Appalachia: Who cares, and So What?

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For the past two decades or more, we have heard a great deal about globalization—about the transformation of local or regional things or phenomena into global ones. Coal, for example, mined in Eastern Kentucky is then shipped to China. In return, people from Eastern Kentucky can buy a number of different things made in China at their local Walmart. Globalization can also be used to describe a process by which the people of the world are unified into a more connected and cohesive society and can 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 normal, desirable, and beneficial.

The problem is, 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—or perhaps even unconcerned about—how important the local continues to be amid all the globalist talk. Neither the local, though, or the global exclusively is a panacea for economic and social challenges; it shouldn’t be either/or but rather both/and. We can learn about the global by learning about the local, and we can learn about the local by applying what we know about the global.

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 stretching from southern New York state all the way down to northeastern Mississippi. More than 400 counties comprise Appalachia (and several new ones occasionally are added), as well as about 25 million people.

You attend a college that has, since the late nineteenth century, 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 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 several years. It’s thus important to learn about your new place. 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 called Bompata, not far east of the large city 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 (that’s right—what is now Florida). French cartographers followed a few years later. Hence, the geographic definition of Appalachia was born.1

It wasn’t until the late nineteenth century, though, that the term “Appalachia” was applied to the entire eastern mountainous region in economic, cultural, and social ways. Beginning in the 1870s, local-color 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 featuring Appalachian characters would eventually be written—in magazines, as well as novels—over the next few decades, and several became national best sellers. Sometimes these stories were positive (for example, describing the way mountaineers stuck with the Union during the Civil War), other times negative (implying that mountaineers were backward in an otherwise industrializing and urbanizing United States). Both views publicized mountain folk as different—as traditional and quaint on the positive side or as regressive and poor on the negative side. The result was that such

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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, he argued, mountaineers were our “contemporary ancestors” and deserved the attention of northern philanthropic foundations and educational institutions such as Berea.\(^2\) Settlement schools, such as those at Hindman and Pine Mountain in Eastern Kentucky, were founded throughout the mountains to provide education to the people, and other institutions were formed to help bring the region’s people into the “mainstream.” Plenty from as far as Europe came to record the cultural traditions there—the oral folklore and songs, the material culture traditions, and the like, and a great deal of the material recorded, documented, and preserved is in Berea’s Special Collections and Archives, there for you to discover. This group felt that the culture of the mountaineer was 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. A frequent question of such stories was, “How did these folks go so wrong?” Again, readers throughout the nation were often spellbound by these stories.

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, though remember the first time this region was named was in the sixteenth century. 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. It was almost as if a section of the country’s map was outlined with a bold black pen and “identified,” “named,” “created,” “constructed,” or even “invented.” Appalachia wasn’t the first region so created; remember that all 50 states—indeed all land areas around the world—have been so created. What we know as “Colorado” today was in some ways similarly born: look on the U.S. map and you

\(^2\) For more of Frost’s writing, see “Appalachian America,” *Women’s Home Companion*, September 1896, pp. 3-4, 21, and “Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains,” *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1899, pp. 311-19.
will see a rectangular area in the American West. If you are from Africa, you probably know that powerful people, mostly in Europe, carved up the African continent’s boundaries in a similar fashion.

These people not only created and defined the region known as Appalachia. They also defined who the people were and who they were not. The region that came to be Appalachia was always a tri-racial place after Europeans and Africans joined Native Americans. But the people of Appalachia—our “contemporary ancestors”—came quickly to be known as white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant (WASP). Ignored were the Native Americans who had been here for generations and Africans who had forcibly been resettled here. Even other ethnicities from eastern and southern Europe were ignored. Appalachia, in short, became whitewashed.

Other writers, such as John C. Campbell, referred to Appalachia as a “coherent region inhabited by a homogeneous population possessing a uniform culture.” 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 to this day. 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 WASP mountaineer. Such mythic beliefs, however, can also 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 create a region such as Appalachia, a place that many referred to as 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 and Detroit, where they found factory or office jobs that were often maddeningly monotonous. They were removed from extended families, and they lived rather anonymously in apartment houses and perhaps eventually in cookie-cutter suburban homes. If they lost their job, they could lose their ability to house and feed themselves.

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They no longer knew how to live close to the land, growing food. They were, she argues, nostalgic for the past and fearful of the future.

And let’s be clear: their perception of mountain people could also be much more sinister, giving them someone to whom they could look down upon, grateful that they had electricity, indoor plumbing, and all the marvels of “modern” life. Waller continues: “Appalachia became the ‘other,’ a place and a people to be admired, patronized, converted, taught, uplifted, disciplined, and sometimes even emulated.” Notice the words she uses in the previous sentence. Ask yourself which of these words has a positive connotation and which have a negative one. Here, “the people were assumed to be everything most Americans were not, but were still clearly of similar heritage and culture.”

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.” Such construction is the reason why Appalachia is the most misunderstood region in the United States today. That’s right: the most misunderstood region in the U.S.

After the War on Poverty in the 1960s, (when the government took a more active approach to end poverty in places such as Appalachia and elsewhere), and with the increasing rise of a powerful media in the twentieth century and beyond, such “construction” of Appalachia and its people has continued. One of the best examples of the way film affirms stereotypes about mountain people is Deliverance, released in 1972, about a canoeing trip gone very bad. A later example is 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. More recently, think about Tiffany “Pennsatucky” Doggett, from Orange is the New Black; her character is replete with stereotypes and, interestingly, a woman to complicate stereotypic men. Reality TV shows, such as Buckwild, Moonshiners, and Appalachian Outlaws only continue to perpetuate the stereotypes of mountain people. 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.

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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—they were different. If they were deemed better, then the people and the place were to be celebrated, preserved, visited, and even commodified, meaning cultural artifacts could be purchased and taken back home. If they were deemed worse, then the people and the place were to be scorned, ridiculed, patronized, changed, and avoided at all costs.

For the last one hundred years, for example, 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 bargain outlet mall prices. Some folks leave their monotonous, homogenous suburban life to stay in an “authentic” Smoky Mountains cabin, with indoor plumbing and an outdoor hot tub, mind you. 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. And the interesting thing is that every one of the fifty-plus countries around the world has a place like Appalachia. Again, learning about the local deepens our understanding of the global, and vice versa.

The significance is that so many misperceptions are connected with the people of Appalachia that it takes concerted effort to try to analyze and understand the complexity of the way the people and the place have been constructed. 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. This is part of 210’s focus on place, race, gender, and class.

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 and factories, 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 sometimes difficult to make sense why Central Appalachia has had some of the world’s richest natural resources, but why its inhabitants have been and continue to be among the poorest in the U.S. 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, Birmingham, 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.”

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 assets here, and there are tremendous deficits. Some people in the region struggle for jobs—today more than ever—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. Learning about the local and the regional can enhance your understanding of the global. Even today, the region and its people need those who are willing to devote a life of learning and service. If you want to learn more, the good people in the Loyal Jones Appalachian Center in Stephenson Hall can assist.

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