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When disinformation makes sense: Contextualizing the war on coal in Appalachian Kentucky

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Recent scholarship indicates that populist rhetoric can profoundly shape commonsense understandings of global energy crises. While scholars often depict rural, working-class communities as objects of right-wing disinformation, posttruths, and alternative facts, how rural communities interpret or experience populist narratives is far from adequately understood. This research examines the recent coal industry recession in coal-producing areas of Appalachian Kentucky, which contributed to ten thousand job losses since 2010. Amid the downturn, politicians and pro-coal lobby groups riled the public by blaming the recession on an alleged "war on coal." This article illustrates how neoliberal disinformation underpins war-on-coal narratives claiming that deregulating industry is the only way communities can save the industry and access economic well-being. Drawing from qualitative interviews, participant observation, and discourse analysis, I explore how war-on-coal disinformation becomes a commonsense explanation for many dealing with coal industry recession. While findings suggest that the war on coal "makes sense" for many living in coal-mining communities, this does not indicate an indeterminate embrace of the industry or pro-coal rhetoric. Communities negotiate commonsense narratives against complicated relationships with the industry, the many dangers of mining, and the challenges coal poses for alternative economic futures.

Keywords War on Coal; Appalachia; Energy; Disinformation; Common Sense

Introduction: Rhetoric and reality

The coal industry that largely dictated Central Appalachian economies for a century is in a period of dramatic decline and is hemorrhaging mining-sector jobs. The situation is especially dire for Appalachian Kentucky, which has experienced nearly ten thousand coal industry job losses since 2010 (Kentucky Energy and Environment Cabinet 2019). Although the U.S. coal recession is primarily due to competition with natural gas, lawmakers from coal-producing states and pro-coal lobby groups roused the public by blaming the Obama administration for an alleged "war on coal." To combat this war, politicians have promised to save jobs by weakening regulations for the coal industry (McConnell 2013a, 2013b, 2015; Paul 2013, 2016). The Trump administration and state representatives continue to promulgate war-on-coal discourses to justify hollowing out environmental regulations in and beyond Appalachia, most recently using the war on coal to justify repealing the Clean Power Plan (Herrick 2018). In defense of their actions, pro-coal politicians claim to speak on behalf of their constituents. However, many people living in close quarters with coal and coal-related industries see laws and regulations as critical for safeguarding Appalachian lives and livelihoods. Furthermore, many who have experienced the industry's social, political, or environmental consequences see the present downturn as a chance to promote a safer, more equitable economy "beyond coal" (Carley, Evans, and Konisky 2018; Smith 2015).

Global energy dilemmas present some of the most profound challenges of our time and have recently been the focus of much scholarly attention (Love and Isenhour 2016). The recent *ethical* turn within energy anthropologies calls attention to the overemphasis of power relations and inequalities within energy research and advocates more scholarly focus on the complex "ethical worlds" of energy actors (Appel 2019; High and Smith 2019).

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At the same time, populism and posttruth scholars have demonstrated how populist rhetorical strategies are shaping commonsense understandings of global energy challenges (Batel and Devine-Wright 2018; Stegemann and Ossewaarde 2018). The far right has mobilized disinformation, posttruths, and alternative facts to influence public perceptions of climate change and demonize environmental regulations (Fraune and Knodt 2018). Scholars often depict rural or working-class communities as the objects of these rhetorical appeals to common sense (Adaman, Arsel, and Akbulut 2019; Scoones et al. 2018). However, how ethically situated, energy-entangled actors experience posttruths or disinformation is not adequately understood.

This research suggests that Gramsci's nuanced conceptualization of common sense may add to anthropological understandings of energy dilemmas; specifically, it challenges energy researchers to consider the ways both powerful entities and ethical ambitions may influence, but not determine, subjects (Crehan 2011, 2016; Gramsci 1971). Thus it helps energy anthropology avoid deterministic tendencies that can assume power relations (or "energopolitics"; Boyer 2011) or ethical or "moral ambitions" (High and Smith 2019, 42) exclusively shape interlocutors' lives. In exploring how disinformation campaigns "make sense," or become commonsense understandings of recession in coal-producing communities, I first access how pro-coal lobby groups and politicians proliferate neoliberal disinformation through the war-on-coal narrative. I then describe how these pro-coal narratives articulate with historical processes, which have shaped embodied vulnerabilities for mining families and communities. Finally, I examine how embodied vulnerabilities provide a constant incongruity that prevents the wholesale embrace of the coal industry, even among those who accept the war on coal. While findings suggest that for many, the war on coal "makes sense," or is a commonsense explanation for industry recession, this does not indicate an indeterminate embrace of the industry or pro-coal disinformation. Communities negotiate commonsense narratives against complicated relationships with the industry, the many dangers of mining, and the challenges coal poses for alternative economic futures.

Theoretical framework: Energy ethics, populist rhetoric, and common sense

In the past decade, anthropological focus on energy has intensified in response to the increasing severity of global energy challenges (Love and Isenhour 2016). A recent energy-focused special issue of the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* critiques what the contributors consider to be two prevailing trends within energy-focused ethnography: the emphasis on state and corporate power and the call for energy transitions (High and Smith 2019). Research within the special issue challenges the "moral binaries" (Appel 2019, 178) that judge fossil fuels to be inherently wrong (High and Smith 2019; Smith 2019) and renewable energy to be intrinsically moral or ethical (Cross 2019; Howe 2019). The authors suggest that these "judgmental" stances limit the scope of energy anthropology, missing the complex *ethical* worlds at every scale of energy contexts (High and Smith 2019, 9–13). Paying close attention to the intricacies of the ethical worlds in energy research can ensure that the "contours of individual moral experience and relational being-in-the-world are fully and deeply accounted for in ethnographic work" (Appel 2019, 178).

While agreeing that anthropology needs a more expansive understanding of the everyday, experiential lives of energy-entangled actors, this may be difficult to accomplish in the current moment in which populist politics are profoundly shaping commonsense understandings of global energy challenges (Batel and Devine-Wright 2018; Stegemann and Ossewaarde 2018). The far right's deployment of disinformation, posttruths, and alternative facts to discredit climate change and demonize environmental regulations can influence public perceptions of energy dilemmas (Fraune and Knodt 2018). A growing number of social scientists express concern about how disinformation and posttruth draw on and appropriate common sense, "deconstruct[ing] truth" for pernicious ends (Asmolov 2018; Bennett and Livingston 2018; Ho 2018; Ho and Cavanaugh 2019, 164). Ho and Cavanaugh (2019, 164) explain:

> Long-standing hierarchies and othering discourses fueled by precarity and resentment—helps to solidify the terrifying and increasingly "common sense" rhetoric that a permissive social order has allowed the formerly marginalized to take advantage of the system such that recipients of underserving handouts triumph over the normative and the hardworking.

Rural or working-class communities are often the imagined objects of populist appeals to common sense (Schneider et al. 2016; Scoones et al. 2018). However, how these communities interpret or experience these discourses is rarely discussed. Cramer (2016) argues that right-wing populist rhetoric fuels a resentful "rural consciousness." Others paint a more complicated picture, suggesting that rural communities and conservative voters do not mindlessly absorb populist rhetoric (Catte 2018; Gaventa 2019). Arguing against the mythos of a unified "white working class," Pied (2018) and Gusterson (2017) both contest the "blue-collar narrative" that a disgruntled working class is responsible for Trump's victory. Similarly, Tretjak (2013, 60) reminds us that there is no unified conservative movement and that the conflation of libertarian and conservative political factions is a misrepresentation of diverse, multifaceted groups that often have "cracks and fissures" that may surprise us. Many studies challenge the tendency to whitewash "rural America," as rural places are also home to African American, Indigenous, and Latinx communities (Brown, Murphy, and Porcelli 2016; Catte 2018). These studies indicate that how populist appeals to common sense are understood or experienced by rural and working-class communities is far from adequately understood.

Given these complexities, how are we to understand the power-laden discourses deployed by various "elite" actors, while at the same time appreciating the nuance of rural communities and the varied uptake of appeals to common sense? In energy contexts, how do we recognize how common sense is mobilized in relation to energy development, while at the same time recognizing its articulation with complex ethical worlds of energy actors?

Gramsci's conceptualization of common sense is a useful analytic lens that can help energy anthropologies account for both hegemonic (or power-laden) appeals to common sense and the complicated ethical worlds of variously positioned energy actors. Gramsci's "senso comune" refers to the gradually accumulating, taken-for-granted knowledge of everyday life (Crehan 2016; Gramsci 1971). For Gramsci, common sense is contradictory, historically informed, layered, multifaceted, flexible, and incoherent (Crehan 2011, 286; Gramsci 1971). It is never fixed but always evolving with history, philosophy, science, and social and political intellectuals (Gramsci 1971, 323–26; Rodseth 2018). Common sense is "developed in constant struggle with hegemonic representations," yet is never entirely determined by them (Smith 2004, 252). Therefore common sense can "reproduce and maintain existing power regimes, but can also carry within the seeds of transformation" (Crehan 2011, 281). Thinking with Gramsci's conceptualization can help researchers consider the wide variety of influences weighing on common sense in energy-entangled communities. Specifically, it forces us to challenge some deterministic tendencies within energy anthropologies: the assumption that energy-enrolled interlocutors are already determined by neoliberal or corporate "energopolitics" (Boyer 2011) or by ethical or "moral ambitions" (High and Smith 2019). It is important to note that Gramsci wanted to understand common sense to transform it, which is not always the project or intention of anthropology (Smith 2004). Still, considering power relations and personal ethics as both weighing on (influential but not wholly determining) common sense can further our understanding of how energy actors are "social, situated and unpredictable persons entangled in the politics of life" (High and Smith 2019, 11).

Ethnographic context and methodology

This research took place between 2013 and 2014 in the Appalachian Basin coalfield of Eastern Kentucky, primarily in the coal-producing areas of Harlan and Letcher Counties. Both counties have historically been among the top coal-producing areas in the region and were particularly disturbed by the industry's recent decline (Gish 2013). The summer of 2013 was a critical moment in Eastern Kentucky. Thousands of job losses and frequent announcements

of more layoffs had everyone on edge. Even environmental activists—who wanted nothing more than to see the end of mountaintop removal mining—were distraught by the fact that many people they knew and cared about were scared, out of work, and facing the possibility of having to leave town. Also troubling was a narrative that had taken on new life with the recent downturn in coal production. The coal lobby, industry officials, and politicians were naming the source of the region's woes as Obama's "war on coal." Pro-coal actors used the war-on-coal narrative as early as 2010 to contest the Obama administration's efforts to tax carbon emissions and employ carbon capture technologies (Reis 2010). However, in 2012, war-on-coal rhetoric seemed to become a reality as more and more coal industry workers began losing their jobs. In a desperate attempt to make sense of all that had happened, many people impacted by production declines began subscribing to war-on-coal narratives. One Letcher County resident explained,

> Wave after wave of layoffs brought real pain and real anger. The community turned tense and polarized, and the whole place felt like a fortress that was indeed besieged by a vast army of shadowy enemies. Public hearings became public theater, as hundreds of coal workers (transportation provided by their employers) swore fealty to coal and vowed vengeance to its enemies. (Kirby 2013)

Eastern Kentucky is a complicated place that has both a rich history of environmental and community activism and widespread normative support for the coal industry (Bodenhamer 2016; Lewin 2019). While by no means universal, support for the coal industry continues because, despite many booms and busts, coal has been a consistent industry amid a long history of failed regional economic development attempts (Eller 2008). Another reason support continues is because of the rich heritage and cultural identity that have historically revolved around coal mining (Lewin 2019; Scott 2010). Everyone seems to know a miner or is related to a current or former coal industry employee. There is a sense that coal-producing communities have sacrificed a lot, including the lives and livelihoods of loved ones, to provide energy for the country. Coal's ubiquity is built into the landscape and the fabric of everyday life. In nearly every community, coal miner's memorials and museums honor those who have died in the mines with signs, monuments, and statues. For many, coal camp houses still act as homes for families. Churches and community centers have repurposed elegant old commissaries. Coal tipples hang over roads like enormous rusting monkey bars. For many older residents, coal camps are bases for tender memories of falling in love or raising families. Residents can recall better times when coal was booming—when the camps and towns were in good condition and full of life, excitement, and, most of all, young people. Despite good memories, it is important not to romanticize coal camp life. As Hazel[1] suggested, "they owned you. You worked for them, but they owned you" (interview, August 14, 2013). Nevertheless, she and others fondly remember using scrip (coal company currency often used in the company store) to buy popcorn and soda after school. She remembers buildings, now empty and dormant, that used to house department stores, soda fountains, florists, and restaurants. Life was by no means easy, but for many people, there was more life around.

During the summer of 2013, I spent two months living in a hollow situated along a creek at the foot of Pine Mountain in Letcher County. At the time of research, Letcher and Harlan Counties had some of the highest unemployment rates in the state, at just above 16% (Gish 2013). Owing to the freshness of layoffs, formal ethnographic interviews were difficult to achieve. Several miners rejected my request for interviews because they were worried about risking their jobs. Because of the sensitivity of the subject matter, I decided to purposively sample (Bernard 2011, 145) for participants who were (a) specialized informants representing organized entities working closely with miners dealing with the recession; (b) members of mining families, but who would not be risking their jobs by speaking with me; and (c) former or retired miners. Ultimately, I conducted twenty-one semistructured, qualitative interviews that ranged from 45 to 120 minutes in length. Of the twenty-one interlocuters, six were former or retired miners, five were spouses or mothers of miners, and thirteen represented organized entities working

Agent/Process/Recipient Analysis of "States Should Reject Obama Mandate for Clean-Power Regulations" Op-ed by Senator McConnell (2015)

Agent	Process	Recipient
Obama Administration	seeks to shut down	America's power generation
Obama administration	threatening to impose	its own…Draconian plan on any state that doesn't do as it's told
Obama Administration	decreed that it will be the judge	of whether a plan is acceptable or not
The Administration	attack(s)	these people (seniors/low-income families/people who struggle)
Administration	attack(s)	the middle class
Administration	standing on	shaky legal ground
(Administration)	won't be able to demonstrate	the capacity to carry out such political extremism
Regulations	cannot be implemented	
(Regulations)	threaten	state economies and energy reliability for families
Regulation	punishes	states
Regulation	could cost	our country about a third of a trillion dollars
(Regulation)	(could) cause	electricity price hikes
Regulation	would likely shrink	our economy
(Regulation)	(would) throw	countless out of work
Regulation	threatens to hurt	a lot of people
(Regulation)	(could) make things worse by chasing	industrial activity overseas to high-polluting countries like China.
(Regulatory) plan	imposed	from Washington

Note: Chart Adapted from Butt, Lukin, and Matthiessen (2004).

Figure 1 Sample from McConnell op-ed analysis.

closely with miners during this time. All interlocutors lived or worked in coal camps and towns near the Letcher County seat of Whitesburg and Harlan County's tri-city area of Benham, Cumberland, and Lynch. It is important to note that I was unable to formally interview actively employed miners, which is a limitation of the project. More research is needed to understand the perspectives of these miners.

Throughout participant observation, I attended a variety of relevant meetings and activities in Letcher, Harlan, and surrounding counties, including "economic transition" or planning meetings, such as Kentuckians for the Commonwealth's "Appalachia's Bright Future Conference," a public meeting for a proposed prison project, and the economic development conference "Save Our Appalachian Region" in Pikeville. I also toured furloughed surface mines in Knott and Floyd Counties and even crossed state lines into adjacent Southwest Virginia to speak with relevant grassroots environmental groups, such as Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards and the Clinch River Valley Initiative. I used NVivo 10 to transcribe and code audio recordings, local and regional newspaper clippings, participant observation data, fieldnotes, and photos. Finally, I used discourse analysis to examine articles, policy statements, and Kentucky politician op-eds, speeches, and press releases, explicitly analyzing for transitivity, or how "agency, the expression of causality, and the attribution of responsibility" are produced through pro-coal texts (see Figure 1) (Butt, Lukin, and Matthiessen 2004; Fairclough 1992, 236).

Hegemonic narratives: Neoliberal disinformation and the war on coal

This section examines how hegemonic or dominant entities like pro-coal politicians (in Kentucky, this is not limited to the right wing or conservatives) and pro-coal lobby groups strive to shape commonsense understandings of coal recession through the war-on-coal narrative. The *war on coal* is a catch-phrase used by the industry, the coal lobby, and politicians to explain coal's waning significance in U.S. energy production (Schneider et al. 2016). Underpinning war-on-coal discourses are neoliberal economic philosophies that are portrayed as necessary measures to save the industry from further economic decline (Schneider et al. 2016). Neoliberal philosophies broadly endorse privatizing social programs; deregulating industry; lowering taxes and tariffs on international trade; and discouraging labor unions as necessary measures for growing economies, promoting industry, and

protecting the free market (Harvey 2007; McNeil 2011). Recently, scholars have demonstrated how the affective and discursive power of neoliberal political rhetoric draws on and reproduces "common-sense neoliberalism" (Hall and O'Shea 2013). One way hegemonic entities construct common sense is through the propagation of disinformation, posttruths, and alternative facts (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Fraune and Knodt 2018; Ho and Cavanaugh 2019; Knodt 2018).

While social scientists have long examined how controlling and propagating discourse shapes power relations (Fairclough 1992; Foucault 2002), many believe that the posttruth moment calls for more specific terminology to explain targeted disinformation campaigns orchestrated by pro-industry and far-right groups (Asmolov 2018; Bennett and Livingston 2018; Schneider et al. 2016). Bennett and Livingston (2018, 124) define disinformation as the "systematic disruption of authoritative information flows due to strategic deceptions that may appear credible to those consuming them." Building on this definition, I use *neoliberal disinformation* to describe the measures by which hegemonic actors are strategically shaping commonsense understandings of a problem or policy issue through publicly asserting neoliberal philosophies and ideas. For example, through op-eds in local newspapers, speeches, press releases, and community initiatives, pro-coal politicians demonize regulations by promoting the claim that the coal industry is being attacked by burdensome federal regulations that encumber coal markets (Figure 1). This narrative attempts to normalize the idea that in the absence of regulation, the coal industry could revive itself, and the market would bring widespread economic prosperity. War-on-coal and other neoliberal discourses conflate individual and market liberties, "promis[ing] political emancipation through economic growth, increasing prosperity, and market mediated social relations" (Heynen et al. 2007, 5–6).

However, policies rationalized by war-on-coal narratives often have little to do with job creation but rather undermine environmental and labor standards protecting miners and mining communities. During the early years of Appalachian Kentucky's coal recession, Kentucky senator McConnell proposed the "Saving Our Coal Jobs" Act, which would "streamline permitting processes" by revising the Clean Water Act to limit the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) ability to regulate industrial discharge (Govtrack 2013). The bill would also revoke the EPA's power to set carbon emission standards without prior congressional approval (Govtrack 2013). McConnell (2013b) used Kentucky's need for jobs as justification for weaker regulations, asserting, "What many Kentuckians really want are good-paying jobs that only coal can provide. … Coal is what keeps the lights on, the kids clothed and the family fed."

Such policy assurances tend to be "false promises" that have destructive consequences for impacted communities (Heynen et al. 2007; Scott et al. 2012). For example, the highly mechanized practice of mountaintop removal mining (MTR)—what McNeil (2011, 2–3) deems "the logical product of neoliberalism"—has contributed to both fewer mining jobs and greater environmental calamity in Appalachia (Eller 2008). The coal industry claims that MTR is essential for remaining competitive in the energy market; nonetheless, it has transformed more than one million acres of predominately mixed deciduous and mesophytic forest into active or reclaimed mine land (Perks 2010). It involves blasting off 600–800 ft. of rock from the mountain with military-grade explosives to access tiny coal seams (Perks 2010). Dislodged rock called "overburden" is dumped into nearby valleys, often overwhelming land and streams. Communities are endangered by fly-rock from blasting, poisoned well water, and floods and mudslides intensified by hundreds of acres of compacted, impermeable mine land (Baber 1990; Burns 2007). Public health issues are a significant concern, evidenced by a growing body of research linking MTR and other forms of mining to increased rates of pulmonary and cardiovascular disease, cancer, and congenital disabilities, as well as the recent resurgence of black lung disease (Ahern et al. 2011; Palmer et al. 2010; Shriver and Bodenhamer 2018).

In addition to pro-coal politicians' op-eds, speeches, and press releases, pro-coal lobby groups circulate war-on-coal narratives through multimillion-dollar public relations campaigns (Bell and York 2010; Lewin 2019; Schneider et al. 2016). Pro-coal lobby groups promulgate war-on-coal narratives through rallies, charities, parades, and pro-coal educational outreach, muddying industry prerogatives with community interests (Bell and York 2010;

Lewin 2019). At pro-coal rallies and events, lobby groups distribute bumper stickers, shirts, billboards, and yard signs stating "Coal keeps the lights on!," "Coal Miner's Daughter," "Friends of Coal," "If you don't like coal, don't use electricity!," and "God bless the coal miner." More than fifty thousand Kentuckians have emblazoned their license plates with the "Friends of Coal" logo (*Business Wire* 2012). In addition to their coal advocacy, pro-coal lobby groups are explicit about their disapproval of environmental regulations and the EPA. During rallies and lobby days, groups distribute anti-EPA and anti-war-on-coal materials in the form of signs, posters, and t-shirts. The pro-coal lobby group Coal Mining Our Future infamously led a crowd of thousands to chant "Damn the EPA!" during one coal rally (Kirby 2013).

In sum, both politicians and pro-coal lobby groups shape commonsense understandings of coal recession through circulating neoliberal disinformation like the war on coal. Presenting environmental and mine-safety regulations as "government overreach," the war on coal casts regulatory bodies as antagonists "waging war" against communities. While politicians and pro-coal lobby groups actively work to shape commonsense understandings of coal recession through neoliberal disinformation, the uptake of these appeals is varied. These narratives articulate with complex ethical worlds (Appel 2019) of variously positioned energy actors, many of whom are intimately aware of the deep history of regional labor struggles, environmental activism, and devastating mine-related fatalities and disasters.

Disinformation, vulnerability, and the loss of the UMWA in Eastern Kentucky

Pro-coal politicians and lobby groups push neoliberal disinformation to shape understandings of coal recession, and yet, these efforts articulate in complicated ways with the long history of coal mining in the region. The loss of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and the embodied vulnerabilities that ensued present a constant contradiction to hegemonic appeals to common sense (through war-on-coal narratives), even among self-identified "Friends of Coal." Former and retired miners with whom I spoke expressed support for the industry and its workers, while at the same time seeing it as a problematic institution. These individuals personally experienced neoliberal anti-unionism in the 1980s and 1990s, which led to the demise of the UMWA in Eastern Kentucky. For many, this was a turning point in the industry work culture that increased worker expectations while diminishing workplace safety standards.

Neoliberalism is infamously associated with union busting in the United States and Great Britain (Clawson and Clawson 1999; Harvey 2007). Inspired by companies like A. T. Massey and Pittston Coal, Kentucky coal executives began slashing health care and retirement programs while demanding longer hours for workers (Anglin 2002; Nyden 2007, 48). During a series of "employer offensives," companies began closing unionized operations and reopening with (nonunion) temporary and subcontracted workers (Clawson and Clawson 1999, 101–3; Nyden 2007). In Harlan County (UMWA District 19), the union's fate was sealed when Arch Minerals purchased U.S. Steel in 1984. After steel production plummeted in the United States, Arch Minerals acquired many local mines. Though U.S. Steel was imperfect, miners respected the company because it had a good relationship with the union and provided a decent standard of living for coal miners and their families. When Arch purchased U.S. Steel's assets, the UMWA began to lose ground.

Martin, a retired U.S. Steel–Arch Minerals miner, explained, "The CEO at the time was not that receptive toward United Mine Workers as an organization … so it was a rocky relationship from start to finish" (interview, July 18, 2013). The "rocky relationship" involved Arch shutting down union mines and reopening with nonunion, subcontracted workers. Benny Massey, a retired UMWA miner, recalled striking to pressure Arch to negotiate a contract with the UMWA (interview, July 15, 2013). Benny claimed that Arch ultimately undermined organizing efforts by bribing UMWA higher-ups with "sweetheart contracts" or under-the-table negotiations. In addition to sweetheart contracts, coal companies would bribe miners with higher wages if they would agree to mine without a

union contract (Nyden 2007; Portelli 2011). Though Harlan County once was a union stronghold, the last UMWA mine ultimately closed in 1997.

The loss of the UMWA in Eastern Kentucky compromised mine safety by increasing pressure on workers while reducing union safety procedures. Without UMWA protocols, companies neglected safety concerns, making miners more susceptible to occupational hazards. Martin alluded to the safety implications of Arch's new business model:

> First thing they did was they called all the supervisors together … had a meeting. And corporate told all us present that they were a different company than what we were used to … and that they would be mining more coal with fewer people. You know, working more hours. And safety would … [be] lax, as a result. (interview, July 18, 2013)

Part of the safety concern was the demanding work hours that nonunion mines tend to require. Benny explained that "salary [nonunion] workers are on duty full time, you have to do what they tell you. The union made sure you got eight hours of sleep. Now salary workers have to go where you are told to go" (interview, July 15, 2013). Milly's late husband worked as a salary miner after Arch dismantled the UMWA. She recalls her husband having an irregular schedule, sometimes working seven days a week and second and third shifts (interview, July 15, 2013). Milly remembered her husband going to check water levels in the mines nearly every time it rained, even if it meant working weekends. Gerald, Milly's husband, felt pressured by the company to work in questionable conditions. In the mine where Gerald worked, the air was often heavy with rock dust and "did not have ventilation." Milly admitted that Gerald felt pressured to falsify air-quality reports, at one point revealing to her, "Every shift I lie." Ultimately, Gerald contracted black lung (pneumoconiosis) and silicosis from exposure to rock dust, a disease that eventually took his life.

In Kentucky, lawmakers commonly argue that unions like the UMWA are unnecessary because the Federal Mine Safety and Health Act protects workers. However, Appalachian Citizens Law Center attorney Steve Sanders, a longtime representative for whistleblowers, explained that "very few miners in Eastern Kentucky have *ever* used either of those protections" (interview, August 13, 2013). Without the security of a union, the desire for work in economically distressed areas can outweigh the desire to voice safety concerns. Steve explained that people endure risk because they "want to work" and do not want to complain about safety issues and risk employment. Whereas UMWA afforded miners grievance procedures or supported miners when they would go on strike, without the UMWA, miners are less likely to speak up against the company. Steve believes now that "people don't call out the issues," especially with the recent plummet in coal production and related political tension. He explained, "Right now, this is a terrible economy for miners … and so they just put up with things."

Unfortunately, not "calling out the issues" can have catastrophic consequences for coal-producing communities. This is evidenced by the numerous coal-related fatalities and disasters in east Kentucky and Central Appalachia (Figure 2), most recently the Upper Big Branch Mine Disaster in 2010 that killed twenty-nine miners in West Virginia. One of the most prominent mine disasters in Eastern Kentucky occurred in the Letcher County community of Oven Fork in spring 1976. Rock dust and gas accumulated in Blue Diamond Coal's Scotia Mine, ultimately causing an explosion that killed fifteen miners. As the community grieved, a second explosion two days later killed an additional eleven inspectors who had gone back into the mine. Scotia was notorious for being poorly ventilated and, at the time of the explosion, had accumulated 420 safety violations (Sinclair and Bishop 1980).

Mine disasters and fatalities can create "collective trauma" (Perry 2012) for coal-mining communities (Scott et al. 2012). Gary was a UMWA miner in a nearby mine when the Scotia explosion occurred. Because Gary knew "the guys" in the mines, he began to experience posttraumatic stress (what he called "survivor guilt") after the incident (interview, July 13, 2013). Gary struggled to come to terms with the fact that the company only received a monetary punishment, what he considered a "slap on the wrist … without any real consequences." Having lost

Figure 2 Memorials honor mine fatalities in Eastern Kentucky.

friends in the explosion, Gary believed that disasters were an enormous "stress on the community" and that the "permanent damage to families is irrefutable." In 1991, Arch Minerals bought Blue Diamond Coal's Scotia property and began surface mining above the disaster site, which Gary referred to as "double devastation." Gary expressed sorrow over the loss of the miners in an incident that he feels would have been different if the mine had been better managed or if the miners had been represented by the union.

Mine disasters are only one among many dangers of working in the mines. The Kentucky Coal Association attracts recruits by claiming "it's not pick and shovel anymore," but high-tech machinery does not necessarily guarantee job safety. Rib rolls (collapsing supports), kettle bottom (dense, fossilized plant matter that falls from the walls in deadly chunks), and getting pinned by continuous miners (clawlike machines that dig out mine shafts) are just a few of these dangers. Labor organizations have historically pushed back against companies to secure both safety precautions and health benefits. However, without the union, "the only entity representing their interest is the company, so I think they are vulnerable. And they don't have any rights with the company or protection from anyone. It's a hard place for them as well" (Mimi, interview, August 7, 2013). These intimate encounters with the dangers of mining point to the incongruities between coal-mining families' experiences and the pro-coal narratives espoused by the coal lobby and politicians.

"Cryin' on coal": Making sense of economic transition

In the absence of the UMWA, pro-coal lobby groups and politicians use the war on coal as an explanatory framework for the coal industry recession, clearly defining the region's problems as democrats, environmentalists, and regulators (Haven, interview, November 3, 2013). Commonsense understandings of the coal recession reflect

(but do not completely mirror) these sentiments. For example, Hope felt that the war on coal disavows the sacrifices miners have made to provide energy for the country:

> I always likened that [mining] to the military thing. They were going in and risking their lives every day so we could be comfortable and have electricity. … It's like a slap in the face. We don't need you, we don't need your jobs. … And you can't help but feel that way when your livelihood and your homes are being attacked. You know, what you do is being attacked. (interview, July 18, 2013)

Similarly, Gene's testimony indicates that she considers the war on coal to be an intentional affront:

> I just think the whole "war on coal" thing that is going on presently—and it can't be called anything but a war on coal—I just think it's something to set us back again. Because you know, we don't want food stamps. We don't want medical cards. … We already see where that's got us. We want to work for a living. (interview, August 7, 2013)

These statements illustrate how war-on-coal narratives can make coal miners and their families feel personally threatened. However, even among those who accept war-on-coal narratives, it is not just a complete embrace of the industry and pro-coal narratives. War-on-coal narratives are negotiated amid intimate experiences with the industry. One person described this complicated relationship as a "love/hate relationship between families and the companies" (Gene, interview, August 7, 2013). Many people indicated that part of the reason they support coal and oppose the war on coal is that they see no other viable opportunities for people to stay in the region and make a decent income. Nevertheless, the dangers of mining work outlined in the preceding section make people *open* to the idea of other opportunities. Others support coal, while at the same time recognizing the environmental destruction it entails. These varied positions reveal the complex articulations between hegemonic narratives and personal experiences, both weighing on commonsense understandings of coal recession.

Hope is the spouse and mother of a miner. After Hope's son was laid off from a Harlan County "strip [mine] job," he had to make difficult decisions regarding his future. Ultimately, he decided to go into the military. Hope explained, "These young guys can go join the military, or they can go to college. But when they come out, there's not going to be anything here for them" (interview, July 18, 2013). She believed that beyond the coal industry, it is difficult for people to find employment that offers similar wages without requiring higher education.

One plausible reason *women* may support coal mining is because of the lack of equal opportunities. Combining two low-wage jobs into a sixty-five-hour workweek, Hope made a fraction of the wages her son earned working in the mines. She felt stuck working low-wage positions. Hope said, "Everybody's doing part-time jobs now. The forty-hour workweek is over. … You work two jobs." Hope must rely on her husband's mining job for health insurance, and his wages are essential for their family's income. To her, the lack of other opportunities is infuriating. She explained that people have "worked so hard to get what they've got, and where they've got. And now [they] have nothing." Sheryl, whose husband owned a small mining company, echoed Hope's anxiety: "What are these people supposed to do? Pack up and leave what has been their home for their entire lives? It's one thing if you want to; it's another if you're forced to feed your family" (interview, August 7, 2013).

Though Hope and Sheryl both explicitly professed their support for the coal industry (and condemned the war on coal), they also recognized the need for economic diversity *because* of the dangers associated with mining. Hope is a self-proclaimed "advocate for coal"; however, she admitted she would be open to the idea of safer jobs. She believed that many people probably do not want to mine but support mining because it is one of the few opportunities for Eastern Kentuckians to earn good salaries and benefits:

> Well, me personally, as of being comfortable with and everything, I would love to see the coal industry come back because it's the only thing I see happening here. But, I am not so closed-minded to not accept change and accept something else. But we need to see something. We need to know, yes, there is something else for our area. We do have jobs for you. I guess if we were reassured, it would probably be—people would take a different attitude. I mean, because, I'm sure a lot of these men don't like to go in these mines and work every day. You know, I worry daily about my son. … That was a big stress. (interview, July 18, 2013)

Similarly, Sheryl suggested that mining is something people do out of necessity, not because of a commitment to maintaining the region's industrial heritage. Sheryl expressed that supporting families is the only reason people in the region went into the mines each day, stating, "Nobody does it because they want to; my daddy never wanted to crawl under that mountain" (interview, August 7, 2013).

Despite their openness to alternatives, the war on coal sustains the hope that once the industry is not under attack by DC bureaucrats and regulators, the coal industry could bounce back and restore jobs to communities. Several community members indicated that local leadership was waiting for the return to "business as usual" rather than genuinely advocating for economic alternatives. Many people also recognized that allowing the continuation of destructive mining practices could impair economic alternatives by continuing to destroy the land and the water. In Eastern Kentucky, MTR mines jut out from the verdant landscape like massive wounds. As Gary, a former miner, stated, "in the long run, coal might be a finite resource, we know that. The future might be tourism, there's a lot of people who think that. But if they destroy the mountains there's concern what impact that would have on tourism, besides the water issues that go with it" (interview, July 13, 2013).

Benny echoed Gary's frustration that leadership is not embracing economic alternatives, recognizing that mining is "short-term, a short-term investment, a short-term profit" (interview, July 15, 2013). Benny had spent the past several years fighting Arch Mineral's attempt to mine Black Mountain in his hometown of Lynch. As a former miner, Benny was not "anti-coal," though he would like to see other resources replace coal. Because his community has suffered immensely from out-migration and population declines, Benny believed the key to bringing young people back was "leaving something for the kids." As a member of the city council, the legacy Benny wanted to leave was clean water and renewable energy. He hoped that "if we could fix the place up, kids will come back." Benny had been tirelessly researching ways to obtain grant support for developing infrastructure for bottling plants and updating water pipes. However, Benny complained, "Politicians don't want to talk about other resources—they want to blame Obama." He believed politicians do not seriously consider his efforts because, in his words, leadership is still "cryin' on coal."

Despite the lack of state and federal leadership, grassroots organizations possess tremendous fight, hope, and effort to effect substantive change. In Eastern Kentucky, Appalshop has been central to this effort. In response to growing polarization and the industry's "co-opting the history and culture and heritage of mining," Appalshop's community radio station WMMT started a program called *Making Connections* (Mimi, interview, August 1, 2013). Mimi explained,

> We're not about engaging in a discussion about whether coal is good or bad, but we're trying to say, there are people in this region who are starting businesses, revitalizing towns, using culture, music, the internet, whatever, to create some jobs in the region, and opportunities. Just hoping and believing that if people hear those stories, that it will give some hope that there are alternatives, there are some things that can be done.

Appalshop also coordinates an annual Appalachian Media Institute, where it trains regional youths to collaborate on film and media projects that honor the diverse heritage of Appalachia and challenge stereotypes about the region. Appalshop has been one of the multiple organizations trying to verbalize what it would take for young people to stay in the region rather than migrate to larger cities. Mimi explained, "It includes tolerance of difference in all

kinds of ways, as well as jobs" (interview, August 1, 2013). Similarly, the STAY Project is a network of young leaders across many Appalachian states working to affirm race, gender, and sexuality-based diversity so that Appalachian youths can thrive in their home communities. In Harlan County, a community project called "Higher Ground" uses theater to help heal the systemic problems and spiritual tolls that many Appalachian communities experience. Roy said, "The metaphor there is that when it floods here, people go to higher ground, and it brings people together of various classes and communities, cause we're all suffering from the same problem" (interview, August 8, 2013). These are only a few of the many community-based initiatives suggesting that there is much more than coal keeping the lights on in Eastern Kentucky.

Discussion and conclusion

This research demonstrates that neoliberal disinformation like the war on coal influences, but does not entirely determine, commonsense understandings of coal recession in Appalachia. Pro-coal lobby groups and politicians push neoliberal disinformation that demonizes regulations and praises the coal industry. However, disinformation campaigns articulate with historical processes and personal experiences, specifically the embodied dangers of mine work that increased after neoliberalization in the 1980s and 1990s, which led to the demise of the UMWA. The demise of the UMWA continues to profoundly impact coal-mining families, who now deal with the many dangers of mining without union representation. For those who accept the war-on-coal narrative, the physical dangers of mining provide a constant incongruity preventing an indiscriminate acceptance of the coal lobby and pro-coal politicians' claims that coal is the future. Even for those who were avid coal supporters (and condemn the war on coal), the dangers of mining make them open to the idea of other economic opportunities if they were to become available. Other pro-coal residents recognize the environmental hazards coal mining has on communities and understand its implications for alternative economies. Many grassroots organizations and groups outright reject the war-on-coal narrative and fight for an alternative future. More long-term research is needed to understand how the unstable but "accumulating debris" of common sense shapes personal and political beliefs in energy-producing communities (Crehan 2011, 286). Further research in Appalachia should also assess to what degree the Trump administration has influenced coal sentiments.

The call for more nuanced engagement with ethical aspects of energy dilemmas asks us to impose less moral critique and judgment on energy contexts, allowing space for energy actors to have differing beliefs from ourselves (High and Smith 2019, 11). While I agree with this "analytical open-mindedness," it is somewhat challenging to accomplish in the current moment of populist rhetorical appeals to common sense via posttruths, disinformation, and fake news. Gramsci's concept of common sense is a useful analytic lens that enables researchers to account for both the ethical lives of energy actors and the pervasive hegemonic narratives inevitably enmeshed in energy contexts. Understanding hegemonic appeals to common sense and personal ethics as only part of the "whole mass of disparate beliefs and opinions that have come together over time" to influence (but not determine) subjects opens possibilities for broader understandings of energy interlocuters (Crehan 2011, 286). Attending to the "cracks and fissures" (Tretjak 2013, 60) between hegemonic narratives and local experiences in energy contexts challenges popular understandings of rural working-class communities (i.e., the blue-collar narrative), opening space for alternative framings. This kind of nuanced examination is critical in the current moment of seeming partisan and rural–urban polarization, which threatens our ability to deal with the many energy challenges ahead.

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Note

1 All interlocutors have been given pseudonyms, except specialized informants representing organized entities who did not share personal information.

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