Powerlessness Repurposed: The Feminist Ethos of Judy Bonds

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The Feminist Ethos of Judy Bonds

Mary Beth Pennington

In 2003, just four years after joining the Coal River Mountain Watch (CRMW) activist organization, West Virginian Julia “Judy” Bonds won the international North American Goldman Environmental Prize, which is awarded annually to “grassroots environmental heroes from the world’s six inhabited continental regions . . . for sustained and significant efforts to protect and enhance the natural environment, often at great personal risk” (“About the Prize”). This achievement in such a short time is notable because of Bonds’s background: At forty-seven years old, she was already a grandmother when she joined the movement against mountaintop removal (MTR). A former Pizza Hut waitress and “coal miner’s daughter,” she never attended college, but as an Appalachian activist, she managed to make audiences of the United Nations, Congress, and a number of environmental, academic, corporate, and governmental organizations listen so much so that she became “one of the most visible faces” in the anti-MTR movement (Barry 51).

Although she never talked about her activism as rhetoric and never identified as feminist, her distinct rhetorical strategies apparent in the few artifacts that preserve her voice (primarily YouTube videos and interview and speech transcripts) are clearly feminist. Bonds enacts ethos in ways that only a woman activist can, but she also offers a blueprint for leveraging
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powerlessness that can be useful to any environmental justice activist. In her public discourse, she constructs authority through her first-person experience as she also invites audiences to analyze the contingency of that authority. She uses emblems of powerlessness as a way to convey the urgency of her message. While she draws audiences’ attention to immediate environmental threats, Bonds calls on them to think about how they conceive of her as a victim activist, how they make decisions about her rights to authority as a speaker, and how their prejudices of class, age, gender, and culture inevitably affect those decisions. Central to Bonds’s ethos, then, is an abiding concern with relationships and power. The exigency of the environmental threat she faces down makes this ethos possible.

The ease with which Bonds confronts the rhetorical complexity of her message as she also pleads for support in the anti-MTR campaign suggests that feminist, ecological ethos finds its resonance in grassroots activism. Environmental injustice, especially, provides an opportunity for someone like Bonds to take the stage as an effective feminist rhetor for several reasons. First, environmental/social justice rhetoric, like some feminist epistemologies, is predicated on personal testimony with the same understanding that the private is very much a part of public matters (Capek 8). Victims of environmental injustice are more times than not poor and marginalized, so their grassroots activists often rely primarily on personal experience as opposed to the privileged discourse of academics and pundits (Capek 7). By using personal experience as evidence, activists such as Bonds express the second-wave feminist strategy of “making the personal political,” a 1968 slogan attributed to feminist activist Carol Hanish that helped to propel the women’s movement forward (Rosen 196). Further, the entrance of the poor and marginalized to public forums can only work if those representatives self-identify as such in order to reveal the complex social hierarchies and prejudices that make environmental injustice possible. This move corresponds with another tenant of feminism—that individuals must reveal how longstanding prejudices are embedded in our social institutions and how these prejudices direct injustices. Finally, because instances of environmental injustice are more times than not imminent threats to individuals, there is an urgency underlying this rhetoric that makes the transformation of the personal to the political and the entrance of unlikely activist figures into the public spotlight all the more essential. This understood urgency is especially valuable for women activists from marginalized backgrounds who can leverage common stereotypes that their culture of
origin may hold regarding their "place" as keepers of the home and family. By publicly rejecting these expectations, women such as Bonds are able to demonstrate the acuteness of the environmental threat—it is so grave that women have been shaken from their preferred way of living and thrust into the spotlight against their will—as they are also able to preserve their cultural values. Subsequently, women activists who make such rhetorical moves join a tradition of female activists, including Mary Harris "Mother" Jones, Fannie Lou Hamer, Lois Gibbs, and countless others.² For Bonds this resemblance serves as further legitimization among the audiences of environmental and social justice activists, lawmakers, and other supporters to whom she speaks.

By isolating the touchstones of Bonds’s rhetoric that find resonance in feminist theory, I articulate a praxis of feminist, ecological ethos, which may serve as a model for victims of environmental injustice who often find themselves with nothing to rely on but their personal experience. This chapter traces Bonds’s focus on relationships and power by examining how she: (1) shares her personal experiences to establish motivation for her activism; (2) prompts audiences to view how they themselves play a part in the MTR problem; and (3) positions MTR as the exigency for a national conversation about the causes of environmental injustice. Section one demonstrates how Bonds rhetorically constructs the story of her entry into grassroots activism as one of necessity. After years of Big Coal’s environmental and economic damage to her family and community, she points to her loss of power as matriarch and protector as the motivating factor for her involvement in anti-MTR efforts. Section two focuses on Bonds’s rhetoric of identification, how she works to establish commonalities between herself, her audiences, and the environment using familiar and distinctly female, activist traditions. Section three highlights the ways in which Bonds calls attention to rhetorical constraints instead of diffusing them, asking her audiences to take ownership of their prejudices as a way to best address environmental injustice. Bonds’s feminist ethos, engendered by her rhetorical strategies, can inform future environmental justice efforts.

**Personal Experience as Rhetorical Exigency**

Judy Bonds’s first response to the effects of MTR was triggered by the horror of seeing her grandson and other children wading in a stream full of dead fish.
There was fish kills in which kids, my cousin’s kids, and my own grandson, you know, were standing in the stream and found these dead fish. Then I started to notice as my neighbors moved out, there was coal trucks running constantly and it just devalued our property, our quality of life. ... I was afraid for my family. I became angry. I became frustrated because I couldn’t find any help. (qtd. in Barry 51)

She would often recount this experience in interviews as a way to explain why her participation in the anti-MTR effort was unavoidable. For Bonds, this experience operates not just as her impetus for environmental activism but also as kairic rhetoric, a strategy of exigency. Carl C. Herndl and Adela C. Licona identify “kairos” as “the moment in time when speaking and acting is opportune and when this opportunity has important implications for a concept of agency” (3). They tie kairos to ethos, which “implies the authority to speak and act with consequences ... a legitimating function for a rhetor or subject” (3). Bonds uses the story of her grandson and the dead fish to validate her right to speak and act. Like many grassroots activists, Bonds began speaking out publicly against MTR because she felt she had no choice. In her hometown of Marfork Hollow, West Virginia, Massey Energy Corporation, the largest producer of coal in Central Appalachia, formerly headed by the infamous CEO, Don Blankenship, had just begun MTR operations near her home when she noticed what she called “white gooey stuff on the bottom of the water” (qtd. in Barry 51). 3 Bonds frames this moment as the lighting of the fuse for her activist efforts, a motivation not unlike that of other environmental justice activists, often women, who burst on the activist scene as political “naives.” Women are often the first to speak out against environmental threats because so many environmental disasters literally “strike home” (see Stein). Joyce Barry explains:

[F]eminist political ecologists argue that women have a unique connection to environmental issues, not based solely or exclusively in biology, but primarily in the work they perform in their homes and communities. Because women are often responsible for providing and managing life’s basic necessities, such as food, clothing, child care and elder care, they view environmental problems in unique ways. (10)

Implicit in this reasoning is the foundational belief that a mother has a biological right to protect her children, if not an automatic reflex to do so. This
belief is heteronormative and conservative, but its persistence among certain audiences makes it useful for rhetorical leveraging.

Bonds uses motherhood as a rhetorical commonplace, embracing the knowledge and values commonly shared by audiences to establish the relational awareness she calls for in her audiences and reflects in her ethos, signaling a kind of kairic “permission” to enter public debate at the grassroots level. Even though the opportune moment enables agency, it is the audience who ultimately determines whether or not that moment is opportune and whether or not the speaker has the authority or permission to seize it. Phillip Siporia traces this understanding of kairos to Doro Levi’s 1924 essay, “The Concept of Kairos and the Philosophy of Plato,” wherein Levi finds in Plato’s “philosophic rhetoric” that kairos involves a linking together of ethics and aesthetics. In this way, “kairos establishes the moral value of human actions” (6). Bonds appeals to the moral sensibilities of her audience by sharing her personal experience as a concerned mother, a form of discourse that is harmonious to their understanding of health and order. This moral appeal trumps whatever reservations audiences may have about her credibility as a speaker. As Siporia reveals through Isocrates, who had not yet considered women as viable public figures, “kairos is a principle that guides men to do, not what they are entitled to do, but, rather, what they should do” (12). Bonds’s testimony reveals to the audience why she has no choice but to act.

Audiences grant Bonds “permission” to serve as spokesperson not only because her motherly instinct provides a socially accepted explanation for her interest, but also because her identification as “mother” casts her as part of a tradition of other women activists who legitimate their activism in similar ways. In an interview addressing the fact that women outnumbered men in the anti-MTR movement early on, Bonds argues that:

It’s a protection issue. . . . A woman just feels that she has to protect her children and her grandchildren and her homeplace. And that’s why there is so many women involved in this because we have that instinct inside of us and that stubborn streak and the convictions to protect. . . . Through the traditional people I’ve studied, the women has been the ones that managed things, that protected things, that basically did what they needed to do to protect their children. (qtd. in Barry 35)

In her response, Bonds appeals to the traditional norm of the woman defending the domestic space and the health of the family in order to publicly legitimize her interest in anti-MTR issues. Her use of the word “instinct”
indicates that she has little choice in the matter and associates that motivation to all women activists with her use of "we." Her repeated use of "protect" emphasizes that she is taking the position of defender, not aggressor, establishing that her activism as a woman has been provoked and is not such an unusual response. Her reasoning clearly operates relationally by connecting motherly duty and crisis to grassroots activism.

Bonds's nod to a familiar and established rhetorical commonplace grants her permission to enter public debate in at least two ways. For some audiences, it is a justification of her activism. In central Appalachia, a woman's interest in her home and family is not just understood, it is expected. Consequently, the anti-MTR movement has been largely organized and populated by working class women whose activism has been informed by "entrenched gender ideologies shaped and solidified by coal in the region," namely that women are responsible for the household and men are responsible for work outside the home (Barry 53). As a woman and mother, Bonds claims a right that few would question. Although progressive societies no longer suggest that women are solely responsible for domestic matters, the basic premise remains, and while many raise alarm at the association in matters of policy, most audiences are certainly not alarmed when a woman herself embraces this role. Many view the response as "natural" in fact—a commonplace that women rhetors who are mothers may do well to note.

For audiences who are sympathetic to her cause and familiar with the history of activism in America, Bonds's maternal rhetoric evokes memories of notable activist figures. Mari Boor Tonn reports that "early women reformers at times assumed maternal roles to bolster their ethos and deflect criticism of their speaking and independent lifestyles" (2). Bonds joins the ranks of such activists. Tonn specifically discusses labor activist Mother Jones's strategy of "militant motherhood" as grounded in "physical care and protection and in a feminine rhetorical style that is at once affirming and confrontational" (3). When Bonds assumed a similar stance in her speeches before academics, environmental action organizations, legislators, and even local coal workers, surely she evoked images of Mother Jones in the audiences' minds. Such an association prompts not only nostalgia, but a sense that Bonds understands the tradition in which she is participating, even borrowing from the ethos of the activists whose strategies she uses, especially Mother Jones, while building beyond them. In short, when Bonds identifies as a mother she appeals to both traditional and progressive audiences, achieving the agency to speak publicly of the injustices she has witnessed.
Mory
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Bond's rhetorical exigency and ethos evolve from her life experiences in a coal-mining community and from her conviction about the injustices of the economic and social systems around her. She refers to Central Appalachia as "an energy 'sacrifice zone,' where the lives and environment of the few are sacrificed for the good of the many" (qtd. in Barry 106). Most of the coal extraction in Appalachia that provides electricity for much of the United States comes from southern West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, and western Virginia, which are areas nationally recognized for their poverty and economic depression. Over the years, Appalachia has existed in the national consciousness as either a culture in dire need of charity—a place of poverty and illiteracy—or as a culture defined by defiance and pride as illustrated by the great Coal Wars at the turn of the century and the ensuing United Mine Workers of America labor battles of the late 1980s. Tapping into this national consciousness, Bonds refers to the economy in southern West Virginia as a "private serfdom" (Shapiro 70). As the "only job in town," coal mining has provided many people with well-paying jobs over the years, but the industry has also held residents hostage economically. With the fall in labor union involvement and subsequent drop in health and safety regulations, as well as the widespread weakening of the economy, Appalachians are clinging to the coal industry more desperately now than ever. The problem, of course, is that the demand for coal has led to new developments of extraction in the coal industry that require fewer workers but are making a far more pronounced impact on the environment. As traditional underground mining techniques struggled to meet increased demand, coal companies developed different surface-mining methods over the years as a way to more cheaply access coal deposits.

Bond's examples demonstrate the effects of coal companies' increased use of a large-scale form of coal mining called "mountaintop removal"—a surface-mining method that far surpasses strip mining in its destructive effects. MTR involves the literal blowing up of mountaintops for the purpose of accessing coal deposits underneath. Once
these mountaintops have been blown away, enormous machinery scoops up the coal and pushes waste into “valley fills,” which serve as containment sites (Barry 4). Barry explains that “an average MTR site removes 600–800 feet of mountain, stripping roughly 10 miles, dumping the waste from this process into 12 valley fills that can be as large as 1,000 feet wide and a mile long” (4). Author-activist Tricia Shapiro draws attention to the extent of the natural destruction and contamination: “Runoff silt clogs thousands of miles of mountain streams—and hundreds of miles of streams are now completely buried under debris. Aquifers are cracked by blasting, wells dried up or poisoned. Flash floods run off the stripped mountaintops” (3). The size and scope of these extraction sites alone should explain why MTR has become a serious concern for environmental scientists and local residents, but it is what Bryan McNeil refers to as the “accompanying social denigration of communities” and the “complex array of social, economic, and political pathogens” that have had an even more devastating effect (20). Those who live near these extraction and waste sites find their quality of life affected in a number of ways. Mortality rates are elevated in communities near surface-mining locations, and there is a pronounced increase in chronic pulmonary disorders and lung cancers among residents in these areas (Barry 4–5). Coal dust and chemicals from coal-processing facilities plague residents.5

Bonds recognized the direness of the environmental situation, and in her delivery one senses discomfort and anger at being forced into the role of activist. The spotlight was inevitable but certainly not sought. While Appalachian women are traditionally strong and outspoken when it comes to local knowledge, they are understandably less strident when it comes to issues extending beyond their immediate community. Any perceived awkwardness in Bonds’s performance, such as reading from a folded piece of paper, stumbling over her words, and using colloquial speech, signals her discomfort with civic discourse, yet she does not apologize for being unpolished or for relying heavily on her personal experience. The unconventionality of her appearance at events, the sound of her dialect, the inelegance of her language, all suggest Bonds is a woman at once out of place and right at home as an activist. In those moments when Bonds seems uncomfortable before her non-Appalachian audiences, she enlightens them to the fact that not all American women find it easy to speak out, especially those from popularly denigrated cultures. Bonds approaches her activism as a woman whose adherence to tradition is surpassed by the rhetorical exigency she claims in the face of the Big Coal crisis. In the process, she invites her audiences to consider the
agency Appalachian women have historically been afforded and how much agency they themselves are willing to grant her in the rhetorical situation.

At the Capitol Climate Action event in 2009, Bonds roars, "I don't mind being poor and I don't mind being made fun of, but I draw the line at being blasted and poisoned" ("Capitol Climate Action"). Just as her maternal rhetoric served to at once justify and interrogate the necessity of justification for her entrance into the public forum, so the phrase "I don't mind" prompts her environmentally conscious audience to consider how environmental injustice works, how it strikes those cultures that are most ignored and seemingly most disposable. As a marginalized cultural group, Appalachians have endured social and economic hardship without much sympathy from their fellow Americans, but for every Appalachian, just as for every mother, there is a moment of crisis-induced kairos. This repetition of "I don't mind," aside from its stylistic value, asks audiences to consider the daily injustices that Appalachians, women, blue collar workers, any marginalized group, really, must face and to ask themselves, "how much is too much?"

Bonds's rhetorical exigency combines with her awkward rhetorical style to manifest in an ethos of advocacy and expression. From kairos, agency is born. Herndl and Licona note, using Foucault, that agency, like power, does not reside in a set of objective rhetorical abilities of a rhetor ... rather agency exists at the intersection of a network of semiotic, material, and yes, intentional elements and relational practices ... agency is a social location. (7–8)

To find agency to speak out, Bonds has to first establish a personal exigency that her audience can acknowledge as warranted. Few would dispute a grandmother's concern for the health and welfare of her grandchildren, thus the rhetorical situation becomes ripe for intervention. The biological certainty of a mother's love has a transcendent power for audiences, which Bonds, like other environmental justice activists, uses as an agentive platform.

Rhetorical Exigency as Public Memory and Responsibility

Bonds uses the analogy of motherhood to self-identify or, as Nedra Reynolds suggests, to "locate" her ethos for her audience and to tap into greater traditions of female activism as a rhetorical strategy (326). Bonds finds power in a seemingly powerless situation by relying on analogies of motherhood and spirituality, historically significant commonplaces used by the environmental
and labor movements. She assumes the authority of a mother as a way to establish power that she does not have with her audiences; in addition, she uses spirituality and the authority of God to grant her influence she would not otherwise have. Her version of motherhood is both militant and meditative, and, as such, embodies a broad spectrum of female activist traditions (see Hamilton; Maathai). In demonstrating an understanding of activist precedent, Bonds builds credibility. Lorraine Higgins and Lisa Brush articulate how difficult it can be for “subordinated narrators” to achieve this goal:

The credible public narrator or protagonist must demonstrate agency, countering assumptions about her own passivity, ignorance, and impugned character. She needs to avoid casting herself or others in extreme hero or victim roles, and she must be willing to engage the substantive and moral terms of the dominant discourse without capitulating to them. (701)

To strike this delicate balance, Bonds attends to the rhetorical canon of memory, prompting audiences to not only associate her call to act with effective activist strategies from the past, but also with memories of the vested authority of all mothers and grandmothers. In these ways, she appeals to both personal and public memory.

Bonds often likens the environmental consequences of MTR and other destructive energy practices to a child’s mess. At the 2010 Treehugger’s Ball in Orange County, California, she warns:

Our children are going to know whether or not we acted; your children will know whether or not we acted ... we partied on our children’s future ... you know what, we told our children to clean up their rooms, but look at the mess we’re leaving them to clean up, look at the mess we’re leaving them to clean up. How dare us! Shame on us. Hey kids ... look at your mom and your dad and your grandparents and look at ’em and say “hey now looka here Mom and Dad help me clean up this mess you done made. Help me clean this mess up. Save something for me.” (“Treehugger’s Ball”)

Note that Bonds calls attention to the multiple generations her audiences represent. She begins by referring to her audience as “we,” as in her generation, but then shifts into calling out the “kids” in the audience, prompting them to make their parents accountable. One gets the impression that the onus of responsibility is shared in Bonds’s paradigm, as she diffuses the assignation of blame. In some ways, she plays the role of disapproving mother, shaming her audience for not cleaning up their “mess,” one of the earliest and most
basic social responsibilities a child learns. Further, in likening sites of environmental destruction to messy rooms, Bonds summons the frequently used environmentalist metaphor of the earth as a “home” that everyone bears some responsibility for keeping up under a universal and unspoken set of “house rules.”

Bonds frames the environmental/energy crisis as a relational problem, not a scientific one. She draws attention to the personal places from which she speaks as she also locates those places in a political context, an ethos in keeping with the feminist model of constructed subjectivity, necessarily dynamic and openly dependent on relationships among speaker, audience, and context (LeFevre 45–46). She sometimes antagonizes her audiences as a way of drawing attention to rarely interrogated perceptions of relationships among victimizers, victimized, and advocates. At the Appalachian Studies Association conference in 2008, Bonds tells an audience of scholars, “If you get your electricity from a coal-fired power plant, then yes, you do have coal mining issues” (“ASA”). By removing the critical distance most of her audiences are afforded and making her issue essentially their issue, she forces them to reconsider where they “stand.” Davis Bourland maintains that “rather than positioning MTR mining as a mere regional issue, Bonds describes an integrated national problem regarding manufacture of American energy” (91). Not only is the energy problem literally shared by everyone, Bonds suggests that those social and political problems that have enabled environmental injustices also belong, in some way, to everyone, as well.

Driving home the issue of MTR, Bonds seeks to make the political personal for her audiences, just as she makes the personal political for herself. At the Treehugger’s Ball there would be little need to encourage her listeners to value nature. At the Appalachian Studies Association conference there would be little need to encourage her listeners to value the experience of Appalachians, so Bonds is calling attention to something else. Her rhetoric here emphasizes her audience’s responsibility to one another and the importance of acknowledging and honoring human relationships, ideas that are distinctly feminist in tone. By using the analogy of the family, Bonds likens environmental justice to domestic tranquility, neither of which is possible without empathy and love. Her rhetoric hints that she is keenly aware of how even the most sympathetic audiences might appreciate a problem but not really act on its behalf. The devastation of MTR and other outrages of Big Coal in recent years are no longer “their” problems but “our” problems in Bonds’s paradigm. Bonds often uses the metaphor of “battered wife” to describe coal
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communities’ dysfunctional relationship with Big Coal (qtd. in McNeil 20), yet another way of shifting the onus to the audience that, by inaction, risks becoming the sympathetic but quiescent bystander to domestic violence.

Bonds’s references to spirituality are also driven by relational awareness and call to mind familiar tropes in environmental activism. In the essay, “Fighting for My Appalachian Home,” Bonds articulates that, as Appalachians, “We are part of these mountains and they are a part of us: we are one. We are connected to this ancient, reverent land” (183). References to spirituality are not uncommon in environmentalist rhetoric, but in environmental justice rhetoric, activists do not typically rely on these metaphors, as they pragmatically seek to identify those “powerful social actors” who are responsible for injustices (Capek 8). While Bonds does not hesitate to call attention to the evils of Massey Energy and Big Coal generally, she also attends to a higher power and the roles her audience should play as stewards of the land. Just as Bonds borrows ethos by assuming the strategies of former “militant mother” activists, she also establishes credibility with environmental groups by showing awe and tenderness toward nature. Yet, just as she reconciles her ethos with her audiences’ expectations, she also provokes them.

Bonds recognizes that many of her environmentalist sympathizers were nonreligious, but that does not stop her from using “hellfire and brimstone” in her delivery. In an interview with Shapiro, she specifically discusses the EarthFirst! Organization, which she claims to be “doing God’s work,” although “they just don’t realize it and won’t acknowledge it” (62). Knowing that she was often speaking to nonbelievers did not stop her from relying on overtly religious rhetoric. At the 2010 Treehugger’s Ball, Bonds declares portentously, “God gonna judge us for what we did for his creation” (“Treehuggers”). Her words of warning are especially noteworthy considering that her audience is comprised of environmentalists who are manifestly on her side, many of whom may not be religious and may not appreciate her thundering Free Will Baptist tone. Bonds warns against complacency and thinking that sympathizing is enough. She includes herself in this Judgment Day roll call (“God gonna judge us”), implicating and incriminating everyone, even those on her side. In taking this ominous tone, Bonds appears to be provoking her audience, setting herself up as a kind of seer infused with the power of God. This tone conveys the urgency of the situation by calling for confession of sin, compelling audiences to assess what part they may play in anti-MTR practices. She implies that action is available to everyone, that this movement, no matter how idiosyncratic, touches all humans as part of a greater story of social responsibility.
Using relational politics, a feminist rhetor acknowledges the location from which she speaks and the dynamics that dictate the rhetorical situation (see Adrienne Rich). Interestingly, Bonds's more meditative use of spiritual rhetoric offers a direct natural analogy for the interconnectedness of human experience and its implicit hierarchies, which nicely illustrates the importance of relational dynamics in advancing a cause, or in the case of the geese she uses as an example, in swiftly and efficiently heading to warmer climes. At a 2008 Powershift rally, Bonds once again commands her audience.

I want you to notice nature, how geese are in flight, and they form a V in a leadership role. And when that leader, of that flight, the lead goose, when he gets tired of flapping his wings, he drops to the back, and the next goose comes up front and becomes the leader, without stopping, without fussing, without whining. He becomes that next leader, he or she, and that's what we have to do, we have to move in those positions. ("Powershift")

This analogy echoes traditional environmentalist tropes of personifying nature and calling upon a higher power to emphasize the direness of environmental abuse, but it does more than that when considered as part of a feminist, ecological agenda. The geese analogy demonstrates the ways in which relationships define, direct, and qualify human action. It illuminates the kind of leadership associated with female activism, driven by consensus, cooperation, and humility. Bonds defines leadership here as modeling and cultivating awareness as well as empathy for the other that includes reflexive questions such as: what distance am I maintaining from the others; am I keeping up; am I falling behind; when is it the right time to advance into the lead; when is it the right time to drop back? This analogy also illustrates the kind of dynamic rhetorical situation Bonds creates with her audiences. She makes audiences uncomfortable, which prompts them to meaningfully contemplate her ability to lead and the ways they themselves might find responsibility in the Big Coal crisis.

In mobilizing her audiences by revisiting and refining familiar commonplaces, Bonds enacts an undeniable resemblance in ethos to the labor activist Mother Jones, of whom both Appalachian and non-Appalachian audiences would likely know. Mary Harris “Mother” Jones was not originally from Appalachia, although during the labor movements of the early twentieth century, she spent a good deal of time in the region generating support for the United Mine Workers of America. During the most violent period in US labor history, Mother Jones made the decision to cultivate a distinctly
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maternal persona, and in her physical characteristics and rhetorical strategies, one finds unmistakable likenesses to Bonds. However, unlike Jones who primarily addressed those workers she wished to organize, Bonds focused her energy not on the victims of environmental injustice but on those with the power and influence to assist in the anti-MTR movement.

Physically, both Jones and Bonds looked the part of mother for their respective time period and audiences. Short and animated, Jones wore her white hair in a traditional bun, wore rounded eyeglasses, and dressed in the modest fashion of an Edwardian gentlewoman; one can imagine that Mother Jones looked the way her coal workers’ mothers would have looked. Bonds, however, looked more the part of a working mother, demonstrating the evolution of roles mothers have assumed since the turn of the twentieth century. Bonds's short, gray hair and modest jeans and T-shirt mark her as a typical blue collar mother or grandmother. The grittiness of her dress proves especially important in emphasizing the location of her agency as related to class, region, culture, and gender. The visual juxtaposition for both activists was deliberate. Jones's strategy was to stand out, prompting audiences to consider “why is someone’s mother here?” since an angry mother usually indicates children in trouble or in danger. Bonds’s strategy was to stand out, prompting audiences to consider, “why should we listen to this kind of mother?” since a woman with her look and sound seemed conspicuously out of place in many of the public forums in which she spoke.

In her public addresses, Bonds’s tone is strikingly similar to Mother Jones’s—scolding and resolved. Of Mother Jones’s rhetoric, Tonn writes:

> Stylistically, Jones’s militant maternal persona took form through her use of personal experience and personal provocation, narrative and inductive strategies, intimate and familial terms of address and ad hominem attacks, empathy and shaming, and opportunities for audience imitation, including enactment and dialogic dialectics. In concert with her physical mothering, these stylistic properties nurtured a collective “familial” identity for her audience and equipped them with skills and confidence sufficient to resist their oppression. (3)

Bonds’s style reads almost identically to Jones’s and perhaps not by accident. By co-opting Jones's persona, Bonds taps into a viable and successful theme. However, she offers a variation on that theme by not simply enacting the role of symbolic mother to MTR victims. She offers herself as an emblem of a historically powerless culture and region and, in this way, sabotages a
bit of that earned ethos as a means of making powerlessness the point for her audiences.

Bonds's adoption and adaptation of Jones's visual and linguistic rhetoric also resonates in the titles Bonds acquired during her activism. Not surprisingly, to Boone County, West Virginia, resident, Tommy Jarrold, she was “Little Mother Jones” (Shapiro 133). Scholars called her a “folk celebrity”; fellow activists called her “the godmother of the anti-MTR movement,” and she has been known as “Hillbilly Moses” by those both sympathetic and unsympathetic to her cause. Bonds preferred to refer to herself as a “little old gray-haired hillbilly woman,” a title perhaps telling of the sexism and ageism she faced during her activism in addition to the frequent Appalachian stereotyping. These descriptors suggest that Bonds was successful in putting her finger on what Karen LeFevre calls the “in-between,” acknowledging audience knowledge, values, and needs as she also aimed to reinvent them.

Rhetorical Exigency as Personal, Public, and Political

At a 2008 Appalachian Studies Association conference, Bonds cites a West Virginia University study on the effect of coal pollution on communities and follows up with the not so subtly sarcastic line, “Well, we hillbillies have known that for over a hundred years; what took you so long?” (“ASA”). Identifying as a “hillbilly” is generally a risky move, especially if one wishes to be taken seriously in public debate. Even the most riveting first-person account can prove ineffective if the audience believes the speaker to be incompetent. Public deliberation necessarily involves what Robert Asen calls “indirect exclusions,” which “function tacitly through discursive norms and practices that prescribe particular ways of interacting in public forums” (345). Asen’s argument suggests that civic discourse by its nature discourages participation from speakers who have not been formally trained. Foucault calls this “rarefaction among speaking subjects: none may enter into discourse on a specific subject unless he has satisfied certain conditions” (224–225). This problem is compounded for speakers whose discursive style announces socio-demographic markers that can unearth deeply seated prejudices in the audience, profoundly weakening their trust in a speaker’s authority and competency. In the above example, Bonds is addressing a sympathetic audience who likely understands the “hillbilly” as a cultural concept, but she and the CRMW organization did not limit their celebration of the hillbilly to safe crowds.
Just after Bonds's death in 2011, Bob Kincaid, president of the CRMW board, describes her in a *Huffington Post* article as “our Hillbilly Moses,” who “knew better than anyone that we will make it to the Promised Land: out of the poisonous bondage of coal companies” (qtd. in Biggers 1). Considering the way that Bonds liked to shift her pronouns from “I” to “we” to “you,” Kincaid’s “we” here does not just describe CRMW members but all Americans who, as Bonds so often pointed out, are just as much a slave to coal as any Appalachian. Kincaid’s association casts Bonds as a “vessel for moral truth” whose life and premature death closely follows the story of Moses (Bourland 102). The spiritual association of the nickname, “Hillbilly Moses,” is significant in that it describes Bonds’s ethos among fellow activists, an association explored by Bourland, Barry, and others. I draw attention instead to the “hillbilly” qualification since it best describes Bonds’s ethos—a charismatic leader who knew that her agency was determined by her audience’s willingness to accept her grassroots knowledge and perceived incompetence as an Appalachian.

Some years ago, understanding the futility of escaping the cultural stereotype, CRMW began what they call the “save the endangered hillbilly” campaign, printing the slogan on T-shirts and protest signs. The slogan is both comic and disturbing, a combination that invites audiences to chuckle and, if the aim is successful, think about why they chuckle. Bonds also uses the term for its subversive effect as well as to educate audiences about what it actually means to be Appalachian. In a personal interview, Bonds responded to a question about her use of the term.

I’m proud to be called a hillbilly. . . . It’s what you use before the word “hillbilly” that we have a problem with. You know it’s the derogatory statements of dumb, lazy, stupid, hillbilly, ignorant, inbred hillbilly. . . . It’s all those adjectives that you put on it that makes it the bad word. (qtd. Barry 107)

When considering the importance of “relevant knowledge and competency” in civic discourse (Dahlgren 337), one can see why those individuals who identify as “hillbilly” find it difficult to establish credibility as public figures. It is a fraught term for Appalachians. As the culture has been denigrated over the years, the expression has become a source of embarrassment as well as cultural pride. The term illustrates the standard view of the culture and conjures images of bearded and overall-wearing Hatfield and McCoy types. Recent horror movies and growing media coverage of prescription drug abuse in the region have contributed a gothic element to the stereotype that has shifted the “hillbilly” image from friendly and lazy to depraved and
alien (see Satterwhite). Implicit in any interpretation of the term is ignorance and lack of sophistication.

Bonds is often aggressive and angry when she identifies as Appalachian in her speeches, citing the negative cultural connotations as partially if not wholly responsible for the exploitation of the area and people. She asks,

Why would anyone care about a bunch of hillbillies? ... We are living with domestic terrorism from these coal barons, and our lapdog politicians are working hand-in-hand with corporations that put them in place to destroy our children's world. (qtd. in Barry 106)

She further claims that the coal industry has "robbed us our humanity, misinterpreted our culture, maligned our heritage" (qtd. in Barry 116). This tone, directed to a group of scholars who are mostly sympathetic to her cause, indicates her desire for audiences to confront their own prejudices and to consider the ways in which their personal biases may contribute to the problem.

By pointing to those very aspects of her identity that may compromise her authority, Bonds essentially invites the audience to consider why she is powerless and why social identifiers come to be liabilities in the first place. Elizabeth S. D. Englehardt identifies feminist theory as an effective way for Appalachians, particularly, to analyze the complex power dynamics that drive cultural stereotypes (3). She describes feminist scholarship as moving constantly between "individual and institutional structures of power ... being attentive to how race, class, gender, and other identity categories combine to shape individual lives and institutions" (7). Bonds enacts a feminist ethos that allows for such analysis. At the ASA conference, Bonds points out that,

The Appalachians is the only ethnic group left that America can still make fun of and get by with it, the only one left. America still rapes the land and people of Appalachia and doesn't think twice about it. Government agencies still hold contempt for us Appalachians, they want us extinct—they want us to go away. ("ASA")

Appalachian marginality is, arguably, so deeply embedded in the national consciousness that resorting to bald observations that make audiences uncomfortable is perhaps the most effective way to make obvious these power dynamics.

Identifying not only from where one is coming but also how that from where constrains the message places responsibility on the audience to reflect on their personal contribution to the meaning of the rhetorical moment. The
negotiation of private and public, the individual and institutions, then, is not reserved for the speaker in her performance as communicator. Kate Ronald finds ethos in the "tension between private and public self" for the speaker (qtd. in Reynolds 37); I contend that drawing attention to this tension as a speaker invites the same negotiation for the audience. Joanna Schmertz defines ethos as "the stopping points at which the subject (re)negotiates her own essence to call upon whatever agency that essence enables" (86). As agency is dependent on the audience, ethos must, then, necessarily invite that same negotiation on their part. Schmertz reasons:

When we attend to our own ethos in a postmodern rhetoric, we are both constructing a subjectivity for ourselves and retroactively reconstructing or recuperating that subjectivity in a process that is never finished because it is always already shaping its own critique, shifting to a new position or location. And as this subject we have made moves, it pulls upon the rest of rhetorical situation, creating new points of convergence among its elements. (89)

This fluid definition of ethos opens up the possibility for speakers to conceive of their audiences as co-constructors and co-investigators, meaning the process of address is not about persuading as much as it is about transparently probing the institutional power dynamics that determine individual persuasive success as enacted by ethos.

In calling herself a "hillbilly," Bonds acknowledges that the audience may perceive her as ignorant, so she uses that disparity to her benefit. Instead of attempting to elide the cultural stereotype that will no doubt appear the moment she speaks, Bonds calls it up first. Calling attention to this rhetorical constraint proves that she is aware of social assumptions about dialect and appearance that her audiences may have. Drawing attention to these assumptions becomes a rhetorical strategy that grants her a certain agency. Her rhetoric generally addresses where she is "from" as an over-fifty, Christian, Appalachian mother without a college education. As her self-labeling attests, a speaker who addresses the relational politics that determines the success of her message as she speaks can in fact strengthen her ethos. Adrienne Rich calls this a "politics of location," which Schmertz describes as a "practice of identifying and acknowledging the position (social, personal, institutional, etc.) from which one speaks" (82). Bonds understood the "politics of location," as she also critically analyzed her perceived credibility as a rhetor, which is perhaps the strategy that most qualifies her as feminist.
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Bonds invites audiences to examine hierarchies implicit in the rhetorical situation that translate as those exclusionary standards that prevent marginalized people from securing civic agency. She meets the feminist responsibility of identifying the limits of her power as a speaker, but she does not stop there. She presses for a dialogue about her limits of power by making her audiences, which at times included well-meaning environmentalists, feel partially accountable for destructive cultural and economic power differentials. Bonds’s exigency and ethos ask audiences to confront their own prejudices and to acknowledge and analyze her powerlessness as she also persuades them to act.

As Bonds demonstrates, to effectively address the economic and cultural complexity of environmental injustices such as MTR practices, a rhetor must draw attention to not only the physical effects but also to the historically ignored discrimination that has made environmental decimation possible. Activists may look to these moves as inspiration for their own ethical orientation as speakers. Admitting one’s powerlessness signals a global awareness of the institutional dynamics at work that can, in fact, strengthen one’s ethos. When activists offer personal testimony and identify power dynamics among audiences and speaker, they can invite listeners to meditate on marginalization and discrimination. Most importantly, activists can prompt audiences—even the most sympathetic—to consider the role they may personally play in the environmental exploitation of populations, which almost always results from deeply engrained and unexamined cultural biases.

Despite their powerlessness, Bonds and the anti-MTR activists in Appalachia have elevated the status of the marginalized rhetor by constructing an ethos that invites deliberation of not only the social injustice at hand but also of those values and beliefs that tacitly direct the rhetorical exchange. Through a relational ethos, Bonds makes it clear that everyone has a role to play in cleaning up Appalachia, and that role begins not when he or she calls his or congressman or volunteers to pass out brochures, but at the very moment Bonds’s words are heard and she is judged as a post middle age, inarticulate, Appalachian woman. Bonds makes the moment of judgment regarding her ethos the point and, in this way, demonstrates how discrimination and cultural biases become insidious and ultimately responsible for environmental/social injustices.

Bonds’s ethos arises from her rhetorical awareness of location and relationality. She offers an environmental justice rhetoric that demands that the
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speaker: (1) publicly recognize where she stands, both geographically and cul­turally (in this case, in relation to her audience and within her social milieu); and (2) leverage that relational awareness as a way to effect change, creating a dialogue in the process about the ways in which existing power structures obstruct change. When Bonds tells her audience “from where she is coming,” she shifts the audience’s focus to where they stand in relation to her, prompt­ing them to find accountability in the message, as well. The added element of accountability—rhetors inviting audiences to consider how “from where they both are coming” affects the success of the message—is especially important. As Henry Giroux claims, environmental justice rhetoric must move toward a more “biopolitical” orientation in which the activist not only describes the practical effects of an environmental threat but also brings into question the apparent large-scale “disposability” of certain populations. Giroux points out that “in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the biopolitical calculus of massive power differentials and iniquitous market relations put the scourge of poverty and racism on full display” (191). Hurricane Katrina was ostensibly a natural disaster, but the homogeneity of its victims (black and poor) was hard to ignore. Unlike Hurricane Katrina, which was a large-scale, highly televised, one-time disaster, many forms of environmental injustice go unnoticed by the national media and occur quietly and destructively over time. In order to get at the “biopolitical orientation” that makes environmental injustice possible, rhetors need to discover a way to bring those sociodemographic inequalities into relief without losing the audience’s trust in the speaker’s communicative competencies. Taking notes on Bonds’s enacted ethos can help environmental justice activists to achieve this goal.

Notes

1. For recent developments in the movement against mountaintop removal, see Sorkin’s “A New Tack in the War on Mining Mountains: PNC Joins Banks Not Financing Mountaintop Coal Removal” and the Washington Post editorial “The Dirty Effects of Mountaintop Removal Mining.”

2. For Fannie Lou Hamer, see Brooks and Houck; for Lois Gibbs, see Goodwin and Jasper.

3. Don Blankenship has since been indicted by federal prosecutors on a number of charges. See Berkes’s “Feds Add Coal Dust Coverup Allegation to Mine CEO’s Indictment.”

4. In January 2013, a new Marsh Fork Elementary School opened in a less dangerous part of Raleigh County. Massey Energy donated $1.5 million to help
pay for the construction. See Lilly’s “New Marsh Fork Elementary Part of Legacy” and Holdren’s “Marsh Fork Elementary Dedicated.”

5. Bonds died of cancer at the surprisingly young age of fifty-eight, a death that some have conjectured to have been a result of her exposure to toxins (Biggers 1).

Works Cited


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