The Rhetoric of Appalachian Identity (Book Review)

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Ezzell occupies less solid ground when he attempts to differentiate Chattanooga from other Appalachian cities in particular or the region in general. Perhaps the native entrepreneurs in Tom Lee’s _Tri-Cities_ were simply more sanguine about economic realities than Chattanooga’s Northerners, rather than being less ambitious. The local investors in Rand Dotson’s _Roanoke_ would never have had their opportunities without decisions made in the Norfolk & Western’s Philadelphia board rooms. They all dwell in the Great Valley structure and existentially depend on a primary rail route. Comparing valley cities to mountain coal camps or county seats amounts to comparing goober peas to chinquapins. These urban places, along with Knoxville and others, possess more commonalities than differences. Additionally, in the late 19th, early 20th century, much of the region’s population growth came from an influx of overseas whites and Deep South Blacks, changing industrializing Appalachia’s complexion. In _Chattanooga, 1865-1900: A City Set Down in Dixie_, what Ezzell has made is an important contribution to the yet undefined, developing field of Appalachian urban history.

**Barry Whittemore**

Barry Whittemore is a lecturer in Appalachian and religious history at the University of North Georgia in Dahlonega. His dissertation focused on town building and town persistence in Virginia’s Southern Blue Ridge, 1880-1920.

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**The Rhetoric of Appalachian Identity**


Appalachians who become academics often operate as go-betweens. For scholarly peers, they rely on academic theories to explain how injustices shape Appalachians. To honor their Appalachian heritage, they downplay their academic status and favor personal experience as evidence. Sometimes these approaches are complementary; sometimes they are not, but the dialectical impulse exists nonetheless. Todd Snyder in _The Rhetoric of Appalachian Identity_ successfully attends to both perspectives, weaving his life story among rhetorical, economic, and pedagogical theories. Snyder’s melding of the personal and scholarly is ideal; a dialectical style best demonstrates the inherent contradictions that inform the lives of Appalachians in the academy.

Snyder’s analysis is largely driven by two concepts: first, what he calls “holme,” “an internalized obligation to remain in the region in which one was born,” (203) and second, the “hillbilly,” a “cultural stereotype” and form of “internalized oppression” (10). Both can be a “roadblock to class ascension, critical literacy, and critical consciousness” (5). However, as I was reading, I could not
help but think of these concepts as respectively representing the personal and scholarly threads of his argument. When Snyder discusses holme, he offers first-person accounts, including his own experience of growing up in a trailer park in West Virginia and eventually becoming an assistant professor at a college in upstate New York. When Snyder discusses the “hillbilly,” he uses critical theory to examine how cultural rhetoric in the U.S. has shaped Appalachian identity. For me, these concepts served as more effective organizing principles than the book’s four-part, formal arrangement: Appalachia and the American Imagination: Critical Theory; Material Reality and the Appalachian Identity: Personal Experience; Appalachia and the Academy: Ethnographic Research; and Critical Consciousness and the College Diploma: Critical Pedagogy.

As these titles indicate, Snyder is trained in rhetoric and composition theory, although he does not spend much time with any one theory or theorist. His use of Edward Said in Chapter 1 runs only three pages; Karl Marx and others receive brief attention throughout. His discussion of critical pedagogy in Part IV is more historical summary than theoretical application. Surprisingly, rhetoric and composition scholarship receives only a brief nod in the early pages of Chapter 6. Still, the few theoretical observations Snyder makes are well-supported, and his concision on the theoretical front will likely be a relief to many.

The book’s strength is Snyder’s attention to holme. He is sensitive to the common trope of “gettin’ above one’s raisin’,” and an intriguing tension is palpable throughout. For example, in his Introduction entitled “The Ethical Appeal to Authority,” he proclaims that the book will not present a “what-education-can-do-for-you Appalachian success story” (7), although later he shares, “my college education taught me how to think and dream differently” (14), and “as I moved through my undergraduate curriculum ... for the first time in my life, I imagined a life outside of Webster County, perhaps even a life outside of West Virginia. If returning holme wasn’t an option, I wanted to live in academia’s ivory tower” (200). I offer these examples not to criticize, but to underscore the instructive value of contradiction. As an Appalachian academic, I know what Snyder means when he says, “I’m no longer an insider. I’ll never be an outsider” (13).

Snyder’s winning first-person accounts make one wish the book were more fully a memoir like Mike Rose’s Lives on the Boundary or Richard Rodriguez’s Hunger of Memory. Yet his theoretical backing grants scholarly legitimacy to the subject. Perhaps the feeling of disquiet I sense throughout the book comes from Snyder’s disappointment at not being able to let his story alone validate what he knows for certain, or perhaps the disquiet I feel is my own. What is for certain is that this disquiet is essential to our understanding of the Appalachian academic experience.

Carefully wrought, Snyder’s book should attract multiple audiences. Appalachian Studies scholars will want to skim the familiar Appalachian backstory in Chapter 1 but may linger over the first-person accounts and critical
and rhetorical theory. Rhetoric and composition scholars, valuing critical pedagogy and ethnographic research, may use the book in graduate classes or to inform their own research. Indeed, it is likely that any Appalachian scholar in any field will find resonances despite the book's purported rhetorical bent.

**Mary Beth Pennington**

Mary Beth Pennington is a lecturer at Old Dominion University where she teaches courses in writing, rhetoric, and literature. Her research interests include the rhetoric of Appalachian activism and pedagogy on which she has presented at the Appalachian Studies Association, the Rhetoric Society of America, and the College Composition and Communications Conference, among others. She was born and raised in southwestern Virginia.

**Appalachia USA: Photographs**


"You can't understand America unless you understand Appalachia," Jeff Biggers wrote in *The United States of Appalachia*. Similarly, the title of photographer Builder Levy’s book *Appalachia, USA* suggests that images of Appalachia can illustrate national trends of industrialization, land use, and labor.

One hundred pages of black and white photographs represent 30 years of Levy’s work in the region—from 1973 to 2004. This retrospective is divided into five sections: Social Landscape; Home, Family, Children; At the Mines; Mountaintop Removal and Slurry Impoundments; and Strike and Protest. The images in each of these sections easily connect to national social movements, including the War on Poverty, environmental regulations, and labor reforms.

Levy’s large format black and white images offer classic examples of darkroom photography. “Preachers,” photograph #19 from 1970 in Sprigg, West Virginia (Mingo County), shows two preachers standing in a room. In the style of the old masters, light streams through a door just outside of the frame, illuminating the face of a lanky man caught in mid-sentence. The second preacher leans closer to the camera, his head is bowed over a white-frocked babe held carefully in his arms. Just out of focus, a woman leans against the unfinished wall of the room. The play of light, focus, and composition could have been composed by Rembrandt.

Many other images in Levy’s book have a similar timeless quality. Levy is responsible for creating several iconic images of the region, including portraits of folk legend Nimrod Workman from Chattaroy, West Virginia (#29), the picket line at the Brookside strike in Harlan County, Kentucky (#62), and a heart-shaped sign by the railroad tracks in Williamson, West Virginia.
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