analysis.

With respect to climate change, the relationship between extractive industries and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions is critically important. Extractive industries have devastated biodiversity, destroyed fertile lands, and deforested large portions of the globe. Much of the work on climate change has addressed the “processing end” of coal, the coal-fired power plants which have released exorbitant amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> into our atmosphere. However, recent research has demonstrated the significant impact of mining coal on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and global warming. A 2012 study by scientists at the University of Kentucky and the University of California emphasized the climate implications of coal extraction by mountaintop removal. If coal mining continues at its current pace—particularly by blowing up mountains—the Southern Appalachian forests will likely switch from a net carbon sink to a net carbon source within the next 12 to 20 years, meaning the area will emit more carbon than it takes in, with adverse consequences for our atmosphere. The researchers found that mountaintop removal is not only more damaging than underground mining to rivers, biodiversity, and human health; it also exacerbates the climate crisis (Campbell, et al., 2012).

For this very reason, organizations like Keepers of the Mountain are joining with indigenous peoples and leaders in other parts of the globe fighting transnational oil and gas giants and calling for climate justice. Activists from Keepers of the Mountain joined 400,000 others to mobilize in New York City in September of 2014, marching to the United Nations Climate Summit to spectacularize the climate crisis and hold international leaders accountable for a binding agreement on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. The march made visible the links between extractive projects and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, particularly the non-renewable fossil fuel giants blocking progressive legislation. In its important 2011 report, “Outing the Oligarchy: The Billionaires Who Benefit from Today’s Climate Crisis,” the International Forum on Globalization compiled a who’s who of the ultra-rich who benefit from the climate crisis. For example, the Koch brothers spent vast personal wealth – \$12.6 million – on campaign contributions to both houses to support minimal emissions standards (Fabricant and Hicks 2013).

These links between Big Energy, extractivism, and the climate crisis emerge in my classroom, but for students it all feels somewhat abstracted from daily life. Traveling to Coal Country exposes them first-hand to the relationship between macro economics and micro realities and establishes connections between our consumptive lives in urban centers (energy demands) and those living in communities in West Virginia (productive zones). For students to move from classroom theory to civic engagement, questions regarding the environment or even eco-systemic ruptures have to personally and emotively touch them. Let me take you on our journey.

## History, Political Economy, and Geography in Action

We left Towson University— a large public university in the suburbs north of Baltimore, Maryland— at 8:45 a.m. on a warm April morning. The students piled into the 12-seat passenger van with their sleeping bags, tents, book bags, and snacks. We were headed on a 7-hour journey toward Beckley, West Virginia. Many couldn't imagine the radical geographical, economic, and cultural transformations from Baltimore to West Virginia. The contours of our tires marked the complex terrain from zones of coal consumption to zones of production.

While the use of coal to produce electricity in the United States has been declining in recent years, primarily due to the price of natural gas, most states are still heavily dependent on coal-fired power. Thirty-seven states were net importers of coal in 2012, paying a total of \$19.4 billion to import 433 million tons of coal from other states and even some foreign countries. Most of the nation's coal comes from just three states: Wyoming, West Virginia, and Kentucky, which together accounted for 60 percent of U.S. coal production in 2012. These three states are also the source of 82 percent of the coal that gets exported by barge, rail, or truck to other states. While we tracked the movement of coal in the classroom from extraction and processing to consumption, our own physical movement through distinct socio-economic and geographic regions brought the theory to life.

In the classroom, we learn that the Coal industry has dominated the political and economic landscape of the Appalachian communities for more than a century. While our vehicles approached Beckley, students noticed that every radio station announced, "This program was made possible by Friends of Coal." Others pointed to the large, flashy billboards: "Coal Supports Our Schools, Do You?" or "Coal is America's Energy: It's Good for America and It's Good for West Virginia." But is it really? The students in the vans discussed the "hegemony of Big Coal."

The coal industry has transformed the region from globally noteworthy natural diversity to an increasingly polluted, degraded landscape where future economic possibilities are few. As anthropologist Bryan McNeil has so powerfully indicated, "[E]conomic development in West Virginia, especially southern West Virginia, is still guided by a coal-first philosophy. Beyond actual mining, coal's extractive industry model profoundly influences economic development in general. West Virginia's economic

development policies follow a pattern in which the state systematically favors industries over citizens, regardless of consequences" (141). It is based on the idea of comparative advantage, and after 150 years of industrial coal extraction, West Virginia is ranked at or near the bottom of every economic category. McNeil has compared West Virginia to the banana industry in the Caribbean, with locally fixed production tied to the fate of one industry that is dependent on unpredictable distant consumers. Ultimately, in both contexts, this has led to intense poverty and inequality.

The economic devastation of the Appalachian West Virginia is real for the students. Along our journey, we make several stops at local gas stations: students point out that some of these areas look like "food deserts," the only food available highly-processed, high carb, high in sugar. Some stop to take pictures of the arrangement of foods at local gas stations while others point out the young men dressed in mining apparel. They also narrate back in the vans the landscape of broken down houses, boarded up buildings, and trailer park after trailer park, commenting

often about the intensity of poverty. One student from Central America said, "I would not have thought that there was such an enormous gap in wealth by just crossing state borders. As we drove down these dirt roads, it seemed like we were entering a whole different country. It looked like some parts of my hometown in El Salvador. This was shocking to me."



ACTIVE SITE OF MOUNTAINTOP REMOVAL COAL MINING KAYFORD MOUNTAIN, 2015  
PHOTO: ALEXIS ADELSBERGER

From its beginning in 1863, the state of West Virginia mined coal. But it was not until after the Civil War, with new interest in the state's valuable coal reserves, that the industry actually grew. When the Civil War ended, the United States entered a tremendous industrialization period, and coal was desperately needed to feed the factories and railroads that were spreading across the country. Entrepreneurs from the industrial centers of the Northeast, South, and Midwest descended upon rural areas such as Southern Appalachia to tap into their human and natural resources. In the 19th century, railroaders and other industrial scouts developed plans and infrastructure for harvesting Appalachia's rich natural resources. Created alongside the company towns and steel rails was an economic system whose distinctive relationships shaped and continues today to shape the region. As World War I escalated, the demand for coal from Southern Appalachia grew to unprecedented heights. At the height of the coal boom, there were nearly 12,000 mines operating in the region, employing over 700,000 men. Men worked in much more primitive and dangerous circumstances then than they do today, as mines are now

more mechanized. There were all sorts of environmental and health hazards, including black lung disease.

As a result of these exploitative conditions, miners in the region built the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and fought back against coal companies. UMWA represented one of the most powerful unions in the United States throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the assault on unions starting in the 1980s has left miners without this critical leverage to negotiate and thus quite vulnerable. The CEO of Massey Energy, Don Blankenship, who took a militant approach to union busting, said “Unions, communities, people – everybody’s gonna have to learn to accept that in the US you have a capitalist society and capitalism, from a business standpoint is the survival of the most productive” (Goodell 2010). Blankenship not only broke down the radical union structures, he also popularized the style of mining known as mountaintop removal coal mining.<sup>4</sup>

Mountaintop removal (MTR) is a method of surface mining that entails the literal removal of 800 feet of a mountain’s top to gain quick access to the coal deposits that lie beneath. MTR is the preferred method of mining coal today, particularly in Appalachia. The process is methodical, rational, and efficient. It is the perfect brew for businesses like Massey that wanted to accumulate capital in a relatively short period of time. Several advances in technology facilitated the rise of MTR, among them computer engineering, large machinery such as draglines—\$100 million machines that can move one hundred tons of material with each scoop—and powerful explosives of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil (McNeil 20). The explosives are used to remove up to 400 vertical feet of mountain to expose the underlying coal seams. Excess rock and soil laden with toxic mining byproducts are often dumped into nearby valleys. Although valley fills are supposed to be carefully terraced and engineered with water diversion ditches, they frequently bury both intermittent and permanent streams. 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 (Cook 142).

Local community residents and environmentalists argue that MTR has directly affected water and air quality. Residents have emphasized that burying the headwaters of streams causes irreversible damage to regional ecosystems and blasting away layers of mountains removes layers of the aquifer. Strip mining also increases the possibility of flash floods. Further, coalfield residents point to the excessive dust in their communities. And there have been instances when rocks from blasts fall into people’s yards and damage property.

As mentioned earlier, the pedagogical intent of our four-day trip to Kayford Mountain is to expose students first hand to the social, economic, and environmental effects of mountaintop removal by living on an active blasting site. Simply getting up this mountain in our university vehicles is a terrifying endeavor. Students are shocked. An active site of MTR activity, Kayford has one very twisty road where a slight mistake could send a vehicle over the edge. For many students who have never left the United States, this is the greatest adventure of

their life. A cacophony of screams and shouts often accompany our maneuvers to avoid veering too close to the edge of the cliff. This physical sense of vulnerability sets the tone for the trip as we attempt to make our way up this mountain range.

The first day is mainly spent getting settled. Students bring their own camping gear. Some students know how to pitch a tent; others don’t. Some are terrified by the rural environment, having grown up in urban Baltimore; others have camping experience. Once we construct our campsite, Elise Keaton (Director of Keepers of the Mountain) and Junior Walk (a young man who volunteers for Keepers) set up a space for discussion. Junior grew up in Eunice, West Virginia, where he worked as a security guard on top of an MTR site. Disgusted with what he saw, he started volunteering with Coal River Mountain Watch and Keepers to assist in educating students, environmental activists, and community groups on Kayford Mountain.

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During the second and third days of our trip, we toured Kayford Mountain. We hiked to an active blasting site with Junior Walk, who told us his history. Students looked over the edge at what appeared to be a bombed out city, a crater in the middle of the Appalachian Mountain Range. Students sat with journals jotting observations, while some were so saddened by this altered landscape that they simply meditated. While we gathered on top of the crater, Junior said, “West Virginia was bought and sold by coal companies. What you are looking at here was and still is today a Resource Colony. Whether it was timber or coal or electricity, we have provided the raw material for the rest of the nation. These practices we have today of blowing up mountains have had detrimental consequences. I was drinking water that was red and smelled like sulphur. I have lots of health problems; you are looking at someone here who was poisoned by the coal companies” (Walk 4/6/2013). Elise Keaton added, “These are the headwaters for the entire Eastern Seaboard. This water reaches from Maine to Georgia . . . this Appalachian region is the water source. And nearly 40 percent of these rivers have been compromised; it is recommended that we eat less than 2 fish per year” (Keaton 4/6/2013).

We all walked back to our campsite in silence and took part in a water workshop in which community residents shared different water samples. We looked at water contaminated by coal slurry, the byproduct of coal processing. Another sample from Raleigh, West Virginia showed particles floating in water. Other samples revealed iron, mercury, and arsenic. As students passed the jars of water around, they heard from other local community activists. One long-time activist asked the students, “What

should water look like?" Someone responded, "Clear." He turned to the student and said, "Yes, but our water is green, black and brown and it smells putrid." He then said, "Well if your water was dirty . . . How would you protect those you love? How would you protect something that doesn't have a price tag on it? To what extreme would you go?" These kinds of workshops challenged students not only to suspend regional, ethnic, and class barriers as they related to the activists and residents, but also to begin to reflect upon *their* own challenges and struggles.

Around a campfire that evening, students shared some of their economic woes. One student talked about working 40 hours a week; another discussed the consequences of not having health care coverage. Others chimed in about inter-personal violence and traumatic experiences, which all affected their studies. But the "collective" commentary was that we are so privileged compared to local residents in West Virginia. In part students began to connect with activists around a shared sense of struggle—many of our working-class students have certainly struggled, particularly in an era when education is becoming more and more expensive and they are working more and more. One student spoke about how she too grew up without running water and plumbing and said many of these "activists remind me of my father!" But most of our Towson students do not live in "toxic zones" or "contaminated environments," so they gained immediate insight into the segmented system of capitalism: in spite of their struggles, they are privileged compared to their West Virginian companions. Not only that, but there is also a realization that their comfort—their heat, electricity, hot water—are fueled by extracted coal, leaving this human and environmental devastation in its wake. That sense of connection—that we are all connected across segmented and uneven divides—proved fodder for future conversations. "Others" pay the price for our comforts, but they aren't really others after all. There is a recognition that through coal—through our consumption of energy—not only are we connected to MTR but our energy practices also enlarge the power of the coal industry.

On the last day of our trip, we visited the Upper Big Branch mining memorial site and the Marsh Fork Elementary School, both in Raleigh. The Upper Big Branch mining explosion occurred on April 5, 2010, killing twenty-nine of the thirty miners on site. The accident was the worst in the United States since 1970. Because Massey Energy cut corners on safety regulations—in this case, failing to provide appropriate ventilation for methane—the company essentially created the tragedy of Upper Big Branch. The Mine Safety and Health Administration found that flagrant safety violations contributed to a coal dust explosion. It issued 369 citations in 2011, assessing \$10.8 million in penalties. Alpha Resources, which had recently purchased Massey Energy, settled its corporate criminal liabilities with the U.S. Attorney for \$209 million. The distance between the theory of neoliberalism and the practice becomes quite visible to students as we tour Upper Big Branch. We read geographer David Harvey and theorize about neoliberalism, the intellectual/political stance that presumes that capitalist trade liberalization or the deregulation of businesses, and indeed the end of all

state-run businesses, will lead to market growth and optimal social ends (Collins, et al., 5) In the classroom, we illustrated the discrepancy between neoliberalism as theory and practice. For corporations like Massey or Alpha, when the bottom line is economic profitability, their incentive is to cut corners to enhance their economic opportunities. In this case, they failed to provide appropriate safety regulations, which could have saved their lives. The theory says that the "liberalized" market creates the rising tide that lifts all boats out of poverty, but if the practice curtails critical provisions, including worker safety, then certain populations are left increasingly vulnerable. Here we see first-hand how neoliberalism benefits some, while miners become "collateral damage" in a broader landscape of capital accumulation. The miners' hats from the Upper Big Branch memorial serve as a powerful symbol of the bodies left unprotected by our political and economic system.

The Marsh Fork Elementary School in Raleigh County was the next stop on our journey to understand the consequences of MTR. And here again, we found other vulnerable bodies left unprotected by expansive capitalism. The school sits next to a coal silo and just 400 feet downslope from an impoundment that holds back billions of gallons of coal slurry. Beyond the immediate threat of this impoundment being breached by rainstorms, there were concerns about air quality within the school as a result of coal dust. The school was at the center of a controversy that led to protests, arrests, and national publicity. Local residents, especially parents of Marsh Fork students, were concerned about the health impacts of exposure to coal dust and the threat of a disaster at the impoundment owned initially by Massey Energy. Due to sustained civil disobedience and protest, the community managed to relocate students to a new site. When we returned in 2013, we were invited to see the school and speak with local activists. The school was equipped with smart board presentation stations, computer labs with the fastest internet connection in the area, and a freshly painted gym.

Towson University students were profoundly affected by the stories we heard at this school. After we headed back to Kayford Mountain, many sat silently and simply reflected. The stories unfolded in a rather poetic way and the physical destruction of the landscape served as a backdrop to the horrors of poisoned waters, toxic waste, increased levels of death as a result of cancer and other illness. So as the late Larry Gibson said in 2011, "We are not collateral damage." For many, it was hard to conceptualize these people and communities as anything but collateral damage for large transnational corporations seeking to profit from coal. As one Massey representative said, "I don't give a damn about nobody or nothing up that holler. I only care about coal . . . You're the diamond, we're the ring" (quoted in Antrim Caskey's *Dragline*, 2010). In this vicious quest for coal, families and communities are simply in the way of a new extractive industry that blows up mountains, poisons water, and makes whole towns uninhabitable.

## Building Empathy and Collective Solidarity: from Passive Witness to Active Engagement

As a researcher, I had studied the Landless Peasant Movement (El Movimiento Sin Tierra, or MST) in Brazil and Bolivia, taking inspiration from their Freirian model of education, where campesinos teach one another, using experience to build political consciousness through small reading and discussion groups about the state of agriculture. Inspired by this model of “educational nuclei” from my work with MST, we had a series of small group conversations on Kayford Mountain about MTR to help us process different parts of our trip. After Upper Big Branch and Marsh Fork Elementary, we sat around a campfire to talk about what we had seen.

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These were some of the reactions. One student said, “I’m so angry with Massey Energy!” Another added, “For me . . . it’s the mountains . . . that’s what makes me the most upset. The Appalachian Mountain range should not look like this.” Others powerfully spoke about how the process of mountaintop removal literally obliterates long family histories. One student exclaimed, “The walk to Stanley Heir cemetery on Kayford Mountain was the most powerful for me. It really illustrated how easy it is to erase these histories, people’s sense of community, family ties, and territorial claims.”<sup>5</sup> Someone else put in, “They really are treated as collateral damage.” Another lamented, “This is all such a dehumanizing process. It seems as though these people are saying over and over, We are not collateral damage. But they certainly seem like they are simply disposable.” This montage of voices and insights defined the evening. The students talked about how learning in the classroom feels like a contradiction. One exclaimed, “We engage in a kind of armchair anthropology, so far removed from the actual communities we are studying.” Others chimed in, “So much of these tales of extractive industries are about seeing, tasting, touching, and feeling the poverty.” Now, they were part of a larger group that local activists describe as “bearing witness to the tragedy of Appalachia.”

The students from my 2011 group were moved towards activism and civic engagement. Many were part of activist groups in Baltimore fighting for economic, racial, and social justice. However, for many of the students of color, a transformation occurred during the trip. Many started the trip pointing out all the Confederate flags on houses close to Kayford Mountain. Others talked about

“racist tendencies” of rural whites. However, as many got to meet Larry Gibson—powerful orator and fierce activist—they began to shed some of their own fears and anxieties about white Appalachia. Larry made them feel comfortable and asked students to talk about their own struggles in Baltimore. Students began to see urban and rural issues as connected. Some argued that these might seem like radically different problems: urban poverty, homelessness, institutional racism, and the gutting of public education, on one hand, and environmental problems such as contaminated water, poor air quality, and flooding, on the other. But as one student so powerfully articulated, “It’s all the workings of a capitalistic system: people, local communities and social structures must become disposable in order to create profit.”

These students came back to Baltimore transformed by this trip. They began to see how their consumptive lives linked to zones of production and wanted to change attitudes and behaviors in cities. They collectively decided to organize an anti-coal forum on campus in Fall 2012. I was officially on maternity leave but provided assistance from afar. These students connected with other environmental and activist groups on local campuses, such as Johns Hopkins, University of Maryland – Baltimore County, Morgan State University. They built an elaborate database of all their friends and allies and began a major publicizing campaign, including a logo and a slogan: “Coal Kills.” With their own money and resources, they produced stickers and fliers to distribute on campus with facts about coal. They managed to trace the ways in which local zip codes in the Baltimore area directly connected to MTR on Kayford Mountain. The kick off to the anti-coal forum was the film *The Last Mountain*, including a screening and follow-up conversation. Students invited the activists to the anti-coal forum and brought their creative work, such as photography and documentary films, to display and use as educational tools. The teach-in was a great success and they mapped out an agenda for how Towson students can begin to bring Mountaintop Removal to an end.

## A Scary Encounter: From Witnessing to New Questions and Analysis

The journey my class made in 2013 to Coal River Valley ended abruptly as we were intercepted around 8 p.m. on the third evening of the trip by Families and Friends of Coal, a right-wing group that represents the interests of coal industries and promotes coal as the only reliable energy source to help the United States achieve energy independence. Ten pro-coal supporters, who claimed to be armed, blocked our Towson University vehicles with their large trucks. One woman stepped forward and asked to speak to the person responsible for all these kids. I came forward and said, “I’m responsible.” She said to me, “Do you know that you are putting these kids at risk . . . we have come to tell you unless you leave . . . someone is going to get hurt.” They also pointed to our guide Junior from Keepers of the Mountain and said, “Do you know you are with a criminal? Many people are looking for him.” I could see that she was angry and tried to calm her before gathering students to head off Kayford

Mountain. She kept referring to us as “environmentalists.”<sup>6</sup> I explained that we were here for purely educational purposes. Once they understood the nature of the class and the intent of the trip, many of the Pro-Coal supporters calmed down significantly. They gathered as a group and came to me to say, “We would like to tell students *our* version of the story.” I was anxious, and as an instructor I immediately thought about protecting the students and getting everyone down the mountain to safety. I gathered all thirty-five students around their trucks and immediately the students wanted to film these testimonials. While cameras were running during some of the verbal threats, in an ethically conscientious way, students asked if they could run their cameras during the conversation. One woman said, “We would prefer cameras to be off because I’m sure you will misrepresent us. They all do.”

A slender woman with straight blonde hair stepped forward and said, “Let me tell you all something . . . All my husband knows how to do is mine coal.” Others told us that coal fuels this local economy. Another pro-coal supporter argued that “radical” environmentalists want to see them work jobs like Walmart because that is the only employment alternative. Many students tried to jump in and ask questions, but in order to avoid any further conflict we encouraged students to simply listen. After they told a rather depressing story about the economic woes of miners, I asked if they would kindly move their vehicles. However, they would not move until we exited the mountain. Students packed up their tents and belongings while Friends and Family of Coal watched from their vehicles. Since they continued to threaten Junior, we took him with us, anxious that he get back safely. Friends and Families of Coal trailed our university vehicles all the way to the local McDonalds at Beckley, where Junior’s colleagues retrieved him. These threats are part of his everyday life of organizing against MTR, he said. He told students that they would never hurt them, but they certainly intimidate and threaten anyone involved in challenging the coal companies.

We did a lot of work in and out of the classroom to make sense of this experience. We did independent research on Friends and Families of Coal, and students wrote responses to the trip, revealing their fears. One wrote, “The first night we were all terrified. We heard a huge truck rev up their engine and someone shouted, ‘We love coal. Tree huggers go take a shower.’ We all huddled closer together in our tent.” But I think this “scary” experience forced all of us to see the complicated layers of coal: our dependency upon this key resource has historically pitted distinct working-class groups against one another. Those working in the mines worry about making a living, but bigger issues are at stake: the lack of economic diversification creates a downward spiral for West Virginians (current plans for development include more Walmarts, private prisons, casinos, and NASCAR race tracks). All of this represents “failed development,” more of the same service-sector, minimum wage jobs without access to healthcare. Additionally, much of the revenue from these industries is funneled out of the local community and toward big businesses. The all-out attack upon labor in the neoliberal period and the failure in this

era to maintain strong unions like United Mine Workers may have pushed miners farther right, supporting Big Energy and Big Coal. Meanwhile, in other geographical hubs of radical extractivism, like Bolivia, where much of my research has focused, workers have moved farther left.

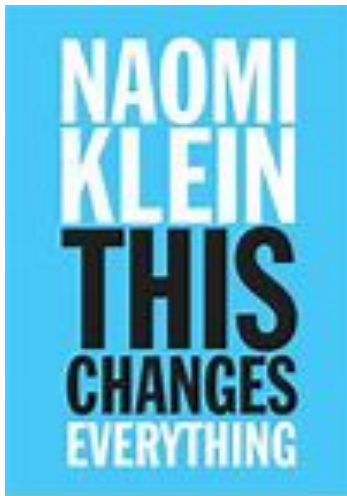
Despite the fact that we were there to learn about mountaintop removal coal mining, these pro-coal supporters provided an alternative education on the challenges of overcoming the Resource Curse. My 2011 group did not hear directly from miners and this led to more of a black and white narrative; either you are for coal or against it. My students, who had existing activist tendencies, grabbed onto this narrative and transformed their experience into civic engagement. However, many from 2013 felt shell-shocked and entangled in the complicated webs of power, dependency, and coal consumption. Many argued that there are no neat and tidy answers to this problem. They began to analyze and think differently about the environmental narrative: “The solution of wind and other renewables,” said one, “might not bring necessary jobs to everyone.”

This was a powerful moment for me as an instructor as well. I was forced to rethink my curriculum. If social class has been essential to my teaching about West Virginia (collateral damage; linking students’ working lives to the lives of Appalachians), how did I omit some critical voices in West Virginia? What about all those miners who historically depended upon coal to feed their families? How could I expose students to the history of unions, the assault on unions, and the miners of today without alienating the environmentalists? Is it possible to bring these two groups into conversation and have a productive dialogue with the intent to educate students?

As I develop this curriculum for future classes, I ask: How can we think in subtler ways about resource conflicts and social class? Poor people in West Virginia who live in blasting zones are dying from coal dust and dirty water while miners are dying from unsafe working conditions. They no longer have the protection of unions and might see these problems through a radically different lens than the environmentalists. In some cases, they have been “bought out” by the coal companies. But these populations are tied into the broader engines of global capitalism: labor and ecosystems might seem like different ends of the spectrum, but they are not. Anthropologist Eric Wolf once talked about the accumulation regime pitting distinct ethnic groups against one another in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: “Accumulation thus continues to engender new working classes . . . It recruits these working classes from a wide variety of social and cultural backgrounds, and inserts them into variable political and economic hierarchies. The new working classes change these hierarchies, and are themselves changed by the forces to which they are exposed.” (Wolf 383) This is precisely what we see in West Virginia, that the capitalist system has segmented and divided “disposable” populations, those working inside the mines and those dealing with the consequences of new forms of extractivism. If we begin to look at the broader “accumulation regime” as responsible for contemporary environmental and economic problems, instead of blaming distinct groups for their socio-economic conditions, vilifying

the environmentalists who perform radical actions or the goons bought out by coal companies, then we can begin to build solidarities across these historic divides. When students can link their own working-class experiences, another layer of solidarity emerges, as urbanites begin to see their lives as inextricably connected to those living in rural areas.

We end our resource journey with Naomi Klein's new book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism versus The Climate* in order to inspire students to "break every rule in the free-market playbook," to envision what reigning in corporate power, rebuilding local and national economies, and reclaiming democracies could look like in the future. Since we have seen explicit links between extractive industries and climate change, the intent of our last unit is to speak directly to the cumulative effects of large-scale agriculture, underground mining, and surface mining, to inalterable ecosystem ruptures such as global warming, and to the responsibility of this generation to confront the climate crisis.



Building solidarity is thus critical to sustaining the anti-MTR movement but also proves critical to thinking about the broader climate justice movement.<sup>7</sup> I have written about the importance of building a massive climate justice movement to link activists in the North and South, rural and urban, those in zones of extraction and those in zones of consumption. Most of my academic research has been in South America, where I have explored Bolivian

social movements and how questions of land and sustainability involve bigger questions of climate change and climate justice. Bolivian activists have a lot to teach the North about mobilization: in the resource-based movements of the 2000s, indigenous and mestizo protestors used their bodies to block capital flows and occupied key spaces of production. Resource-based movements managed to halt plans to privatize water and gas and overthrow a neoliberal President in 2003. Activists in West Virginia are beginning to create critical alliances with indigenous peoples in the South, exchange ideas about activism, and even implement more sustainable economic systems.

We are at a political and organizing moment of great import. Cross-border, cross-community learning must attempt to maximize the potential for progressive change. One of my great hopes is that the South can teach the North how to translate long histories of militant and embodied politics into new spaces and places. While some of this is already happening, the key question is how to sustain young people and involve those who have benefitted historically from these extractive systems in

order to building a long-term movement with the potential to stand up to non-renewable fossil fuel giants and create meaningful international legislation.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> International Studies, Latin American Studies and Political Science students are drawn to the course, but most students in Resource Wars are anthropology majors. While it is a requirement for our major, they take this topics course because it is of interest.

<sup>2</sup> Twenty percent of the student's grade is tied to creative work from our West Virginia trip. They choose from photography, documentary film, creative writing, and popular writing. The assignment challenges them to creatively document the social, economic, and environmental effects of MTR. If students cannot make the trip, they receive an alternate assignment.

<sup>3</sup> As faculty, we often do not have an opportunity to hear about the economic lives of our students. However, this trip is an opportunity to get to know my students on a personal level, which then informs my teaching. Further, the hierarchies of a classroom are also broken down on the mountain, which gives students a certain amount of confidence to share their intimate thoughts.

<sup>4</sup> A.T. Massey Coal Company evolved from a family-run business based on Coal River in West Virginia in the 1920s to a transnational corporation dedicated to processing, shipping, and selling bituminous coal for international markets (Fabricant and Fabricant 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Larry Gibson's family has lived on or near Kayford Mountain since the late 1700s. More than 300 relatives are buried in the cemetery there. In 2011, he took students to the cemetery and talked about how gravesites had been destroyed by MTR.

<sup>6</sup> RAMPS, a group of which Junior is a member, is a non-violent direct action campaign where environmentalists from all over the country come to Kayford Mountain to perform civil disobedience (living in trees; hanging off of MTR machinery) to spectacularize the problem of MTR. The pro-coal supporters assumed we were there as part of an environmental action.

<sup>7</sup> For many students it is the very first time they have heard about the human, environmental, or social costs of coal extraction. Much of this has to do with the influence of non-renewable fossil fuel giants in our public spheres, particularly in politics, government, and education. Big coal has not only reshaped politics through lobbying but has also redefined curriculum in elementary education. For instance, Scholastic partnered with the American Coal Foundation ([www.teachcoal.org](http://www.teachcoal.org)) to publish elementary teaching materials designed to hide the "processes" behind and the consequences of coal extraction (see Bigelow 2011). This omission looks very much like a propaganda campaign. But this is not the only example of critical omission of "scientific facts" from our curriculum. While on the mountain in the Spring 2015, we learned from Elise Keaton that climate change has been written out of elementary and secondary education in the state of West Virginia. These two examples illustrate the ways in which non-renewable fossil fuel giants have influenced (through money, politics, and power) the public about our energy and climate future. Much of the responsibility then falls upon grassroots movements to rebuild this knowledge base.



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