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Cover Page Footnote
I am grateful to Joe Gershtenson as well as two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on a previous version of this article. In addition, I am indebted to Sarah Watson, Chad Montrie, and Michael Samers for many thoughtful conversations.

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Maintaining the life of being both an academic and activist can be emotional and immensely difficult. In our efforts to achieve career advancement and to help others we may find ourselves moving between many places and living out the contradictions and tensions that result from such movement. Often forced to produce inaccessible, jargon filled articles, the majority of academics rarely find the opportunity to give back to the communities where they conduct research. How do we as academics then, come to terms with the work that we do? Can we truly be both activists and academics and, if so, in what ways?

This paper is a reflective article, interleaved with autobiographical details in hopes of enhancing my exploration of the academic-activist dichotomy. First, I examine the need for new economic development opportunities in Appalachia and explore my own attempts to document and foster alternative economic practices. Then, I highlight my own struggles as an academic, activist, and native working in Eastern Kentucky and the ways through which I attempt to blur the lines among these roles. Finally, I offer a few words to those who move from place to place in hopes of helping themselves and others. Throughout each section, I emphasize the power of place(s) in shaping my understanding of Appalachia and my duties as an academic/activist.

My place(s)…

I am writing this essay during a very strange time in my life. At present, I am a PhD student who, for the most part, stays hidden away writing in a small apartment in a relatively large city. Looking out my living room window, I can see nothing but a concrete parking lot and a few cars parked beside my own. The scene from my bedroom window isn't much better; there's nothing there but train tracks and an old (and probably unsafe?) electrical grid. After having spent 18 years of my life nestled in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky, such urban landscapes can be a bit depressing for me. Such landscapes, coupled with the daunting pressures of academic life, often result in my lying awake at night and wondering why I'm voluntarily in this place. At the same time, I think about my experiences in past places and I quickly remember why I have chosen to stay and want to be an academic.

In this piece then, I seek to foster a dialogue on the challenges that many face in academia, regardless of professional rank or level of institution. Instead of following a more traditional reflective article format I have chosen to write in an introspective manner, which is admittedly not typical of many publications that one might see in engagement journals such as, for example, the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement.* For the most part I indulge in reminiscences, anxieties, and aspirations, contextualized within/through places. Though I make note of theoretical and methodological practices that I use within my own research and aspire to make some contribution to the discussion of possible

theoretical approaches which might be used to improve the quality of life in economically depressed regions, such references are limited within this specific piece. I realize that for some, such an approach will be frustrating and I will no doubt leave readers wanting/expecting more theoretical discussion. I argue, however, that there is a need for such intimate and personal essays in academia.

In his introduction to the work, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Lopate states that, "The hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy. The writer seems to be speaking directly into your ear, confiding everything from gossip to wisdom. Through sharing thoughts, memories, desires, complaints, and whimsies, the personal essayist sets up a relationship with the reader, a dialogue – a friendship, if you will, based on identification, understanding, testiness, and companionship" (1995, p. xxiii). What better way to foster a dialogue about the difficulties we face in academia, especially when attempting to engage in meaningful and/or socially relevant research beyond the university, than to tell my own story and hope that, in turn, readers will be inspired to share their own tales.

My own story then begins in the predominately rural region of Appalachia. I was born into a working-class family from Eastern Kentucky. My father was a coal miner who spent many hours each day under the ground exposed to substantial amounts of coal dust, which gradually led to the deterioration of his health and a diagnosis of Black Lung disease when I was only 15 years old. With the realization that my father would be unable to endure such difficult labor conditions much longer, my mother enrolled in vocational school to become a licensed practical nurse. I can remember watching her study for hours on end at our kitchen table, reviewing her class notes and course readings. After completing her course work and exams she began working as a nurse, a career she continues to enjoy immensely.

As I reflect upon these memories, feelings of pride well up inside of me. My father was willing to suffer such harsh working conditions and low wages to earn an income for my family and when he was no longer able to do so my mother found a way to sustain our livelihood. Over the years I began to question why my family and many other families in this region continually endure such hardships and yet reap little reward for their efforts. So many miners in Eastern Kentucky suffer in ways that may seem unimaginable to outside observers. For example, in addition to contracting Black Lung disease while working in the mines, my father lost most of the cartilage in his knees which now causes him terrible pain. Furthermore, a small piece of coal remains lodged above his right eye and cannot be surgically removed without risking the loss of his sight.

Instead of giving in to despair and cynicism, I embraced my experience growing up in the region and decided to devote my time to improving the quality of life in Eastern Kentucky. I felt that my first step in helping to foster alternatives to resource extraction was to learn more about the region, which would require me to seek out higher education. During this time, my desire to improve the quality of life in my homeplace grew stronger and after completing my master's degree in 2007 I accepted a position as the arts and culture outreach coordinator for a non-profit development agency located in Eastern Kentucky. At first, I was hopeful to be working in the region. Over time, however, I became frustrated with my own inadequate understanding of Appalachia's place within the global economy– the history of environmental degradation, out-migration, and exploitation in this region– and my confusion regarding what might be done so that families could have 'a good life' while maintaining an environmental ethic. In search of a field of study that would provide me with the theoretical and methodological frameworks through which to better understand the complexities of the region's economy, I turned to economic geography. Since then, my work has been motivated by a desire to expose economic injustice and to seek an alternative path forward for Appalachia.

Can my work be useful to my homeplace?

I carried what I had learned from serving as an arts and culture outreach coordinator with me and went back to graduate school to work on a PhD. Serving in that position provided me with an opportunity to offer some assistance to individuals in the region, but my work was problematic. For example, I had worked closely with state-led and regionally based organizations to offer workshops for artisans and crafters. Such workshops would often encourage self-sufficiency, teaching individuals how to market their own products and create their own websites. In addition, individuals were frequently encouraged to open their own studios and numerous workshops were given on how to apply for micro-financing. I often assisted directly, through teaching or sponsoring such workshops, and yet in the broader community around me I began to notice crafters/craft organizations that were choosing to engage in cooperative production and distribution. In my mind, these individuals were actively choosing another form of economic life, one that encouraged reliance on others and allowed them to reduce a percentage of risk associated with limited time and capital. Although I could recognize these other forms of economic activity in the craft industry, I was at a loss to fully engage with them. Under the constraints of funding sources I continued to perpetuate a discourse of self-sufficiency. Having left this position, however, I now find myself able to explore the complexity of such alternative economic practices.

In my dissertation research, for example, which examines alternative economic practices within the context of Eastern Kentucky's handicraft industry, I explore the existence of alternative capitalist and non-capitalist practices, as well as the contradictory role of the state craft marketing program. In addition, I investigate how the state simultaneously supports cooperative and entrepreneurial craft production by creating a 'geographical lore' pertaining to crafts produced in Kentucky, and yet perpetuates a discourse of self-sufficiency via entrepreneurial workshops that alienate cooperative craft producers. Despite such discourses, craft producers have continued to form new cooperatives. One such example is the Sheltowee Co-op Art Shop, located in Somerset, Kentucky. Income generated through the sale of craft items is given directly to the artist. In this scenario artists become the first distributors of the surplus – or profit – generated (CEC, 2001). These artists allocate a collectively agreed upon percentage of surplus to a community reserve that all artists may access, directly challenging the "you're on your own" premise of neoliberalism. As the CEC (2001) argues, the trauma of capitalist exploitation is that the worker is cut off from the social possibilities that surplus enables and represents, and yet, these artists maintain control of social possibilities by controlling the surplus generated. Thus, this cooperative approach provides an expansion of social possibilities, allowing crafters to revisit their own notions of the good life and define for themselves how surplus should be distributed (Fickey, 2011a, 2011b).

Documenting such economic diversity in the landscape makes me hopeful. Such efforts, however, are not entirely new and I would suggest that this is what makes the documentation of alternative economic practices so powerful – the fact that this form of research has proven itself as a worthy endeavor and has helped many people across the globe make a living. In numerous ways my research contributes to the work of other

scholars who have fostered a diverse economies/alternative economic practices research program that spans many disciplines and seeks to serve marginalized groups throughout the Global North and South (for a detailed discussion, see Fickey, 2011a). Researchers working within this theoretical framework have spent years creating a new language of economic diversity which recognizes both capitalist and non-capitalist practices as 'development worthy' (Carnegie, 2008; Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2006). I argue in all of my research that fostering the recognition and implementation of alternative economic practices (such as cooperatives and barter exchange systems) is crucial for creating new economic development possibilities in Appalachia. In a region plagued with a history of resource extraction, which has resulted in diseases such as Black Lung and a significant increase near mountaintop removal sites in the number of infants born with birth defects, the search for new development strategies is both critical and urgent. It is in this sense, then, that I hope my work is useful to this place. But how then does one make research have meaning in many places, beyond the university campus?

How can I make my work accessible in many places?

Over the past few years, after returning to graduate school, I have struggled to find a way to be an effective activist and academic in Appalachia. In the summer of 2011, I found myself in another new place which forced me to consider very deeply the complexity of being an Appalachian academic and Appalachian activist. I had decided to attend the Mountain Justice Summer Camp being held in Letcher County, Kentucky. Being from and conducting dissertation research in Eastern Kentucky, however, I found attending this direct action camp 'risky'. And yet, this camp was truly inspiring. As I sat through countless performances of labor songs during the first evening, I gave in to what is best referred to as poetic sensibilities. Inevitably I found myself thinking of my father's personal struggle and began to cry silent tears, hiding my face as best I could in hopes that no one would notice. A mentor of mine, Andrew Merrifield, describes poetic sensibilities as one of the most powerful and subversive sensibilities in society. In Merrifield's words, "Power fears poetry… Poetry resides somewhere else, somewhere inaccessible to power; it evokes sentiments, touches being, and speaks in a strange tongue" (2011, p. 163).

Later that evening, as I lay awake in my tent, I wondered if artistic forms of expression - music, art, and poetry - were far more effective tools than any academic text in stimulating poetic sensibilities and creating social change. I decided in that moment to broaden my efforts and try as best I could to make myself available to public projects attempting to generate change, such as training activists to collect oral histories, or doing something as simple as serving as an advisor for individuals applying for state-based grants to conduct community-based improvement projects (especially those related to the arts). Though such activities may never count towards any tenure clock, they do me allow to blur the lines between academic and activist.

In addition to such local and community-based efforts, I have also started publishing small research projects in open source journals. As academics, we often find ourselves forced to produce inaccessible articles filled with jargon and rarely have the opportunity to give back to the communities where we conduct research. To publish in open source journals then is to risk career advancement. I say, it is worth the risk. Our work must be accessible, in both language and format. For example, in collaboration with a scholar in entomology, I recently published a research database pertaining to invasive species in an online open source journal. This database allows craft producers in Central Appalachia to explore what invasive species may threaten the very raw materials they use in production. While arts organizations may financially support handicraft production, this is not enough to guarantee the sustainability of the industry. The raw materials producers use, such as hardwood trees (e.g., oak, walnut, ash), often face threats from insect pests and pathogens that affect resource quality and quantity (Fickey and Rieske-Kinney, 2011). What good would such information serve if it were hidden away in an academic journal? Though the publication may be useful to me as an academic, as an activist I would have failed (in my own opinion) to have served the region and those with whom I work. However, even through an open source journal the dissemination of this information is severally restricted given the limited internet access throughout the region. Yet, this is no reason to avoid open source journals, which are still much more accessible than academic journals. Such strategies then may be problematic, but they are still useful. In my final thoughts below I reflect on how my own past experiences of places have generated a desire to produce accessible research as best as I am able in my current place.

Final thoughts - moving from place to place...

Writing this piece has forced me to think careful about moving from place to place. I have reflected upon why I left one place for another, what I thought I would find in another place, and especially how I feel towards my current place. Our experiences in place(s) can be very meaningful and transformative. In a recent issue of the *Journal of Appalachian Studies* for example, Dwight Billings noted the following regarding the power of place:

> People live in places, leave places, and move (or are forced to move) to new places… People struggle to flee places, stay in places, defend and improve places, and make them more healthy, safe, and just… Thus an important theme running through Appalachian studies is why place matters and how "people" (including corporations and states) DO place, especially in the context of a global world. (2011, p. 196)

For academics and activists alike, moving from place to place creates new experiences and networks, as well as access to new opportunity structures. Though I often spend one day in Eastern Kentucky watching artists work clay into beautiful pottery and the next sitting in at my desk assisting an activist with organizing a protest on campus against the use of coal fired plants, I openly embrace such physical, mental, and emotional movement between places.

Many of the craft producers I work with move between different places as well. Some engage in wage labor in one place of work during the day while trying to set aside time in the evening or on the weekends to produce crafts in home/studio-based places of work. Such craft items are then sold to make ends meet. I document such stories of alternative economic practices, such as small-scale craft or even agricultural practices, in hopes that others will come to believe that it is possible to make a living and have a good life beyond resource extraction. Through my work as an economic geographer and Appalachianist, I seek to actively expose injustice and unfairness, working directly with activists and assisting protest against collectively determined oppression (Barnes, 2002; Blomley, 1994; Merrifield, 1995; Samers, 2006). As noted above, such lofty goals require much movement between many places on my part, but as fellow economic geographer Ian Cook once mused in his own autobiographical work (2001), moving between all of these places is simply part and parcel of the life we all lead as academics.

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