

# PEOPLE OF COLOR IN THE GREEN FUTURE OF CENTRAL APPALACHIA

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“**THE ONLY THING BLACK IN CENTRAL APPALACHIA IS COAL,**” if you listen to the national media. After nearly forty years engaged in study, research, and service about and among African Americans in Central Appalachia – not to mention having been born into and spending my first twenty years in a family of (Black) coal miners, in Harlan County, Kentucky – I find it enormously frustrating that my contribution to these essays would be titled, framed and detailed such as it is. The reasons for the popular perception that “*there are no people of color in Central Appalachia*” are complex; but, they are *strangers* in their own lands, amazingly so in the historic coal towns, in stark contradiction to the fact that they have worked and lived near the mine openings for most of the last century, while coal has been king.<sup>1</sup>

In Hazard, Harlan, Lynch, or Pikeville in Eastern Kentucky; or Appalachia, Castlewood, or Norton in Southwest Virginia; or Beckley, Bluefield, Gary, and Keystone in Southern West Virginia – people of color (Blacks) live in *their* hollows and enclaves; but, by-and-large, they are not *of* their total community. No critical mass of them are members of the associations and organizations or among the body of powerful individuals or even in grass roots community-based interests groups whose actions influence and control economic developments. Even more certainly, people of color are not at the table in the academies and the regional think tanks. African Americans in Central Appalachia must be *proactively* brought into the work of the ATI and CAPP, where society, economy, and environment intersect. Their voices must be heard by the organizers and alliance-builders if there is to be justice and equality in the transformed healthy, prosperous, and sustainable, future Appalachia that is envisioned in these essays.

## **The backdrop: Invisibility and marginality**

The underlying justification for the first comprehensive account<sup>2</sup> about the presence of blacks in the Appalachian Region was in reaction to an observation made in *the* primer in Appalachia Studies. Writing almost a century ago, John C. Campbell put on paper; “in those parts of [Central]

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<sup>1</sup> Torok, George D. *A guide to historic coal towns of the Big Sandy Valley*. Knoxville. University of Tennessee Press. 2004

<sup>2</sup> Turner, William H. and Edward J. Cabbell. *Blacks in Appalachia*. Lexington. University Press of Kentucky. 1985.

Appalachia...with few large valleys, few mining and industrial developments, or few cities, there are few Negroes.”<sup>3</sup>

In what is widely recognized as *the* research-based validation for funding the Appalachian Regional Commission, John C. Belcher concluded that “the number of Negroes in the Appalachian Region is such a small proportion of the total population [that] the social consequences of their presence and migration are not of any great significance.”<sup>4</sup>

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Despite Professor Belcher’s rather callous and dismissive assertion, Blacks – primarily through migration from Central Alabama and the Uplands of South Carolina – made up a critical mass of the railroad workers and they penetrated the mountain hollows of what we know today as the Central Appalachian coalfields; they were the in the forefront of the great industrial transformation of the Region, beginning in the 1880s. My grandparents were among the Blacks who came to occupy a great many of the coal mining jobs in Central Appalachia and withal, they formed many significant institutions, churches, schools, and mutual aid societies, for example, between 1900 and 1960.<sup>5</sup> My father was born in Wise County (Coeburn), in far Southwestern Virginia, and my mother’s Appalachian roots are deep in Benham, in Harlan County, KY., where she gave birth to my seven siblings, in the nearby coal camp of Lynch, which claimed the “largest coal tipple in the world” in the year of my birth, 1946.

Even with that reality, in a 1954-dated report commissioned by the Southern Regional Council that was designed to discuss the implications of the Brown Decision with local leaders in the Appalachia highland, the author opined that he “...believed the power and obligation lie

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<sup>3</sup> Campbell, John C. *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*. Lexington. University Press of Kentucky. 1921.

<sup>4</sup> Belcher, John C, “*Population Growth and Characteristics*,” in *The Southern Appalachian Region: A Survey*, Thomas R. Ford (Editor). Lexington. University Press of Kentucky.

<sup>5</sup> Wagner, Thomas E. and Phillip J. Obermiller, *African American Miners and Migrants: The Eastern Kentucky Social Club*. Urbana. University of Illinois Press. 2004.

primarily with the whites, [so I] talked with relatively few Negroes and lay no claim to knowing Negro opinion.”<sup>6</sup> The author of the report was a Berea College professor.

Not insignificantly, it was Berea College graduate, Christian minister and civil rights devotee James G. Branscome, who spoke up about the invisibility and marginalization of people of color in [Central] Appalachia, at the time when the ARC was in its infancy.

One group of Appalachians who are consistently overlooked and underserved by the institutions of the region is the blacks. While the percentage of blacks in the region as a whole is low, about eight percent, they make up the **entire** population of many isolated small hollows and ghost coal towns abandoned by the corporations and welfare and poverty agencies. Because the backbreaking jobs that brought black imports into the region are gone and because of the discrimination and competition with the majority of poor white people for jobs and welfare funds, their existence is a poor one indeed. As yet, no agency or journalist has documented the presence and needs of these people, let alone described the culture of a minority group in the midst of another cultural minority.<sup>7</sup>

### **Not just whites in Appalachia**

Nearly four decades after Rev. Branscome’s criticism, there is much more recognition of racial and ethnic diversity – the growth of minority populations – in Appalachia as a whole, particularly in the Southern Region (AL., GA., MISS., NC, SC, and TN). An ARC-sponsored report<sup>8</sup> published in 2004 confirms historian Ron Eller’s point that “contemporary Appalachia is a diverse and complex place.”<sup>9</sup>

Most of the 321,000 new Appalachian residents since 2000 are minority, they live in the Southern Region, and about 80,000 of them are Hispanic. In a recent ethnographic interpretation of the ARC-sponsored study, it is noted that Hispanic entrepreneurs, in contrast to African Americans,

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<sup>6</sup> Menefee, Robert G., titled “The Supreme Court Decision and the Appalachian South.” *New South*. Vol. 9. No. 10. October 1954. (Southern Regional Council, Atlanta, GA).

<sup>7</sup> Branscome, James G. “Annihilating the Hillbilly: The Appalachian’s Struggle with American Institutions,” in *Journal of the Committee of Southern Churchmen*. Winter 1971, 40.

<sup>8</sup> Pollard, Kevin, “A ‘New Diversity’: Race and Ethnicity in the Appalachian Region.” Appalachian Regional Commission. September 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Eller, Ronald D., *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945*. Lexington. University Press of Kentucky.

are much more likely to start their own businesses.<sup>10</sup> The in-migration of Hispanics to Central Appalachia since the 1990 Census – especially in historically homogenous and overwhelmingly “white spaces” – is rising continuously while the number of African Americans in coal towns, historically long present – but largely ignored – is declining precipitously.<sup>11</sup> In the coalfield counties I have studied in Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia, people of color have much higher poverty rates and their quality of life – as measured by the standard indices – is much lower than the general (white) population.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, however, because the racial and ethnic diversity of the Central Appalachian Region will only grow, some policy centers and service providers have put in place culturally-sensitive interventions to facilitate the *new diversity* in Appalachia.<sup>13</sup>

### **Where do we go from here?**

While spending a month in the summer of 2009 talking to black community leaders in Eastern Kentucky, Southwest Virginia and in Southern West Virginia, I didn’t heard a single person talk about the interconnection between environmental justice, green technologies; and, most importantly to them, about how green jobs were interconnected to civil rights issues.

Is the word getting to African Americans about climate change and related themes? It is, albeit rather belatedly. Despite the fact that Professor Robert Bullard, an African-American scholar, has been writing, organizing, mobilizing, and empowering Blacks to take charge of their lives and surroundings for almost two decades, only quite recently did America’s premier black think tank – the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies – whose three decades-long mission “focuses

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<sup>10</sup> Curlin, Beth, “Hispanics in Appalachia,” in *Mountain Promise*: A publication of the Brushy Fork Institute. (Spring-Summer, 2008). Berea, Kentucky

<sup>11</sup> Lewis, Ronald, *Black Coal Miners in America*. Lexington. University Press of Kentucky (1987). See also, Turner, William H., “Blacks in the coal mining industry of Eastern Kentucky.” Unpublished study commissioned by the Kentucky Commission on Human Rights. (Fall, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> See: “*Report of the Poverty Task Force*.” Research Memorandum #504, Legislative Research Commission. Frankfort, KY. (December 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Parisi, Domenico and Danile T. Lichter. “Hispanic segregation in America’s new rural boomtowns.” Population Reference Bureau. September 2007

exclusively on issues of particular concern to African Americans and other people of color” – take a seat at the climate change table.<sup>14</sup>

Said Joint Center CEO Ralph B. Everett:

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“At a time when our nation is facing major economic challenges, we must ensure all sectors are coming together to discuss climate change policy proposals that are likely to have far-reaching consequences...ensuring that energy policies are fair to all Americans.”<sup>15</sup>

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Despite the fact that he was, until recently, the Special Advisor for Green Jobs at the Obama White House Council on Environmental Quality, African American Van Jones’ name is not prominent among blacks in Central Appalachia. Nor does the name of Chicago-based Naomi Jones – founder of Blacks in Green -- ring a bell along the ridges and in the (historic) coal towns where blacks have lived and worked (mainly in the mines) since the days when blacks were in the critical mass of the workers who were so vital to the industrialization in Appalachia. It is reasonable to assume that only a small number of people of color in Central Appalachia have heard of the Central Appalachia Prosperity Project and the Appalachian Transition Initiative.

Those devoted to driving the healthy, prosperous, and sustainable future must be *proactive* in bringing people of color into the green economy of Central Appalachia. My sense is that the very terms – environmental stewardship, ecological awareness, sustainable values and practices – are not in the vocabulary of most African-Americans in the hollows of the Region. It’s like the answer a woman gave me when I asked her if she were an “Affrilachian.”<sup>16</sup> She said she was so busy trying to figure out how to stay at home and make it that she didn’t have time to figure out the latest thing she had been labeled. She was, until recently, a coal miner in Harlan County, Kentucky.

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Bullard’s book *Dumping in Dixie: Race Class, and Environmental Quality* (1990) is widely regarded as the first to fully articulate the concept of environmental justice. He is professor of sociology at Clark Atlanta University, and also serves as director of the university’s Environmental Justice Resource Center.

<sup>15</sup> Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. *Joint Center National Survey Results: African Americans Respond to Global Warming*. Washington, DC. (July 2008)

<sup>16</sup> See *Pluck!: The Journal of Affrilachian Arts and Culture*. Frank X Walker (Editor) University of Kentucky.

Helen Lewis' community development ideas abound with practical and effective tips that combine participatory development, cultural identity, social capital, and sustainability that can be applied in bringing people of color into the conversation about the future of Central Appalachia.<sup>17</sup> If anywhere industrialization and de-industrialization has eroded and destroyed communities, it appears in 3-D in the black coal towns of Central Appalachia. While there were the vagaries and downsides to growing up on the black side of the mountain – in a coal company town, Lynch, Kentucky, in the 1950s and 60s – I remember better the foundational Appalachian values I learned there that imprinted in me a sense of self-determination, social networking, community participation, cooperation, and mutual aid.

Professor Lewis' toolkit contains some elements that are particularly important the work of the ATI and CAPP, where society, economy, and environment intersect, where people of color come in. Some basic values and assumptions, hitherto largely ignored where people of color in the mountains are concerned include: a) *people development*: gaining skills, education, pride, and confidence, it is b) *cultural based*: it encourages creativity and preserves important cultural values and traditions, it is c) *inclusive*: not limited to one group, or those who already have power; and, it starts with d) *local resources*: concentrating on the assets of people, what they want to preserve, their skills and knowledge – not concentrating on deficits.<sup>18</sup>

People of color in Central Appalachia will be as enthralled and ecstatic as anyone about weatherization, solar energy, waste-to-energy, and the entire range of Central Appalachia's green future – even in the face of campaigns that stir up fears of job losses or utility rate hikes – if they are brought into the conversations on the front end. People of color in the Region have been ignored and left out of environmental and sustainability movements despite the fact that traditional Appalachian values to which black mountain people subscribe fit perfectly with values of responsible environmental stewardship.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Lewis, Helen M., "Rebuilding Communities: A 12-Step Recovery Program," in *Appalachian Journal*. Spring-Summer, 2007, 316-324.

<sup>18</sup> McKnight, John L., *Mapping Community Capacity*. Evanston, Illinois. Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research. Northwestern University (2000)

<sup>19</sup> Green, Naomi. "Bringing Black Americans into the Green Economy." *In these Times: News and Comments of the Workers' Struggle*. September 2009.

Their support for environmental justice and equity is rooted in the bedrock of strong faith communities found along the ridges where people of color live. There are many competent “spark plugs,” creative mountain people of color, who know a lot about human rights abuses and the connection between how they regard and treat their fellow citizens and how they care for and treat the planet.

The environmental challenges in Central Appalachia cannot be solved without embracing the wisdom and mobilizing the involvement of people of color at the shovel-in-the ground as well as the management levels. Importantly, people of color in the mountains are keen to the *skepticism* about the continued existence of racial discrimination and unequal opportunity, what with the election of Barack Obama at president of the United States of America. They “*get it!*” when it comes to communicating the message that justice is not just about themselves – and their spots along the mountaintops – but rather it is about all the people in Central Appalachia.<sup>20</sup>

Futurists – such as ATI and CAPP – must recognize this and increase the civic engagement of people of color in the economic transition of Central Appalachia, to include bringing in collaboration between the people of color who live near the mine openings (in the rural areas, the *interior* of Central Appalachia) and those in nearby (*rim*) cities, e.g., Keystone and Charleston, WV and Harlan and Lexington, in Kentucky.

Coal has *never* been the only thing black in Central Appalachia. The future of the economically-diversified area – where renewable energy strategies are being staked out – will miss its goal of maximally bringing into play all human capital if it repeats the mistakes of the past; it must include people of color.

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<sup>20</sup> See: “Ten Lessons for Talking About Racial Equality in the Age of Obama.” [www.opportunityagenda.org](http://www.opportunityagenda.org). January 2010.