The Uses and Misuses of Appalachian Culture

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> *"…a widespread discontent has developed with the use of 'culture' as it, like most words of fashion, has become an all-embracing term that pleads immunity to doubt."*
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> J. A. Sorenson in *The Concept of Culture*

The *Cincinnati Enquirer* recently ran a photographic spread on University of Cincinnati students spending their spring break in Eastern Kentucky. The subhead reads "Cultural appreciation course takes students to meet those in need," and the brief five-paragraph story has three more references to Appalachian "culture". The eight photographs show students helping people too poor or physically limited to maintain their own homes. Nowhere in the text is this "culture" defined but the inference is that an Appalachian "culture" exists, and it is one of inability, dependence, and need. [1:B2]

It is easy to point out that both the university and the local media have bought into the stereotype of a culture of poverty pervading the entire region.[2] However, the next logical question is to ask the source of that stereotype – where did it originate? This is where urban Appalachian leaders, activists, and scholars have to step up and take responsibility for their own misuse of the concept of culture.

The careless use of slogans by the media or even well-intentioned people working for social change creates an illusion that we know what we are talking about. Terms like "culture," "cultural competence," and "multiculturalism" are often used to express sincere intentions that are inclusive and challenge the status quo. Yet, often dropped into our conversations and writing without any thought, they have become "just part of those routine word packages that are forever flying by."[3:wk3] Without a deeper understanding of their limitations, these terms may lead, unintentionally, to

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[1] Amie Dworecki. 2010. "Hands-on Learning Project", *Cincinnati Enquirer*, April 11.

[2] See for instance Michael Harrington's *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1962) which, despite its age and overgeneralizations, is still cited as the authoritative work on Appalachian poverty.

[3] Katha Pollitt. 2010. Quoted in Natalie Angier, "Just Don't Call Me…" *New York Times*, August 29.

practices that reinforce the misunderstanding of Appalachians. As the Urban Appalachian Council approaches its 40th year of advocating for Appalachians, it needs to be more thoughtful about its references to "Appalachian culture".[4]

Background

In the Cincinnati of the 1950s and 1960s Appalachian migrants collided with German Catholic, African American, and other long-time residents. The migrants were seen as threats to the social order and property values by some, while others saw Appalachians as competition for jobs, housing, recreational space, and access to social services. Another source of conflict was institutional: the Community Action Agency, Model Cities, and the Citizens' Committee on Youth discriminated against Appalachians by refusing to hire them or to include them in agency programs. UAC developed a set of tools to counter this resistance, to document Appalachians' needs, to sustain its own credibility, and to justify its cause.[5] One of these tools was to list positive cultural traits in defense of a heritage perceived by many as dysfunctional. UAC encouraged people to use lists of positive stereotypes such as the one later developed by Loyal Jones to counter negative stereotypes.[6] However, the Jones list is itself just another inventory of stereotypes, deployed in the process of fighting back.

Nevertheless, much of the training received by social workers, law enforcement personnel and educators was based on supposed Appalachian cultural traits such as "personalism, familism, and fatalism",[7] having "school phobia",[8] and belonging to an "analgesic subculture".[9] These sound like, and in some cases were intended to be, lists of diseases. Unfortunately many of them were formulated by "experts" on Appalachia.[10]

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[4] See Evelyn Knight. 2010. "Director's Corner," *Appalachian Center Newsletter,* Spring.

[5] Obermiller, Brown, Jones, Maloney and Wagner, "Identity Matters: Building an Urban Appalachian Movement in Cincinnati," in Fisher and Smith, eds., *Transforming Places: Lessons from Appalachia.* Forthcoming from the University of Illinois Press.

[6] Loyal Jones. 1994. *Appalachian Values*. Ashland, KY: The Jesse Stuart Foundation.

[7] Weller, op. cit.

[8] David H. Looff. 1971. Appalachia's Children: The Challenge of Mental Health. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.

[9] Richard A. Ball. 1968. A Poverty Case: The Analgesic Subculture of the Southern Appalachians. Morgantown,WV: West Virginia University Press.

[10] See Bruce Tucker. 2000. "Imagining Appalachians: The Berea Workshop on the Urban Adjustment of Southern Appalachian Migrants," pp. 97-20 in Obermiller, Wagner and Tucker. eds., *Appalachian Odyssey: Historical Perspectives on the Great Migration.* Westport, CT: Praeger.

The acknowledgement of an Appalachian identity has served many urban Appalachians well over the nearly four-decade history of the Urban Appalachian Council. The concept of Appalachian culture had its uses in the early days when it was used as a part of the contemporaneous discourse of power. The political battle for resources and social justice required language that could be understood in the racial and ethnic ferment of the latter 20th century. But the key question today is whether the cultural meme is still an appropriate or effective response to how urban Appalachians are perceived or treated.

Appalachian Culture: A Critique

Here's how two members of the UAC Research Committee view the misuse of the term "culture":

> Where Appalachians are concerned, the concept of culture has often been vitiated by indiscriminant use and vague referents. Even in those instances where Appalachian character traits or values are specified, they may be overly generalized or slanderously stereotypic. History, geography, geology, environment, along with social, political and economic factors are important considerations, but are too often conflated under the all-encompassing rubric of "culture". Appalachian culture is often adduced as a nebulous explanatory variable, but the science available to reinforce this position is scarce. To argue for a "mountain culture" in a particular area such as the coalfields, or a specific "rural culture" in Appalachian Ohio for instance, one would need to specify the topic very carefully and document it thoroughly with the relevant studies. In those instances where this research has been carried out, generalizing it to a wider area or larger population within the region remains problematic. In short, it is difficult to conceive of an accurate statement of "culture" for some 25 million people living in 13 states, especially given a high annual turnover rate in the population through in- and out-migration. This is not to say local cultures do not exist, particularly in rural Appalachia, but they are usually belief and behavior sets tied to specific places and are not descriptive of everyone in the region.[11]

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[11] Robert L. Ludke and Phillip J. Obermiller. 2010. "Introduction," *Appalachians: Their Health and Well-Being*, under review at the University Press of Kentucky.

There very well may be many local Appalachian cultures in the region and in urban neighborhoods, none of them unique in an anthropological sense, and all of them deeply contextualized by variables such as social class, geography, and degrees of urbanization.

Unfortunately the format for thinking about urban Appalachians established by Roscoe Giffin in the 1950s, (and about rural Appalachians established by Jack Weller in the 1960s), still infects contemporary discourse.[12] (Giffin, for instance, described Appalachian migrants as "trainable within the limits imposed by culture."[13]) Giffin and Weller established lists of Appalachian characteristics which they proceeded to contrast with lists of "modern" or "outsider" characteristics.

There are at least three major problems with this model. The first is its tendency to laminate "Appalachian culture" in a fixed and unchanging way. In the words of psychologist Ellen Corin, "…social and cultural variables are not reducible to a few discrete indices. Social and cultural environments have to be seen as systems of interacting variables and processes."[14:119] This approach to understanding the dynamic aspects of life in rural Appalachia is reinforced by anthropologists Elvin Hatch and Susan Keefe. Their studies show that Appalachians are continuously incorporating various aspects of modernity into their lives.[15] In contemporary terms, when bullet points or a rigid matrix of expected behaviors or beliefs are used in conjunction with the words "Appalachian culture" the information presented is usually both inaccurate and stereotypical.

A second problem arises when "cultural content" is described as a reality without any supporting evidence. Anthropological research shows that supposed Appalachian cultural characteristics either don't exist, or are

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[12] See Bruce Tucker. 2000. "Transforming Mountain Folk: Roscoe Giffin and the Invention of Urban Appalachia," pp. 69-95 in Obermiller, Wagner and Tucker, eds., *Appalachian Odyssey: Historical Perspectives on the Great Migration*. Westport, CT: Praeger; Jack Weller. 1965. *Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.

[13] Roscoe Giffin, "The New Urbanites," n.d., mimeo. CSM files, Berea College Archives.

[14] Ellen Corin. 1994. "The Social and Cultural Matrix of Health and Disease," pp. 93-132 in Robert G. Evans, Morris L. Barer and Theodore R. Marmor, eds., *Why Are Some People Healthy and Not Others: The Determinants of Health of Populations*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

[15] See Elvin Hatch. 2008. "Modernity with a Mountain Inflection," *Journal of Appalachian Studies,* v.14: 145-159; see also Susan Keefe. 2008. "Theorizing Modernity in Appalachia," *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, v.14: 160-173.

restricted to very small and highly specific locations in the region. [16,17] As Appalachian anthropologist Patricia Beaver commented in a recent interview: "I was thinking about Loyal Jones's book about Appalachian values this morning… I think we have overused those ideas and I have certainly shied away from using some of the values that I talked about in the 1980s, because of the complications of class, ethnicity, work, gender, and modernity." [18:170]

A third problem arises when only "positive" cultural characteristics are listed. It is one thing to describe what some Appalachians may affirm, revere, and value. Why is there no mention of what is excluded, rejected, ridiculed, or persecuted? This is a selective form of cultural construction that blurs the distinction between honestly recording actual beliefs and behaviors and confecting a highly sanitized version of "Appalachian culture". [19]

University of Kentucky sociologist Dwight Billings sums up the latest scholarly thinking on the topic this way:

> Significantly, new recognition of the importance of power and history [has] also led to the reconceptualization of Appalachian culture itself – a more robust understanding of culture involving more than just values, combined with a new emphasis on social history in the context of a multi-disciplinary Appalachian studies movement…the universalism and essentialism of the 1960s modernization theory gave way to greater stress on differences and diversity in the region. Unitary notions of Appalachia and Appalachian identities have been replaced by plural and complexly constructed conceptions of the region and its people". [20:6-8]

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[16] C. A. Coyne, C. Demian-Popescu, and D. Friend. 2006. "Social and Cultural Factors Influencing Health in Southern West Virginia: A Qualitative Study," Preventing Chronic Disease (Oct.), downloaded June 15, 2009 from http://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2006/oct/06_0030.htm

[17] See Susan Keefe. 2005. "Introduction," pp. 2 – 26 in Susan A. Keefe, ed., Appalachian Cultural Competency: A Guide for Medical, Mental Health, and Social Service Professionals. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

[18] Bruce Stewart. 2010. "An Appalachian Odyssey: Interview with Patricia Beaver," *Appalachian Journal*, v. 37: 164-182.

[19] C. f. Kwame Appiah. 2005. *The Ethics of Identity.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

[20] Dwight B. Billings. 2009. "Writing Appalachia: Old Ways, New Ways, and WVU Ways," pp. 1 – 30 in Egolf, Fones-Wolf, and Martin, eds., Culture, Class, and Politics in Modern Appalachia. Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press.

"The word 'culture' has conquered the world but lost its soul."[21]

The concept of culture itself is a relatively new one. Its roots are found in the 19th century rise of nation states and the concomitant drive to understand Darwin's theory of evolution. Both of these threads used lists of traits and behaviors to show why nations were better than tribes, fiefdoms, principalities, and city states, and why more "evolved" people were always more civilized than other groups. Both explanations of "civilization" were based on comparative cultural analysis such as that used by Giffin and Weller. While Franz Boas, an early 20th century anthropologist, thoroughly debunked this elitist fraud, some Appalachian scholars and activists have not yet caught on.

By the mid-20th century anthropologists had made "culture" the central concept of their discipline and generated some 164 definitions of the word, indicating they didn't have a clue as to what it meant.[22] Fredrik Barth, who spent a career studying ethnic groups across the world, insightfully (if humorously) suggested a ten year moratorium on the use of the word "culture" by his colleagues in anthropology.[23] A similar encouragement might be directed toward those involved in urban Appalachian advocacy and research. Perhaps the time has come to follow Barth's lead and declare a ten-year moratorium on the use of "Appalachian culture" in our public discourse.

But if we insist on using the term culture, even sparingly, perhaps the past decade or so of anthropological insight can provide guidance. Lila Abu-Lighod advocates for an "ethnography of the particular". She avoids the compulsion toward homogeneity, coherence and timelessness, noting that people live complex, often spontaneous lives as they adjust to the changing conditions around them. Rather than references to "Appalachian culture", better to appreciate the multiple and various survival strategies practiced by people in their home places.[24]

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[21] Appiah, op.cit.

[22] A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn. 1952. *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions. Cambridge, MA: The Museum.*

[23] Fredrik Barth. 1989. "The Analysis of Culture in Complex Societies, " *Ethnos*, 54: 120-142.

[24] Lila Abu-Lughod. 1991. "Writing Against Culture." pp. 137-162 in Richard G. Fox, ed., *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.

Fredrik Barth criticized all attempts to create a homogenized, unitary "culture" for any group.[25] Those who do "…silently reaffirm the assumption of pervasive logical coherence in culture without exploring its extent and character, [while leaving] the axioms of received wisdom on "culture" undisturbed…"[26:122] The message here is that trying to delineate a culture often tells us more about the biases of the observer than the nature of the people being observed.

Gerd Bauman suggests that essentializing culture as a thing in itself is a crude simplification that frequently results in polarizing distinctions such as " them and us" and "insider and outsider".[27] The concept of multiculturalism often founders on such easy but false dichotomies. Contrasting "Appalachian culture" with "mainline/mainstream" beliefs and behaviors is problematic for the obvious reason that neither can be accurately characterized. We are better off seeing human behavior as situational, coming alive through social interaction. The central questions then become ones not of culture but of practice, for instance, by identifying the lived patterns of urban Appalachian life, by demonstrating the needs and priorities in Appalachian neighborhoods, and by finding the most effective ways of meeting those needs and priorities.

A Few Tough Questions

There are some serious challenges to changing our way of thinking about Appalachians. For instance, isn't this dismissive attitude toward Appalachian culture a bit presumptuous? Isn't there something quintessentially, perhaps even ethereally Appalachian that is being overlooked here? Isn't asking for empirical descriptions of Appalachian culture being overly positivist? What about the literature and poetry and other artistic expressions that are rooted in the urban neighborhoods and rural hollows where Appalachians live? Let's examine each of these important questions in turn.

Kentucky scholar Rodger Cunningham makes a strong case for Appalachian culture as "a systematic structure of meanings implying orientation to the cosmos; in short, a folk ideology and at the same time a specifically spiritual phenomenon…".[28:55] This profound understanding of culture is important

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[25] Barth, op. cit.
[26] Barth, op. cit.
[27] Gerd Bauman. 1999. *The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic, and Religious Identities.* New York: Routledge.
[28] Rodger Cunningham. 2010. "The Green Side of Life: Appalachian Magic as a Site of Resistance," Appalachian Heritage, Spring, v. 38: 54-62.

because "the persistence of essential values among Appalachian mountain people can not only help mountain people themselves resist their oppressors, but if properly made known to the world, it can help shape thought on these issues in general".[29:60] Cunningham specifies the religious aspect of mountain culture as "an intimate relation to the land and its seasons, and to places and to extended family – and as 'dependent on the vision of Southern Appalachia as God's promised land', a vision intimately connected to the mountainous nature of the land". [30:57]

That's about as ethereal as you can get, and it may be true for some Appalachians living in the region. Evoking a relationship to the land and mountains, however, just won't work for many urban Appalachians, most of whom are now generations removed from those symbolic places. Appeals to such a culture will not be *their* means of resistance or empowerment. Appeals to identity appear much more compelling among urban Appalachians.

The anti-positivist argument is attractive but not persuasive. Leaving science out of any question means rejecting a potential avenue for answering that question. The social sciences, particularly anthropology, have been instrumental in providing a better understanding of Appalachia and its residents. Anthropologist Susan Emily Keefe is among the more insightful commentators on Appalachian culture, certainly one of the few who have tested its salience in any meaningful way. Using social science techniques, she provides a careful analysis of the perils involved in the whole concept of Appalachian culture, along with the variety of ways that Appalachian identity can be expressed. She cautiously affirms that there is a set of core values in the rural areas and small towns in a few counties in the mountains of North Carolina, but she is not sure how these values differ from those of other Americans, or whether they are espoused in the hundreds of other counties comprising the Appalachian region.[31] Keefe is a principled scholar, careful not to extrapolate broad generalizations from an extremely small sample – a good practice for urban Appalachian researchers and advocates as well.

As to creativity, there is a bountiful Appalachian literature (to take one example) that is indeed evocative of the Appalachian experience. Whether historical or contemporary, much of this body of work tells the Appalachian story with a compelling and authentic voice. But we must remember it is

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[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Keefe, op. cit.

fiction, that its characters never existed, that its plots and settings are suggestive not descriptive. In the words of historian Patricia Nelson Limerick: "There are some who would argue that when an ethnicity becomes the basis of a thriving literary tradition, it is already on the ropes, already on its way to status as the property of a small group of self-conscious intellectuals and no longer just the lived reality of regular folk."[32:252]

Local color writers, some of whom are still hard at work in the 21st century, did and are doing a disservice to Appalachians. They are part of what Limerick calls…"the breezy and colorful school of ethnicity and culture."[33:236] This school of "creative" writing about Appalachians at times includes scholars and researchers in academia, reporters, photographers, film documentarians, playwrights, artists, and choreographers. These are the people who manipulate their works into a cultural statement about the region and its people that fits an established template, but does not represent much of the Appalachian experience. We do not mean to lump all creative folk into this category, but are critical of those who remain oblivious to how deeply their work is contextualized by their own historical and social settings. [34]

The Diminishing Role of Culture in Advocacy

Is it possible for UAC trainers to operate today without enumerating the elements of Appalachian culture? There is great pressure to use such lists. People "in the trenches" of urban schools and working class neighborhoods often want lists of "dos and don'ts". Some may even want us to confirm that they have reasons to dislike the people they are frustrated trying to help. On the other hand, many of the trainees are themselves Appalachian and hungry for a positive view of their heritage.

It is encouraging that professionals who conduct training have been moving away from trait lists for at least a decade. There is more encouragement now for trainers who can use a more complex model and discuss what Appalachians have in common with other groups and to discuss behaviors in terms of social class as well as ethnicity. As urban neighborhoods become more diverse it makes sense to downplay culture and focus on observed rather

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[32] Patricia N. Limerick. 2000. *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

[33] Ibid.

[34] C.f., Kenneth W. Warren, "Does African-American Literature Exist?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, downloaded 3-2-11 at http://chronicle.com/article/Does-African-American/126483/

than theoretical behaviors. In this context, case studies and stories based on experience (ethnography) become more important than fixed concepts of culture.

It may be hard for some to leave the well-trodden paths of cultural competence training, but there is an alternative way to deliver the same message effectively. That way is to develop presentations focusing on the issues we know Appalachians face in their neighborhoods, schools, and work sites, and how best to deal with these issues. For example, using the Lower Price Hill Women's Health Survey to focus attention on Appalachian health needs, or using case studies to tell the story of individuals, groups, and whole neighborhoods. In short, there are many ways to communicate urgent needs without reference to cultural characteristics.

But What about Cultural Programming?

One of UAC's strengths is presenting and encouraging the arts. For example, it presented the film, *Coal Country*, at the Underground Railroad Freedom Center as part of the Council's 35th anniversary celebration. There, the audience discussed the historical and artistic merits of the film. This kind of involvement in the arts is a way of encouraging artistic expression without recourse to the generalizations and trait lists often associated with presentations on Appalachian culture.

The Council's message is not just directed at members of the helping professions. It is also directed to Appalachians and to the community at large. This is the "cultural programming" part of UAC's work and is directed toward celebrating Appalachians. Part of UAC's mission is helping urban Appalachians develop a positive identity to help them cope with negative stereotypes and to appreciate the richness of traditional music, dance, crafts, and storytelling. UAC should emphasize the variety in the Appalachian heritages of the diverse people in Appalachia whether Anglo Saxon, Scots-Irish, African, European immigrant, or Native American. This is the "spiritual" part of UAC's mission and it is just as important as the focus on the need for quality education, health programs and economic opportunity.

Just as we do not want to confine the concept of Appalachian heritage to cultural traits or values or behaviors allegedly shared by Appalachians, we should not confine our celebration of a regional heritage to specific handcrafts, music, literary or dance forms. We need to include the new artistic

expressions emerging among urban Appalachians. By encouraging community people in composition and performance (e.g., poetry, skits, music, murals), we refuse to freeze our heritages at a particular point in time. We need to respect *both* our past history and the history urban Appalachians are in the process of creating. Respect for roots in the British Isles and the influence of Celtic traditions must be combined with respect for the blend of African, Native American, Hispanic and other influences flowing through urban Appalachian neighborhoods. Rap may now be more influential among urban Appalachian youth than bluegrass.

Conclusion

What is needed now is a more flexible, even experimental, view of urban Appalachians. As UAC continues to reaffirm its commitment to advocacy, to addressing the social conditions faced by low-income Appalachians and their neighbors in Cincinnati, its presentation of the arts should continue to focus on the diverse heritages of Appalachian people. In its training efforts UAC needs to be very cautious about how, when, and where the word "culture" is deployed. UAC's board, staff, and volunteers must be judicious about where "culture" appears in its brochures, grant proposals, programs, speeches, scholarly publications, and Internet postings. Instead of encapsulating the Appalachian experience in "culture", UAC can expand real understanding by relating Appalachians' efforts to raise their children, get an education, find a job, and live in a healthy environment.

At this point it is fair to ask: "What can we use as a substitute for the concept of culture?" One option is the notion of Appalachian identity. It seems possible to have an identity ("Appalachian") without reifying it into a culture. Ernie Mynatt, the "godfather" of the urban Appalachian movement in Cincinnati, promoted the notion of Appalachian identity rather than culture.[35] It may be time to get back to those roots. But Appalachian identity is just as subject to reification and essentialism as the concept of culture. The notion of identity, therefore, should not be rooted in some abstract concept, but on how people are currently interpreting their lives in social, economic, and political terms. In this way the concept of identity allows for structural analysis, including the implications of social class.

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[35] C.f. Ernest N. Mynatt, "The Appalachian Experience," 163-page typescript in the files of Phillip Obermiller.

Another option, heritage, can be useful when used in the plural – Appalachian heritages. This refers to the multiple historical influences that have affected Appalachians. But it is wise to go beyond history to the Appalachian future. One way UAC can fulfill its mission is make sure that all of the varied stories get told, all the many voices of Appalachia are heard, and all urban Appalachians have the power to participate in developing new and better visions for themselves, their families, and their communities.