

# Mountains Beyond Mountains

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BONNIE FORTUNE

**O**n December 22, 2008, in Kingston, Tennessee, near Knoxville, a containment pond for coal ash, a by-product of coal processing, was breached at the Kingston Fossil Plant. 5.4 million cubic yards of wet coal ash spilled out onto the playgrounds, roads, and into the homes of the community. It was one of the largest environmental disasters of its kind that the United States has witnessed to date. The Tennessee Valley Authority, a New Deal project and today the nation's largest public power company, was responsible for maintaining the containment pond at the plant.

I grew up in Tennessee. I moved to the Midwest to go to college and lived there for nine years. The Midwest, like all other regions of the United States, is connected to a power grid that sources electricity produced by coal. Though I lived in the flat Midwest, I was still connected to mountainous Tennessee and the Southeastern United States. Not only did I miss the spectacular mountain landscape of my childhood home, I was daily using electricity that came, at least in part, from the destruction of the Appalachian mountains.

Regional boundaries are permeated everyday with telephone calls, interstate roadways, migrating birds, love letters, news broadcasts, and electricity distributed over an aging infrastructure of wires and cables.<sup>1</sup> The coal ash spill happened miles away from me but it still affected my daily routines.

So, I signed up for Mountain Justice Summer Camp. The camp, to be held in West Virginia, was advertised "for people who love mountains." I thought going to the camp would be a good way to experience first-hand the effect the coal industry was having on what some were calling "ground zero" in the

climate change movement. And I could bring back this information to my Midwestern neighbors. The camp focused on educating and training activists to work against mountaintop removal coal mining in the Appalachian region of the United States. Mountaintop removal (MTR) is a dramatic form of coal mining that removes the “overburden”—the trees, vegetation, soil and rock—from a mine site through explosives, bulldozers, and draglines. This “overburden,” the mountaintop, is pushed into the surrounding valleys, creating a valley fill. MTR is an aggressive type of mining that was first used in the late 1960s. Since then, it has become increasingly widespread because it provides a cheaper way for coal companies to extract coal and the coal extracted is usually lower in sulfur. It also requires fewer workers.

I signed up online and put my name on a rideshare board, offering space in my car to anyone going east from the Midwest. I told my neighbors, Sarah and Ryan, to give me a call sometime in the week that I was gone to make sure that I was not dead. I was worried I would be killed by the hippie traveling in my car or in a mine site accident; the unknown made me cautious.

I felt real anger about the coal ash spill and the destruction of a region for profit and convenience. I was, however, nervous about acting on my anger by attending the camp. In signing up for the camp, I was certainly worried about others’ perceptions of me and the authenticity of my commitment. The camp is organized to train activists for a summer of direct action and service work in and around the Appalachian region. However, I was going to conduct field research and I knew that my own activism would appear elsewhere and in other forms.

Rusty, a twenty-one-year-old Christian vegan from Chicago with a tree tattooed to look like it was sewn on to his neck, responded to my ride offer. We didn’t exactly become best friends. I picked up Rusty at the train station and we headed east on an awkward two-day drive through Indiana, Ohio, down into Virginia, finally stopping in Pipestem, West Virginia. On the drive, Rusty and I would fall in and out of silence because of our ideological differences. I questioned his love of anti-civilization, and anarcho-primitivist writers like John Zerzan and Derrick Jensen. I had read their writings, even attended a lecture by Jensen at my student union, but I remained skeptical of their essentialism and told him so. We fell into silence again after a brief discussion of his Christian faith. Rusty nodded off.

There is a growing movement of left-wing Christian radicals, of which he considered himself a part. Although faith-based activism has a rich tradition in the United States (for example, the anti-nuclear movement of the 1970s and 80s was led by members of the Catholic Church), I do not identify with this movement. I did not grow up in a religious family. I formed my own opinions about religion, shaped by the violence I saw committed in the name of faith. But I would find my opinions shifting over the week I spent in West Virginia.

At the camp, there were several other activists who placed faith at the center of their activism, including the self-named Sage, a West Virginia native and Mennonite preacher, who led prayer circles to bless the mountains. Confronted with a mountain pushed apart, there are many feelings and responses, few good or positive.

By the end of the week, group prayer at the site of this violence did not seem so strange. Though I am a religious skeptic, I think ritual is most useful in times of grief. Environmental destruction on such a large scale brings out precisely these feelings of anger and grief. Having time to be silent together with others in the presence of such great loss became a powerful ritual for me, and an important part of the camp.

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“Welcome to the camp. You’re not cops right?” was the greeting the morning Rusty and I arrived at the Appalachian South Folk Life Center on the southern tip of the tiny state of West Virginia. Don West, a friend and contemporary of Myles Horton, the celebrated organizer who founded the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, started the Folk Life Center. Highlander is famous for being the site of 1930s labor organizing in the South and direct action training for Civil Rights movement activists in the 1950s and 60s. Horton had visited Denmark before founding the Highlander Folk School. When they started their folk centers in Appalachia, Horton and West built on the tradition of the Danish folk schools, or the *Folkets Skole* movement, where adults came together to continue their education and engage with their community.

The Folk Life Center is a big field with fire pits, a couple of rustic buildings and an almost *plein-air* chapel. The folk life was not in the architecture but in the conversations and planning that took place at the seven-day retreat, culminating in a large parade and direct action on Saturday.

Rusty and I separated as he joined with other people at the camp, leaving me to pitch my borrowed tent. I oriented myself with the large schedule written on butcher paper in the main building. All the meals were made here, including breakfasts of homemade granola and dinners of barbecued venison. The schedule included workshops on: “MTR 101,” “Guerilla Video,” “Legal: Know Your Rights” and “Listening for Change: Oral History and Appalachian Heritage.” The main building would also host a square dance, meetings about Appalachian culture, and rallies to save the mountains from coal companies over the course of the week. It was lively with the excitement of friends greeting each other.

College students, traveling kids, coalfield residents, and long-time environmental activists populated the camp. Most were friendly. Some, like me, were new to the movement. The most guarded people were those who had

been coming to the camp for the past several years. They warned newcomers “the quickest way to show you don’t know what’s up” is to go around snapping pictures without asking. The group planned tree sits, lock-downs, and other civil disobedience actions over the course of the coming summer. With good reason the organizers felt that they couldn’t be too careful.

One longtime organizer asked me to take the battery out of my cell phone as we talked, explaining that, “you never know who might be listening in, and with what technology.” This was a gathering of people who had had enough of lobbying and voting and were ready to “go to jail for justice.”

The Mountain Justice participants “do not engage in sabotage,” but they do participate in non-violent civil disobedience actions on a regular basis. A certain level of suspicion was normal. Assessing who you were and where you were from was part of the conversation; you never knew who might be an informant. This level of paranoia was stressful for me, an introvert who prefers to listen and observe. I found myself standing in the main hall staring at the mural on the back wall trying to absorb my surroundings. The mural depicted large, muscled coal miners leaving underground mines at the end of the day. On their way home, they fought with and bested a half-grub-half-business-man creature smoking a cigar. This was an alternative version of Appalachian history.

Culture inevitably shapes the way places are seen, experienced, and inhabited. Mountain Justice Summer organizers believe in this strongly. Making a point of scheduling workshops and hosting evening events devoted to the culture of Appalachia, they communicated a different regional point of view than the one presented in the national media or by the Friends of Coal, a powerful lobbying group that dominates West Virginia’s political landscape. The “seasonal round,” a traditional relationship to place built on the cycles of the seasons, was the main theme used to communicate the Appalachian cultural perspective. Mary Hufford, a professor of Folklore and Folk Life from the University of Pennsylvania, explained the seasonal round through the hand-drawn maps she collected from Appalachian people documenting the best places to forage for wild ginseng and ramps. Foraging was, and in some places still is, an annual activity for many Appalachian families. The seasonal round centers on the biodiversity of the region, and social patterns follow the growth of edible or medicinal vegetation. For example, family reunions are often scheduled to happen concurrently with the ripening of wild strawberries, blackberries, or elderberries.

The Central Appalachian region stretches from Pennsylvania down to Alabama in the eastern United States. It is nicknamed the “Mother Forest” because the region, unlike the Midwestern plains I had traveled from, was never glaciated. Whereas most forests are dominated by two or three canopy species, this region has almost eighty tree species. The abundance of

medicinal plants, edible plants, and fertile soil has made it a cherished ecosystem for generations. Hufford described the region as a “thinking system,” the destruction of which also impacted the economic, social, and spiritual ways of life of those communities connected to the mountain forests.

Many speakers at the camp were coal country mothers and fathers who became nationally recognized environmental activists when illness, property damage, and quality of life issues forced them to act. They told about protecting their homes from coal company thugs with handguns under their pillows. Larry Gibson, self-proclaimed Keeper of the Mountains and one of the most outspoken of the local environmental activists, keeps a shotgun loaded and ready at his house.

Gibson spoke to the Mountain Justice campers at the camp and at his home on Kayford Mountain. Gibson described forming his relationship to the mountains as a child when he explored and developed a working knowledge of each stream, rock, and hill with his pet red tail hawk as a guide. Coal deposits line Gibson’s backyard. Over 1,000 people visited that backyard in 2009 alone. So many people came to hear his passionate diatribes against mountain top removal coal mining that he built a parking lot. Standing in the parking lot you can taste the blasting chemicals, a mixture of ammonium nitrate and diesel fuel. Nearly the same concoction, it is said, that was used in the Oklahoma City bombings. Gibson likens coal industry practices to terrorism both because of the tools used and because the end result is equally destructive. Blasts, and there is one almost everyday, often reverberate all the way from the mine site to Gibson’s wooden house about a mile away.

A blast had just been detonated when we visited Gibson’s property and walked with him out to the Kayford Mountain mine site. Dusty brown clouds hung in the air as we scaled a pile of rubble to look out and view what anywhere else might have been taken for a construction site for a new suburban development. Looking down on the mine site many were silent, eyes leaking tears. But Gibson told us that he didn’t want tourists who were looking for tragedy, like gapers at a car accident. He opened up his home and his land, and took people on this tour because he wanted to instill anger in each person who visited him, the same anger he felt at the lack of foresight inherent in this pervasive mining practice. He wanted visitors to take up the fight.

On the second day of Mountain Justice Summer camp, I went out with a large group to help a family whose garage had been flooded by muddy runoff. When you blast for coal and remove the mountaintop, you are essentially replacing it with a tabletop formation. If you pour water on a tabletop, it runs off the nearest or lowest edge, taking whatever is around with it. Similarly, spring rains in West Virginia that year had run off the mined mountaintops and caused flooding on such a large scale that the Red Cross and the National Guard had had to come in to provide disaster relief.

Sage, the young preacher, led groups from camp out to do service work in the area. Ditches and gullies on the route were lined with twisted cars. Power lines snaked through metal fences and mud-coated clothes piled up on the roadside. The Red Cross workers identified people who needed help and matched them with volunteers. They were operating out of a school building that was closed for the summer. The building also doubled as barracks for the National Guard, whose sleeping cots were set up in one of the empty classrooms. After being matched with someone in need, we worked for five hours digging mud and pieces of family history out of one man's flooded garage. "You don't think it floods in the mountains, you know," said one volunteer from Virginia while we were working in the garage amid silt and dirt sprinkled with black coal flakes.

The man who owned this garage was a former mine worker, back when mining was done underground. He showed us a mud-spattered fan used to detect airflow in the mines. If the fan stopped, he said, then you knew you would soon lose fresh air in that area of the mine and should move your crew out. The flood that came in the night had cost him a whole flock of chickens and several dogs. He was resigned to it, telling us he planned to move. Three generations of coal miners are now moving away, maybe to Florida. There was nothing he or the others could do to prevent future floods or the blasting that happened regularly a mile above their homes.

Done cleaning the garage and back at the Red Cross headquarters in the school, we asked for more work assignments. They sent us back into the hollers looking for another family in need. We never did find that family, even after asking several folks, so we drove the hour back to camp. On the way, we passed sixty-car trains full of freshly mined coal. We talked about the coal industry, the history of organizing, and hollers, the valley recesses in a mountain landscape. Though hollers are recognized as havens for biodiversity, they are destroyed as a matter of course in the "valley fill" practice of MTR mining.

I had to leave Mountain Justice camp on Friday morning. I was unable to stay for the Saturday action planned to close the camp and kick off the Mountain Justice Summer of direct-action in the coalfields. I was conflicted about leaving without participating in the week's project. Campers had been painting banners and planning logistics all week; "Don't talk to the police if you are arrested."

The action took place at Marsh Fork Elementary School near Pipestem, in Sundial, West Virginia. The tiny school sits at the base of a mountain honeycombed with old underground mine sites. On its top rests one of the world's largest coal sludge ponds owned by the now notorious Massey Energy Corporation, currently under investigation by the Obama Administration. This location has long been a site of conflict between coalfield residents and coal companies.

Back home in Illinois, I listened to reports from the Mountain Justice action on Pacifica Radio. Actress Darryl Hannah spoke up for the cameras about her love of the mountains. Larry Gibson marched with the campers and with resident activists to the contested site. About seven people were arrested that Saturday, some for marching on company property, others for kayaking out onto the toxic sludge pond to drop a banner demanding an end to mountain top removal coal mining.

In 2010, after years of actions like the one organized by Mountain Justice campers that weekend, Marsh Fork Elementary is being moved to a new location. Additionally, Massey Energy CEO, Don Blankenship, will be stepping down, which, for some, signifies a sea change in the coalfields. Maybe the coalfield residents were wining against the grub-man after all.

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In Illinois, I work with a group called the Midwest Radical Culture Corridor (MRCC). The MRCC is a group of artists and activists living and working in the greater Midwest area. The purpose of the MRCC, as two members of the group wrote, is to “re-imagine the multiple infrastructures that shape not just our individual lives but also the field of political possibility in the region.”<sup>2</sup>

My love for mountains would be channeled into research and art making with the MRCC, rather than into banner drops or lockdowns. I returned to spend my summer in Illinois, working with the group to make a map of the region’s resource infrastructure, specifically what we call the Corn and Coal Shed. In the map, *Region from Below: Power Plants*, we document the ways that these two industries link to one another, both connecting and expanding the region. In addition, we put together an archive of distinctive maps that illustrate the Midwest’s natural and industrial resources. Both were featured in *Heartland*, an exhibition at the Smart Museum in Chicago. Our map and our archive show us that the Midwest is far from an isolated entity; industry and resource extraction explode the arbitrary borders of the Midwest everyday. Similarly, the *Heartland* exhibition as a whole illustrated the ways that America’s center connects to a globalized world.

Chicago’s Little Village neighborhood is one of the points on our map. Here the Crawford Power Plant produces electricity for a networked power grid that stretches out across the United States. Sin Chicago while the coal burned at the Crawford plant primarily comes from Missouri. The utility company Commonwealth Edison owns the coal-fired 1950s-era power plant, which contributes to high rates of asthma in the largely Hispanic community living in Little Village. Thus, the Crawford plant can be thought of as a way station on a pollution highway that snakes across the country. Though the health concerns are local, the energy market is national, thereby making regional boundaries permeable, collapsing the boundary lines that separate

distinct places from one another, from adjacent city neighborhoods to neighboring states.

Rusty, my rideshare buddy, lives in a vegetarian cooperative house near the Little Village neighborhood. I left the camp without saying goodbye and he got a ride back to Chicago after the Saturday action with another camper. But I would see him again in the Fall, after the *Heartland* exhibition opened in Chicago. We were both walking, surrounded by the staccato rhythm of a bucket drum corps, in the National Day of Action Against Climate Change demonstration outside of the Crawford Power Plant. We saw each other underneath the smokestacks of the coal-fired power plant. I went over and hugged a surprised Rusty as we watched a group of seven young, black-clad activists “lock down” with bike locks in front of the power plant. The fight, in all its forms, continues to spread out from Appalachia.

Whether mountain states or plains states, each region is connected to another under capitalism. Perhaps maps are best at noting the limits of the mapmakers’ vision. The map I made with my neighbors and friends, the Midwest Radicals, came at the end of a long summer of research. It is flawed and reflects only a small part of the ways that Midwest industries are connected to the rest of the United States and to other countries around the globe. What it does do, however, is document several projects that are trying to articulate a way beyond an energy system dependent on carbon extraction. It also, and most importantly, shows how coal from the mountains of West Virginia powers the neighborhoods in the flat lands of central Illinois. Here one landscape is embedded in the other.