

Appalachian Literature and the Postcolonial: A GPS for Appalachian Literary Studies

by Jill LeRoy-Frazier

In 2002, the *Journal of Appalachian Studies* published a special issue titled “Standing at the Crossroads: A Symposium on Globalization and Appalachian Studies,” one of several journal issues and conference sessions that year to focus upon the question of how the new gospel of globalization might impact our study of Appalachia. In the pages that follow, I will sketch a framework for one approach to this challenge in the context of teaching Appalachian literature, and broach some related questions designed to urge our further collective, multi-disciplinary exploration of contemporary pedagogical concerns stemming from the global imperatives that face us as scholars and teachers.

Notably, in their contribution to the aforementioned *JAS* issue, political scientist Herbert Reid and sociologist Betsy Taylor level a challenge for scholars of Appalachia to leave behind the practice of “culturalism,” which they define as the teaching of culture “apart from questions of power” (9). Instead, they advocate a “critical regionalism” that would, ultimately, free academics from our habit of “postcommunal professionalism”—the attempt to preserve and celebrate a reified, lost past, which only serves the ends of the multinational corporate state—and enable us to acknowledge “complex relations of class and culture” in order to help realize “democratic public sphere projects sufficient to launching a social movement for sustainable life sutured partly by global regional networks” (20). Key to this project, Reid and Taylor argue, is the need to reconceive of Appalachian identity not as “place-bound” but as “place-based” (21): While a “place-bound” notion of cultural identity “feed[s] off of provincialism” (24) and constitutes “another episode in a static identity politics” (10) with the “unfortunate tendency . . . to reinforce an outsider/insider perspective” (19), understanding an Appalachian sense of self in “place-based” terms, in contrast, would be to conceptualize it as “grounded in the thick particularity and holism of living communities and local history” (24), in a “shifting pattern of space relations” (22) contextualized by a particular historical moment, rather than as an unchanging locus of origin, the center to which return is desirable and necessary in order to understand and empower oneself and the region.

Indeed, since its inception as an academic field in the 1970s, Appalachian Studies has had as one of its major foci the project of discovering “who we are” in order to solve persistent problems of poverty, under-education, and lack of opportunity in the Southern mountains. Early on, James Branscome envisioned a “sympathetic Appala-

chian studies curriculum [that] would enable the public school students of the region to achieve greater insight into themselves and sharper awareness of the problems and opportunities in the region” (18). Branscome’s assumption that Appalachian studies is a project for, and primarily by, cultural insiders, entailing the exploration of an essentialist cultural identity that once rediscovered and validated would lead to cultural self-help, has become a staple of the discipline despite occasional twinges of doubt such as that expressed by John Gaventa, who notes that as early as 1977 he worried that “by focusing on the unique culture . . . of the people of the hollows, Appalachian studies were in danger of scrutinizing the victims rather than the victimizers” (qtd. in Gaventa 82).

Regardless, the study of Appalachian literature has proven no exception to this general rule. Standard texts in the field, such as the literature and culture anthologies *Voices from the Hills* (1974), *The Uneven Ground* (1985), and *Appalachia Inside Out* (1995), along with teacher’s resource guides like *Appalachian Literature, Appalachian Culture: Literature-Based, Cross-Curricular Activities for Middle and High School Classrooms* (2000), typically approach teaching Appalachian literature, indeed, “from the inside out”:-students commonly are instructed in the folkways and history of Appalachia and led through readings of the literature that reflect, reinforce, and perhaps occasionally analyze those customs, all in an effort to help them understand themselves better and, perhaps, alleviate their social isolation from and disenfranchisement by mainstream America.

Inherent in this approach, though, however potentially empowering for some individuals, are several significant problems related to the critical naiveté of assuming a fixed and discoverable identity characterized, as Stuart Hall puts it, in terms of “one shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’” (110). Indeed, Gaventa’s early reservations, which he revisited in 2002, include the observation that Appalachian studies must come to terms with “the tricky question of Appalachian identity” (86). Tricky, to be sure; Hall argues that cultural identity frequently is perceived as fixed and transparent, a cohesive package ready for representation if only it can be uncovered, recouped from among the “many other, more superficial or artificially imposed selves which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (110). Postcolonial study, in that case, becomes the process of “unearthing that which the colonial experience buried” (111), of rediscovering a lost community as it existed before the divisive violence of exploitation and outsider occupation and restoring its unity as the foundation of cultural meaning—all of which, of course, is in turn reflected in a literature perceived to inspire members of that now-diminished culture to action.

The above description sounds a lot like Appalachian studies as we know it. Yet as Gaventa notes, “defining Appalachian identities in terms of insiders and outsiders has led us to gloss over issues of difference around race, class, and power” (87), and he contends, therefore, that scholars should look not just within, but also “outside the region at the bigger national and global forces that affected the region” (82) in order to avoid overlooking the role of “the problems in institutions which dominate their lives” (82). But perhaps we should go it one further, as Reid and Taylor imply, and look for, as it were, “the difference within” our notion of native Appalachian identity as well—for were not Appalachians in some cases themselves victimizers? (I think of John C. C. Mayo of Eastern Kentucky as a prime example of agents of exploitation from within the region; without people like him, arguably both Southern Appalachia and the energy industry wouldn’t be what they are today. And in the literature itself, what do we make of characters such as Ham Nelson in Wilma Dykeman’s *The Tall Woman*, or Miles Bishop in Denise Giardina’s *Storming Heaven*?)

Similarly, in his study of the African diaspora, Hall advocates that scholars should

approach cultural identity not in terms of being, but of becoming; rather than trying to “restore an imaginary fullness or plentitude to set against the broken rubric of our past,” we should also acknowledge “the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute,” in this case, Appalachian “uniqueness” (112). Appalachian identity, then, “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power,” would become “the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” and the possibilities of the future (112); it would “see and recognize the different parts and histories of ourselves” and “construct those as points of identification” (Hall 120) on the “sliding scale” (114) of a shared formative history that informs “the whole body of efforts made . . . to describe, justify, and praise” (121) a group of people still becoming what they are.

Implicit in Hall’s approach are potential answers to many questions that necessarily arise from the standard model of Appalachian literary study and alluded to by Reid and Taylor in the broader Appalachian studies: for example, what is the value in teaching Appalachian literature to those culturally or geographically outside Appalachia itself? Is our field truly only self-reflective for the few, or can other readers derive value from studying the literature and culture in such a way that they are enlightened not just about the particularities of Appalachian experience, but also about human power dynamics across a range of discrete experiences? In what ways can we shape our study of Appalachian literature to avoid the pitfalls of looking for, as Hall perceives it, merely “a simple, factual ‘past’” of a primitive folk and instead approach our task with an awareness of how human history is, precisely, always a matter of representation, always already “constructed through memory, fantasy narrative, and myth” (Hall 113)? Of what benefit would the exclusivist fashioning of self-knowledge typically assumed by the course’s pedagogy be, for example, to a student of non-Southern or non-North American or even non-Western background? In what ways can studying a regional literature like that of Appalachia lead to a deeper understanding of whatever cultural identity each individual student perceives him- or herself to possess, and a new awareness of how that identity itself is socially constructed rather than just a “natural” occurrence? What does this brand of literary study do to advance the goal of combating cultural stereotypes, particularly for a mainstream audience who might have normalized such stereotypes as “true”? Does the celebratory and preservationist slant to this teaching of folkways and communal history smack of the quaintness associated with “primitive,” regressive cultures, and thus only reinforce those errant assumptions? As Gaventa puts it, “how do we link to those who also self-identify as being ‘voices from the margins, and living on the fringe’ in other regions [he implies both geographical and ethnic]? Do we identify with others who have also suffered from being negatively stereotyped by dominant cultures?” (87). And finally, is there value in teaching a body of literature as merely self-referential, with little sense of how or why it might be related to and help us understand more about the bodies of literature with which it is both concentric and contiguous, and which it both engages and is engaged by (these might include, most obviously, Southern literature, American regional and local color literatures, United States literatures, and global regional literatures)?

All of these are questions I have asked myself as I prepared for two different teaching experiences over a span of about ten years: one, a course in literature and writing focused on Southern literatures at the University of Michigan in 1992-93, in which I wanted to include Appalachian selections, and one, a full-scale Appalachian literature and culture course at Milligan College in 2003-04. As unlike as they are, these institutions share one key characteristic: many, if not most, of their students are neither Southern nor Appalachian, Milligan’s location near Johnson City, Ten-

nessee, notwithstanding. A great number hail from the Midwest, making the appeal of discovering one's personal/cultural identity in the material less compelling than typically might be assumed in courses of this nature. Hence I realized I must think more broadly about the issue of cultural identity and its satellite concerns if I were to connect with the students registered for the two courses and help them understand a value in studying Southern/Appalachian literature for reasons other than, as some expressed it, "needing to know why people here are the way they are." (I am fully aware, of course, that "the way people here are" in my mind probably differs from some of my students' ideas about that.)

Practically speaking, how, then, might we shape an Appalachian literature and culture course for both "outsiders" as well as various types of "insiders" in hopes of successfully avoiding the "monkey-in-a-zoo" dynamic by which Gaventa is troubled, as am I? What strategies might make use of the assumed "insider/outsider" dichotomy for pedagogically subversive purposes? One technique with which I opened the Milligan College semester was to ask the students to compose an on-demand writing on the first day of class in which they grappled with the very question of identity, both personal and cultural. I asked them to divide a sheet of paper by drawing a line down the middle. Then I instructed them to freewrite in the lefthand column their responses to the question "How do you know who you are?" In the righthand column they responded to the question "Who are Appalachians?" As they generated thoughts, they began to move back and forth between the columns, noting places of overlap and/or ways in which they began to notice similarities in their ideas about themselves and their ideas about the cultural group "Appalachians." For "insider" students, of course, this frequently meant that they consciously recognized the ways in which their self-identified personal traits also fit their conceptions of cultural characteristics. For "outsiders," the exercise often had the effect of helping students start to recognize the ways in which their senses of identity frequently are constructed through difference, as much through declaring "what I am not" as through "what I am." After students had written for about fifteen minutes, I asked them to share their responses with one another. They were frequently amazed to discover how, based on the particulars of their responses, they recognized in some ways that "they are Appalachian too, regardless of where they come from," as one student put it. Subsequently, the entire class was able to engage in a more complex and nuanced analysis and discussion of the concept of identity and its relationship to literary and cultural production.

A second way in which I structured the course was to build in a conscious focus upon the rhetorical construction of various representations of Appalachia—both literary and scholarly, as well as in the popular media. While our progression through the literature was largely chronological after the first two weeks of class (see syllabus excerpt, Appendix A), we began with the topics "What is Appalachia? Who are Appalachians? Who are you? Is Appalachian literature American literature? What is Appalachian studies?" and "Cultural Stereotyping and Regional Identity: Where do they come from? What is the difference between them?" During these sessions, students were introduced to key terms and concepts like high vs. low culture, the oral vs. the written tradition, regionalism, local color, provincialism, and stereotyping, then asked to read selections from a variety of perspectives on the purposes of studying Appalachia. Students also viewed video sources such as *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Beverley Hillbillies* (which I knew they would regard as a portrayal of Appalachian hillbillies, although the Clampetts purportedly were Ozark mountaineers), along with the Appalshop film *Strangers and Kin*, and were asked to consider how those pieces represent different positionalities toward the narrative of Appalachian culture. This

segment of the course culminated with an open-book quiz that asked students to select one of the pieces we'd read or viewed and analyze it rhetorically in order to uncover the paradigms through which the creators approached their subject matter: these might include victimization, romanticization, preservation, celebration, or critical analysis (see quiz #1 prompt, Appendix B). The goal was for the students to recognize the polemical and material uses that can and have been made of presenting culture in a particular mode. Following the quiz (some students wrote for nearly thirty minutes), the class debriefed as a group by sharing their responses in preparation for moving on to the next segment of the course.

Toward the end of the course students were asked to begin constructing their own narratives of Appalachia; to this end, I included an archival research project in the semester's work, for which students did research at the Center for Appalachian Studies and Services at East Tennessee State University in order to locate little-known stories and cultural elements that buck their stereotypical notions of Appalachia. As they had been with the rhetorical analysis of the introductory course materials, students were encouraged to consider what paradigms the stories they represented out of their research might fit into, and to recognize both the similarities and the differences they encountered that link "unique" Appalachian experience to other cultures. One student was surprised to discover the overlap she portrayed between Native American cultural issues and Appalachian ones; another was interested in the roles Johnson City and Elizabethton, Tennessee, played in the development of larger American manufacturing concerns and the organization of wage laborers in the twentieth century.

Finally, I selected many of the literary texts upon the basis of the various perspectives on Appalachian culture that are represented and the ways in which, particularly in the contemporary literature, their authors engage often global issues that also impact an Appalachian mindset. Thus, I included not only John Fox, Jr. and Mary Noailles Murfree for their distinctly "outsider" nineteenth century accounts of the region, but also the largely celebratory "insider" works of Jesse Stuart, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, and James Still. Stuart's stylistic nods toward addressing both "insider" and "outsider" audiences, primarily through his representation of dialect, and Still's refusal to be purely nostalgic in his work, made a nice segue into the more consciously oppositional work of Don West, Harriette Arnow, and Denise Giardina, whose explicit focus on class and power issues helped the students approach the spectres of the coal mines and of Appalachian migration with more complexity. The skeptical stance of Elaine Fowler Palencia toward the notion of Appalachians as a race of noble savages—especially in her short story "The Art Business"—gives a new twist to the "insider/outsider" dynamic, as does Lee Smith's *Oral History*, while the works of Barbara Kingsolver and Chris Offutt explicitly grapple with the overlap between a traditional Appalachian ontology and experience and those of, variously, Central America, Africa, and the Jewish diaspora. Finally, poets like Stephen M. Holt, whose overtly acknowledged influences (for both stylistic and ontological reasons) include Chinese poet Li Po and Spanish poet Pablo Neruda, helped students recognize that Appalachian, or indeed any, literature and culture do not develop or exist within a geographical vacuum.

As we continue to explore pedagogical strategies that can address, extend, and add to the questions I have raised in this essay, I recognize that a further step in the development of my own reading list might necessarily be the inclusion of cultural and literary narratives that exemplify the kind of overlap I have identified as a concern of particularly the contemporary Appalachian authors I mention. That is, how would reading diachronically, say, between Li Po and Holt, or between Kingsolver and Mayan or Incan legends and stories, even more fully achieve the goals outlined

by scholars of Appalachia concerned with the necessity of acknowledging the global in our studies of and work on behalf of the local, both as an abstract value and as a concrete place? Queries such as these mark only one point of departure from which scholars and teachers in multiple fields might expand our understanding of Appalachian place within a global context.

Works Cited

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Appendix A

Syllabus Excerpt

Week 1	<p>Course Introduction: What is Appalachia? Who are Appalachians? Who are you? Is Appalachian literature American literature? What is Appalachian studies?</p> <p><i>Key terms:</i> high/low culture, oral vs. written tradition, regionalism, local color, stereotyping, identity</p> <p>Helen Hollingsworth, "The Land of Appalachia: From Encounter to Perception," <i>AIO</i> 1.32-37</p> <p>Jim Wayne Miller, "Nostalgia for the Future," <i>AIO</i> 2.734-39</p> <p>James Branscome, excerpt from "The Case for Appalachian Studies" (handout)</p> <p>W.H. Ward, "The Rush to Find an Appalachian Literature," <i>AIO</i> 2.623-28</p>
Week 2	<p>Cultural Stereotyping vs. Regional Identity: Where does it come from? What is the difference?</p> <p><i>Strangers and Kin</i> (film)</p> <p><i>The Beverly Hillbillies</i></p> <p><i>The Andy Griffith Show</i></p> <p>James Branscome, excerpt from "Annihilating the Hillbilly" (handout)</p> <p>Loyal Jones, "Appalachian Values" (handout)</p> <p>Henry D. Shapiro, "The Making of Mountain Folk," <i>AIO</i> 2.454-60</p> <p>Altina L. Waller, "Feuding in Appalachia: Evolution of a Cultural Stereotype" (handout)</p> <p>Paul Salstrom, excerpt from <i>Appalachia's Path to Dependency</i> (handout)</p> <p>Amy Tipton Gray, "The Hillbilly Vampire Goes to Class," <i>AOI</i> 658</p>
Week 3	<p>Quiz #1</p> <p>The Oral Tradition in Appalachia</p> <p>Eliot Wigginton, excerpts from <i>The Foxfire Books</i> (handout)</p>

Fixin' to Tell About Jack (film)

James Robert Reese, "Ray Hicks and the Oral Rhetorical Traditions of Southern Appalachia," *AIO* 2.492-504

Bill C. Malone, "Appalachian Music and American Popular Culture: The Romance That Will Not Die," *AIO* 2.462-69

George Ella Lyon, "Progress," *AIO* 1.194-95

Week 4

Archival Research

Field Trip: orientation session at the Center for Appalachian Studies and Services (CASS), ETSU

Literary Accounts of Pre-Industrial Appalachia

John Fox, Jr., excerpts from *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come* (handout)

Mary Noailles Murfree, selected stories (handout)

Jesse Stuart, selected stories (handout)

Week 5

Elizabeth Madox Roberts, *The Time of Man*

James Still, *Pattern of a Man and Other Stories*

Examination #1

MOVIE NIGHT: MATEWAN (time and place TBA)

Week 6

Railroads, Timber, and King Coal: Industry and Appalachia

Ronald L. Lewis, "Railroads, Deforestation, and the Transformation of Agriculture in the West Virginia Back Counties, 1880-1920" (handout)

Ron Eller, "The Ascendency of Coal" (handout) and "The Miner's Work," *AIO* 1.127-33

Don West, "Kentucky Miners" and "Harlan Portraits," *AIO* 1.125-27

James Still, "Earth-Bread," "Mountain Coal Town," and "Night in the Coal Camps," *AIO* 1.134-35

Week 7

Denise Giardina, *Storming Heaven*

Week 8

Harlan County, USA (film)

Quiz #2

Mike Yarrow, "Miners' Wisdom," *AIO* 1.145-54

Week 9

Stephen M. Holt, *Late Mowing*

Guest Lecture and Poetry Reading by Stephen M. Holt

Other poetry selections TBA

Continue discussion of Holt, et al.

Week 10

Seminar Paper Presentations

Week 11

Urban Appalachians: World War II and Outmigration

Harriette Simpson Arnow (film)

Excerpts TBA from Phillip J. Obermiller et al, eds., *Appalachian Odyssey* (handout)

Excerpts TBA from Chad Berry, *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles* (handout)

Obermiller and Michael E. Maloney, "Living City, Feeling Country: The Current State and Future Prospects of Urban Appalachians," *AIO* 320-30

Week 12

Harriette Simpson Arnow, *The Dollmaker*

Quiz #3

Week 13

Appalachia Now

Lee Smith, *Oral History*

Elaine Fowler Palencia, "The Art Business" (handout)

Amy Tipton Gray, "No Minority," *AIO* 1.264

Frank X. Walker, *Affrilachia*

Week 14 Chris Offutt, *No Heroes*

Archival Research Reports
Archival Research Paper due

Final Examination

Appendix B

Quiz #1 Prompt

In our discussion of background materials on Appalachian culture, we have identified several paradigms or mindsets that seem to structure their writers' approach to the subject matter: victimization, romanticization, preservation, celebration, and scholarly/objective analysis and critique. Choose one example of these materials and briefly discuss which paradigm it most clearly falls into, and why. How does this paradigm influence the way we perceive the culture presented in that piece? In what ways does the piece reinforce and/or resist cultural stereotyping?