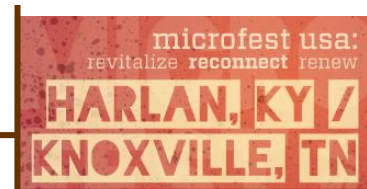


# Creative Engagement and a Moral Economy in Appalachia

by Caron Atlas



Stories build connections between people, provide ways to share knowledge, strengthen civic networks, provide the tools to rebuild communities, and provide the infrastructure, the social capital, which is essential in democratic community-based development.

Helen Matthews Lewis<sup>1</sup>

I moved to Eastern Kentucky from New York City in 1986 to work at [Appalshop](#), the Appalachian cultural center. I intended to visit for a year and stayed a decade. I credit that time in Appalachia for shaping my values, strengthening my analysis, and deepening my grounding in culture and grassroots social justice. Having not been back for several years, I eagerly attended the Network of Ensemble Theaters' MicroFest in Harlan County KY and Knoxville TN to re-immense myself in the region. I brought with me what I had learned from the region as well as questions that remained with me from the time that I lived there.

I learned in Appalachia what it looks like when culture, place, identity, and community come together in the struggle for social justice. I witnessed how mountaintop removal causes great pain, and experienced music as an integral part of organizing. I became aware



Highlander Research and Education Center's Art and Cultural Organizing session at MicroFest: Appalachia. Photo: Caron Atlas

of the long record of misrepresentation of Appalachian people and their history by the media and how this misrepresentation has been used to justify the exploitation of the region's resources. I also experienced community resistance, activist scholarship, and youth leadership that continue to inspire me. I learned how public funding could be re-imagined from paternalistic government poverty programs to creation and citizen action, how to be part of an ensemble, and that some of the best art happens outside of New York.

After I left the mountains, I still wanted to know what happens when the coal runs out, and what the alternatives are to an extractive economy. I questioned how self-determined stories, songs, and images from the mountains might capture the country's imagination to the same degree as television stereotypes and appropriated music. I continued to ask what it would take to shift historical power relationships that have reinforced status quo linkages between politics, economics, culture, and poverty. How can

rural Appalachians join with people of color in urban communities (both within Appalachia and beyond) to further their shared political and economic interests while addressing systemic racial inequities?

My subsequent work with the [Arts & Democracy Project](#) and the [Naturally Occurring Cultural District Working Group](#) in New York City added some questions about art, culture, activism, and policymaking: What is the relationship between citizen action and policy change? Are there times when it is better to work within the system and others when it is better to be independent from it? How do these questions relate to artists participating in policymaking? How do imaginative ideas and creative methodologies extend conventional modes of civic participation and reframe assumptions about leadership and economy? Are there trade offs between making creative leaps and making systemic change? How can the two be integrated so that each stretches the other towards positive change?

## BEING PART OF HISTORY

My move to Appalachia was inspired, in part, by a 1985 meeting at the [Highlander Research and Education Center](#) in New Market, TN. I experienced what so many people gain there—a powerful sense of being part of a shared history and movement for social justice. Highlander brings people together across the South, in the words of Director Pam McMichael, “to learn from each other, build relationships, craft joint strategy, incubate new ideas, and develop tools and relationships necessary for today's challenges for social and economic justice in our region.” The people who have come to Highlander over the years are working on a wide range of issues including labor, immigration, mountain top removal, racism, and LGBT rights.

So it was fitting that the first workshop I took at MicroFest was a cultural organizing workshop by Marquez Rhyne from the Highlander Center. The workshop modeled Highlander’s popular education methodology of “listening deeply” and recognizing the lived experience of the people in the room. Marquez invited the group to collectively build the definition of cultural organizing as well as sharing Highlander’s own definition: “strategic use of arts and culture to move progressive policies and practices with marginalized communities.”

Highlander just celebrated its 80th anniversary and has been connecting culture and social justice since it began. For example, at Highlander, the southern spiritual *We Shall Overcome* became an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement. To learn more about the



**Zilphia Horton at a street gathering in the early 1940s. Horton played a leading role in Highlander’s early cultural work. Photo: Courtesy of Highlander Research and Education Center**

people who were part of Highlander’s history Marquez invited us to view a group of laminated photos and “gravitate” towards one that attracted each of us. We then introduced ourselves to each other as that person, using the script on the back of the photo. Afterwards, he encouraged us to add to the history so it could continue to live.

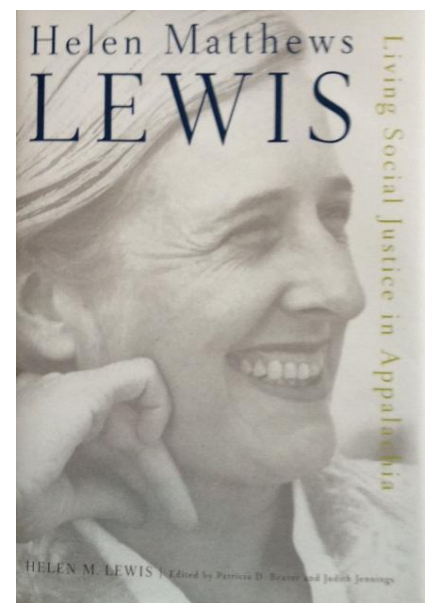
The person I chose was Helen Lewis— one of my heroes—an inspired activist scholar who is considered by many the mother of Appalachian studies. I recently had the pleasure of hosting a reading in Brooklyn for the book release of *Helen Matthews Lewis: Living Social Justice in Appalachia*,<sup>2</sup> a collection of her writings edited by Patricia D. Beaver and Judith Jennings. At the reading a discussion of a moral economy resonated deeply in my Brooklyn community. “The 12 Steps Towards a Moral Economy,” an essay within the book, responds to an “addiction to extraction” that takes many forms in Appalachia, ranging from the dominant coal industry to the brain drain of the best and brightest young people from the region.

### DANCE STEPS FOR A MORAL ECONOMY

The twelve steps are not a straight-forward staircase to community revitalization. It is more like dance steps. Sometimes you go two steps forward and one step back to repeat number one. You tap dance for funders, foxtrot around the local authorities, and slow waltz into some of your projects. The metaphors are endless: you can rock and roll, do the twist, tango, and do a dip. Sometimes you go in circles, sometimes individuals come up with creative improvisation and you keep repeating the steps...There are some basic values and assumptions underlying this model, such as sustainability.

Helen Matthews Lewis

A moral economy requires a cultural shift and the dismantling of a system of arrangements that support extraction. You can’t ignore the connection between power, politics, culture, and economy in Appalachia. As Judi Jennings, executive director of the Kentucky Foundation for Women puts it, “Political power in Appalachia has historically been connected to economic power all the way back to the coal ‘company towns.’ Economic power makes its own politics. School superintendents and coal companies have power because they can give people jobs, or not, but neither are elected power.” These power relationships sustain poverty in the region. Writes Helen Lewis, “We realized that so many of the problems communities were dealing with were related to the economic system, and if we could not reform the economy—develop a moral economy, one which serves all the people—we could not solve health, education, environmental problems.”



To change the status quo requires a perspective on economy that goes beyond producers, consumers, and profit margins to one that includes equity, sustainability, and meaning. It is one that supports place rather than destroys it. British economist Jonathan Dawson suggests looking to other fields to guide this paradigm shift. “Ecology offers the insight that the economy is best understood as a complex adaptive system, more a garden to be lovingly observed and tended than a machine to be regulated by mathematically calculable formulae.”<sup>3</sup>

Inspired by a passage from E.M. Forster’s *Howards End*, Kentucky writer and environmental activist Wendell Berry calls for a land use ethic that is shaped by a sense of “affection” for land and place. “And so,” Berry writes, “I am nominating economy for an equal standing among the arts and humanities. I mean, not economics, but economy, the making of the human household upon the earth: the *arts* of adapting kindly the many human households to the earth’s many ecosystems and human neighborhoods.”<sup>4</sup>

Like participatory democracy, a moral economy requires active participation and creativity. It is about the art of the economy and the power of culture. In the Knoxville MicroFest session about arts and community development, [Alternate ROOTS](#) Executive Director Carlton Turner urged the group to stretch beyond narrow economic outcomes for the arts. “Much of what we’ve heard so far concerns arts as economic development ...but I want to talk about this work as cultural transformation. Not just about creating another job or bringing in a few more dollars, but transforming the culture.” The moral economy and cultural transformation are part of the same whole—imaginative action that disrupts status quo power relationships and creates shared benefits.

We saw ample evidence of Helen Lewis’ 12 steps to rebuilding community at the MicroFest. Here are some examples of five of those steps:

### **Regain community history through oral histories, music, and theater**

In Knoxville, [Carpetbag Theatre](#)’s performance of *Speed Killed My Brother* illuminated the legacy of military service passed down through generations in a region that is facing a growing number of veterans coming home with post-traumatic stress disorder. In Harlan County, *Higher Ground*, an initiative of the Appalachian Program at [Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College](#), brings together a diverse community coalition to talk about challenging issues such as addiction to prescription painkillers and natural and man made disasters through theater and public art. Down the road, the [Eastern Kentucky Social Club](#) (EKSC) keeps the African American identity and history of Lynch, KY alive and provides a place of community. At the MicroFest we were treated to an evening at the Social Club with great food and music, including an a cappella gospel group composed of former coal miners from Lynch. With chapters across the country, EKSC reunions demonstrate how relationships and a sense of home can live on long after people leave a place, complicating simplistic notions of insider and outsider.

## Mobilize, organize, and revitalize

The Social Club was the only place I saw an Obama poster in a county where the President is seen as eliminating coal jobs. The industry itself has been eliminating jobs through mechanization. From 1973 to 2003, the region lost 62 percent of its coal jobs. Even in a significant coal producing place such as Harlan County, coal now makes up only 1,200 jobs in a county of 30,000 people. In Central Appalachia as a whole, coal mining is only 2 percent of direct employment.<sup>5</sup> The coal jobs that exist come at a cost. [\*The True Cost of Coal\*](#), a film by Appalshop's [Appalachian Media Institute](#), shown at the MicroFest, demonstrates how Appalachian young people are recognizing the significant human and environmental costs of an extractive economy that doesn't leave them much of a future. Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC) has a long history of organizing around the costs of an extractive economy—be they the results of strip mining, mountain top removal, gas drilling, or unfair taxation—using stories as a humanizing resource and strategy.



Miner, activist, and singer Rutland Melton (left) with Jerry Stropnick, longtime NET member and theater artist at the Eastern Kentucky Social Club. Photo: Michael Premo

Singer-songwriter and labor activist Hazel Dickens created songs to remind people of their history and move them to question the coal industry. As documented in the Appalshop film, [\*Hazel Dickens: It's Hard to Tell the Singer from the Song\*](#), also shown at MicroFest, Dickens' music and activism are interwoven, her songs helping families gain the strength to speak out following mine disasters and mobilizing workers during a strike. Dickens adapted Florence Reece's famous song from the

1931 coal strike in Harlan County for the 1989-90 United Mine Workers of America strike against the Pittston Coal Company in Virginia. "In Russell County no neutrals can be found, you're either a union man or one of the Pittston clowns. Which side are you on, which side are you on?" In the midst of a coal war or mine disaster, there are times when you have to take a stand.

## Analyze and envision alternatives

Dee Davis, president of the [Center for Rural Strategies](#) and a Hazard KY native, writes, "Today Appalachia is regarded as the poorest part of the country, especially so in those areas that were blessed with rich deposits of coal. So how does the very richest become the very poorest? Not by accident. Not without a plan. Not without a story."<sup>6</sup> That plan was made visible by an historic 1981 land ownership study about who owned Appalachia. It focused in particular on corporate and absentee ownership. Prepared by the Appalachian

Land Ownership Task Force associated with the Appalachian Alliance and based on the work of Appalachian residents, it drew a clear picture of why Appalachia remained in poverty while its valuable resources benefited those outside the region who did not pay their fair share of taxes.<sup>7</sup> It was a good example of how grounded analysis can lead to action. Citizens met several times to respond to the study and created the Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition (KFTC) in 1981 (its name was changed to [Kentuckians for the Commonwealth](#) in later years). KFTC members worked to remove the property tax exemption for unmined minerals and to stop strip mining without landowners' permission under broad form deeds.<sup>8</sup>

KFTC is now collaborating with the [Mountain Association of Community Economic Development](#) (MACED) on the [Appalachian Transition](#) initiative to envision a new, more diversified, and sustainable economy for the region,

recognizing this as “a unique moment that calls for new ideas and broad participation in shaping a different kind of future.” Appalachian Transition’s website identifies a “way forward” including arts and culture. “Appalachia boasts a rich cultural and artistic heritage, with unique talents and crafts found only in the communities of the region. Fostering cultural and artistic expression not only opens up new economic opportunities, but helps communities identify what is important to them and communicate in new ways. A wide range of organizations and efforts conserve the region’s artistic traditions while fostering new forms of artistic expression.” The initiative also plans to integrate culture into an April 2013 gathering.<sup>9</sup>

The Building Home collaboration between [Virginia Tech’s theater department](#) and the [New River Valley Planning District Commission's Livability Initiative](#) is using theater and the “BUILT” participatory board game developed by [Sojourn Theatre](#) to analyze what is needed and to envision alternatives for a regional plan. Theater has encouraged participation by a larger and more diverse group of people than usually engage in planning. The game has offered an experience of decision-making that moves players along a continuum of grappling with and understanding individual, neighborhood, and regional interests.



**More than 1,500 Kentuckians rally at the Kentucky State Capitol for the 8th annual "I Love Mountains Day," February 14, 2013. Photo: Kentuckians for the Commonwealth**

Playing two rounds of the BUILT game at MicroFest left me with an experience of the creative tension between working within the system and using our imagination to stretch or transcend it. We were asked to make land use decisions regarding where



**MicroFest participants playing the BUILT game. Photos: Michael Premo**



various organizations should be sited in the community. Should a particular location be a school, a job incubator, or a community center? But, inspired by the vision behind the former Evarts, KY high school where we were playing the game, I

thought, what if we wanted to combine them into a multi-use community space? We learned that, in the third round of the game, these creative leaps can take place. However, paralleling many community processes, we didn't have time to play this round.

### **Collaborate and build coalitions**

The Appalachian Media Institute, Highlander Center, and the High Rocks leadership program for young women in Hillsboro, WV are supporting the youth-led [STAY Project](#) (Stay Together Appalachian Youth), “a diverse regional network of young people throughout Central Appalachia who are working together to advocate for and actively participate in their home mountain communities.” Not having found a place for themselves in adult-led social justice efforts, they are designing their own projects, building diverse coalitions, and contributing solutions to community needs. Their focus is on the need for communities now and in the future to have the basic human rights that all people deserve, no matter where they live, or their economic status, race, language, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or cultural background. Their three core principles are: 1) Youth ask each other what they want and need in order to stay and work in their home communities. 2) Connect youth with the resources and skills they need to make their visions for Central Appalachia come true. 3) Recognize that there are young leaders in the region who are already creating change.<sup>10</sup> STAY Projects' programs and convenings are grounded in Appalachian culture and incorporate music, dance, and media.

## Develop leadership and organizational capacity

In addition to their leadership in the STAY Project, youth in the Appalachian Media Institute are leaders in their own communities. The Highlander Center offers the [Zilphia Horton Cultural Organizing Institute](#) which furthers cultural organizing skills, and Tribe One, in East Knoxville, “equips and empowers youth, young adults, and their families.” Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College students, often women, have returned to school to gain new skills and become local leaders. On one of my previous return visits to Kentucky, Appalachian Program Director Robert Gipe asked me for advice on the Rockefeller Foundation grant proposal that supported the initial *Higher Ground* project. He brought his entire class to our meeting. I met with a powerful group of women who care deeply about their community and who helped write the proposal to develop the play. Women from the community are still leaders in the project and hold the college accountable for its outcomes.



STAY Project Summer Institute. Photo: [STAY web site](#)

## BEING PART OF A GREATER WHOLE

In an unexpected synchronicity, I learned that Hurricane Sandy was about to hit my city of New York while in Harlan County watching *Higher Ground*, which enacted the community response to floods, real and metaphoric, in that place. *Higher Ground* is not only a play *about* neighbors coming together to support and change their community, it *is* neighbors coming together to support and change their community. As the play’s subtitle says, “It takes many hands to battle a flood.” Robert Gipe describes how “in the process of making plays about drug abuse, mine disasters, outmigration, and land use, we have developed a strong community organization, one that finds hope in addressing problems together in a way that celebrates strength rather than enabling hand-wringing.” The play and its performance in multiple contexts, including before the Appalachian Regional Commission, a federal policy making body for the region, demonstrates how theater can build both community and people’s capacity to engage policy.

As I hurried home to New York the next day to beat the storm, I didn’t realize that the themes I noted from this play and my other experiences at MicroFest—civic capacity and imagination, poverty and infrastructure, dignity and place—would soon resonate powerfully for me as a part of hurricane relief and recovery. This experience of citizen



action would reflect a core principle of both the moral economy and of ensemble theater; that is, being part of a greater whole.

During disasters, be they floods in New York or Appalachia, or collapsed coalmines, people step up to help one another in extraordinary ways. In *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit writes about this civic capacity that gives us a “glimpse of who else we ourselves may be and what else our society could become.” The question is how do we build this capacity and incorporate it further into our everyday lives? Is our policy making built on fear and competition? Or does it support the compassion and solidarity that is being part of a greater whole?

The relief work I did in New York after the storm, organizing [cultural and wellness programs](#) in an evacuation shelter, succeeded because it brought together neighborhood volunteers, social networks and city systems. Will this integrated approach to civic engagement continue? Connectivity and diversity are described as key components of resiliency,<sup>11</sup> but it remains to be seen whether the intersections between community engagement and government efforts will survive after the storm. The same question can be raised in Appalachia where a powerful history of civic action more often has been seen as a threat rather than an asset by local governments that benefit from the status quo.

We can't be limited to either/or paradigms. If our economies and our communities are complex and adaptive ecologies, our job in both urban and rural areas is to work across sectors, strengthen our interdependence, and stretch our vision and practice. MicroFest asks how we know if the work works. I think that it is unrealistic to make claims for arts and culture in isolation. But, if they are part of an interwoven moral economy, creative civic action, and sustained activism, then the work works. With strength and joy we step up, stand together, and create a greater whole.



**Caron Atlas** is director of the Arts & Democracy Project, which connects arts and culture, participatory democracy, and social justice. She also co-directs NOCD-NY, the Naturally Occurring Cultural District Working Group. Caron is active in participatory budgeting in New York, serving on its steering and district committees, and in Hurricane Sandy relief and recovery, creating a Wellness Center at the Park Slope Armory Evacuation Shelter with a team of volunteers. She teaches at Pratt Institute's Programs for Sustainable Planning and Development and New York University's Art and Public Policy program. Previously Caron worked at Appalshop, the Appalachian media center, and was the founding director of the American Festival Project, a national coalition of activist artists. She also worked as a consultant with National Voice, Urban Institute, Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts, Pratt Center for Community Development, Fractured Atlas, Network of Ensemble Theaters, and several foundations. Caron is co-editor of two publications: *Bridge Conversations* and *Critical Perspectives: Writings on Art and Civic Dialogue*, contributor to *Beyond Zuccotti Park*, and a board member of freeDimensional. She was a Warren Weaver Fellow at the Rockefeller Foundation and is an alum of Coro's Leadership NY. Caron received her BA and MA from the University of Chicago.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quotes from Helen Lewis are from *Helen Matthews Lewis: Living Social Justice in Appalachia*, edited by Patricia D. Beaver and Judith Jennings. Lexington: University Press of KY, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> *Helen Matthews Lewis: Living Social Justice in Appalachia*.  
[www.kentuckypress.com/live/title\\_detail.php?titleid=2580](http://www.kentuckypress.com/live/title_detail.php?titleid=2580)

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Dawson. “How Do We Redesign a New Economic Theory Framed by Ecological Systems?” [www.guardian.co.uk/sustainable-business/redesign-new-theory-economics-ecological-systems?intcmp=122](http://www.guardian.co.uk/sustainable-business/redesign-new-theory-economics-ecological-systems?intcmp=122)

<sup>4</sup> Wendell E Berry. Wendell E Berry Lecture. “It all Turns on Affection”  
[www.neh.gov/about/awards/jefferson-lecture/wendell-e-berry-lecture](http://www.neh.gov/about/awards/jefferson-lecture/wendell-e-berry-lecture)

<sup>5</sup> “Coal and the Future.” Appalachian Transition. [www.appalachiantransition.org/why4](http://www.appalachiantransition.org/why4)

<sup>6</sup> Dee Davis. “Check is in the Mail.” [www.appalachiantransition.org/sites/ati/files/essays/Dee Davis Essay FINAL.pdf](http://www.appalachiantransition.org/sites/ati/files/essays/Dee%20Davis%20Essay%20FINAL.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force associated with the Appalachian Alliance. “Land Ownership Patterns and Their Impacts on Appalachian Communities. A Survey of 80 Counties”  
[www.crmw.net/files/1981\\_Land\\_Ownership\\_Study.pdf](http://www.crmw.net/files/1981_Land_Ownership_Study.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [www.kftc.org/about-us/our-history](http://www.kftc.org/about-us/our-history)

<sup>9</sup> Appalachian Transition. [www.appalachiantransition.net/](http://www.appalachiantransition.net/)

<sup>10</sup> [www.thestayproject.org](http://www.thestayproject.org) and presentation by STAY project participant Ada Smith at rural cultural roundtable cosponsored by Arts & Democracy Project in June, 2011.  
[artsanddemocracy.org/uploads/Rural Roundtable Report.pdf](http://artsanddemocracy.org/uploads/Rural_Roundtable_Report.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> As described by Andrew Zolli and Ann Marie Healy in *Resilience, Why Things Bounce Back*