Appalachia: Who Cares, and So What?- GSTR 210
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We hear a great deal about globalization— about the transformation of local or regional things or phenomena into global ones. Today, for example, coal is mined in Eastern Kentucky and then shipped to China or Argentina. In return, people from Eastern Kentucky can buy a number of different things from almost anywhere in the world. Globalization can also be used to describe a process by which the people of the world are unified into a single society and function together. This process is a combination of economic, technological, socio-cultural, and political forces, and many people have written about how such transformations are natural, desirable, and beneficial.

Today, though, we don't often hear about the local. It is my argument that for every movement made in the direction of the global, there is simultaneous response in the direction of the local. Media today seem to be unaware of how important such local movements are.

I study and write about Appalachia—a region that runs generally along either side of the Appalachian Mountain chain in the eastern United States. The federal government defines the region as running from southern New York state all the way down to northeastern Mississippi. More than 400 counties comprise Appalachia (several new ones have just been added), as well as about 23 million people.

You attend a college that has since the late nineteenth been committed to serving the Appalachian region mainly through educating students from the region. Many of you reading this come from somewhere in Appalachia. You've probably not always identified with being "Appalachian"; you may have come here thinking of yourself by your own community—Big Creek, for example—or by your county or by your city. Others of you come from different areas of the United States or even the world. And to you, too, "Appalachia" may be a mysterious word.

The point I'd like to make is that place matters in this globalized age. You're living in Appalachia at the moment—on the western fringe, actually (take a look out of the windows in

Baird Lounge, and you will see the western foothills of Appalachia). And whether you come from Eastern Kentucky, Atlanta, or Kenya, you'll make your home here for the next couple of years. It's thus important to learn about it. And one of the best ways to learn about home is to leave it. I remember once living for a time in a rural village in Ghana, not far south of Kumasi. One night I was having a difficult time sleeping because it was still very hot and humid at bedtime. I started recounting my day's experiences and connecting those experiences with what I knew about life in Appalachia. I came up with a rich list. The point is, I had to leave home to learn about home. This semester, you'll learn more about Appalachia in GSTR 210 and, in the process, I hope, learn more about your home.

Although the mountains we call Appalachia are some of the world's oldest mountains (between 400 and 500 million years old), "Appalachia" as a region is much younger. Spanish cartographers were the first to give name to the region—"Apalchen," in 1562, mistakenly associating it with the Apalachee tribe of Native Americans, who lived in Northern Florida. French cartographers followed a few years later. Hence, the geographic definition was born.[1]

It wasn't until the late nineteenth century, though, that the term "Appalachia" was applied to the entire mountainous region in economic, cultural, and social ways. Beginning in the 1870s, writers such as Mary Noailles Murfree and John Fox, Jr., began using mountaineers in fictional stories, stories that characterized mountaineers as being quaint (read: different) and isolated from the rest of mainstream America. Some two hundred stories would eventually be written—in magazines as well as novels—over the next few decades. Sometimes these stories were positive (for example, the way mountaineers stuck with the Union during the Civil War), other times negative (that they were backward in an otherwise industrializing United States). Both views publicized mountain folk as different—as traditional and quaint on the positive side or as backward and poor on the negative side. The result was that such "difference" attracted outsiders to come to Appalachia, either to preserve what they saw or to change it, depending on one's perspective.

As President of Berea College between 1892 and 1920, William Goodell Frost had a great deal to do in identifying the people here as "Appalachian Americans" and attributing backwardness to isolation economically, socially, and geographically. Otherwise, mountaineers were our "contemporary ancestors" and deserved the attention of northern foundations and educational institutions such as Berea.[2] Settlement schools, such as those at Hindman and Pine Mountain, were founded throughout the area to provide education to the people, and other institutions were formed to help bring the region's people into the "mainstream." Plenty of people came to record the cultural traditions here—the oral folklore and songs, the material culture traditions, and the like. On the positive side, this group saw mountaineers as worthy of charitable and educational uplift. But there was a negative side, too. Papers such as the New York Times and the Louisville Courier-Journal reported at times shocking and titillating stories about feuding families, moonshining, and people living in squalor.

Some scholars say that Appalachia was discovered during this time in the late nineteenth century. It would be more correct to say that "Appalachia" was created. Powerful people, such as President Frost and others, delineated a portion of the country that was said to be different from the area outside it. Others, such as John C. Campbell, referred to it as a "coherent region inhabited by an homogeneous population possessing a uniform culture."[3] The result of such portrayals led to mythic notions about the people inside the region. By mythic, I don't necessarily mean false; instead, mythic refers to things that can't necessarily be proven or disproven, which is why such beliefs remain powerful. For every mountaineer who used a kerosene lamp, one could find another mountaineer yearning for electric lights; one could find a poor mountaineer and a wealthy one in the same community. Or an African American or a Polish American right alongside a "White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant" mountaineer. Such mythic beliefs, however, also can tend toward stereotyping.

Historian Altina Waller reminds us that the late historian Henry Shapiro gave us a convincing argument in trying to understand why people in mainstream America might need to have a region such as Appalachia, a strange region inhabited by a "peculiar" people. "This perception," she writes, "came not from the reality of Appalachian peculiarity but from the needs of middle-class Americans" in industrial areas of the country. These folks had left rural areas and flocked to cities such as Chicago, where they found factory or office jobs that were maddeningly

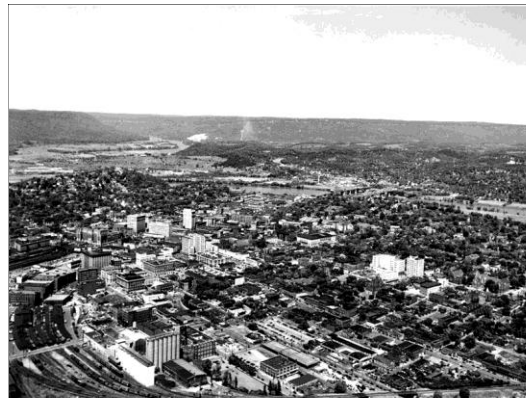
monotonous. They were removed from extended families, and they lived rather anonymously in apartment houses. If they lost their job, they could lose their ability to house and feed themselves. They were nostalgic for the past and fearful of the future. Waller continues: “Appalachia became the ‘other,’ a place and a people to be admired, patronized, converted, taught, uplifted, disciplined, and sometimes even emulated.” Here, “the people were assumed to be everything most Americans were not, but were still clearly of similar heritage and culture.”[4]

Hence, the construction or the invention of Appalachia sometimes had very little to do with reality, just as the construction of the “cowboy” or the “Indian” has very little to do with truth and accuracy. And so it is with “Appalachian.” Close your eyes, and when I say the word “Appalachian,” you will likely envision a white male, usually wearing overalls, no shoes, and sporting a beard. Such construction is the reason why Appalachia is the most misunderstood region in the United States today. After the 1960s War on Poverty and the power of the media in the twentieth century, such “construction” continued. Think of the film Deliverance from 1972, or perhaps you may have seen Wrong Turn, released in 2003, where six people, having taken a “wrong turn,” find themselves hunted down in West Virginia by cannibalistic and inbred mountain men.

So let’s come back to the beginning. Appalachia: Who cares, and so what? By now I hope you understand a bit more about how “Appalachia” was created around difference. People here weren’t supposed to be like people elsewhere—they were either better or (more frequently) worse—either way, they were different. For the last one hundred years, people have flocked here because they knew about this difference. They came to educate, to straighten out, to convert, to feed, to clothe…the list is endless. Tourists crave this difference. Ten million people each year come to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the surrounding area. They want to see quaint log structures and maybe a bear—or maybe some outlet mall prices. Some folks leave their monotonous, homogenous suburban life to stay in an “authentic” Smoky Mountains cabin. Along the way, they may pull off I-75 and buy an Appalachian quilt or basket in Berea and take it back to their home to hang on the wall.

The significance is that so many misperceptions are connected with the people of Appalachia that it takes concerted effort to try to arrive at an accurate understanding. This is what I hope you will do in GSTR 210 this semester. It also means learning more about an institution that for at least a hundred years has been committed to providing high-quality education to students from Appalachia and beyond—an institution that encourages students to go into Appalachia and make a difference.

One reason stereotypes are so alluring is because they tend to make the complex exceedingly simple. It's easy to think that all Appalachian people are _____________ (you fill in the blank). It's much harder to make sense, for example, of the plethora of peoples who've historically inhabited Appalachia since time immemorial—Native Americans, African Americans, a multitude of ethnic groups who came to work in the coalfields, even those who've been here only a few short months or years from Latin America. It's much easier to believe all people in Appalachia are poverty stricken; it's much harder to make sense of a region that includes both the very poor—many from Central Appalachia, for example—as well as some very rich people—especially in Southern Appalachia. It's also easy to think of people from the mountains as being rural hayseeds; it's harder to consider the city dwellers in places such as Pittsburgh, Knoxville, and Asheville.



So there you have it. Who cares, and so what? Place matters. While you're here, you're an Appalachian. In learning about this region, you'll learn about yourself and your own home, wherever it is. Because of the stereotyping and the construction of Appalachia, chances are that before you can learn about Appalachia, you'll first have to unlearn what you think you know. Folks in Appalachia are not all that different from folks anywhere else. As one author writes, "What we 'know' often obscures the fact that Appalachian residents, regardless of subregion, are average and ordinary human beings, who under a given environment will develop like other human beings." [5]

I'll close by switching the conversation from what studying Appalachia can do for you to what you can do for Appalachia. There are tremendous riches here, and there are tremendous deficits. Many people in the region struggle for jobs, for basic necessities taken for granted elsewhere, and dignity. Learning all you can about such a place, while you're a student at an institution that has long had a commitment to this region, can open up new and unexpected possibilities for you. Even today, the region and its people need those who are willing to devote a life of learning and service. Welcome to GSTR 210.

If you have additional questions about Appalachia, I encourage you to come by and visit us in the Appalachian Center. We are located on the first floor of Bruce; my office is in Bruce 123.

Notes

[1] See David Walls, "On the Naming of Appalachia," from *An Appalachian Symposium: Essays written in honor of Cratis D. Williams*, edited by J. W. Williamson (Boone: Appalachian State University Press, 1977) 975 A6463.

[2]For more of Frost's writing, see "Appalachian America," *Woman's Home Companion*, September 1896, pp. 3-4, 21, and "Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains," Atlantic Monthly, March 1899, pp. 311-19.

[3]Quoted in Henry Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), ix. 301.2975 S529a

[4]Altina L. Waller, "Feuding in Appalachia: Evolution of a Cultural Stereotype," in *Appalachia in the Making: The Mountain South in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 349. 975 A64545

[5]Richard A. Couto, "Appalachia," in *Appalachia, Social Context Past and Present*, fifth ed., ed. Phillip J. Obermiller and Michael E. Maloney (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 2007), 9. 330.975 A6465 2007

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