Trying to Get Appalachia Less Wrong
A Modest Approach

by Elizabeth S. D. Engelhardt

The quiet presence of the mountains testifies that telling shortened and simplified stories of Appalachian people, places, and cultures might prove tricky. Few mountain ranges on the planet are older, have borne witness to more history, and have endured through more seasons of change. All photos courtesy of Roger May.

When the editors of *Southern Cultures* asked me to guest edit a special issue on Appalachia, I said yes immediately. Not only is western North Carolina my family home, but Appalachian Studies is my most long-standing scholarly home. Literature, music, food, art, entrepreneurship, and scholarship from and about Appalachia are energetic, diverse, robust, and prolific right now—and they have long been so. I am thrilled and honored to have helped create this issue you hold in your hands.

At the same time, when we began this process, my breath caught in my throat a bit. Because here’s what I also know: everyone who has thought they could explain Appalachia—its places, people, or cultures—has gotten it wrong. Every ten years or so, Appalachia’s people and culture figure in a national or international discussion—more often as pariahs than participants. Punch line and poster child, Appalachia has long been a cultural scapegoat for the environmental or societal
tragedies that people would rather debate or mourn than fix. All too often it is an empty vessel to be filled with whatever straw men (or women), unexamined assumptions, and a priori claims one wants to set up. Regularly, Appalachia is imagined to need a funeral, to be already gone, to cry out for remembrance. Especially when the discussions have aimed for uncomplicated or simple, the think pieces, talking points, and invocations fall frustratingly short.

Maybe this is true about most places, people, and cultures. Big hats or hair, cowboy boots, oil fields, and the ability to leave the nation stand in as an “explanation” of Texas, where I lived and taught for ten years. Reporters “capture” the upper Midwest, where my father is from, by finding casserole dinners, ice-fishing with beer, and river flooding. Places thought to be rural have their population subtracted and their diversity erased; urban spaces, however different from each other, are tagged with an identical set of adjectives. Perhaps this is especially true in the United States today. Fast-paced and wide-swinging pendulums of political, social, and environmental change have pushed 2016 into 2017 and as much guessing as there may be, the ground on which the nation sits feels uncertain and unfamiliar.

Appalachia stands out, however, in the sheer length of time that people have believed it could be explained simply, pithily, and concisely. Its land is “strange” and its people are “peculiar”—in speeches in the 1870s and the politics of 2016. Self-identified hillbillies, mountain men, moonshiners, and outlaws are sought to speak for everyone—in penny papers from the 1890s and on reality television today. Serious news stories extrapolate to the whole by focusing in on one industry, and assume that sorting out who is friend and who is at war with it will diagram its complex politics and economies—whether that be timber in 1900, textiles in 1930, or mining through the present day. Media coverage largely portrays one class (poor), one race (white), one religion (conservative Christian), and one worldview (narrow)—and assigns difference to so-called strangers or outsiders. Again and again Appalachia is relegated to the past tense: “out of time” and out of step with any contemporary present, much less a progressive future.

Simultaneously, commentators perform sleights of hand to embrace mountain landscapes, sounds, tastes, and fashions as if those have no human lives, trails of earth, or forgotten and erased counterparts behind them. Vacation getaways, popular musicians, newest food fads, and design styles are somehow of but not in Appalachia itself. They are wildly popular and loyally followed by fans around the globe, but they are never reconciled with those other, dark portraits of mountain societies. Whether emphasizing its problems or extracting its products (coal and creative), approaches to the region minimize connections between Appalachia and people unfamiliar with, outside of, or unfriendly to the mountains. Yet Appalachia and people who live in the mountains are connected to other places and other people, who are, in turn, connected to others still. Within Appalachian

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circles, people disagree, live radically differently from each other, separate themselves into a range of political positions, and change their community affiliations over time. Chasing purist notions of inside and outside or drawing bright boundary lines on maps or in cultural productions does not work.

The quiet presence of the mountains testifies that telling shortened and simplified stories of Appalachian people, places, and cultures might prove tricky. The Appalachian mountain range is one of the oldest on planet earth, has borne witness to more history, and has endured through more seasons of change than most any other place. The heights and depths, temperature range, and reach of the mountains across the continent mean diversity on a scale beyond the keyboard of human writers. The soft worn rocks, the breathtaking heights that still manage...
to hold a roundness and gentleness, and the massive depths to which those waters plunge are well outside any media's news cycle.

My life is connected to those long mountain views. I notice the bears that come down from the high mountains when the acorns are abundant in the lower elevations. My mother and aunt debate whether the woolly worm's stripes suggest a cold February this year or a mild January next year. We take pictures of a small island in the French Broad River that lasted long enough for saplings to put down roots before a spring flood changed the course and brought them down. As a daughter visiting home, I often took my grandmother or my godmother on a drive up to the family cemetery to learn again the stories of the people buried there. Fire sweeps the mountain one year, but new life is there the next. I learn from my Cherokee friends that Selu and her descendants name, thank, and value the plants, rivers, land, and animals surrounding us. Whatever we call them—Pisgah and the Rat, Mount LeConte, Cheat Mountain, Black Mountain, the Peaks of Otter, and Caesar's Head—the mountains themselves preside up in the clouds, regardless of who is elected to today's state legislatures.

This issue runs about one hundred and twenty pages. The archives of Southern Cultures offer a few hundred more pages on the mountains, conceived broadly. It isn't enough, of course. We are poets, artists, and scholars who offer up our own small pieces of the whole or who reflect on our own situatedness—where we stand and with whom—and invite conversation with others who hold different parts of Appalachia's stories. As editor, I began by listing some topics I thought were overdiscussed or overdetermined. This issue will have no banjos, no coal country stories, no kitschy hillbillies, and no folksy tales of grandma's biscuits or cornbread used to police who is an insider and who is not, I resolutely declared to the editorial team. Let's turn to the less expected, to the understudied or rarely acknowledged, we said. We invited and thankfully received submissions that could help document and understand a diverse and multi-vocal Appalachia in this present moment, the one closest to where we stand in time.

As a result, some of the pieces here begin with experts too rarely heard. They circle around small moments that expand outward. A man drives around his hometown of Asheville, North Carolina, and takes snapshots of his vibrant black 1950s community he witnesses over the dashboard of his pickup. In a conversation in a queer-friendly Kentucky room, a word is created and its joy starts to spread as soon as "fabulachian" is said out loud. Darin Waters, Gene Hyde, Kenneth Betsell, and Rachel Garringer use such moments to render visible the strategies historically erased communities have used to create and preserve safe and transformative spaces for themselves.

Others take on the global and transnational Appalachia—but rather than doing so in the more common economic or political realm, they turn to the worlds of fiction and art. Appalachia's only Nobel laureate in literature was born in West Vir-
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ginia and remained loyal to it, but if Pearl Buck rarely set her novels and stories in Appalachia, what do we do with her? Jolie Lewis tries, but by her own admission fails, to bring the difficult Buck into Appalachian literary canons. Photographer Aaron Blum finds Carhartt and steel-toed boots next to robes at a Krishna temple in West Virginia and in so doing discovers his own widened view of Appalachia’s complicated global connectedness.

Anna Creadick begins with moments in her own life where she was uncomfortable admitting that she plays the banjo, not wanting to conform to stereotype or expectation. She argues that the most infamous banjos in contemporary Appalachian film, the ones she most wished to avoid, those of Deliverance, might have something important to communicate about masculinity, disability, and sexuality—and, in the end, about our own Appalachian performances. Grace Hale, with her typical laser-focused clarity, centers in on a haunting moment in the documentary film Harlan County, U.S.A. She finds the aural and emotional heart of the piece and cautions us not to turn away from Bloody Harlan just because it looms large. In so doing, Hale puts the cultural and the technological together around coal, labor, and gender, raising difficult questions as she does. Graham Hoppe explores what is true and meaningful in the tourist world of Dollywood,
Gatlinburg, and Pigeon Forge—a turn made more poignant after fall 2016, when fires swept through the landscapes he studies. He reminds us that in our memories and narratives, the lines between the handcrafted family heirloom deeply connected to place and the mass-produced re-creation sold with a nod and a wink might in fact be razor thin. In fact, Hoppe argues, today's Appalachia might need them both.

And so I humbly take back that big talk about kicking out the expected in a portrait of contemporary Appalachian cultures. Banjos, coal mining, and hillbilly kitsch hold revelations and wisdom. I may as well admit to letting in some cornbread or biscuits too, even if I still need to insist you don’t have to be a grandma using a single true recipe to make them Appalachian.

My mother serves dinner, sometimes including biscuits or cornbread, on dishes she and my father went over the mountains from North Carolina to Tennessee to purchase soon after they married in the late 1960s. They are Iron Mountain Stoneware from Laurel Bloomery, Tennessee, and they are tough, heavy, and practical. Shaped and fired in the mountains, the dishes come from a factory that deliberately hired local residents and nurtured their artistic talents. Nancy Patterson, who led the design department for the business, studied first in Denmark, Finland, and Taiwan, and the aesthetic she created shares a global minimalism that still today is striking in its sophistication. My Wisconsin engineer father fell in love with their practicality and my North Carolina local pottery-collecting mother agreed.

The pattern violates much of today's popular advice for food service: the brown, yellow, and rust color pattern does not set off food like restaurant white is said to; the bowls do not have rims on which to scatter herbs or artistically drizzle sauce; they do not take to chargers or artistically mismatched table settings. But for me, they are what we might get right about Appalachia. Cornbread, soup beans, and dried apple pies look and taste great on them, but so do stir-fries, tacos, and seafood. They are complicated, sturdy, weighty, globally connected, beautiful, and they have a long history that stretches beyond my lifetime. I find in them a memory of the past, a guarantee of present conversation, and the promise of future meals. And after eating and before the next meal is ready, they still need to be washed by this guest editor who is a daughter of the mountains. I know I will not get Appalachia completely right or the dishes completely done, but I see merit in just keeping on trying.

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