Who Knows? Who Tells? Creating a Knowledge Commons
by Anita Puckett, Elizabeth Fine, Mary Hufford, Ann Kingsolver, and Betsy Taylor

With a land mass the size of Rhode Island denuded by mountaintop removal coal mining, the southern Appalachian coalfields have become a national sacrifice zone. Confined to less populated areas, beyond the view of travelers on major highways, this growing social and ecological disaster has been invisible for decades to nearly everyone, including environmental activists, in the U.S. A long history of viewing Appalachia as outside mainstream national concerns has contributed to this invisibility. Cyber-activism is changing this neglect by making images of mountaintop removal (MTR) and its impacts accessible to Internet users. But the astonishing invisibility of MTR continues, due in part to the institutionalized privileging of professional expertise over local, experientially-based knowledge regarding the consequences of MTR. Moreover, the targeted delivery of "expertise" vetted by the coal industry produces friction between local miners and residents who square off as either "Friends of Coal," or those who "Love Mountains." The result is a complex struggle between different constructions of expert and experiential knowledge over territory that is paradoxically both "home" and the commodity known as the "coalfields."

Many academics, including the authors of this chapter, have been drawn into these highly politicized contexts through our involvement with the remarkable grassroots movement against mountaintop removal that has grown in the region since the mid-1990s. Dozens of local and regional organizations, often containing academics and other "experts" of various sorts, have allied in creative ways with each other, with national and international community organizations,

and with artists, filmmakers, journalists, creative writers, coalfield citizens, and other individuals. This anti-MTR movement has produced powerful, eloquent films, magazine, newspaper, and e-zine articles, TV reports, celebrity interventions, Internet information sites, YouTube videos, political protests, public, professional, and academic conferences, and legislative campaigns, all of which flash with increasing frequency across national mediascapes. As a result, MTR is becoming more prominent in the public consciousness. Nevertheless, it is still marginal to national debates about fossil fuels, climate change, and green job creation.

We therefore ask how grassroots organizations and academics can work together more fully to transform the difficult local, regional, and national political terrains in which these organizations have to operate. By "terrains," we mean the physical and virtual places where those who have *experienced* the real environmental and community impacts of MTR (activists, citizens, civic organizations, policy advocacy groups, and local environmental groups) come in contact with the communications constructed by institutionally-validated academics and professionals who assert a more abstract *expertise* and the power that commonly goes with it. We examine not only the structure of these contact arenas, but also argue for creating venues where these "experts" *must* engage in *experientially-based* dialogues with those whose knowledge derives from practical, pragmatic, and physically real engagements with the outcomes of MTR mining. We call such venues "knowledge commons," for it is here that different ways of thinking and acting on issues must merge experiential knowledge and ways of talking about it with credentialed expertise. Expertise itself is not the villain here, but the ways experts ignore and dismiss those having local experience. If exchanges occur at all, experts treat local knowledge and people as beside the point when, in fact, they are crucial in devising solutions that protect residents and promote democratic participation.

We claim that constructing knowledge commons is critical to anti-MTR movement-building and to the development of social justice activism more generally. Speech and its written forms must become objects of strategic focus in order to change underlying power relations and promote full community and grassroots organizational participation. In this chapter, we provide a brief theoretical and historical context for this argument, followed by individual examples from four of us. Fine rhetorically analyzes how an Internet mode of communication can construct a powerful knowledge commons. Puckett describes ways that activist academics can cross the borders of normally segregated academic terrains. Taylor discusses the often invisible influence of the coal industry over the ability to have public and democratic debates about MTR. Hufford illustrates how to transform the corporate state's expert domains into sites of public dialogue with local experiential knowledge. Finally, Kingsolver contributed to discussions of the overall argument and to the chapter's final form.

1. Theoretical and Historical Context

Many contemporary social justice movements demand that local efforts link closely to regional, national, and international political terrains. In coal-producing Appalachia, control of resources at the local level, including verbal ones, has always been part of "King Coal's" power and monolithic economic preeminence.[1] But since the 1980s, neoliberal power structures have forced "places" all over the planet to market themselves transregionally and globally, and this has led to a new form of argument and control over regional resources. Situated within larger neoliberal projects, new "place managers" or "place entrepreneurs"[2] broker among local,

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[1]   John Alexander Williams, *Appalachia: A History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 259-263.

[2]   Herbert Reid and Betsy Taylor, *Recovering the Commons: Democracy, Place, and*

regional, national, and global contractors to offer incentives such as tax breaks, compliant workers, and local connections to induce mobile capital to relocate. New "growth coalitions," consisting of local level landowners, politicians, developers, attorneys, bankers, financiers, businesses, and entrepreneurs, market their particular locales for future development in hope of bringing in jobs and investment that directly benefit them. Universities increasingly have taken on roles in these "growth coalitions," often by claiming large economic payoffs at the local level from research and development.[3] Most basically, these coalitions utilize the same verbal resources and rely on strategies sustained, reproduced, and created by their communicative activities to keep opposition out and convince the general public that their views are natural, moral, and inescapable. In very few contexts are there knowledge commons that include contradictory, experientially-based evidence or oppositional views.

However, at the grassroots level, an explosion of efforts has created citizen-led visions and projects for alternative development that steward the environment, grow jobs, and de-couple various links in the global partnerships of the neoliberals. Anti-MTR struggles have taken place in the thick of this grassroots struggle, and their ways of talking about alternative development have created new ways of communicating that encourage, if not compel, development of knowledge commons that are, in turn, strongly encouraging transformations in the roles of academic "experts."

Global Justice (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); See also Dorothy Holland et al, *Local Democracy under Siege: Activism, Public Interests, and Private Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 189.

[3]   Jennifer Washburn, *University, Inc.: The Corporate Corruption of American Higher Education* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

From the mid-1990s to the present, these struggles have taken two different paths. For Larry Gibson, Judy Bonds, Maria Gunnoe, among many other courageous individuals, there has been the brave and often lonely path of direct confrontation and public speech about the vast destruction of beloved and historic landscapes, homes, health, and the forest commons on which many traditional Appalachian livelihoods depend.[4] By the late 1990s, a number of Appalachian nonprofits (e.g., Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition, Appalachian Voices, and a few regional Sierra Club organizations) began to focus on MTR and to work with such individuals' grassroots efforts in political campaigns, public education and awareness, and regional and national networking. These grassroots attacks on the existing neoliberal constructions of political economic power were direct, as they were in earlier coalfield labor disputes, but have not effectively challenged elite control over hegemonic discourse.

The second path has been more indirect, and often did not seem to relate to coal mining at all: the struggle for democratic takeover of local planning structures and creation of multi-issue coalitions with the political strength to imagine and create place-based, sustainable economies. These efforts tapped into powerful legacies of local economies that use the forest commons (ginseng, herbs, hunting, etc.), local agriculture, crafts and artisanship, and strong traditions of interdependence among neighbors and family,[5] as well as love of community and the land. Some promoted sustainable lifestyles and jobs by implementing green technologies and "going local," which expanded local efforts into regional socio-economic enterprises[6].

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[4]   See Catherine Pancake, Dir. *Black Diamond* (Oley, Pa.: Bullfrog Productions, 2006).

[5]   See, for example, Mary Hufford, "Building the Commons: Folklore, Citizen Science, and the Ecological Imagination," *Indian Folklife* 1 (Oct. 2000): 15-16.

[6]   See Van Jones with Ariane Conrad, *The Green-collar Economy: How One Solution Can*

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Fix Our Two Biggest Problems (New York: HarperOne, 2008); and Michael Shuman, *Going Local: Creating Self-reliant Communities in a Global Age* (New York: Routledge, 2000).