

Topophilia or Topophobia? Environment and Health in West Virginia

This paper explores existential tension between two radically opposed experiences of environment where West Virginia stands as a landscape that simultaneously promotes attachment and alienation. We may think of different locales as on a continuum from the potentially therapeutic to essentially pathogenic. What has been called a therapeutic landscape necessarily represents only one possible dimension of our relationship with place or, in this case, what geographer Yi-fu Tuan referred to as *topophilia* as the basis for positive affective attachment between person and place born of comfort and subjective well-being. A landscape of fear—captured in Tuan’s *topophobia*—establishes an essentially negative, or at least ambivalent, relationship between people and place that may ultimately induce anxiety, dread, and depression. In her work on the emotional development of children, in particular, the environmental psychologist Louise Chawla suggests that the places we inhabit, at all times, have the potential for either light or darkness as there is always a “shadow side” to our relationship. While Chawla’s concept evokes the relative darkness, it nevertheless opens the possibility of change in our relationship to any given place. That is to say, this relationship is dynamic. After a long history of environmental catastrophe with direct impact on human health in West Virginia—most recently punctuated by a chemical spill that affected over 300,000 people—I take up the challenge to view Appalachia from a fresh perspective as I consider what’s next for West Virginia through illustrations of creative, dynamic forces for change now at work.