

Marginalization and Resilience from Within and Without Appalachia: Views on Place and  
Disruption in Eastern Kentucky and Washington, D.C.

Kirsten Crase, Ph.D.

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Location A: Letcher County, Kentucky. As most of you undoubtedly know, this area of the central Appalachian region has long existed in a close relationship with the coal industry, which provided not only the largest source of employment in the region but also a very powerful element of local identity. In the last two decades, the explosion of mountaintop removal mining, on the one hand, and the recent contraction of the coal industry, on the other, has resulted in an intense whiplash for residents of this region—a whiplash felt economically, ecologically, and psychologically. They have witnessed, in quick succession, both the hollowing out of some of their most beautiful and culturally significant landscapes, and the sudden hollowing out of their economic mainstay as coal mines have closed and laid off workers in record numbers.

Location B: The urban community of Southeast Washington, D.C. This community, which may or may not be as familiar to most of you, has also experienced its own kind of whiplash over the last decade. You may have heard of Anacostia, which is the neighborhood in Southeast D.C. shown here, and for many years achieved notoriety mainly because of its reputation as the most dangerous part of the city. With the recent growth in gentrification, however, developers have begun to eye Southeast D.C. as an area that could be ripe for gentrification. What that has meant for the low-income residents of this community is that a place they have long called home is now rapidly becoming unaffordable for them and they are beginning to be pushed out.

Letcher County, Kentucky and Southeast Washington, D.C. on the surface appear to have very little in common. One is rural, one is urban, one overwhelmingly white, one overwhelmingly African American, one is located far from any centers of political power, one located at the back door of the White House and the halls of Congress. The disruptions they are facing are also distinct—those based on the coal industry versus those based on gentrification and displacement. Different places, different problems. Early in my work on this project, I was told by a scholar that I was comparing not just apples and oranges but practically apples and potato chips, and that I might as well throw salmon into the mix while I was at it. But there is, in fact, a method to my madness.

What compels me to look at these two places and the struggles they're facing in tandem is that they have three central, and critical, elements in common:

- 1) They have both suffered historically from marginalization on the basis of class, race, and geographical location.
- 2) They are both facing disruptions to their fabric as communities—economically, culturally, and physically.
- 3) And most significantly, they are both places where residents believe in the power of place and home—where sense of place is palpable and engrained in everyday life.

That sense of place, and the people who bring it to life in these two communities, is what unites them. And by looking at them in tandem, we can gain an appreciation of similarity and commonality across vast differences.

In the remainder of this presentation, I'm going to share with you some of the words of the residents I've interviewed in these two communities. The words I'll share consider what place means to them, how their experiences with marginalization and disruptions occurring are

also interlaced with their sense of place, and how being rooted strongly in place serves as a source of strength and resilience as they look to the future.

I first want to look at a common theme among several of the residents I interviewed in Letcher County and Southeast D.C.: that of having pride in their community and family history, and grounding their sense of place in that historical pride.

The first quotation comes from a Letcher County woman in her 60s:

“I was reared kind of I guess in an idyllic world, as far as I was concerned. Everything was wonderful, you know, our mom and dad loved us, we had problems, we weren’t rich, and there wasn’t a whole lot of extra, but we were happy. Mom and Dad spent time with us, on the weekends we’d get out in Dad’s old Jeep and we’d go to Pine Mountain or go to the custard stand, have an ice cream, or just ride around, he’d take us swimming in the river, so we grew up feeling really loved and secure.”

This is mostly centered on this woman’s own family experience, but it also speaks to her intense love for the community and environment of Letcher County—a place where people could live “idyllically” even if they weren’t materially wealthy, and where there were mountains and rivers to get out and be amongst and friendly custard stands to visit on warm summer days.

The second quotation comes from a Southeast D.C. woman, also in her 60s:

But this was a place where you had ... I mean you had folks who came here who had skills, who were educated. Aunt Bess taught music from her house on Morris Road where my mother now lives, so you had people who wanted to be citizens of the United States, and wanted to make a contribution ... So you had all of that going for you in one place. You had teachers and preachers and doctors and lawyers and merchants and cleaners and pharmacists and all these people living in the same area, in the same village, working toward the common good.

Here we see this woman’s memory of both her own family experience and that of the community as a whole, specifically as it existed in the 1950s and 60s immediately prior to the Civil Rights Movement, when full citizenship rights were not always guaranteed to African Americans. She has a great deal of pride in seeing herself and her community today as growing out of this tradition of self-reliance.

Next, and on a less positive note, but an equally important one, I want to look at a set of quotations that emphasizes how longstanding marginalization can impede people's sense of their own agency. This can happen when individuals and communities repeatedly experience the bitterness and disappointment of receiving the short end of the stick, whether that be in terms of poverty, educational opportunities, the stigma of being stereotyped, etc.

This first quotation is from a Letcher County woman in her 30s, describing what she calls the dysphoria that often exists for people who have to confront regular threats to their well-being as a result of the coal industry's role in everyday life:

...I have a really hard time with how incredibly effectively the propaganda machine of the coal industry has convinced people to fight for the right to destroy their homes, like, to be angry that someone would suggest they not. And I just have so much despair, all the time, about that, and just how painful that is. And I think it has to be a pretty profound sense of dysphoria for people, whether they're dealing with that or not, but ultimately there's no way that you can exist in that disconnect without having a huge psychological toll, which, when you look at the drug abuse, of the epidemic here, there's a lot of stuff attached to that.

In a somewhat similar vein, a Southeast D.C. woman in her 50s suggests that the public housing residents in her community, who are subject to the whims of the less-than-functional D.C. Housing Authority, "may sometimes feel like slaves ... in that they have no control over their destiny. 'Cause if the Housing Authority says you have to move out, you gotta move. ... You're powerless." And a Southeast D.C. man in his 20s agrees, saying of the many extremely low-income residents of the community, "remember, we talkin' about destitute, degraded people. So some people like, 'My life'll be difficult anyway, whatever happens happens.' ... And some people have been degraded to the point where they just flow with the wind."

In all of these quotations, there's a tragic sense of having been beaten down and robbed of the sense of agency and authority, the sense of ownership, that's necessary to be able to

participate actively in shaping one's own life and the life of one's community. And while this is a very real portrayal of how marginalization can affect people psychologically, and does and has affected people in both Letcher County and Southeast D.C., it's also not the whole story, thankfully.

Over the course of my conversations with people in Letcher County and Southeast D.C., I've come across numerous examples of people engaging in what I call "positive place-talk," which is basically the same thing as the psychotherapeutic practice of "positive self-talk," but with a specific application to place and community. In practices of positive place-talk, residents first believe that something difficult is possible, they then make that difficult thing happen, and then in turn encourage others to believe that they, too, can take similarly difficult but positive actions. In communities that have long been hindered by marginalization, disinvestment, and disruption, this can be immensely powerful and regenerative.

Many of you may be familiar with the case that the next quotation touches on—that of the establishment of Summit City Lounge in Whitesburg, in Letcher County. I hesitated at first to include this quotation here because of the recent and tremendously saddening closure of Summit City after being in operation for 9 years, but I decided to leave it in, because even though Summit City itself no longer exists, it is undeniable that the precedent it set and the fights it fought and won, jumpstarted the economic revitalization that's now taking place in downtown Whitesburg. And this quote is from Amelia Kirby, one of the co-founders and co-owners of Summit City.

So Summit City I think, if it's done anything here, it's shifted, it's forced some of the people, especially the people in the powers that be, to reckon with what we actually can have. We can have a place that will stand up to any place in the cities that you routinely travel to to go and have your fun, we'll have it here, ... so now suddenly there's a whole dialogue in Whitesburg about what role can arts play in community economic development that's I think sprung from what we did, and from the sort of latent passion

in that direction that everybody has constantly always suppressed because there's always this sense of despair, of what's possible and what's not possible. So having something come out of nowhere.

In Southeast D.C., the following quotation outlines a similar situation, where residents came together to revitalize a park that had been abandoned to criminal elements, and in the process gave people the power to “reckon with what we actually can have,” as Amelia said. This quotation comes from a Southeast D.C. woman in her 50s who has worked as a longtime volunteer with the local neighborhood council:

...they cleaned up the park ... and then what we discovered was the park was still going to pot, because it had become a haven for drug trafficking and substance abusers ... so we went to Washington Parks and People ... the first thing they did was they mobilized the community to form a group that would preserve and protect the park. ... So we started walking clubs there, so people could start walking in the park, we started having movie nights on Friday nights, there's this beautiful amphitheater in the park that nobody was using ... and it was a great attraction for the people in the neighborhood. But what it did was change people's mentality about coming into the park and what kind of activity there could be. ... so people are taking ownership of that park now, and that's working.

In conclusion, there are communities throughout Appalachia and beyond that suffer from these same combined forces of marginalization and disruption. Putting these two communities in conversation with each other, even if only indirectly as I have done here, is important as a reminder of the overlappings of many of the challenges faced within and without Appalachia. It is also important as a validation of something those in Appalachia have always known—that sense of place is both an idea and a practice, and that its potential for generating flourishing communities is vast.