

Secular Communion in the Coalfields

The Populist Aesthetic and Practice of Roadside Theater

Ben Fink



Figure 1. From left: Elise Santora, Caridad de la Luz, and Pat D. Robinson in Betsy! Book by Dudley Cocke and Ron Short with Rosalba Rolón and Beegie Adair; music by Ron Short, Beegie Adair, and Desmar Guevara; directed by Dudley Cocke and Rosalba Rolón; produced by Roadside Theater and Pregones Theater. Puerto Rican Traveling Theater, New York, NY, 2015. (Photo by Marisol Diaz; courtesy of Roadside Theater and Pregones Theater)

Amidst the consumer spectacle of midtown Manhattan, the four-story former firehouse on West 47th Street was easy to miss. It took the three yellow school buses two trips around the block before they found it, pulled to the curb, and let several generations of southern New Jersey families out into the April afternoon sunshine. Everyone felt a little dazed and more than a little thrilled as we made our way into the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater, \$10.00 tickets in hand. New York City was only a two-and-a-half-hour ride from rural Salem County, but the teenagers' bewildered delight while driving through the Lincoln Tunnel told me many were here for the first time.

We had come to see *Betsy!* (2015), produced by Roadside and Pregones Theaters, during the play's three-week off-Broadway run (Roadside 2015a). Like *Hamilton* (2015), which would soon

open two blocks away, *Betsy!* is about Caribbean immigrants struggling to find their place in the story of America. But from there the stories diverge: while the soldier-turned-lawyer Alexander Hamilton manages to “rise up” into his new nation’s elite, the Bronx jazz singer Betsy Garcia Swindel gets dragged down into a past she wished she didn’t have, discovering her proud Puerto Rican heritage is mixed with Scots-Irish immigrants from the Appalachian coalfields (see Álvarez 2015).

Betsy!, like every Roadside play, is populist: a tradition of politics and culture that is neither left nor right, based in building a commonwealth—whole communities making things together and owning what they make. Through telling their own stories rooted in shared traditions and values, neighbors representing a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives find themselves working together to build their communities’ collective wealth and power, often toward profound and even radical change (see Boyte 1981; Goodwyn 1978). This kind of work—and this kind of theatre—has animated generations of American movements toward democracy, from farmers’ cooperatives to labor unions to faith networks. “Populist” was the only political label Martin Luther King, Jr. would accept (Boyte 2017:30).

But from the outside, this kind of populism is hardly noticeable. Much more visible to onlookers is populism’s “shadow”: Donald Trump is but the latest in a long line of authoritarians who have mimicked populist rhetoric to push an agenda of exclusion and fear. With this manipulative, demagogic pseudo-populism so prevalent today, and genuine populism so often repressed, many have come to conflate rule by the people with rule by the mob (Bretherton 2011; Goodwyn 1978).

Hamilton is a product of this misunderstanding. After the one ordinary person onstage (a reactionary farmer) gets “refuted” by Hamilton and his buddies early in act 1, all the remaining candidates for power are of the elite. And up against the British royalists and the southern slaveholders, the northeastern capitalists—cast as hip youth of color—easily become the heroes (see McMaster 2016; Nichols 2016). *Hamilton* the musical keeps its elitism implicit, but Hamilton the man minced no words: “The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right. Give therefore to the first [upper] class a distinct, permanent share in the government. They will check the unsteadiness of the second” (Yates 1787).

This is the same unspoken worldview I grew up with in suburban Connecticut. My mother worked for the state government trying to improve social service administration, and my father worked at a policy nonprofit trying to make reticent (read: racist) local governments build affordable housing. Important work, and highly relevant to ordinary people—but ordinary people were not involved. They were spoken for, not spoken with. It was up to “the best and the brightest” and “the talented tenth” to make the decisions, with “clients” kept at arm’s length.¹ (I once likewise complained to a family friend that liberal professionals like us often have closer relationships with our MSNBC anchors than with our next-door neighbors. She did not see that as a problem.)

1. Recall that “the talented tenth” was a term coined by prominent white northern philanthropists in the late 19th century, including John D. Rockefeller, who were concerned with the so-called “southern Negro problem”; and “the best and the brightest” was coined as an ironic criticism of the professional “whizz kids” of John F. Kennedy’s administration, who led the country into the Vietnam War (see Halberstam [1969] 1972).

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As a teenager I didn't have the words to articulate why all of this bothered me, but I found my frustration reflected in my favorite plays. Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's surreal musical *Assassins* (1990) pits America's meritocratic myth, embodied by a sunny and smarmy Balladeer, against a group of historical outcasts determined to tell a different story. After losing a months-long battle with my high school administration to produce it, I settled for Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937): an opera set during a steel strike, which focuses on the professionals and managers—the preacher, the doctor, the newspaper editor, the academics, and the artists—who sell out the workers to the boss.

My work in the following years continued in a similar vein. I moved to Chicago and cofounded a company whose 11 months of existence yielded seven experimental productions that raged against the status quo,² and in subsequent years I worked on several more in Germany.³ But eventually I recognized all these projects still followed an essentially Hamiltonian script: *we the artists* knew something *they the people* didn't. Our task was to enlighten them, or if that proved impossible, to denounce them.

This same orientation followed me out of the avantgarde and into community-based, social change, and educational theatre, albeit in a subtler form. We who led the work rarely came from the same community as “the community” we attempted to “engage.” We found ourselves upholding a power imbalance between producers and consumers, servers and “underserved,” even as we did our best to “empower” those we saw as “oppressed.” When this inequality got uncomfortable, as it often did, we fell into a predictable, anxiety-filled, theatrical ritual of shame, denial, and guilt. It felt wrong, and a lot of us knew it. But if there was a better way to make change, we didn't know what it looked like or where to find it.

My first step out of this management mentality was more stumble than stride. While working on a Theatre of the Oppressed⁴ project in Minneapolis in my early 20s, I met a Lutheran-turned-Jewish community college professor and a motorcycle-driving lesbian math teacher. Both had been trained by the Gamaliel Foundation, one of several national networks that practice broad-based community organizing roughly in the tradition of Saul Alinsky.⁵ Working with them felt different from my past experiences, in a very good way. Our ensemble included people of many different classes, races, ethnicities, and sexualities, yet I never felt like I had to hate myself for being a straight white man. On the contrary, they agitated me, lovingly yet firmly, to get over myself and build serious relationships with people who weren't like me (see Fink 2018).

Through them I met Harry Boyte—political theorist, Southern Freedom Movement veteran, and self-described populist—who became a mentor. Harry, in turn, introduced me to Dudley Cocke, one of the founders of Roadside Theater, part of the east Kentucky-based grassroots multimedia cultural center Appalshop. Dudley grew up in the Virginia Tidewater's

2. Naked Theater in Chicago produced the original plays *Muffet's Leap* (2005) and *Oregon Trail: The Musical* (2005); adaptations of Sondheim and Laurents's *Anyone Can Whistle* (2005) and Brecht's *Man Is Man* (2005); and three festivals of short plays written and produced in 24 hours (all 2005).

3. I collaborated with hier:Leben of Berlin on adaptations of Sondheim's *Company* (2007) and Styne/Sondheim/Laurents's *Gypsy* (2014), as well as the German-language premieres of Sondheim and Laurents's *Anyone Can Whistle*/*Jeder Mensch kann pfeifen* (2012) and Wright/Frankel/Korie's *Grey Gardens* (2013).

4. *Theatre of the Oppressed* was originally a book by Augusto Boal ([1974] 1985), and it has grown into a worldwide practice.

5. Saul David Alinsky (1909–1972) is considered one of the founders of modern community organizing. He spent his early years working alongside populist Popular Front leaders including A. Philip Randolph and Ella Baker. After successfully organizing the Back of the Yards neighborhood on Chicago's South Side, he founded the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the first national community organizing network (see Gecan 2017). His books *Reveille for Radicals* (1946) and *Rules for Radicals* ([1971] 1989) are considered classics in the field (see Bretherton 2011).



Figure 2. Roadside Theater and Urban Bush Women perform at Open Windows Festival, part of the American Festival Project. Appalshop Theater, Whitesburg, KY, 1988. (Courtesy of Roadside Theater/Appalshop)

Princess Anne County, and, like many of his Cocke ancestors, moved from the coast to the mountains. He and his college friend Don Baker, the son of a coal miner, established Roadside in 1975.

Dudley and his colleagues at Roadside talked a lot like the organizers I'd met, but with a heightened sense of play. They led from questions, from big ideas, from the improvised back-and-forth of people and cultures and words and worldviews. Alinsky, in his young populist days, would have recognized them as “radicals,” a term he reserved for “those few [...] who really liked people, loved people—all people” (Alinsky 1946:17).

The Roadside ensemble didn't fret about how to “work with the community,” because they were part of the community—no more, and no less. Poor, working-class, and middle-class people were the “us,” not the “them”: they were the ensemble, they owned the company, they set the agenda. They traced their lineage not to Hamilton but to the backwoods distillers he tried to tax; not to the avantgardists but to their contemporaries in the national grassroots theatre movements of the 1930s to '50s (Roadside 2015b); not to professional progressives but to the rural Populists of the 1890s and their descendants in the Southern Freedom Movement of the 1930s to '60s. Roadside sought to extend these legacies. Through producing tours and residencies across 45 states over 30 years (see Roadside 2020a), and helping to found the regional network Alternate ROOTS (Regional Organizations of Theaters South) and the national multi-cultural American Festival Project (Roadside 2014b), Roadside worked to build a nation whose communities were united at the grassroots level.

But by the time Dudley and I met in 2014, a lot of this work was gone. Like many populist projects, it had fallen victim to the national “anti-community” policy agenda (Brooks, Cocke, and Dower 2018) pushed by organized right-wing interests who once openly called themselves “neoliberals.” The neoliberals had begun organizing in the 1940s, came to prominence in the 1970s, and assumed the US presidency in 1980. Their aim was, and continues to be, to privatize and otherwise decimate the commonwealth: attacking unions, community centers, public lands, public schools, public health care, public housing, public utilities, and public support for

cultural work (see Fink 2016; MacLean 2017; Mirowski 2019). After a 15-year campaign, they succeeded in slashing the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities in the mid-1990s, which defunded the American Festival Project and Roadside's national touring and community residency programs (Cocke 2016).

Nevertheless, Roadside persisted. It doubled down on local and regional work, maintained a handful of national collaborations with other grassroots ensembles,⁶ and continued to document and theorize its approach in depth (see Cocke 2004, 2015). My first conversations with the Roadside ensemble spanned the lasting policy implications of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, the reasons why the economic theories of neoliberal leader Friedrich Hayek won out over those of his central European contemporary Karl Polanyi, and the implications of Immanuel Kant's observation that "out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made" ([1784] 1963).

These conversations led Dudley to invite me into the *Betsy!* Scholars' Circle: a group of 12 academics (I had recently finished a PhD in cultural studies at the University of Minnesota) who were working on research, writing, and creative projects related to *Betsy!*'s forthcoming off-Broadway premiere (see Haft and López 2015). *Betsy!* was the latest result of Roadside's two-decade collaboration with Pregones Theater, a partner in the American Festival Project. "We have common relationships with oppressing systems in our history, hundreds of years of that. We are both the 'other,'" explained Rosalba Rolón, Pregones's artistic director and *Betsy!*'s codirector (Fink 2015). But as they performed plays with each other's audiences and immersed themselves in each other's schools and churches and social clubs, the basis of their relationship shifted away from externally imposed oppression toward celebrating and growing the beauty and cultural wealth in both of their communities.

By that point I was living in south Jersey, managing a social-service program called CREATING Families that exposed lower-income Salem County families to the arts. Chafing at the program's rigid expectations for the "impact" that these activities would have on families' lives, it was a revelation and a relief to hear Rosalba call unapologetically for "art for art's sake": art that's disconnected not from a community or political context, but from funder-driven expectations to produce immediate measurable "outcomes."

I got both excited and nervous when Dudley suggested I bring the families to see the new play. *Betsy!* promised to be worlds apart from the smorgasbord of small-scale workshops and local performances my program's funders envisioned as "free family fun." Roadside and Pregones were doing something different: not administering a service to a community external to themselves, but reflecting their own communities' complicated stories and traditions back to their neighbors. The play's 16 original songs were written by ensemble members who had spent a lifetime imitating and emulating Scots-Irish ballads and fiddle tunes, Latin jazz, and rhythmic spoken word; together, they now innovated a hybrid form that simultaneously honored their heritage and made it new. The whole play was grounded in call and response—not only onstage among the players, but also between performers and audience—as the two ensembles performed the coming-together of their communities that Roadside sometimes calls "secular communion" (Brooks, Cocke, and Dower 2018).

I was struck by the power of this aesthetic. But as I told the Scholars' Circle on a group call, I had no idea how to explain it to the people I was working with. I would sell the trip simply by

6. Roadside's local and regional work includes a long-term project to preserve and perpetuate area Cherokee traditions, in collaboration with the Daniel Boone Wilderness Trail Association and Natural Tunnel State Park. Roadside's ongoing national collaborators include Pregones Theater/PRTT, Junebug Productions, the Ashé Cultural Arts Center, the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute, Urban Bush Women, and New Mexico's Idiwanan An Chawe, a Zuni-language theatre company.

saying we were going to New York to see an off-Broadway show. “And then they’ll come to *this* off-Broadway show,” Dudley interrupted, “and see a part of themselves on the stage.”⁷

As the families filed into the theatre—parents and grandparents and brothers and sisters and cousins of all ages; black, white, and Asian; poor, working-, and middle-class folks—Dudley and Rosalba pulled me aside in the lobby. Eyeing a few small children taking their seats, they asked me: was I sure this was going to be all right?

Shortly after the lights dimmed (not all the way) and *Betsy!* began, I started to understand their concern. As the title character dug deeper into her family history, what began as a fun and funny musical veered into a story of..

Barmaids, Hunters, Bastards,
Bastardy Bastards, Bastardy Bastard Bonds...
Brothels, Whores [...]
Women forced to dance in the Tavern Trade a.k.a. the Pole! [...]
War, a Cumberland land, from Ireland to Puerto Rico,
all were mountain slaves, slaves,
it’s all about slavery.⁸

From a nonprofit management perspective, which holds that the staff (me) is expected to provide a safe and reliable product to a group of recipients (the families), *Betsy!* was a minefield. Never more so than in the scene where Betsy witnesses the ghost of her Scots-Irish grandfather addressing her mother, who had left the South for the South Bronx:

MAN (As J.C.): How did you possibly think that we could be happy for you? First you take up with a damn nigger-spic and now you tell us you are going to have his baby. How in God’s name are we supposed to be “happy for you?” If I could get my hands on that son-of-a-bitch, I’d choke him ’till he turned white, then maybe you wouldn’t care so much for him since you seem determined to do exactly the opposite of what we want you to do. Think about that poor little bastard child that you are fixing to bring into this world. What kind of life could a half colored child expect? Neither color is going to accept it, and what if it’s a girl, what kind of hope can she ever have of getting married except to a colored man.

Think about what you are creating here, even if you won’t think about yourself. If you come on home, come on home now, we will help you through this and help you get a good job away from that jazz nonsense and that God-forsaken city.

But by the end, despite the pain, Betsy recognizes she was “never quite whole” without this part of her history. She picks up the pack of family documents she’d been trying to get rid of for the whole play, sings and raps a final upbeat number, and invites everyone to get up out of their seats and join in the bilingual refrain: “¿Y tu abuela, donde está?” “And your grandma, where is she?” As in: everyone’s past is complicated—do we try to deny it, or do we take it on?

To my relief, the families took it on. In the discussion that followed, they opened up with stories of their own complicated family histories. One of the fathers, a burly Italian American who rarely participated in events back home, told a long and difficult family history. Like many others, he spoke from a hunger I had not seen in him before. They seemed to recognize the chance they were being offered—to enter into secular communion, to bring their whole selves

7. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations come from my personal communications with the speaker during the years 2014 to 2019.

8. All quotations from *Betsy!* are from the unpublished 2015 script provided to me by Roadside Theater.

and stories and become cocreators of the story Roadside and Pregones were telling—and they embraced it.

I continued to correspond with Roadside in the months that followed, and that August they invited me to apply for a job at Appalshop. Three months later, in November 2015, I packed my Honda Fit and made the day-long drive to Letcher County, Kentucky. But I haven't left Salem County behind. I still visit, I'm in touch with some of the families and my old colleagues, and we do small projects together from time to time. And as the big project I've helped start at Roadside continues to grow, I look forward to the day we can all work together again.

Everyone Is Welcome, Everyone Is Challenged

ELIZABETH: At one time we thought coal was everything around here. My dad went to college but didn't finish. He came back home to marry my mom and work in the coal mines—because he could make more money in coal than being a schoolteacher.

JASON: For a while, my dad and his friends thought coal would go on forever, but today there are less than 100 coal jobs in all of Letcher County. [...]

ANDREW: I don't know why people are so surprised that we've lost coal jobs. You don't just wait for the next crop of coal to grow up. It isn't a renewable resource.

HARLAN: Now wait a minute here young feller...coal built this country...

— *The Future of Letcher County* (Roadside 2017–)

COME AND TAKE IT—those words greeted Nell Fields and me on a raw afternoon the following February, as we rounded a bend in Big Cowan Creek in Letcher County (population 22,000), 10 minutes outside the county seat of Whitesburg (population 1,900). They were printed at the bottom of the Confederate flag hanging on a house by the side of the road, just below the image of an assault rifle.

I was pretty sure Nell didn't like this display any more than I did, but neither of us said anything. Nell, born and raised in Letcher County, knew better than to take the bait. As for me, if I opened my mouth and let out my outrage I would be reduced to another know-it-all from far away who had come to take the remaining dignity and pride from a long-exploited and humiliated community. This was the role I felt the flag begging me to take—my stock part in the ongoing culture war that had long kept people here divided and conquerable. Slowly, I was learning to resist (see Fink 2017a).

Appalshop's director Alex Gibson, one of relatively few black people around, gets a lot of questions about issues like these. He was once recounting Appalshop's history to a group of visiting academics: it started in 1969 as the Appalachian Film Workshop and expanded into theatre (Roadside), radio (WMMT Mountain Community Radio), music (June Appal Recordings), archiving (the Appalshop Archive), news (the Community Media Initiative), youth leadership development (the Appalachian Media Institute), and other divisions as community needs and opportunities arose. In as many ways as possible, he concluded, Appalshop seeks to amplify the voices of ordinary people in our communities. We do not give people a voice; people are already speaking; we just work to make everyone heard.

“But,” interrupted a graduate student, “what if those people are racist?”

Alex paused a moment, then responded: “Most people don't organize their lives around being racist.”

The student's question reflected a common assumption: that there are good people and bad people, and that working toward justice means taking the side (and telling the stories) of the good people and not the bad. Appalshop takes a different approach. Its stories focus on what we all organize our lives around: the places we live, the people we love, the work we do, the values

we cherish.⁹ These remain constant across cultures and ideologies, even as their expressions vary widely. That's how Puerto Ricans from the Bronx, white people from east Kentucky, and ethnically diverse families from south Jersey can all find themselves in a story like *Betsy!*, in spite of—or because of—its cultural specificity.¹⁰

None of this means the ugly parts get ignored. *Betsy!* may not demonize Betsy's grandfather, but it doesn't excuse him either. We see him in his full hate, and we also see where that hate comes from: he was terrified of losing someone he loved, and he felt powerless to protect her.

These feelings of fear and powerlessness, combined with a fierce and sometimes volatile pride, have been part of life in the coalfields since the speculators arrived with the railroads at the turn of the 20th century. The region's new ruling class, who had come to take the mountains' natural wealth by any means necessary, justified their abuses by casting themselves as saviors bringing civilization to a backward people.

Red Fox/Second Hangin' (1976), one of Roadside's first major productions, offered a different perspective. During 90 minutes of tightly choreographed physical and verbal storytelling, three young male actors told a tangled tale of murder, family feuds, and residents losing their land and liberty as



Figure 3. From left: Ron Short and Angelyn DeBord in *Pretty Polly*. Written by Don Baker and Ron Short, directed by Dudley Cocke, produced by Roadside Theater, Wooten Presbyterian Church, Wooten, KY, 1979. (Courtesy of Roadside Theater/Appalshop)



Figure 4. From Left: Kim Neal Mays, Ron Short, and Tommy Bledsoe in *Leaving Egypt*. Written by Ron Short, directed by Dudley Cocke, produced by Roadside Theater, Appalshop Theater, Whitesburg, KY, 1987. (Photo by Tim Cox; courtesy of Roadside Theater/Appalshop)

9. These are what some psychoanalysts call “self-objects”: the people and things in relation to which we form our social selves, which ultimately become part of those selves, and which show us the world and how we fit into it—or don't (see Brown and Herndl 1996; Kohut and Wolf 1978).

10. A visiting friend once suggested an interesting perspective on Appalshop's work. If we understand whiteness as the result of European Americans being severed from their folk cultural traditions, where inclusive communities create together, and leaving them with no culture other than the dominate-and-consume culture of their/

industry imposed its version of law and order. “Stories of those watershed events were still fresh in many people’s memories here in the mountains,” Dudley told me, “and audience members thought nothing of interrupting the actors to tell something they knew. In this digressive manner, the script continued to develop.”

Nell Fields, riding with me that February afternoon, had seen *Red Fox* many times—along with the subsequent *Pretty Polly* (1980), *South of the Mountain* (1982), and *Leaving Egypt* (1987). These plays, created by neighbors, offered Nell and her family a people’s history they recognized as their own. As president of the Cowan Community Center, a 50-year-old community institution that we passed as we neared the head of Big Cowan Creek, she had worked with Roadside for decades. So when the company set out in 2015 to make a new play, she was among the first to get involved (see Roadside 2016).

The Future of Letcher County (2017–) would follow in the tradition of Roadside productions created during long-term “community cultural development” residencies in places like Dayton, Ohio (*The Enormous Radio*, 1993–1996); Choteau, Montana (*The Coming Home*, *The Reunion*, 1992–1996); and the Bay Area in California (*Stranger at the Table*, 2001–2002) (see Cocke 2015). These community-made plays often feel looser and less polished than plays performed by the ensemble, but their aim is the same: to express what ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax, a friend of Dudley’s and an admirer of Roadside, called the “inherent genius and viability of every cultural community” (in Hardin 2006).

Creating *The Future of Letcher County* would bring community cultural development back home, just as the bottom was dropping out of the coal industry, sending the county’s economy into freefall. Could a play do something to address this economic adversity, as previous Roadside plays had addressed communities’ cultural and political challenges? Roadside had

spent the past few years exploring this question with a new partner: the Jamaican economist Gladstone “Fluney” Hutchinson, founder of the Economic Empowerment and Global Learning Project at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania.

Like Roadside, and unlike many of his fellow economists, Fluney recognized that theatre had a role to play in economic development beyond employing artists, selling tickets, and contributing to the so-called creative economy. Cultural work, and playmaking in particular, was valuable

our oppressors, then by reconnecting people with those traditions and making the space to practice them alongside people of other cultures, Appalshop’s work plays a profound (if subtle) role in undoing whiteness (see Thandeka 1999).



Figure 5. From Left: Elgin Hechilay, Charlene Hechilay, Tommy Bledsoe, Arden Kucate, Kim Neal Mays, and Ron Short in *Corn Mountain/Pine Mountain: Following the Seasons*. Written by Arden Kucate, Edward Wemytewa, Donna Porterfield, and Ron Short; directed by Dudley Cocke; produced by Idiwanan An Chawe and Roadside Theater, Appalshop Theater, Whitesburg, KY, 1998. (Photo by Tim Cox; courtesy of Roadside Theater/Appalshop)

not just as a product but also as a process: how people make meaning together, through their shared intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and material traditions and features. Through creating plays together, the people in a community could tell new stories about themselves, discover “latent assets” in their traditions, and turn those assets into new “community wealth” (see Fink and Pickering 2016; Fink 2017b; Hutchinson and Schumacher 2017).

In planning this work, which I had been hired to help lead, I saw a piece was missing. If the people of Letcher County started telling their own stories and creating their own value, it would be all too easy for that value—once again—to get extracted. To keep it, they would also need to build their own *power*: defined by allies in the tradition of broad-based community organizing (which I had learned back in Minnesota) as *organized people* plus *organized money* plus *organized ideas* (see GPP 2013).

This, then, became the core of the new project we called *Performing Our Future: the flow and synergy that happens when a community tells its own stories (grassroots cultural work), builds its own power (broad-based community organizing), and creates its own value (community wealth creation)*. Each of these three practices strengthens the others. Cultural work grounds wealth creation and organizing in communities’ traditions, values, stories, and creativity. Wealth creation orients cultural work and organizing toward discovering what we can make together and claiming what it’s worth. And organizing focuses cultural work and wealth creation on building collective power and keeping the agenda in the community’s hands (*Performing Our Future* 2018a).

Broad-based community organizing may have been new to Roadside’s explicit practice, but it had long been in their blood. They had worked with affiliates of the Alinsky-founded Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) during a multiyear project in California (*Connecting Californians and Tamejavi*, 1999–2002; see Cocke et al. 2015).¹¹ And they spent three decades making and touring plays (most prominently *Junebug/Jack*, 1991) with John O’Neal and Junebug Productions, which grew out of the Free Southern Theater, part of the theatre wing of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

Like broad-based organizing campaigns, Roadside productions are ensemble works, not star vehicles. They focus not on the genius of individual artists, entrepreneurs, or institutions, but on the latent creativity of an entire community. And like organizers, they catalyze this creativity by building close relationships with a community’s leaders: usually not the people with official

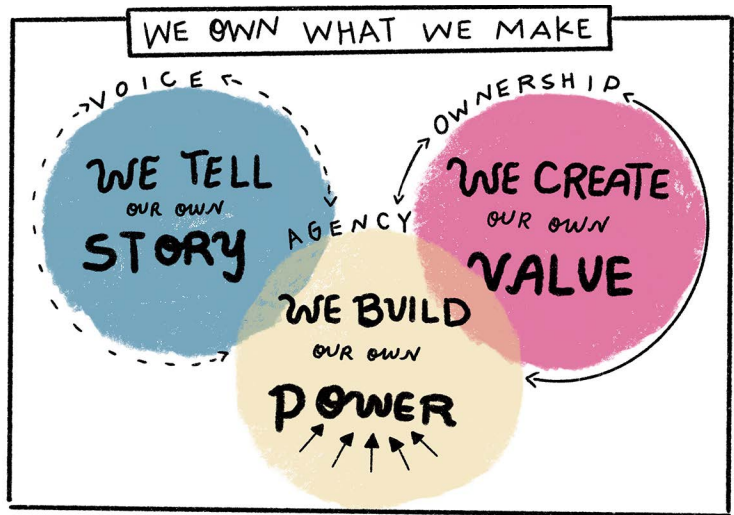


Figure 6. Diagram showing Roadside Theater’s synergistic practice of grassroots cultural work, broad-based community organizing, and community wealth creation. (Artwork by Kate Fowler, Studio Two Three, 2020)

11. The word “Tamejavi” means “cultural market,” and is formed from the languages of three Central Valley groups: Ta—from *Taj laj tsav puam* (Hmong); me—from *mercado* (Spanish); and javi—from *nunjavi* (Mixtec) (see Roadside 2014a).

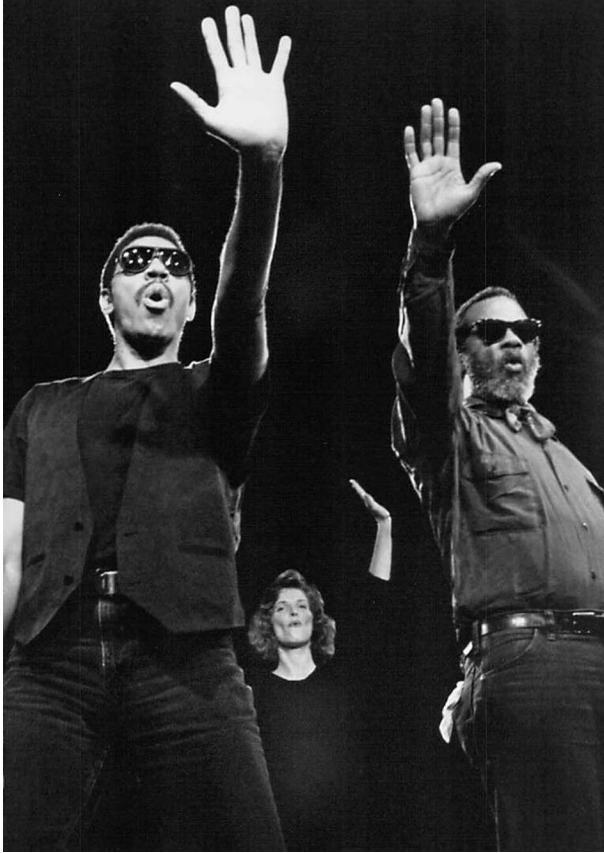


Figure 7. From left: Kenneth Rafael, Kim Neal Mays, and John O'Neal in *Junebug/Jack*. Written by John O'Neal, Ron Short, and Donna Porterfield; directed by Dudley Cocke and Steve Kent; produced by Roadside Theater and Junebug Productions. Appalshop Theater, Whitesburg, KY, 1998. (Photo by Jeff Whetstone; courtesy of Roadside Theater/Appalshop)

car that afternoon. His Facebook profile listed his occupation as “Boss” at “Strip mine.” Unlike Nell, who rarely took credit for her decades of effort creating opportunities for local youth, Bill dominated every room he was in, sometimes shooting his mouth off until he got thrown out of county government meetings. Nell got her politics from Robert Kennedy, who had visited Letcher County when she was a teenager.¹² Bill, on the other hand, grinned and agreed when I suggested he was the embodiment of every urban liberal’s dread: a staunch Old Regular Baptist, a fixture in the local Republican Party, and an outspoken supporter of Donald Trump.

Not surprisingly, while Nell had been an ally of Appalshop from the start, Bill had never set foot in the place. “There were kinda two cultures in Letcher County,” he later told me, “coal culture and Appalshop culture.”

titles, but ordinary residents who have a following among their neighbors, and who are working to develop those neighbors into leaders themselves.

Nell is one such leader. Our first encounter, to discuss her participation in the *Future of Letcher County*, followed the principles of a *one-to-one relational meeting*. “One-to-ones” are a basic community organizing practice. They are face-to-face meetings where the only agenda is to understand what makes a leader tick and what drives that person to want to make change—what’s known in the organizing trade as *self-interest* (see Chambers 2004:44–54; Fink 2017c). I asked Nell some probing questions along these lines, and I shared my own stories where I saw overlap in our interests and values. Eventually, after a strained silence, she told me something she’d never before told anyone at Roadside: “If you really want to reach everyone in this county, you’ve got to go talk with my brother.”

Robert William “Bill” Meade, one of Nell’s 17 siblings, was chief of the volunteer fire department in remote Kings Creek—where she and I were headed in the

12. Three decades after Kennedy’s visit, Nell would serve as project coordinator of the Appalshop/John Malpede collaboration *RFK in EKY* (2004).

I'd already lived there long enough to know things weren't that simple. There was a long history of coal mine workers siding against their bosses, and those workers themselves were variously divided based on socio-economic status, race and ethnicity, religion, political party, and even location within the county. (A resident of the town of Blackey—population 120—once called me an outsider not because I was from Connecticut but because I was from Whitesburg.) But “us-versus-them” was itself a longstanding local tradition, immortalized by Florence Reece during a 1931 strike just over Pine Mountain:

They say in Harlan County
There are no neutrals there.
You'll either be a union man
Or a thug for J.H. Blair.
Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?
(see Morris 2019)

The question remained the same 85 years later, but the sides had shifted decisively. Now you could either be “pro-coal,” which meant standing with all the bosses and owners, exploiters of workers and polluters of land and water and air; or “anti-coal,” which meant standing against everyone's loved ones who had given their lives to keep their families and communities from going hungry. If the choice of sides in 1931 was pro-boss or pro-worker, by 2016 it had become pro-boss or *anti*-worker.

This shift was no accident. It was bought and paid for by industry and its political allies, including US Senator Mitch McConnell. As Barack Obama entered office in 2009, the local airwaves were ringing with warnings of a “War on Coal.” By the time I arrived late in 2015, Letcher County was saturated with “Friends of Coal” T-shirts, banners, bumper stickers, rallies, community events, educational curricula, media campaigns,



Figure 8. From left: Judith Rivera, Jorge Merced, Kim Neal Mays, Ron Short, John O'Neal (shadow figure), and Adella Gautier in *Promise of a Love Song*. Written by John O'Neal, Rosalba Rolón, and Ron Short; directed by Steve Kent and Rosalba Rolón; produced by Roadside Theater, Junebug Productions, and Pregones Theater, Aronoff Center for the Arts, Cincinnati, OH, 2001. (Courtesy of Roadside Theater/Appalshop)



Figure 9. Bill Meade, chief of Letcher County's Kings Creek Volunteer Fire Department, takes part in Roadside Theater/Appalshop's *Performing Our Future Institute*. Kings Creek, KY, 2016. (Photo by Clay Wegrzynowicz)

and vanity plates, available free of charge at the county courthouse (see Srinivasan 2017). It was a textbook culture war: declared by an elite to diminish the collective power of ordinary people by convincing some that others are a threat to something they organized their lives around—be it coal, kids, or Christmas (see Fink 2014).¹³

Appalshop’s long history of asking tough questions, including of coal companies, and amplifying unheard voices, including those locked up in nearby prisons (*Thousand Kites*, 2007), made it an easy target in these culture wars. Beloved Appalshop radio DJ Jim Webb summed up what Bill Meade and many other locals believed: “‘Appal-heads’ are anti-coal, anti-prisons, anti-Appalachian people.”

Why, then, did Bill agree to meet with me at all? Besides his relationship with his sister, it likely had to do with Roadside’s distinct reputation. Appalshop’s work includes several divergent approaches to public life—an *alternative* approach, promoting youth and queer folks and others who often get excluded; an *activist* approach, speaking truth to power and calling out oppressors; and Roadside’s *populist* approach, where everyone in the community is welcome and every-

one is challenged. Like most everyone who lived in Letcher County before the national arts and humanities endowments got slashed, Bill and Nell knew Roadside as the people who bounded into their kids’ school or pitched a revival-style tent up their hollow; whipped out a banjo, fiddle, and Jew’s harp; performed a bunch of reimagined mountain “Jack tales,” starring the trickster of beanstalk fame; and concluded with a sing-and dance-along (*Mountain Tales and Music*, 1975–).

There wasn’t any obvious activism in these performances, though Jack and his female counterpart Mutsmeg were always having trouble with the King. But making home-grown, professional-quality the-

atre a part of the everyday lives of tens of thousands of poor and working- and middle-class people in east Kentucky, southwest Virginia, southern West Virginia, western North Carolina, and upper east Tennessee—in a nonprofit theatre field where just two percent of foundation funding reaches rural and low-income communities (Helicon 2017)—was its own kind of radical gesture.

Nell later claimed she had ulcers all the way over Cowan Mountain and down Kings Creek, as we neared her brother’s firehouse. We opened the door to a cavernous gym joined onto the fire engine garage, and I heard a booming welcome from a 250-pound, five-foot-four septuagenarian dressed in Dickies khaki work clothes. For the next two hours Bill held the floor with tale after tale of home, work, and family, rants about the corruption of county govern-



Figure 10. Three generations of coalfield residents attend a Roadside Theater tent performance in Jenkins, KY, 1981. (Photo by Dan Carrico; courtesy of Roadside Theater/Appalshop)

13. A similar strategy had also been used since 2005 to convince many locals that opposing a planned federal prison in Letcher County meant opposing poor families’ only chance for economic survival (see Lustbader and Gullapalli 2019).

ment, and stories of local volunteer fire departments struggling to survive the collapse of coal. He talked less about fighting fires than about responding to opioid overdoses—often several in a weekend—and hosting dinners and other events where neighbors could gather and enjoy themselves.

I mostly listened. But early on, while responding to something Bill said, I found an opportune moment to perform my usual self-introduction. Leaning into the interfering-outsider stereotype, I smiled, raised my eyebrow slightly, and identified myself as a “communist Jew from the Northeast.” After a slight pause, Bill laughed. Then we laughed together. Then he responded with a slightly offensive Jewish joke—and we laughed again. (At some point I noticed Nell wasn’t laughing. As soon as we got back in the car she apologized for her brother’s behavior. I thanked her and assured her I was not offended. This was all part of forming a relationship based in sharing stories and values, strong enough to withstand the pressures I knew would come.)

Bill and I soon found we both liked long-distance road travel (he used to be a trucker) and old church hymns (I was working on starting a regular shape note sing in Letcher County).¹⁴ We both cared about defending our communities from exploitation, whether by big government (his main concern) or big business (mine). And I was pleasantly surprised to learn his immediate self-interest was uncontroversial: he wanted the fire department to host bluegrass concerts again. They had stopped in the 1980s, when a long-gone county sheriff got too greedy with his bribe requests, and for the next 30 years the community assumed it would be impossible to revive them. I recognized this as what our economist colleague Fluney Hutchinson calls “bounded imagination” or “resigned preferences,” a big part of how exploited communities stay exploited (see Fink 2017b). “How much does it cost to put on a bluegrass concert?” I asked him. Three hundred dollars, he said.

Three weeks later, on a Saturday night in the dead of winter, over a hundred residents showed up at the firehouse. The show included two bands, a square dance, a hot dog dinner, and a neighborhood art exhibit that spanned a full wall of the gym. It was the first time some of these local artists ever presented their work to their neighbors. The 2016 Big Kings Creek Meat & Greet would be the first of many similar events, and the start of a lasting relationship with Appalshop.

But not everyone was pleased with our new partnership. Some of my colleagues, having spent decades fighting Bill’s strip-mining and logging and right-wing politicking, still saw him as the enemy. But that started to change as they got to know him and realized he didn’t expect them to agree with him, only to acknowledge where he was coming from. This has always been Roadside’s approach: to collaborate with “problematic” people instead of dismissing them, to include all perspectives instead of taking the “right” side, and to frame issues in locals’ own stories instead of imposing a nationalized media script (see Porterfield 2018). Just as Alinsky counseled “no permanent enemies” (Gecan 2017), so does Roadside vet potential partners with just one question: Where do you stand on organized exploitation?¹⁵

A basic tenet of populism is that every community’s culture contains the potential for democracy and justice, and the goal is to draw it out.¹⁶ Roadside’s primary tool for this purpose is the

14. The annual East Kentucky All-Day Singing, first held in 2017, has drawn shape note singers from at least 13 US states and 2 other countries to Letcher County.

15. A refusal of permanent enemies and an embrace of everyone who stands against organized exploitation are distinctive and central attributes of populist practice. Mark Warren, writing about broad-based community organizing, explains: “As opposed to mobilizing around a set of predetermined issues,” communities find “a common ground for action. Conversation and relationship building lead to the identification of issues around which participants are prepared to act together” (2001:31).

16. Harry Boyte, who first introduced me to Roadside, often reminds audiences that Martin Luther King, Jr. (whom he knew personally) never denounced Southern culture as inherently racist, but instead insisted that racism was a

story circle, developed alongside Junebug Productions. Like a lot of Appalshop's best work, the story circle is something new and inventive that furthers something old and common-sensical: just a group of people sitting in a circle listening to each other's stories about an agreed-upon topic—seemingly casual yet meticulously curated. The strictness of the protocol put me off at first: one teller at a time, in one direction around the circle, just a beginning/middle/end with no



Figure 11. Roadside's Ben Fink conducts a story circle with east Kentucky community leaders at the Letcher County Culture Hub's first planning retreat. Pine Mountain Settlement School, Bledsoe, KY, 2017. (Photo by Malcolm J. Wilson)

analysis or explanation, no thinking about your story in advance, no interrupting, no cross-talk, nothing on your lap. But I soon recognized the reason for all the rules: here was nothing less than an attempt to create a space without inequality, where everyone speaks, everyone listens, and everyone's story receives equal attention (see Roadside 2014c).

I wasn't sure Bill could stay quiet long enough to participate in a story circle, but again he surprised me. Knowing he would get to talk, and everyone would hear him out, he proved more than willing to listen in return. He participated in several story circles and follow-up meetings, as Roadside collected material for the *Future of Letcher County* play. And one year and

three months after we first met, in June 2017, Bill took the stage at Appalshop to create the role of Harlan. It was the first time he had ever been in a play, or inside the Appalshop theatre.

Harlan, a composite of lots of Letcher County people and their stories, is an old right-winger whose offensive (to many) positions on sexuality, religion, environmentalism, and mass incarceration get a full airing in the play. They also get just as extensively challenged, by other characters who speak in the equally real words of county residents: the feminist academic Elizabeth; the flamboyantly gay teenager Andrew; the young Christian idealist Jason; and Harlan's liberal sister Jane, played (we couldn't resist) by Bill's liberal sister Nell.

The play's first act is a 45-minute argument among the five characters about the county's economic, cultural, and political future, peppered with stories, songs, jokes, and impromptu audience interventions. It concludes with each cast member in turn asking the audience "What do you think?"—à la, "¿Y tu abuela, donde está?"—and then inviting them to become players in act 2, contributing their own stories in story circles that further the discussion of their community's future.

In performance after performance, in venues across the county and as far away as West Baltimore, *The Future of Letcher County* demonstrates how harshly neighbors can disagree and still act together as neighbors. Many of the play's most touching moments occur when charac-

"betrayal of the southern heritage" (in Evans and Boyte [1986] 1992:158). Or in Dudley's words: "Our nutrient was our Southern communities," though "none was free from poisons" (Cocke 2018). I learned this lesson again during the 2018 Kentucky teachers' strike, when a new sign appeared in my neighbor's yard next to the COME AND TAKE IT flag. It bore the logo of the teachers' union and another large-lettered warning: REMEMBER IN NOVEMBER.

ters discover unexpected common ground, as in the moment late in act 1 when Harlan reveals his pain at the county's schools being taken out of the hands of their communities:

HARLAN: The point I'm tryin' to make is that them old schools *belonged* to us. At least we thought they did until they took 'em away from us.

ELIZABETH: Economists and developers have a term for that kind of thing. They call it creative destruction—

HARLAN: —Say what?

ELIZABETH: —Creative destruction. It's an economic concept based on the theory that capitalism destroys and reconfigures previous economic orders, ceaselessly devaluing existing wealth in order to clear the ground for the creation of new wealth.

HARLAN: Well I don't know nothin' about all that, but like I said before, I do know we lost a lot when we lost our schools.

And everyone, onstage and in the audience, nods in silent agreement.

Community Centers of Power

*I know dark clouds will gather o'er me
I know my way is rough and steep
Yet beauteous fields lie just before me
Where God's redeemed, their vigils keep
I'm goin' there to see my mother
She said she'd meet me when I come
I'm only goin' over Jordan
I'm only goin' over home.*

—*Traditional*

About halfway through that first Kings Creek bluegrass concert in February 2016, just after Bill badgered me to come onstage and sing “Poor Wayfaring Stranger,” I was approached by a short and powerfully built woman in her late 50s. I had heard of Gwen Johnson, and it turned out she'd heard about me, too. As she later told a group of visiting national funders: a firefighter friend had told her “there was this guy [...] and he had some money.”

We scheduled a one-to-one for a few days later. I learned Gwen had lived in the coal camp of Hemphill most of her life, currently worked a desk job in early childhood education, first learned to read as an adult, and went to college when her daughter did. Gwen's politics hearkened back to an earlier time: she supported her coal miner relatives and opposed their “exploiters” with equal vehemence. A musician, volunteer Appalshop radio DJ (the Hemp Hillbilly), and self-described “tree-hugger,” Gwen still proudly sang “Which Side Are You On?”; next to her desk hung photos of her family alongside John L. Lewis and Mother Jones.¹⁷

This same sense of solidarity, she told me a year later, made her break her longtime vow to vote for the first woman who ran for president—and in favor of someone she denigrated as “a groper of women.” It happened, she explained, when Hillary Clinton came to West Virginia

17. John L. Lewis served from 1920–1960 as president of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and became the founding president of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). He played a large part in coal miners getting fair wages and benefits (see Alinsky [1949] 2017). Mother Jones was an Irish immigrant who traveled the country campaigning for workers' rights during the final decades of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century. She organized with the UMWA, the populist Knights of Labor, and the anarchist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) (see Gorn 2001).

in 2016 and promised “to put a lot of coal miners and coal companies out of business” (in Bruggers 2016).¹⁸ To Gwen and many of her neighbors, Clinton had cast herself as yet another exploitative outsider. To vote for her would be to vote for their own annihilation—or what Hannah Arendt called *loneliness*: “the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences for man” ([1951] 1968:475).

I couldn’t agree with Gwen’s vote, but I could see her logic. And I could only admire everything she was doing to stem this spreading loneliness at home. When Gwen wasn’t asleep or at work, she was volunteering at the Hemphill Community Center, founded by her family and neighbors in the basement of their shut-down neighborhood school. Hemphill Community Center hosts weekly music performances and community meals, provides space for locally run classes and events, and houses a memorial to fallen coal miners. Its walls are covered with murals by local artists, photos of generations of union leaders, tributes to veterans, announcements of community happenings, and several prominently placed rainbow-colored signs that insist on inclusiveness in the community’s own uncompromising language:

And the second *is* like *namely* this, **Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.**
There is none other commandment greater than these. —Mark 12:31

NO EXCEPTIONS!

Hemphill Community Center, like Cowan Community Center and Kings Creek Volunteer Fire Department, is a place where the community is in charge, where everyone is welcome, and where anyone ready to put in the work can become a leader. Roadside, paraphrasing Southern Freedom Movement organizer Bayard Rustin, calls these kinds of places “community centers of power.”¹⁹ Their presence often marks the difference between communities that claim their voice and those that let opportunists speak for them, between those that act together across differences and those that succumb to culture wars, between genuine populism and its authoritarian shadow.²⁰

As institutions that pose an inherent obstacle to established power, community centers of power often find themselves under threat. When I arrived in Letcher County, the county government had already pulled support for these centers’ utility bills, insurance, and other essential

18. After watching this clip countless times, I’ve come to believe the most offensive part may be right after she said this line, when she turned to the moderator and said, “right, Tim?” (in Bruggers 2016). Given the chance to speak directly to an audience of West Virginia coalfield residents, Clinton instead turned away and addressed her fellow professional instead. Nor did she redeem herself after losing the election, when she boasted: “I won the places that represent two-thirds of America’s gross domestic product. So I won the places that are optimistic, diverse, dynamic, moving forward” (in Blake 2018).

19. “Community centers of power” is Roadside’s paraphrase of Rustin’s phrase “community institutions or power bases”: “A conscious bid for *political power* is being made, and in the course of that effort a tactical shift is being effected: direct-action techniques are being subordinated to a strategy calling for the building of community institutions or power bases” (1965).

20. Roadside has developed a working field guide to identify a community center of power. The more of these questions that can be answered in the affirmative, the more likely it’s a community center of power: 1) Is the organization accountable to the people, all the people, of the community it claims to represent?; 2) Is the organization part of the community—not serving it from above or below?; 3) Do the people in the organization, including the people in charge, reflect the full diversity of the community?; 4) Can anyone take part and feel like they belong?; 5) Can everyone access all parts of the work? If there’s a building, can everyone go everywhere, including into the production areas?; 6) Do the spaces where the organization meets—and the stuff hanging on the walls—demonstrate the organization’s central place in community life?; 7) Does everyone help set the agenda, make things together, and keep the value of what gets made? 8) Can anyone in the community step up and participate in leadership? 9) Does the organization adapt itself to new participants, new challenges, and new opportunities? (Roadside 2020b)

expenses, and was about to cut off support for their senior citizens programming. They claimed they had no choice, citing the drop-off in revenue from coal severance taxes. But many community leaders noticed they'd somehow found the funds to build a multimillion-dollar recreation center, where nothing is allowed on the walls other than lists of rules, ads from corporate sponsors, and signs warning users to pay the proper admission fee—a decidedly un-free space. After Gwen pointed out this disparity at a county government meeting, the trash collection at Hemphill stopped.

With Hemphill's cafes, bars, and union halls mostly gone, and its churches mostly sectarian ("like bee swarms," Gwen says), the community center was the only place left where everyone was welcome. And these new funding cuts put the center on the brink of shutting down. When Gwen and I met, she told me Hemphill's community leaders were in the midst of a "dark night of the soul."

What kept them awake most often were the center's electric bills. Letcher County was serviced by a single energy company, American Electric Power (AEP), a government-sanctioned monopoly that was about to raise its rates. Hemphill's volunteers were already reaching into their own pockets during the winter months to keep the center's doors open. Gwen took part in public actions; she contacted AEP directly and asked for assistance; she showed up at every county government meeting called to address the issue. Nothing worked.

Hearing all this, the standard nonprofit-manager response would have been: "What can we do to help you?" Thankfully, I knew better. I knew Gwen resented the torrent of externally controlled dollars pouring into the area from regional and national institutions, which she called the "Save the Dumb Hillbillies Foundation." She may have been desperate, but that only stiffened her resolve.

Instead I asked: "what are you planning, and can we work on it together?"²¹ Two years later, with Appalshop support, Hemphill opened the Black Sheep Brick Oven Bakery, which taps the latent assets of neighbors' culinary abilities and work ethic to employ community members released from jail, recovering from addiction, and returning from military service with PTSS (see Brown 2018; Dais 2020).

But however successful Black Sheep became, it wasn't generating revenue fast enough. With another winter coming on, and heating costs again about to spike, the center was once more on the verge of shutting down. What Gwen needed, she knew, were allies. The trouble was, as Bill Meade once said, "we had always fought our own battles, and none of us got together and tried to fight the whole war" (in *Imagining America* 2017).

But that was starting to change. Through the process of making *The Future of Letcher County*, leaders from a growing number of local community centers of power were starting to talk with each other. A new organization-of-organizations was taking form, which soon became known as the Letcher County Culture Hub (see Roadside 2020c).²²

Since its start in 2016, the Culture Hub's work has ranged from reviving the oldest community square dance in Kentucky, to taking leadership of the new county government-appointed board to expand access to broadband, to opening up new local business opportunities in agroforestry and maple syrup and trash composting, to starting a cultural exchange with a Massachusetts community on the opposite end of the political spectrum. Just like the Black

21. For an economist like Fluney this is the difference between "asset mapping" and "liability mapping"—starting with what a community has and is doing, versus the opposite. Both can provide temporary aid, but only the latter meets people where they are and creates the conditions for democracy: most people don't organize their lives around what they *don't* have and what they're *not* doing (see Fink 2017b; Hutchinson and Cocke 2014).

22. "Culture hub" was a term Appalshop learned from Fluney, referring to an organization that can identify latent assets (especially cultural assets) and catalyze their transformation into community wealth (see Fink 2017b).



Figure 12. Letcher County community leaders and national guests share stories and take part in a reading of *The Future of Letcher County* at the first Letcher County Culture Hub Celebration. Cowan Community Center, Cowan, KY, 2018. (Photo by Chana Rose Rabinovitz)

Sheep Bakery and the bluegrass events at Kings Creek, these projects weren't Roadside's idea. Roadside simply offered its process—which involves leading when necessary and following when possible—and then took its place as one of many community partners cultivating the work.

As these partners continued getting to know and trust each other—first through the one-to-ones and story circles that created the play, then through the Culture Hub's sharing and strategy sessions—Gwen recognized she and Hemphill were not alone. Several other Culture Hub partner organizations opened up about their own fears caused by rising electric rates, and together they considered what they could do about it.

As usual, Gwen's first impulse was to fight. (One time, in a room full of funders, activists, and nonprofit professionals, Gwen was asked for her preferred gender pronouns and responded: "You can call me anything you want, so long as you call me when it's time to give the oppressors hell!") But after some research, the Culture Hub's leaders concluded they did not have the power to mount a successful campaign against AEP, or against the county and state governments that had failed to protect them. Instead, inspired by their relationship with a new local solar energy company, Culture Hub partners committed to getting as many of their buildings as possible on solar power.

I anticipated big pushback, given the War on Coal rhetoric all around us, but I had again underestimated the community's inherent genius. As Gwen expressed in Letcher County's weekly newspaper *The Mountain Eagle*:

Solar is coming to Hemphill! We are getting geared up to get solar panels atop our building. It's hard to believe the grounds housing the Letcher County Coal Miner's Monument, amidst a coal camp community, could achieve such a thing. We did a little homework months back to ask coal miners what they thought of the idea.

Without fail they all echoed the same thing. They all thought we needed to move ahead with it. They thought with the closing of the Big Sandy Power Plant and the rate increases and riders on the AEP bills, that we had to search out new ways of doing things. Without fail they all told us they thought solar was a great idea. So all these months later it looks like it is about to happen. We want the miners to know how much we appreciate their contributions to our efforts all these years. The benevolence of the miners has helped us every step of the way. We love coal and hope and pray for a resurgence of technology that will put every miner back to work. We will always support our working people. That is who we are! (Johnson 2019)

But the true beneficiaries of the War on Coal had not given up. As the Culture Hub made plans and lined up the necessary partnerships, several industry groups started pushing a bill through the Kentucky legislature that would tilt the market in favor of the big energy companies and make our solar project financially unfeasible.²³ In an op-ed in the Lexington *Herald-Leader*, these organized interests raised all the old culture-war shibboleths. They claimed only hipster environmentalists in Lexington and Louisville cared about solar energy, and everyone in rural areas opposed it (see White 2018).

Several Culture Hub leaders wanted to refute this claim. But it was soon clear they had conflicting stories in mind. Two of them threatened to quit the Culture Hub if our op-ed criticized AEP: one had a brother who worked there, and both expressed concern about the Culture Hub becoming an “activist” organization. Gwen roared back: if we didn’t call out the energy company as the oppressor, we were betraying the people of Hemphill. Several days and many drafts later, five leaders submitted the version that made the paper. It did not attack AEP directly but simply asserted that many people here supported solar energy. Gwen refused to sign her name to it (see Fields et al. 2018).

Surprisingly to many, the anti-solar bill failed. There were surely many reasons for this, including strong advocacy by state and regional groups. But an op-ed from five residents of so-called “Trump Country” couldn’t have hurt—to say nothing of a former strip mine boss working the phones for weeks, urging fellow Republicans to stop supporting a bill that could do so much damage to his community’s volunteer fire department.

A similar bill ultimately passed a year later, but in the intervening time the Letcher County project got far enough along to get grandfathered in. It became the largest homegrown alternative energy project in east Kentucky, with solar energy systems installed at Hemphill, Appalshop, and the local nonprofit housing agency, HOMES, Inc. (see Fink 2020). And in a sign of the Culture Hub’s growing unity and strength, when leaders penned a similar op-ed in 2019, Gwen signed it (see Gibson et al. 2019).

People sometimes ask me if Roadside has changed people’s minds about coal or Trump. As far as I know the answer is no. Nor was that ever the intent. Instead, we have created the conditions where supporters of coal and Trump can enter into communion with neighbors who think differently, without anyone fearing a threat to the things they organize their lives around.²⁴ Through telling their own stories, building their own power, and creating their own wealth, the people of Letcher County have started to loosen the stranglehold of divisive culture

23. The technical details: the bill would have ended Kentucky’s practice of one-to-one net metering, which required energy companies to buy back electricity produced by rooftop solar installations at the same rates they sell it to consumers.

24. Harry Boyte writes: “empirical studies of those who have actually participated in movements for social change” show how local traditions and organizations “can turn into breeding grounds for insurgency” as “people draw on rich cultural resources and tradition from the past, unearthing subversive themes of protest, dissent, and self-assertion” (1981).

wars (see Fink 2017a). And if politics is downstream from culture—as Roadside has long held—when we change what’s possible culturally, political change will follow.

To borrow language from literary theorist Stanley Fish, the Culture Hub has created a new *interpretive community*. If power equals organized people plus organized money plus organized ideas—as per the tradition of broad-based community organizing—interpretive communities are the site of organized ideas, where making meaning meets building power. The Culture Hub’s *interpretive strategies*—the distinctive ways its participants have learned to make sense of the world—have opened up space for people in Letcher County to create new meanings, new understandings, new stories, and new possibilities (see Fish 1980:167–73).

Many of these interpretive strategies can be summed up in the Culture Hub’s tagline: “We Own What We Make.” As with many populist formulations—like “the people”—We Own What We Make “lacks analytical specificity” and is best “understood symbolically rather than abstractly or quantitatively” (Boyte 1981). No one can agree on its precise meaning: who’s included in “we”? what does it mean to “own” and “make”? and so on. But when the Culture Hub considers potential partners and projects, and someone asks if they’re committed to We Own What We Make, everyone knows the answer in their gut. This is how the Culture Hub has remained inclusive while maintaining what Fluney Hutchinson calls “oppositionness”: a basic rejection of the status quo’s fundamental unfairness and injustice, and a dedication to changing it (see Fink 2017b).

The Culture Hub’s unusual mixture of oppositionness, nonpartisanship, inclusiveness, and provocation has made it both dynamic and delicate. Unlike more standard organizational models, which prioritize linear efficiency, the Culture Hub encourages productive tension: between individual freedom and organizational strategy, between letting community leaders lead and holding them accountable, between accepting the world as it is and insisting on the world as it ought to be (see Chambers 2004:21–40). As Culture Hub leaders sometimes say, nothing gets moved until there’s tension in the rope.

These particular attributes have also made it challenging for the Culture Hub to sustain its work. Arts-and-culture funders, geared toward supporting artists as individual professionals/entrepreneurs, often clash with the Culture Hub’s focus on catalyzing the inherent creativity of whole communities and their grassroots leaders. Community organizing networks and their backers, who tend to frame their work in terms of discrete issue-based campaigns against defined political targets, have struggled to integrate the Culture Hub’s long-term strategy of building power through ideologically heterogeneous groups telling stories and making things together. And community development agencies, accustomed to sector-specific projects run by professional staff with predetermined “deliverables,” often see the Culture Hub’s iterative and grassroots-led methods as inefficient and unreliable.

The Culture Hub, alongside a growing coalition of national allies, is working to build the power to change these standard approaches: to remove the barrier separating “artists” from “communities”; to shift the focus away from siloes and sectors toward “sector-agnostic” community centers of power (Frasz 2019); and to end the dominance of “trickle-down funding,” where communities and their grassroots leaders are the last consulted and the least supported. The need for these changes was underscored when a Culture Hub leader attended a meeting of “intermediary” organizations—regional development agencies who often serve as gatekeepers between the grassroots and the big checks. Upon returning to Letcher County, she told us the general sentiment at the meeting was: “Don’t give them [community-led groups] too much recognition, or they’ll want more money.”

Nevertheless, she added, “we’re learning how to ask.”

Our Answer to Scale Is Coalition

WE ARE residents of some of our country's most abandoned yet beautiful places [...]. We have all seen the value inherent in our lands, labor, and imaginations—our commonwealth—get exploited for the profit of others. We all worry about bad water and air, unsellable homes, unpayable debts, and unemployed neighbors. And we all struggle with feelings of isolation and powerlessness. But most of all, we all share a long history of resistance to exploitation. Our most formidable resistance has been rooted in our cultures—in the expression of our intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and material traditions. We have come together to honor and build on this creative legacy, to imagine and work toward a future where everyone belongs and everyone's contribution matters—where as an allied community, we own what we make.

WE BELIEVE culture drives development: a culture of bottom-up collective power and interdependence drives equitable development and counters the culture of top-down administration and dependency that drives exploitative development. [...]

WE ARE BUILDING a national coalition to advance community-led, culture-driven development [...]

—Statement following the first meeting of the Performing Our Future national coalition in Uniontown, Alabama, July 2018 (Performing Our Future 2018b)

Uniontown, Alabama, 30 miles west of Selma, is roughly the same size as Whitesburg, with inverse racial demographics: Whitesburg is over 90% white, and Uniontown is almost 90% black. A few miles south of town, in many residents' backyards, is a landfill containing waste from more than 30 states, including a seven-story mountain of coal ash. When we visited in 2018, Gwen reported back to the Culture Hub: "The coal that got mined here in east Kentucky and burned in east Tennessee got dumped in Uniontown."

Our communities found each other through two private funders, who suggested Appalshop contact the Uniontown-based organization Black Belt Citizens Fighting for Health and Justice. Some academic and nonprofit colleagues seemed surprised at our connection. Appalshop is an arts and humanities organization; Black Belt Citizens is a grassroots organizing group battling an environmental crisis. What would we have to work on together? And wouldn't race be an insurmountable barrier?

Black Belt Citizens' then president Esther Calhoun offered a simple answer to the second question: We need to talk more about race and racism, and that includes talking about how poor black and poor white people have been driven apart by those who hurt them both. I started to say something about my white privilege, and she stopped me: don't ever apologize for where you came from. You're here now.



Figure 13. Annette and Bill Gibbs, among the founders of Black Belt Citizens Fighting for Health and Justice, stand in front of their home in Uniontown, Alabama. (Photo by EarthJustice)

As 2017 drew to a close and the Letcher County Culture Hub started standing on its own feet, Roadside set out on the road once again. What other groups were out there, we asked, isolated from one another yet putting up similar resistance to organized exploitation and the temptations of culture wars? We contacted old partners, current collaborators, and people we'd met through conferences, cohort gatherings, and other projects. The ensuing conversations offered many new perspectives on our work—including from youth educator Mike O'Bryan at North Philadelphia's Village of Arts and Humanities: "We need to end mass incarceration, and that's not going to happen as long as people where you live are so desperate for jobs that they support building prisons in their communities. So to me, equitable economic development in Kentucky is a racial justice issue."

The Village was one of many organizations that recognized themselves in the story we were creating—of community centers of power uniting across geographic, political, racial, and rural-urban lines to share stories, build collective power and wealth, and shape a future where We Own What We Make—but weren't in the right place to take on a time-consuming and open-ended new project. After eight months of meetings, two more core collaborators emerged alongside the Culture Hub and Black Belt Citizens: the Arch Social Community Network in West Baltimore, and Rural Urban Flow in Milwaukee and Sauk Counties, Wisconsin.

The Arch Social Community Network grew out of the Arch Social Club, West Baltimore's century-old African American social organization (see Fink and Johnson 2020). Located across the street from the CVS that burned in the 2015 uprising following the death of Freddie Gray, the Arch has become a gathering place for residents to heal and start imagining a different future together. These gatherings led to the creation of the Arch Social Community Network, led by longtime local organizer Denise Griffin Johnson, who had worked with Roadside on an earlier Baltimore playmaking project (*Something to Behold*, 2011–2013; see Haft 2015).

Rural Urban Flow is even newer: a nascent network of Wisconsin community-based cultural and agricultural workers, anchored by Wormfarm Institute, a farm and art center in rural Sauk County, and The Table/Alice's Garden, a spiritual community, urban farm, and community cultural development organization in North Milwaukee. Roadside got connected with the Flow through national efforts to revive the land-grant university Extension System's democratic, populist tradition.

These four organizations—Rural Urban Flow, the Arch Social Community Network, Black Belt Citizens, and the Culture Hub—were incompatible by most standard metrics. Yet they were all led by ordinary residents working through their communities' centers of power, and they were all committed to what Denise from Baltimore calls "cultural organizing," based in making things rooted in the culture we share, as opposed to the all-too-common practice of "deficit organizing," based in "what we don't have" (see Fink and Johnson 2020).

At the invitation of Black Belt Citizens, we met together for the first time at Quinn Chapel AME Church in Uniontown. It was more than an hour's drive from the nearest airport, and when we gathered in July 2018 we had our choice between stifling heat and deafening wall-unit air conditioners. But it was perfect. The ceilings were low, the chairs and tables well loved, and the walls covered with photos of generations of baptisms, weddings, and funerals. When we walked out the door, we were in the community. Dudley told me he knew the meeting was right when one of the church elders walked in well after we'd started, settled in the back with a few other neighbors, and just sat and listened.

The two-day meeting marked the start of a new act in Performing Our Future's ongoing, participatory drama. Many found catharsis working with local kids at the public library and visiting an African American cemetery desecrated by the coal ash dump. Tensions arose during story sharing and analysis, as we started wrestling with how to keep an oppositional relationship to the status quo while maintaining our work's roots in local traditions—a debate that continues.

Some were concerned we did not leave Uniontown with a set script for the actions to follow. But in Roadside's experience that would have been premature. What was important was that we reached some common understandings. We agreed we weren't trying to "scale a model": the goal wasn't a national-sized Culture Hub but a coalition of locally owned and controlled projects with shared values, strategies, and "best principles," recognizing that our practices will always look different from culture to culture and place to place.

"The only 'proof' of membership" in an interpretive community, says Stanley Fish, "is fellowship, the nod of recognition from someone in the same community, someone who says to you what neither of us could ever prove to a third party: 'we know'" (1980:173). We experienced this feeling of mutual recognition many times during our meeting in Uniontown. There was one particularly memorable moment when a young leader from West Baltimore talked about his experience with community development nonprofits in Africa: when these organizations scaled up, in order to get more water to more communities, they lost "the need behind the need." Everyone nodded. No one needed more explanation of "the need behind the need." Some called it democracy, others self-determination, others community governance. And we all knew it was what had brought us together.

The coalition has met regularly since: in Milwaukee in 2018 and 2019, in Baltimore in 2020, and monthly by Zoom. It has developed a three-year strategy (Performing Our Future 2019) and a structure for governance and decision-making. Current projects include a new community play in West Baltimore, a collaboration involving Roadside, the Arch Social Community Network, and the Baltimore African American theatre company WombWork Productions; a long-term oral history and storytelling project connected to ongoing environmental justice efforts in Alabama's Black Belt; and a series of interactive visual art and civic dialogue projects spanning rural and urban Wisconsin, in the context of the 2020 election season. The four delegations are collaborating on a "cookbook," to include recipes for making food, making theatre, and making community; and working with other national community art-and-development projects to build an interactive digital learning platform. And more ideas continue to emerge.

Will Performing Our Future someday produce a joint stage show, weaving a shared story from the specific experiences of the Black Belt, the Rust Belt, the coalfields, and the inner city—plus others who may join along the way, like the families from Salem County, New Jersey? It's possible. It's also likely the project will proceed in other directions that we can't yet see.

That is the essence of the populist aesthetic: the struggle and joy of the process are part of the product. We won't know how the story ends until we all get there together. And that "we"—the people doing the making, the community that cocreates and finds itself reflected in the work—is always open to newcomers. In the performance of secular communion, there is always a role open to all who are willing.

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