

**The Myth of Appalachian Whiteness:  
Stereotyping and Racism from the Perspective of a White Appalachian Woman**

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The stereotype of the backward, barefoot, poor white hillbilly is familiar to most. However, it is a myth that obscures the realities of race and racism in Appalachia. And the reality of diversity, while becoming increasingly important in the scholarship of Appalachia, has sometimes been overlooked in attempts to refute the “poor white trash” stereotype. Recent studies have begun to examine the experiences of black Appalachians within the region derived somewhat from emerging “whiteness” and “white privilege” studies. Like many scholars, I believe that the invisibility of blacks in Appalachia is also based on demographics as well hegemonic practices and ideas. In this essay, I present my particular perspective and how my views and scholarship are connected to the trajectory of Appalachian research on race and identity. I believe that it remains that, most likely, the best ones to challenge the falsehood of Appalachian whiteness are those who are subject to racism in Appalachia.

**Introduction**

In 1985, I attended a conference at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, where Dr. James Turner delivered a keynote address. Dr. Turner, who holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from UK, is a prominent scholar, teacher, and administrator; well-known among Appalachian scholars and activists and he is black. What caught my “ear” during his address was his claim that, on his way from North Carolina, he had stopped to visit with many relatives. As I recall, he insisted on the existence of many black residents, particularly his relatives, in Appalachia.

Yet, the stereotype of Appalachians as white – and poor, and rural, and backward – persists. It is a stereotype that arose from deliberate as well as unintended defamation of the inhabitants of the region. And there is a reality that Appalachia has often had, at least in the last 80 years or so, a fewer percentage of blacks than most regions of the country. And those that do live in the region are most often concentrated in urban areas.

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Another reality is that the lives of many black Appalachians are shaped far more by their racial status than their regional connections. Lastly, researchers, who are predominantly white, tend to develop research from their own positions, thus reifying the “whiteness” myth.

The omission of black Appalachians from the American consciousness is an indication of the strength of the aforementioned stereotype. It abets as well as ignores the impact of racism in Appalachia. And any time there is one kind of exclusion of people, there are opportunities for many more. While I am particularly concerned here with the omission of blacks and the issue of the racial “divide” in Appalachia as elsewhere, I must note that the stereotype also obfuscates the presence of Hispanics and other diverse ethnicities in the region. It also overlooks and exacerbates the issues of gender, class, sexual preference, differences in abilities, and so on. I should also note that I am visibly white, I fit the physical stereotype perfectly with my Scots-Irish ancestry, and I am an “avowed” Appalachian. I have to acknowledge that my experiences, and subsequent beliefs about race, will likely differ from the experiences and of someone who appears black. And that my perceptions are informed by my own research into Appalachian identity. Yet they seem mesh with the ideas of others such as Wilburn Hayden, Jr. (2002):

....white privilege is so ingrained in our society, for whites, blacks, and other minority groups, it is often seen as normal, if it is seen at all. A part of this phenomenon is the perception within Appalachia, as *well* as outside the region, that whites are the only significant group living there and/or that other groups are so small that their presence in the region is of little consequence.

### **“Whiteness” and Racism in Appalachia**

To continue making my points about the myth as problematic, I will introduce some of the research on race, blackness and whiteness, in Appalachia. In the rest of this essay, I will discuss what researchers suggest are the likely causes and consequences of the myth and how it might be addressed.

Bound up with the omission of blacks in the general perceptions of Appalachians is the belief, perhaps more persistent within the region than without, that Appalachia has never been as racist as the South generally. Allen Batteau (Inscoc in Pudup, Billings, and Waller, 1995) terms this the myth of “Holy Appalachia”.

Two points need to be made here. One is to note the fluidity of defining the boundaries of the region and sub-regions over time. Where Appalachia exists is not a trivial matter because it is associated with the question of whether Appalachia is a southern region. The short answer is that part of Appalachia extends into the Deep South. But the question is not just about a physical boundary but the historical perceptions of the cultural boundaries. Early popular and scholastic descriptions of the area focused on the Central Appalachian Plateau (Raitz, Ulack, and Leinbach, 1984), mostly in Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. Sometimes the southern mountain region was included in Appalachia and sometimes the plateau was actually considered a Southern region. Over time its political boundaries grew to include 420 counties in thirteen states (ARC). This complexity of definition reflects the obscurity of popular views about where and what the region is geographically as well as culturally. Is Kentucky a southern state? Is West Virginia in the Midwest?

The answers may not be found definitively but the questions are still important, tied as they are with my second point: The history of slavery and slaveholdings and the current and historical racial attitudes in Appalachia are confused in the public as well as scholastic perceptions. For example, in my research on identity (Campbell, 1994), a white respondent said, “But you know how it is in Kentucky. People, well, really, the Blacks are treated really better in Kentucky than they are any place” (Campbell, 1994:140). Yet, a middle-aged black respondent from Kentucky told tales of overt discrimination while growing up in Appalachia. At the same time, he explained that local whites made it possible for him and his fellow black students to go to a white public school when he was much younger (Campbell, 1994: 144).

Slavery did exist in Appalachia despite early popular accounts to the contrary. Insoe (1995) captures the mythology of race in the local color movement of the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Romantic Appalachian stories meshed with the way that the American public accepted the accounts of the “peculiar” people of the mountains (Shapiro, 1978). Insoe (1995) is especially critical of John Fox Jr’s character, Chad, who is purported to encounter his first black after he leaves the mountains of Kentucky for the bluegrass. Yet, according to Insoe (1995:106-108) other writers, such as W. J. Cash, detail a deep hatred of blacks on the part of mountain people.

In an attempt to assemble and disseminate current scholarship on racism and “whiteness” in the mountains, the *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, devoted Volume 10, numbers one and two, to the subject. I draw heavily from these articles, especially Barbara Ellen Smith’s (2004), to explain the salient points regarding the myth within the context of my own research experience and perspective. I also acknowledge that I (and

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other Appalachian scholars) base much of this work on the cultural studies of whiteness and white privilege that have emerged in the last two decades. But this particular essay is focused more on the stereotypes that reflect a culture of poverty mythos for whites while overlooking black reality. This mythos certainly is in the realm of the blindness of white privilege but includes another dimension of inequality that adds to the distorted vision.

Dual accounts, similar to the popular writings on race, appear in the scholarship on Appalachia and race (Gowen and Waalkes, 2004: 272):

There are two general and contrasting images of race relations in Appalachia, and while each has historical evidence to support it, neither accurately portrays the region as a whole.

One image is that Appalachia was “overwhelmingly abolitionist” (Gowen and Waalkes, 2004: 272), and the other was the notion that Appalachia held “class resentment of wealthy slave owners” and were “ignorant of and hostile toward blacks” (Gowen and Waalkes, 2004: 272). Research has revealed that in actuality: “contemporary racial attitudes in Appalachia appear to reflect attitudes in the larger regions surrounding them” (Gowen and Waalkes, 2004:2737).

Smith (2004) examines the literature on Appalachian whiteness from a critical historical perspective in which she highlights the importance of racial discourse and “positionality”; prefacing this with her recognition that the attempt to refute the white Appalachian stereotype has overshadowed the importance of race relations in Appalachia. Early journalism and popular research focused on the poor white backward Appalachian subculture (Ball, 1968 , Kephart, 1976, Weller, 1965). Many initial scholastic refutations of the Appalachian Studies movement focused so heavily on discounting this culture of poverty thesis (along with cartoon characters like “Snuffy

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Smith” and “Li’l Abner” (Smith, 2004)) that they actually helped to perpetuate the myth of Appalachian whiteness.

This concentration on refuting the culture of poverty also helped to prevent addressing the myth of “race innocence” in Appalachia (Smith: 2004). Additionally, in her essay, Smith (2004) defines whiteness as a position obscured by the absence of blacks or as a position made manifest by the definition of the “other” non-whites. Smith (2004:41) analyzes the literature on “whiteness” and racial formation in the country as a whole and finds that it is particularly weak on the intersection of race, class and gender.

Smith (2004:42) is also dissatisfied with the lack of “critical consciousness of whites” in much of the literature on class in Appalachia. Some of the best research on the history of the Appalachian working class overtly and intentionally includes blacks. But again, Smith (2004:45) finds it dichotomized in terms of class and race rather than the intersection of positions.

But there were also attempts to play up whiteness itself during the years of so-called “great Migration” in the United States. For example, it was the president of Berea College who coined the phrase “our contemporary ancestors” in an attempt to attract upper-class Anglo-students from the North (Smith, 2004:47).

Another concern about historical racism in social movements is recounted by Don Manning-Miller (1993). Like much activist organizing in the nation as a whole, complaints arose among participants of the exclusion of blacks in the efforts. Manning-Miller called for whites to include the issue of racism in all organization strategies, because without that effort, “social justice work will not succeed” (Osborne, 2004:143).

For Manning-Miller (in Osborne, 2004, Smith, 2004) token attention to race maintains white blindness to race status and to status intersectionality.

There is evidence (Osborne, 2004) that some of this exclusion has diminished if not disappeared. In one study, Osborne (2004) found that many grassroots organizations in East Tennessee had “anti-racism” agendas. I think that it is reasonable to assume that what change exists is associated with a greater interest in race relations on the part of both scholars and activists, black and white), *and*, perhaps most importantly, on Blacks’ demands to be recognized. However, ten years after Manning-Miller voiced his disquiet, Osborne found that, unless racism was the central concern, it was rarely part of the agenda for most East Tennessee groups” (Osborne, 2004: 149).

The myth of whiteness is, of course, not only due to misinformation, invisibility, complacency, or the institutionalization of racist structures. Overt racism is part of political agendas that benefit from the diversion of attention from the problems of African-Americans. Whiteness studies have developed in order to recognize that being white is a racialized position whether blacks are present or not. “Analyzing social relations and settings in terms of whiteness brings to the fore the racially interested and motivated actions of whites” (Hartigan, 2004: 58). Therefore, it must be acknowledged that racism is not, of course, always due to inattention. Still, the shrinking of black Appalachians from the areas in which Appalachian researchers typically focus, that is to say, rural areas, is something that must be considered as well.

### **Identifying Blacks and Black Identity in Appalachia**

Frank X Walker (nd) is a scholar and poet who coined the term “Afrilachian”. After all, “African-American-Appalachian” is a mouthful. But in conducting my

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dissertation research on Appalachian identity in the early 1990s, I actually met one individual who described herself as such (Campbell, 1994). I think the way that I found her is telling of the issue of race relations as well.

In the process of collecting interviews for my research, race was there in its absence -- my trajectory for identifying suitable respondents was shaped by my whiteness. That is until I made a point of breaking out of it. Being as I was raised in the heart of Central Appalachia, I asked my cousin, who was then a prominent lawyer in Perry County, Kentucky, to help me identify a black Appalachian in the region. After all, I reasoned, he should know everyone. But he informed me that he didn't. So, in one of my rare episodes of brashness, I got in my car, drove from Lexington, Kentucky to the Perry County seat of Hazard, and approached the first (visually) black person that I met. She was very accommodating and helped me contact the aforementioned respondent who had been studying Appalachia at Berea College (it is a small world, after all).

I knew that there were many black people in that particular county but I rarely met any while growing up in the next county to the east, Letcher. As a kid, I assumed that no blacks lived in Letcher. As an adult, I discovered that they were mostly in the northern end of the county, near Jenkins, and that demographic trends have assisted in the invisibility of blacks. Those trends are, of course, shaped by the history of racial relations in the country.

Turner and Edward Cabell (1985: 242) explain that the out-migration from Appalachia began earlier for blacks than for whites. Blacks came into the coal-mining areas of Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia in large numbers in the early part of the twentieth century and left in record numbers after 1930 (Turner and Cabell, 1985: 242-

243). Before the 1900's they were found throughout the region. They also had a higher out-migration from southern and central Appalachia than whites during the 1960's (Turner and Cabell, 1985: 245). As if to corroborate Turner and Cabell, Theresa I. Myadze found in 2006 that Blacks comprised 8.2% of Appalachia compared to the 15% they found in 1985. Elsewhere, Kelvin M. Pollard (2004) using the 2000 census found that the percentage of blacks in Appalachia was catching up to the rest of the country. The biggest gains were in the southern Appalachian states, particularly in metropolitan areas.

Perhaps most important of all, black invisibility is linked with segregated opportunities. "But in truth, black men and women became 'invisible' to historians and popular writers long ago because they did not swim in the mainstream of Appalachian life and culture" (Culpepper, 2002:262). According to Turner (Wagner, Obermiller, and Turner, 2004: 122):

Even now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century when Appalachian coal towns such as Lynch are but remnants of their former selves, today's generation, the offspring and descendants of African American miners and migrants, still live virtually invisible lives.

However, black Appalachians dug coal, taught school, shopped at stores, went to the movies and danced in community centers. But usually in separate seams, buildings or neighborhoods (Wagner et al, 2004). Blacks also had less economic stability in the mines. "When machines replaced strong black arms and backs to get the coal, black miners – the last hired – were more often than not the first fired" (Turner and Cabell: 1985). Cabell and Turner also found that Appalachian blacks were among the poorest people in the United States, at least in 1985, when they edited their landmark book on black Appalachians . In 1990, Cushing and Rogers reported that "The limited data

available by race reveals that blacks tend to have very low incomes in Appalachia; well below incomes of the rest of the Appalachian population . . . “

A recent newspaper article by John Cheves (2010) highlights the importance of both numbers and institutionalized discrimination in maintaining black invisibility. He (Cheves, 2010) makes it clear that that invisibility is linked to a lack of power. When Osi Onyekwuluje, a conservative Republican ran for political office, it all came down to nobody recognizing his name and just who the heck he was. His policy stance was never at issue. Moreover, blacks are extremely underrepresented in state and local offices. This in turn, limits visibility in positions of power which limits visibility in the public consciousness, and so on (Cheves, 2010).

John Hartigan, Jr., (2010) points out the difficulty in even discussing race across the nation in both pre- and post-Obama. This difficulty is rooted in the value of individualism which obscures social constructs such as race and thus obscures racism and thwarts productive racial dialogue. In his analysis (2010) Hartigan asserts that “Analyzing social relations and settings in terms of whiteness brings to the fore the racially interested and motivated actions of whites.” Whiteness, rather than blackness, is most revealing of race relations and racism.

Like most matters of such significance, the answer to recognizing the impact of race, including whiteness, is simple but not easy. Sociological analyses must recognize the distribution patterns of Blacks and other groups in the mountains. We must become familiar with Appalachia’s histories and ideologies in order not to make the mistake of omitting black realities that can occur through aggregate snapshots of the region. But we must also recognize our limitations in more qualitative studies. For example, as Smith

explains (2004), Shaunna Scott noted her position and how it affected her research on an Eastern Kentucky community. As Scott said, “The most regrettable shortcoming of this ethnography is its inattention to matters of race and ethnicity” (Smith, 2004: 203). One reason for this shortcoming, is that “the ethnographer is white” (Smith, 2004: 203).

The stereotypes of Appalachians are ubiquitous. I can recount a litany of my encounters with it over my lifetime, as can most people in and from the region. A recent example of the way in which assumptions are made about those of us identified as Appalachians, while not particularly disparaging, struck me as indicative of its depth and pervasiveness. A colleague of mine, while discussing issues of diversity, looked at me and said, “Well, *I*’M not a Southern Baptist.” I’m not either. I was raised as a Methodist in the mountains. And I guess only a local could understand the irony of my living among my *Missionary* Baptist relatives. Certainly this experience isn’t on the level of being discounted because of race or gender. But it typifies the ease at which any of us can be categorically left in a place that we ourselves might find irrelevant.

Often we have heard (and perhaps expressed) the lament that we wish we could just do away with the concept of race. Ideally, we would no longer “see” racial differences. The rather pat, yet appropriate, response is that racial distinctions still affect what happens to people. If we don’t see “race” we most likely will not see “racism”. And noting and understanding racism is already problematic in our society. Two decades ago, Robbie Benson (1990) documented the legacy of a 1919 race riot in Corbin, Kentucky. The small town residents often denied that their searingly white community (there was one black family in town at that time) was racist but nearby blacks noted being uncomfortable even to venture there.

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For me to call on black Appalachians to identify themselves as such may seem presumptuous in light of what I have been saying. After all, for some it is another negative identity in a world that denigrates overtly and covertly. As Alex Haley said (Ann Hawthorne, 1991:fn2: 141-142), "...if you deal with being black you don't have time to deal with being Appalachian". Perhaps it is more important to encourage, support, and listen to those non-whites who want to identify themselves as Appalachians. Therefore, I am emboldened to insist that blacks keep on standing up for themselves in all areas, including Appalachian studies and sociological analyses, because forcing us to see race inevitably falls on those who are the victims of racism. Sometimes the privileged must be made to understand our privilege and not slip into complacency -- or old habits -- just because we care both personally and professionally about issues of race.

To wit, when I was invited to edit the section called, "Ethnicity and Identity" for the *Encyclopedia of Appalachia* (Haskell and Abramson: 2006), I never gave the section title a second thought. At one point, Dr. Turner suggested the title should be "Race, Ethnicity and Identity" and the executive editors readily changed it. I was reminded therefore that I must be ever-vigilant of my own thoughts and behaviors in a society that is so profoundly racist.

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