

REGIONAL TRAINING WORKSHOP APPALACHIAN LAND STUDY

August 26th-27th, 2017

At the Appalachian South Folklife Center in Pipestem, WV.

www.folklifecenter.org

About 25 of us congregated in beautiful Pipestem, a mix of generations and experience coming from across Central Appalachia. The goal of this workshop was to gain an overview of key concepts and research tools that are emerging as key to our regional study. It was two days of knowledge sharing, mutual inspiration, and methods training.

The mission of the 2017 Appalachian Land Study is to provide accurate data about land and mineral ownership and public revenues to communities, scholars, local governments, and other stakeholders.

DAY ONE

LISTENING FOR CHANGE

We began our work together with the music and insights of Carrie and Michael Kline and Jackson Napier, who guided us in how to “listen for change.” We explored what it mean to truly listen to the people we communicate with in our research and community work: how to conduct an interview in a way that builds trust and creates a space for dialogue. We agreed this is a model for how we should communicate generally.

LEARNING FROM OUR PAST

Joe Childers then joined us from Lexington, KY to talk about lessons learned from the first land study in 1979-1981. Joe was the Kentucky state coordinator for the land study and remains an important voice for social justice in the region. He walked us through the nuts and bolts of the project and reflected on how the political context had changed. He emphasized that there is a political opening right now to have discussions about a just transition, offering us the ‘practical hope’ that we all need right now.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

We then had a ‘report back’ regarding grassroots work that is going on, especially in Virginia and Kentucky. Highlander transition fellows are playing a key role in this early work, and Terran Young detailed her process for researching land ownership in Wise County. David Rouse and Kathy Selva also offered us their deep knowledge of what we are calling the “land matrix” (the social, economic, and political relationships surrounding land ownership and use).

MULTIPLE DISPOSSESSIONS IN APPALACHIA

In the afternoon of our first day, we heard from David Rouse and Herbert Reid about the history of dispossession in Appalachia. A big topic! But in just a few minutes, they focused us in on how this history relates to our current moment—the challenges and opportunities posed by coal's decline and other developments in the region.

BREAK-OUT WORKSHOPS ON KEY ISSUES IN THE REGION (FRACKING PIPELINES AND COMMONING)

We then had breakout workshops on two important aspects of land in our region. Carolyn Reilly from the Bold Alliance briefed us on the latest developments in the latest form of extraction: fracking and the pipelines that transport all that natural gas through the region. Marie Cirillo and Mary Hufford talked about the commons and alternative legal frameworks for understanding how we may use and govern our resources. Working towards alternative futures involves recognizing the hidden knowledges and practices that are already part of the fabric of Appalachian life.

DOING CORPORATE RESEARCH

Our next presenter, Eric Dirnbach, has extensive experience doing corporate research for unions. He called in from NYC to give us a primer on how corporate research might fit into our land study. Throughout the day, it came up again and again how we must not only document land ownership, but need to understand exactly how corporate control works as well as its impact on land use. Eric clarified the approach he uses and what tools are available for this kind of research.

BUILDING GRASSROOTS TEAMS

Bill Price from the Sierra Club in WV, and a long-time organizer, finished up the day with an energizing workshop on how to recruit others to join us in the land study effort. His message circled back to the start of the day: that we can communicate with diverse people throughout Appalachia by honoring their experience and partnering with them to create a common vision for the region.

We finished with a wonderful night of music from Carrie and Michael, connecting us to the rich musical traditions of the evening.

DAY TWO

On our second day, we got down to the nuts and bolts of our work together. Our hope was to leave the weekend with a clear sense of where we are going as a collective. Even though we wish all of you could be with us, we made great progress.

RESEARCHING LAND RECORDS

Lindsay Shade walked us through what it takes to access and make sense of land records, including the diverse arrangements in different states and how to begin analyzing what we are seeing. We will need more training, for sure, but this gets us started.

COLLABORATIVE AND PARTICIPATORY METHODS

Each session connected with each other and some themes kept on recurring over the weekend. Betsy Taylor returned us to the basic ethics of the study and of how to conduct truly collaborative research with an interactive review of key participatory methodologies. We got a chance to practice them, keeping in mind the lessons we learned from Carrie, Michael, and Bill.

FACILITATING DIALOGUE IN THE COALFIELDS

We then heard from Nick Mullins, who has been active in communicating new approaches to messaging and activism around a just transition. We learned some strategies for communicating across what may seem hardened political divides. But we finished with the sense that the underlying goal and ethics of the land study can connect many different kinds of people.

MAPPING OUR LAND MATRIX

Betsy led us in a group exercise mapping the land matrix in the region: all the stakeholders, organizations, and interests involved in governing, using, and transferring land. This spurred a lively discussion of who should be involved in our study.

MOVING FORWARD WITH RESEARCH DESIGN

Lindsay then led us in a discussion of what we all thought our common research questions should be, how to fit in local research agendas, and where we all fit in in the study. We need to analyze these responses in order to develop a proposal to return to our whole group. But we left feeling excited and energized about our next steps and seeing this project through.

Thank you all for your commitment and fellowship this past weekend.