

# Building More Inclusive Solidarities for Socio-Environmental Change: Lessons in Resistance from Southern Appalachia

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**Abstract:** It is increasingly recognized that socio-environmental justice will not be achieved through liberal and cosmopolitical forms of activism alone. Instead, more diverse and inclusive solidarities must be achieved across political ideologies for transformative change. By engaging with one constituency often overlooked by mainstream environmentalists—rural, conservative Americans—we argue for a situated solidarity that can be forged among people whose views of nature, community, and politics differ significantly. This framework rejects totalizing expressions of global ambition that erase important place-based differences. To explore this ethic, we examine a localized anti-fracking campaign in western North Carolina to determine how place-based forms of environmental resistance can be brought in closer connection with the cosmopolitical movement for climate and energy justice. This requires that cosmopolitical movements make room for more customary forms of cultural politics, while conservative movements look beyond their own place-based struggles to resist mutually experienced forms of oppression.

**Resumen:** Es cada día más evidente que la justicia socioambiental no se logrará exclusivamente a través de formas de movilización liberales y cosmopolíticas. De lo contrario, el cambio transformativo requiere de solidaridades diversas e inclusivas que trascienden las ideologías políticas. Basado en nuestra colaboración-investigación con una población sobrepasado por ambientalistas convencionales—estadounidenses rurales y conservadores—proponemos una “solidaridad localizada” que se puede forjar entre poblaciones con distintos conceptos de naturaleza, comunidad, y política. Este marco rechaza a las expresiones universalizadores que borran de las idiosincrasias producidas por arraigarse en un lugar. Para explorar dicha ética de solidaridad, investigamos una campaña contra el fracking (la fracturación hidráulica) en el oeste de Carolina del Norte, para así determinar como las formas localizadas de resistencia ambiental se pueden acercar a los movimientos cosmopolíticos para la justicia climática y de energía. Concluimos que este acercamiento requiere que los movimientos cosmopolíticos se abren a distintos costumbres y culturas políticas, mientras que los movimientos conservadores miran más allá de sus luchas locales para resistir opresiones comunes.

**Keywords:** situated solidarity, commons environmentalism, cosmopolitanism, fracking, diverse environmentalisms

## Introduction

In June 2014, the North Carolina legislature took the final step in permitting unconventional natural gas production, commonly known as fracking, with the passage of the Energy Modernization Act (SB 786). This legislation generated immediate and widespread opposition from a variety of environmental organizations, grassroots activists, and concerned citizens. The residents of western North Carolina (WNC) were especially vocal in their opposition to fracking, something that was notable in this rural and typically conservative region of the state. Two WNC residents created the Coalition Against Fracking in Western North Carolina (CAFWNC), which was a regionally focused anti-fracking campaign drawing on and utilizing markedly Appalachian ideas of society, culture, and the environment in its messaging and activities (see Figure 1). On several instances, activists stated that their concern was not about prohibiting fracking generally, or even throughout the state, but it was on keeping fracking out of the mountains.

At the same time that this localized anti-fracking campaign was taking shape, national and international environmental movements garnered unprecedented visibility. In September 2014, more than 300,000 people took to the streets in New York City for the People's Climate March organized by 350.org, where demands for climate justice took center stage (People's Climate Movement 2015). That same year, more than 300 cities around the world staged events as part of Global Frackdown, which was animated by a "call for an end to fracking and a swift transition to a 100 percent renewable energy future" (Schlosberg 2014). In both of these demonstrations, significant action was taking shape around issues of global environmental justice, collective responsibility, and social transformation.

As these two examples show, there are diverse and distinct environmentalisms occurring simultaneously, yet they often suffer from deep disconnections, and even distrust in one another. Cosmopolitical movements (like 350.org) often dismiss the



**Figure 1:** Anti-fracking signs in Western North Carolina (Foster 2014; reproduced here with permission) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

type of politics in WNC as narrowly focused, “not-in-my-backyard” efforts, while more conservative movements (like WNC’s anti-fracking campaign) see global justice activism as “Obama” politics that has little relevance for, and may even be threatening to, their daily lives. This mutually produced dismissal, we argue, is not only the result of differences in political ideology, but it is symptomatic of a more fundamental tension in social movement building—that of place-based vs. universal imaginaries and identities. This disconnect is also important because it has been suggested that the struggle for socio-environmental justice “cannot be won by white liberal America alone” (Grijalva 2015). This is a critical arena for radical scholars to explore: how to undo the hegemony of liberal, wealthy environmental cosmopolitics to provide more inclusive avenues for truly transformative change. This challenge is underscored with the election of Donald Trump for United States president in 2016, which is widely seen as highlighting the significant and deepening rifts between rural Americans who voted for Trump, and those living in urban areas with much more progressive viewpoints (Brownstein 2016). We tackle this challenge by beginning in conservative, rural Southern Appalachia, a place rarely seen as connected to either cosmopolitical or other forms of environmental activism. In this context, we ask: Could these two ways of resisting (place-based and cosmopolitical) be brought into closer connection to one another, and what new ideas or practices would be necessary to do so?

To answer this, we seek a theoretical framing that does two things. First, it must critically evaluate the merits of the regionally focused anti-fracking movement and the cosmopolitical tendencies of mainstream movements, while also acknowledging their limitations. Next, we must offer a framework for better connecting these two distinct ways of doing environmental activism, which we suggest can be done through the intentional building of meaningful “situated solidarities” (drawing on Nagar and Geiger 2007; Routledge and Derickson 2015) among people who are differently rooted in place and whose views of nature, community, and politics differ greatly. In short, it is our view that any form of environmental politics that asserts totalizing views of place, nature, or community is itself hegemonic, exclusive, and dismissive, and therefore less likely to command the broad-based support necessary for transformative environmental politics.

Through an empirical analysis of anti-fracking activism in WNC using this framework, we show what cosmopolitical environmentalists can gain by developing a more pluralistic cultural politics that makes room for political practices embedded in locally specific (often conservative) views of nature, systems of authority, and political values. We will also show what place-based environmental movements can gain by looking beyond their own intimate struggles toward shared experiences of oppression that are rooted in processes of de-politicization and neoliberalization that affect a variety of social movements. Together, these new ideas and practices can help forge more situated and inclusive solidarities.

Before proceeding, however, we should discuss our use of the term “conservative” in this analysis, since it is a primary way in which we describe the community in WNC. Residents of WNC certainly exhibit many characteristics that one might commonly associate with political conservatism: all of the seven counties in the western most part of the state voted for Trump in the 2016 presidential

election, and four of the seven counties by 60% or more (*The New York Times* 2016). All but two of the westernmost counties have a lower percentage of residents who believe that climate change is “mostly caused by human activities” than the national average (Yale Project on Climate Change Communication 2014). In the state of North Carolina generally, 87% of residents report having some Christian affiliation, with Southern Baptist being the most popular (Gallup 2004; RCMS 2010). Through these characteristics, we argue that WNC is very much a stronghold of rural, conservative politics.

But, our use of the term also emanates from our research participants, themselves. The word “conservative” was commonly evoked by residents of the region to denote a particular “way of being” characteristic of Southern Appalachia that shuns public rowdiness (such as protests) and embraces intimate, face-to-face ways of doing politics (as opposed to joining massive national groups). As Keefe (2008:170) writes about WNC: “doing things ‘for show’ is the subject of gossip and public scorn ... Family ties are the basis of the most important identities for people.” There is also a noted dislike of outside or government intervention in this region, as Nesbitt and Weiner (2001:347) note: “resistance to loss of control brings together fears associated with capital, the state, and residential migrants from large eastern cities and is helping to produce right wing political sympathies”. In this way, we also speak about a cultural conservatism that is in direct contrast with many elements of the mainstream environmental movement that embrace public protest and state intervention.

## **Toward a Situated Solidarity: Perspectives on the Inclusive Socio-Environmental Movement**

The question examined here, about how to connect a localized anti-fracking campaign and a globalized climate and energy justice movement, does not emanate from our research participants in WNC, nor does it come from our own initial efforts to understand their opposition to fracking. Instead, this focus emerged as we considered how to present our findings. Given that hundreds of typically conservative residents of WNC were prompted to speak out in ways we had not seen during our years of working in the region, we were deeply moved by the opportunity to leverage our knowledge of this activism into new theoretical and activist insights for how it could be made more broadly relevant.

First, we understood that the WNC anti-fracking movement had insular and inward-looking tendencies that inhibited its wider relevance, and it exhibited signs of classic “not-in-my-backyard” (NIMBY) politics (Dear 1992; DeVerteuil 2013). Yet, we also felt our deep understanding of this movement presented a valuable opportunity to examine how NIMBY politics might be converted into “Not-in-Anyone’s-Backyard” (NIABY) politics—a “scale shift” that helps people move from a concern for one’s own condition to concern for anyone in that condition (Schaffer Boudet 2011), which might enroll new subjects (particularly conservative, rural Americans) into broader fights for social and environmental justice. It seemed critical to conceptualize WNC’s environmental ethic in a way that could make it visible and meaningful to mainstream, more cosmopolitically minded

environmentalists and academics, who might otherwise dismiss it for its NIMBY characteristics, or because it arises from a stigmatized population not often seen as fully enrolled in global environmental politics.

In this context, we turn to feminist and radical scholars who are increasingly examining how to forge solidarities among various resistance movements (see, for example, Kensinger 2013; Mott 2016; Routledge 2000, 2012). The theoretical framing and research presented here adds to this growing literature on solidarity by offering a way forward for socio-environmental justice organizing that makes room for different understandings of the way political acts are conducted (i.e. practice), while diversifying the grounds upon which groups come to understand their shared experiences of oppression or injustice (i.e. ideology). By reading different environmental ethics *with* each other, instead of against one another, we arrive at new notions of solidarities that might better connect and unite these distinct, but not fully disconnected movements.

### ***Commons Environmentalism in Southern Appalachia: Linking Place-Based Activism to the Post-Political Condition***

Stereotypes of Appalachia often depict poor, dirty, uneducated people who have readily sacrificed nature for jobs, resisting regulations that might protect their own environment (Billings et al. 1999; Wray 2006). These characterizations often assume that most residents of the region are unable to participate in the modern environmental movement because of anti-environmental, anti-state, and anti-science stances, leaving this region largely ignored (and sometimes despised) by mainstream environmentalists.

This simplistic and problematic characterization of Appalachian people fails to recognize a locally distinctive, place-based form of environmentalism that has been present in the region for generations. Kathryn Newfont (2012:3) argues that Southern Appalachia exhibits a “commons environmentalism” rooted in “forest defense efforts of mostly rural, often working class people in the Southern Appalachians, people who were not typically friends to wilderness”. Newfont shows how these typically non-confrontational mountain communities mobilized to defend a protected, well functioning, general access forest commons that was, historically, central to Southern Appalachian livelihoods and economies. Commons environmentalism depends heavily on local social networks and norms that are typically enacted in community spaces like churches, town councils, and potluck dinners, which are locally resonant but often exclusionary to newcomers or outsiders. It is precisely this strong sense of community and connection to place that brings many politically conservative Appalachians to care about possible destruction of their shared resources (Boyer 2006; Evans 2013).

What is further notable about commons environmentalism is its rootedness in a historically constituted cultural politics—ways of being and acting, privately and civically, that are often described as “our way of life”. Being polite, following the rules, prioritizing private property rights and individualism are essential to being politically effective and socially relevant in WNC. As one activist told us: “You don’t disagree here publicly. That’s just not nice.” Another activist stated: “And that’s the

way rural people do—they don't stand up and yell and shout and waste time and stuff like that." This political sensibility is common in many US rural areas, and it calls for different political strategies than are typically employed in urban areas (Szakos and Szakos 2008).

While the localized cohesion and norms that give the commons ethic meaning are important to understand, it is also critical to acknowledge the ways this form of environmentalism often misses the opportunity to look outward, where one might witness the same forms of oppression occurring in other places. Specifically, we argue that place-based forms of resisting would benefit from a better understanding of the ways that neoliberal, post-political processes pervade environmental governance (McCarthy and Prudham 2004; Swyngedouw 2013). Scholars have noted the myriad negative socio-environmental effects of neoliberal policies, including how they favor capitalist markets over public health and safety (Harrison 2008), how neoliberal approaches to environmental governance place the burdens of regulation on individual bodies (Bee et al. 2015), and how neoliberalism normalizes the irresponsible and harmful outcomes of inadequate environmental governance (Prudham 2004). In short, neoliberal policies have firmly entrenched capitalism and the interests of the economic elite into environmental governance, often marginalizing vulnerable and non-elite communities (Heynen et al. 2007), including many residents of Southern Appalachia.

The argument has been made more recently that current neoliberal politics are not only market and profit oriented to the detriment of social wellbeing and justice, but our very foundations of democracy have themselves become "post-political" in ways that prevent robust public debate on truly alternative (and more socially just) futures (Mouffe 2005; Swyngedouw 2010). In effect, entrenched forms of oppression are working against *all* movements for social change through complex processes of state de-legitimation and malfunctioning democracies. For example, a post-political framework can draw attention to the ways that political marginalization is fundamentally necessary to facilitate resource exploitation, or how symbolic participation processes justify and facilitate profit-oriented decision-making by private owners, rather than truly engage in value-oriented decision-making by public bodies. These types of undemocratic moments are experienced in many places and by many people, thereby producing a mutually experienced form of oppression. The solidary opportunity presents itself when inward looking, place-based social movements (like the anti-fracking activism in WNC) look out and see these broader connections. We turn, next, to a similar assessment of the mainstream environmental movement in the context of the cosmopolitical global imaginary that often animates them.

### ***Beyond Militant Particularism: The Limits of "Universal" Solidarity and Cosmopolitics***

David Harvey (1996, 2001), drawing on the work of Raymond Williams (1989), argued long ago that place-based activism provides an important context for building political energy, critical consciousness, mass involvement, and organizational capacity on issues that resonate in people's everyday lives. At the



same time, however, Harvey was quick to note that place-based movements can become extremely ineffective and exclusionary if they remain too inward looking, thus working against the broad solidarities necessary for large-scale change. Harvey (1996, 2001) notes that the more a group's sense of solidarity, ideology, and organization is tied to purely local concerns and institutions, the more they are divided from potential allies and broader struggles. Furthermore, groups focused on local issues are likely to misrecognize the systemic roots of the problems they are confronting (Harvey 1996, 2001).

According to Harvey, Raymond Williams supplies the solution to this tension in his account of militant particularisms as a framework "to connect particular struggles to a general struggle, ... to make real ... the extraordinary claim that the defense and advancement of certain particular interests, properly brought together, are in fact the general interest" (Williams quoted in Harvey 1996:32). From this perspective on social movements, the critical element for transformative change is supplying place-based movements with a "global ambition" that extends their vision and solidarities beyond the locality. For Harvey and many Marxists, the general interest that sits at the heart of all militant particularisms must necessarily be class politics. Developing a common critique around capitalist socio-ecological exploitation, they believe, will yield the collective identity and umbrella consciousness necessary to unite disparate, place-based movements in a more systemic confrontation with power.

The globally oriented ethic of many mainstream environmental movements (like 350.org or Global Frackdown) exhibits many of the characteristics that might be considered productive for shifting militant particularisms into a more universal social movement. These groups draw largely on a "cosmopolitical" ethic that is firmly based in visions of a global society, seeking justice by attacking ethical tragedies as a universal community of responsible individuals (Beck 2010b, 2013; Harris 2011).<sup>1</sup> They bring into being an imagined community of interconnected individuals, not defined by or constrained by state borders or affiliations, whose primary orientation is towards the moral significance of actions and inactions (Bray 2013; Ingram 2013). Unlike the commons ethic, cosmopolitan environmentalism is deeply concerned with transcending every place, community, and culture in order to build a global vision of society. Ulrich Beck has argued that:

*only those who learn to see the world through cosmopolitan eyes will be able to avoid the decline [of socio-environments] on the one hand, and on the other to discover, to try out and acquire the new options and opportunities for power which could make a difference (2010a:264, emphasis added).*

This idea is very much characteristic of the People's Climate March, for example, which drew people from all over the world, where there were numerous references to social justice, anti-capitalism, and global governance (Giacomini and Turner 2015). Naomi Klein (2014), furthermore, whose book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* directly names and analyzes the role of capitalism in the fight for global climate justice, serves as inspiration to many cosmopolitical climate change activists. While mainstream climate and energy activism may not address the root causes of capitalism in the ways that David Harvey or other Marxist scholars

would envision, they are enacting many of the principals of the “global ambition” to which this logic aspires.

While there is certainly value in this cosmopolitical thinking, we argue that it is neither socially just, nor pragmatically feasible, to think that all people will adopt a class-based or cosmopolitan view of themselves and society—this itself is an act of dismissal and hegemony. As Featherstone (1998) points out in his review of militant particularisms, we likely do not know the solution for change, so we would do well to nurture a diversity of geographically and culturally contingent movements and experiments. He argues that we must provide space for activists “to imaginatively connect and fuse different identities, to transform understandings of race, class and ecology, or to offer an active interrogation and reconstitution of identities” (Featherstone 1998:23). For example, the disenfranchisement of people in Southern Appalachia is deeply tied to place-based politics of extraction, exploitation, neglect, and stigmatization and are unlikely to see a communist future (as Harvey’s class politics would advocate) as a viable ambition. Put simply, we argue that the mainstream environmental community must work harder to reach marginalized communities with very different political orientations. Our engagement with situated solidarities, which we turn to next, provides a means of forging new connections between the place-based and universal imaginaries of divergent environmental movements.

### ***Situated Solidarities: An Inclusive Politics Built On Difference***

First developed as a feminist perspective on researcher positionality in fieldwork, Nagar and Geiger (2007) argue that there is danger in essentializing and solidifying differences between people and places. They favor, instead, a closer engagement of what interconnections exist by virtue of our rootedness in particular “socio-institutional” locations as a form of situated solidarity. Charania (2011:366) describes situated solidarity as “engagement with issues within and beyond our own borders that requires us to meet and engage our differences and acknowledge our connections without referencing an undefined global space and self from which to act and understand ourselves and our political projects”. Routledge and Derickson (2015) further explore this in the context of scholar-activists by showing how researchers and their collaborators, while coming from very different positionalities and possessing very different access to power and resources, can effectively come together to align academic work and activist goals for transformation. In effect, this perspective argues that there is not one singular counter-hegemonic viewpoint, but instead, we should focus on ways to unite a variety of social practices in shared resistance.

Drawing on this literature, we define situated solidarities as potential connections between various social movements that are forged *in* place to acknowledge and honor the diversity of people and ways in which we come to enact various forms of resistance, while also connecting *beyond* place to recognize the wider causes of our oppressions and marginalizations through mutual respect. In the context of a situated solidarity that unites commons environmentalism and cosmopolitical politics, we argue that *both* place-based



and universal imaginaries are necessary for an inclusive and diverse politics of resistance. Situated solidarity involves, furthermore, a “shared commitment to interaction” (Rawls and David 2005:470) that involves a conscious engagement within and across difference.

Creating more diverse solidarities has been the subject of much research, yet this often focuses on what we might already consider more “progressive” or “radical” political domains. For example, Pickerill and Chatterton (2006:736) note about autonomous movements that “squatting a building leads to a greater awareness of national-global property speculation ... a local campaign against school closure can unravel global agreements on privatization and tradable services ... [enabling] the building of extra-local solidarity and resistance”. Halvorson (2012:431) argues that the Occupy movement “is thus an important reminder that alternative imaginations for other worlds need territories as much as the connections across space”, while Chatterton et al. (2013:614) show how diverse interests converged at the Copenhagen climate talks to “oppose dominant responses to climate change and practice solidaristic alternatives which develop a broader critique of the forces at play shaping localities”. Despite these excellent analyses of solidarity building, scholars have yet to engage directly with more conservative political ideologies as part of the solidarity project. This is the task we take on here: exploring the potential for situated solidarities with conservative rural people in and beyond Southern Appalachia.

Using these ideas, we suggest that situated solidarities can (and should) also be forged between conservative place-based social movements and cosmopolitical global movements through similar processes of recognition that do not require a forging of universal goals and worldviews. The task for building situated solidarities, then, is twofold: (1) to identify political framings that can build a more universal movement without erasing the locally-distinctive dynamics that make place-based activism effective; and (2) to recognize the shared antagonisms and dismissals that have been forged through long histories of oppression. In the following sections, correspondingly, we describe our empirical work with anti-fracking activists in WNC to argue that global movements must take better care to enact a more pluralist cultural politics, especially by building respect for parallel politics that emerge from conservative (or other non-cosmopolitan) values, and that localized resistance must work harder to understand and identify their own struggles within universal systems of oppression that underpin all marginalization.

## **Research Method: An Ongoing Participatory-Action Project in Southern Appalachia**

As members of the Coweeta Listening Project (CLP) our research is conducted by a team of geographers and anthropologists doing long-term, collaborative, and participatory-action research (PAR) in western North Carolina since 2009. PAR methods include a vast range of traditions, ideologies, and methodologies, which yield different ways of defining problems, collecting and analyzing data, and using results (Brown and Tandon 1983; Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991; Wallerstein and

Duran 2008). Our version of PAR echoes that of Austin's (2004:421–422) collaborative research and action, where she notes:

... key tenets are to foster collaboration among community members and researchers ... engage all in reflective practice and reciprocal learning, build the capacity of community groups to create change, balance research and action, practice inter- and multi-disciplinary work, and situate community concerns in a larger context.

Specifically, we conduct four main activities to support grassroots empowerment and democratization of knowledge WNC. These include: (1) community dialogues that engage professional scientists and community groups in two-way conversations about local environmental issues and knowledge, rather than typical expert-dominated teaching lectures; (2) articles written in a regional newspaper to open up discussion on community-generated questions about the environment in non-scientific language; (3) participation in community events, such as civic meetings, community festivals, and farmers' markets to create opportunities for informal sharing, as well as individual and collective action; and (4) conventional research conducted on social and environmental change in the region to help us contextualize our actions within the historically constituted power dynamics that define the region's political ecology.

The attention of the CLP was drawn to fracking in the summer of 2014, when a civically active resident of Macon County, North Carolina invited us to a small meeting of people concerned about the prospects of hydraulic fracturing in the region, just as they had learned of the recent passage of the Energy Modernization Act. This meeting connected concerned citizens from three WNC counties and prompted us to shift our summer research from local perceptions of climate change to fracking because of the strong form of community opposition it sparked, which we had not seen in our many years of doing research in the region. Our fracking-specific research was concentrated between June 2014 and December 2014, when we participated in weekly strategy calls with the organizations and individuals most heavily involved in anti-fracking organizing in WNC and across the state. We also conducted presentations on the science of fracking impacts to local governments and other groups, encouraged informed public input on the state's proposed oil and gas rules to regulate the fracking industry, contributed to briefing papers about hydraulic fracturing's social, ecological, and economic effects, participated in and observed meetings, rallies, and film screenings organized by CAFWNC, and offered logistical support (e.g. photo copies) where possible. We also hired two committed activists (one native WNC resident and one non-native WNC resident) as community researchers to help set up interviews and gather information at public meetings.

In addition to these activities, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten WNC activists. These interviews focused on participants' personal experiences in the anti-fracking movement, the social networks that have (or have not) formed through this movement, critical reflection on the political tactics and strategies employed, and the future of anti-fracking activism in the region. Interviewees included three professional organizers working for non-profit environmental groups, and seven grassroots activists. Nine of the ten interviewees

were women, and about one-third of interviewees were long-time WNC residents, while two-thirds (including all of the professional activists) were relative newcomers to the area. Our own outsider status was useful for provoking a wide range of explanations about how politics work in the mountains; we believe that our own solidarity with anti-fracking activists, as well as our multi-faceted presence in the region since 2009, also built sufficient rapport with long-time residents to permit open communication. In this article, we also include comments that were captured in video, print media, or email exchanges; this helped expand our sample to include more native (i.e. multi-generational) residents. All interviews and written texts were analyzed using narrative analysis for prominent themes on what ideologies and actions underlie the resistance movement, as well as areas where participants felt they had encountered barriers to broader political participation. The names of all those quoted here have been changed to maintain their anonymity. Having offered this research context, we turn now to our case study in Southern Appalachia to better understand how situated solidarities may be formed in, and with, people living in this place.

### **Connecting to Place: Intimate, Interpersonal, and Cultural Politics of Resistance in Southern Appalachia**

What was perhaps most notable about our engagement with anti-fracking activists in WNC is how they carefully and intentionally crafted their own place-based, conservative forms of resistance, very much characteristic of the region's history of commons environmentalism. Activists in WNC embraced forms of customary political practice typical in WNC as a means to garner the attention of their peers and elected officials in rural and conservative places. Close engagement with this form of resisting provides insights into how cosmopolitical movements, seeking closer connection with more diverse constituencies in places like WNC, might adopt some of the "ways of being" that constitute conservative cultural politics.

Where national and statewide environmental organizations opposing fracking in North Carolina utilized a variety of legislative tactics (e.g. promoting a "Disapproval Bill" in the state house) and legal strategies (e.g. court challenges to the constitutionality of the MEC's make-up), the regional WNC campaign developed several different strategies sensitive to cultural politics of Southern Appalachia. Take, for example, the significant and coordinated effort among WNC activists to get as many local government resolutions against fracking passed as possible. On the surface, this appears to be a simple response to the lack of local government authority to regulate fracking activities (SB 786 prohibits and local regulations on or bans of fracking)—what else can local governments do, other than pass resolutions? But, in fact, this recognizes a significant cultural understanding of the differences between "newcomers" in WNC (or those people who have moved to the region for jobs or retirement), versus "old-timers" (those with multi-generational ties to the mountains). This distinction is meaningful in Appalachia, and it cannot be overstated how much the newcomer/old-timer distinction was at the forefront of activists' minds in WNC. Many of the anti-fracking leaders were

newcomers, and they saw the need to find a connection to the old-timers in the region who hold significant political power, but are not always on the forefront of resistance campaigns. Because local officials often come from families who have lived in the area for many generations, a resolution from a city or county functions as a stamp of approval from longstanding authorities and respected community leaders. As a fracking activist and relative newcomer to the region, John, told us during an interview:

If somebody is an activist, they are more likely to be first generation in the mountains, as opposed to the folks who have some sort of actual political authority ... from what I have noticed, the more generational [residents].

He went on to say:

Some of the county commissioners ... seem to be ... from families that have been there [in the mountains] for a while, by the time they have gotten into that position. And I do kind of wonder if having grown up here and being part of the culture for generations gives a person a different perspective on how useful the showing up to activist event kind of things is for affecting the types of change we're looking at producing.

John observes that old-timers might know best which tactics would yield long-term results in this political context. Engaging them also helps build solidarity across difference in the region—newcomers were brought into conversations with old-timers, and elected officials engaged with activists. In fact, the westernmost counties in North Carolina passed the majority of local government resolutions. Four of the seven western-most counties in North Carolina passed resolutions against fracking (only three others were passed in the rest of the state), as did several towns in the WNC. Other areas of the state focused on legal strategies aimed at the state legislature or the constitutionality of the North Carolina Mining and Energy Commission rule-making body. In WNC, we were repeatedly told that working through local authorities was a far better way to mobilize diverse Southern Appalachians than a more publicly oppositional stance would have been.

This was also closely connected to how anti-fracking activists described the work they were doing in terms of “mountain culture”. Maria, a retiree to the area, noted: “conservative people and rural people just don’t run around and jump up and down and carry signs and do that kind of stuff. They’re just quieter and they talk to each other about issues, and they talk to people they trust.” She went on to describe how she was careful to dress the part when speaking to the County Commission, for example, putting on a dress and pantyhose, as she was told that was the polite thing to do. John captured this dynamic slightly differently, stating:

I’ve been here four years. I know if somebody I don’t know runs up to me hopping up and down and hollering, I am a little more worried about that person’s wellness than I am about whatever they are trying to communicate to me. So, if there are people who have preexisting relationships that are on board and willing to go talk to somebody they know, then that is going to be way more effective than me running up and cold calling somebody.

In another example, the anti-fracking movement also hosted what they called “Landowner Rights Workshops” all around WNC. Residents in Southern Appalachia, like many other rural areas in the United States, are extremely protective of private property rights. Anti-fracking activists told us time and time again, when people find out that “forced pooling” is allowed by state fracking rules, people who typically do not concern themselves with environmental issues would take note. Forced pooling is the practice whereby landowners can be compelled to allow drilling under their property if enough surrounding landowners agree to the activity. The Landowner Rights Workshops focused on the legal aspects of mineral and oil/gas rights, the proper procedures for “land men” to approach you about gas on your property, and provisions related to forced pooling in the state’s current rules and regulations. As one anti-fracking activist, Craig, stated: “I am finding that people know little about or understand [little about] the technology [of fracking], but if you mention that their property rights could be taken away they are all ears”.

Through all of these actions, anti-fracking activists took deliberate steps to politically engage in ways consistent with socially, culturally, and historically specific values and customs—as one activist put it “stirring up local emotions”. This culturally specific politics is effective in generating resistance in this area, in large part because it is distinctly not cosmopolitical. This was a lesson we watched relative newcomers to the region learn themselves (as we also did), as they navigated this place-specific political culture to build the movement and incorporate marginalized people. Activists in this region did not demand that people adopt a new single imagined community of global justice against fracking, nor a change in values, nor new political strategies. Instead, they allowed this movement to be appropriately place-oriented. Furthermore, by taking the activities of anti-fracking activists seriously, we can see that this place-based politics is not mere NIMBY-ism, but instead it engages a relational and interpersonal form of politics, one that stands in stark contrast to the global “we” of cosmopolitics. Accessing and appealing to socially, culturally, and historically specific systems of authority, especially where they are relevant to more conservative and rural people that are often the most negatively impacted by environmental change, will be an essential move if the mainstream environmental movement is to gain more appeal, especially in rural areas.

## **Connecting Beyond Place: Identifying and Understanding Mutually Experienced Forms of Oppression**

While mainstream environmental movements would benefit from finding ways to incorporate and connect to place-based and conservative forms of resistance, the same is true in reverse: localized movements might be more effective if they can connect their experiences to broader alliances in global environmental struggle. Specifically, our experience with the WNC anti-fracking campaign shows that they would benefit from a better understanding of the ways that

environmental or social movements in other places are working against similar de-politicizing and marginalizing forces that residents in WNC face. Activists certainly need not use the terms “neoliberalism” or “post-politics”, but we found that activists in WNC often came close to, but failed to fully realize, the ways in which neoliberalism and post-politics dramatically limit their own possibilities for change.

Take, for example, the intense amount of work that went into galvanizing residents in WNC to show up and speak at the Mining and Energy Commission’s (MEC) “public comment” on its draft rules for fracking. Because fracking is exempt from nearly all national environmental regulations, regulation of fracking activities falls to state governments, who typically write a set of “rules” to govern oil and gas companies seeking fracking permits. In North Carolina, the MEC was in charge of this process, and was largely made up of industry-friendly commissioners, including Jim Womak, “a Lee County commissioner and outspoken advocate of hydraulic fracturing, as chairman of the new board” (Ball 2012). The MEC initially scheduled three public hearings on the oil and gas rules, none of which were located in the western part of the state. Most people assumed this was because the western part of the state was seen as the least likely to hold any shale deposits that would be suitable for fracking, but WNC anti-fracking activists also connected this to historical disregard for the mountains, and they argued that this was one more example of impeding their ability to literally speak on political issues. They lobbied for, and successfully got, a hearing in Cullowhee, North Carolina. As one activist, Maria, said about the western MEC hearing: “That was a really big success for us because they weren’t going to give the western counties a public hearing ... they were not going to come out here, they were not even going to give us a chance to speak.”

Once the hearing was scheduled in WNC, both pre-existing environmental organizations and new grassroots organizations that were created in response to fracking (e.g. the CAFWNC) spent massive amounts of time and energy reviewing the draft rules, identifying places of concern and specific suggestions for improvement, and disseminating this information about the rules and the commenting process to the wider public. Paying careful attention to the public comment process was critical—this was a forum for the public to provide specific comments or suggestions to improve the rules, not generalized comments about whether or not fracking should be allowed at all.

Efforts aimed at getting a large anti-fracking turnout at the MEC hearing were a huge success—estimates are that 600 people showed up. Hundreds of concerned WNC residents spoke about the need for greater setback distances, stronger regulations on wastewater storage and transportation, the need for public health and water quality monitoring, and so on. An organizer with a local environmental non-profit, Mary, stated:

Anytime there’s something like [the MEC hearing] I think it’s good to get as many comments as you can ... I mean just having that amount of comment in the public record is good. It was something that was available to us, and it was really nice for people to see, “oh, our hearing had the biggest turnout, it has the least people pro-fracking”.



The activities geared towards generating participation in the MEC hearing provided great energy to the anti-fracking movement as they prepared for the event, and it provided a public forum for dissent that, they felt, was a meaningful way to document their opposition. Furthermore, this forum for dissent was more culturally acceptable because it was directed at Raleigh-based legislators and political appointees rather than Appalachian neighbors. Yet, nearly every activist we talked to would rather easily admit they knew all this public comment would not prohibit fracking in WNC, or even change the rules that permit it to take place. Frustrations about the entire process came out in our interviews. As, Karen, an organizer working at the same non-profit as Mary, said:

We have to do it, it's our obligation as the public, but I feel like that the state agencies do the bare minimum to just give a show of public input, but really it's just a big waste of everyone's time and energy ... I just find that it's a travesty of public process that there's zero accountability.

Beyond frustration about the process, activists also expressed disappointment that, in the end, the oil and gas rules were only very modestly changed, despite thousands of public comments from around the state. Sarah, a retired person who joined the anti-fracking movement, said:

It was a great evening because there were so many people that spoke from their heart, knew what they were talking about, and really stirred the audience. But it didn't stir the MEC commissioners. When we found out that, back in December, the MEC basically made no changes [to the rules] and said that we didn't know what we were talking about, that too many people just said they wanted it banned and there weren't many scientific facts, I was totally depressed for at least two weeks.

While this offered an experience for the activists that is personally meaningful and publically significant, these are highly focused events that take up (and arguably, waste) massive amounts of activists' energy, resulting in tremendous disappointment. In effect, the activists were given a place to speak, but never any chance to legitimately shape the political process or on-the-ground outcomes. As John stated, this form of public participation and democracy is "theater", and not much else:

I have never seen a piece of public community theater or ritual that was so plainly that and little else ... It did what good theater does, it provided an opportunity both for catharsis and ... you got to clear out the emotions then charge back up ... As far as actually affecting what law gets written by the existing administration, no effect whatsoever.

Furthermore, we heard several comments from activists about how the entire process was created to favor industry interests, or how the democratic process, itself, was working against them. Lisa, a grassroots activist, stated:

What I noticed, it seems like, the folks on the side of the administration were bringing in their talking points that were developed by the oil and gas PR firms ... So, it was, it felt very much to me like it was a populist movement against a corporate agenda being enacted through the office of government.

Jessica, a member of a regional environmental organization, went on to say:

I do not feel as though it [the MEC hearing] was a democratic process, in that I did not feel like the elected officials fairly acted upon the majority of opinions at all. So I did not feel like it was a democratic process truly in the heart.

We see here that the anti-fracking activists intimately and directly experienced the marginalization produced by neoliberal and post-political processes. While activists were able to identify corporate control of politics and the ways that the public is marginalized through processes that are undemocratic, they never identified this as a challenge common to other social and environmental struggles in other places. Even when prompted by us, as collaborators in the movement, to think about the ways this anti-fracking movement was related to climate change or other socio-environmental issues, activists were hesitant to draw connections between their struggle and that of other cosmopolitical movements.

We suggest that, when leaders of place-based, conservative movements fail to articulate broad connections of democratic process and corporate politics to those who participate in activism, they create a militant particularism that significantly impedes transformative change. They must come up with ways to incorporate these broader challenges into people's view of themselves, their movement, and their ideas of other people and places. The failure to do this means that their gaze remains inward, focused on particular problems in particular places. For localized movements like that seen in WNC, this could include more directly challenging the rules of participation, calling for direct votes on activities like energy production, and greater influence on electoral politics. Actions like these could potentially address John Gaventa's (1980) analysis of power in Appalachia, if residents directly challenge conventional ideas of what issues are, themselves, political and up for debate in this region. While global solidarities around the injustices of capitalism may be harder to forge in a place like WNC, situated solidarities could focus on these experiences of a broken, exclusionary, and ineffective public process. In doing so, place-based political movements can help cosmopolitan efforts win concrete battles in particular places. This could also allow diverse environmental movements to retain their own worldviews, ideas of nature, political cultures, and specific strategies, but find solidarity in their confrontation with the barriers to political change that neoliberalism continually throws up.

## **Discussion: Towards a More Inclusive Solidarity**

Though oil and gas prices are currently low, and fracking has slowed down in many parts of the United States, the effects of fracking (from chemical exposures to boom-bust economic cycles) will continue to be felt by local communities for decades. To counter this, or any socially unjust condition, will require significant and mass mobilization of all kinds of people, living across the world, with varying and diverse political ideologies and conceptualizations of community and justice. Drawing on both our analysis, and on inspiration from the ongoing work of various social movements who are engaging in intersectional forms of resistance, we now explore concrete recommendations to both activists and scholars that

emanate from our theoretical and empirical analysis of the potentiality of situated solidarities.

First, there are ways that highly organized and nationally or internationally reaching justice organizations can take time to consider the local and place-based ways in which various communities understand injustice. For example, we can see how church spaces and religious convictions are central in many rural and conservative people's understanding of what issues are important and require attention. When rural, conservative organizing is valued, rather than ignored (or even disdained), we can begin to see how working with religious groups and leaders may garner more resonance in places like Southern Appalachia, as opposed to attempts to provide leadership from outside the community. For example, in Pennsylvania, more than 100 religious leaders, drawing inspiration from Pope Francis, urged the Governor to end fracking because, as their letter stated:

people have a right to clean air, pure water and to the preservation of the natural, scenic, historic and esthetic values of the environment. Pennsylvania's public natural resources are the common property of all the people, including generations to come (PAAF 2015).

We see similar elements of WNC's commons environmentalism reflected here. Working with religion, as a key part of conservative cultural politics, could help cosmopolitical movements win new constituencies. But this requires that cosmopolitics not require cosmopolitical thinking. Instead, it is a challenge for some more cosmopolitically minded activists to overcome their own preconceptions of people who have very different social, cultural, or political orientations.

Similarly, questions of race and racialization are certainly relevant to this discussion of how to build solidarity around mutually experienced oppression: How does the mostly white community of WNC find common ground with resistance movements where people of color predominate, or with those that focus on issues of systematic racism or discrimination? How does their understanding of the environmental injustice propagated against them by state actors compare with the ways that communities of color have experienced sustained forms of environmental injustice at the hands of the state?

Through these questions rooted in an ethic of situated solidarities we find the issue of race as a potential point of convergence between various resistance movements through our idea of mutually experienced oppressions. Appalachian people have been widely noted as being a racialized and stigmatized group of people, themselves (Hartigan 2004). It is not uncommon for people living in this region—both multi-generational and newcomers—to note the ways in which outsiders often stereotype the region in derogatory ways. Some of our research participants have even noted the ways that this outside perception has been central to the history of resource extraction in the region. If local organizers, who have already shown skill in connecting to the cultural politics of Appalachia, explore avenues for making connections to other stigmatized groups, perhaps wider solidarities could be forged. Despite these potential connections, however, there is a significant need for further research on the racial dimensions of anti-fracking

movements in and beyond Southern Appalachia, as this research was not able to address this issue in detail.

As for recommendations to scholars with radical and progressive political commitments, we hope our analysis in Southern Appalachia shows the value of research on solidarities in more diverse communities. Where the activities of Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and other radical justice movements are absolutely critical for scholars to evaluate and engage, so are the less obvious spaces of resistance, such as we have provided here. We must maintain humility, therefore, such that we remember all movements are navigating complex political terrains, where it is the *diversity* of local knowledges, situated strategies, and deeply historical cultural ways of being and doing that we should respect and honor.

There are inherent challenges to this task, of course, as finding common ground among diverse and heterogeneous communities will take intentional and iterative work. For example, nearly all of the participants in this research—individuals who were also the primary organizers of the anti-fracking movement—were female and relative newcomers to the area. It has been widely noted that women are most often on the front lines of grassroots environmental activism (Seager 1996), and many of the newcomers to this region are from more urban areas of Florida and surrounding states. As such, even where new solidarities were forged between anti-fracking leaders and newcomers, the impetus is still generated by those with ties beyond Southern Appalachia, and potentially, pre-existing concerns for environmental issues. However, the connections and relations forged through their efforts have the potential to transform all people involved, including exposing old-timers to new ways of thinking about environmental protection, as well as building new sympathies with the cultural politics of the region among newcomers.

As such, what we have offered here, through both our theoretical discussion and empirical analysis, is an approach to environmental movements that provides for diverse, and even divergent, understandings of place, politics, nature, and culture through situated solidarities. Through this ethic, we suggest that the forms of dismissal, distrust, and disconnection that have kept various movements apart can be lessened, and a more diverse solidarity forged.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> We are not using the word “cosmopolitics” in the way Isabelle Stengers (2010) employs it through her exploration of science. Instead we are working with the term in the Kantian sense as theorists in sociology, political science, international relations, and related disciplines have employed it.

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