

APPALACHIA
in the CLASSROOM:
Teaching the Region

Edited by
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INTRODUCTION

As we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century, the scholarly discipline of Appalachian Studies continues to evolve and change to keep pace with the living culture on which it focuses. While Appalachian Studies must remain mindful of the past to understand and inform the present, educators and scholars should maintain a contemporary focus on the region and its people in order to address current issues. Rigorous study and critique of both old and new Appalachian arts and literature legitimize this still relatively young discipline and provide students with critical thinking skills that can be applied in any context. Moreover, students acquire cultural awareness and sensitivity both particular to Appalachia and yet transcendent of it, enabling them to apply their Appalachian Studies knowledge to other cultures throughout the world.

Appalachia in the Classroom: Teaching the Region seeks to contribute to this twenty-first-century dialogue in Appalachia by offering different topics and teaching strategies that represent the diversity found within the region. And therein exists one of the challenges, yet realities, of studying Appalachia today. How do educators avoid essentialism and essentialist thinking while still acknowledging that a distinct region and culture exist? Such tension plays an integral role in postmodern Appalachian Studies as educators move beyond solely debunking reductive stereotypes and grapple with complex contemporary Appalachian subject matter in a cross-curricular context using interdisciplinary teaching methods. As some educators may struggle to come to a solid understanding of Appalachian Studies in the twenty-first century, the contributors to this collection offer several answers, although the answers are not always tightly contained or given in black and white. In fact, how do educators and students even designate Appalachia? The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) offers one understanding, certainly, albeit politically and geographically prescribed. Yet scholars have debated the ARC's changing boundaries since the commission was conceived in the 1960s.

Additionally, the region's image has been shaped over time by literary treatments, from frontier explorers and local color writers to more contemporary

authors who hail from both inside and outside Appalachia. Even this distinction between “insider” and “outsider” proves challenging with the region’s history of out-migration, as does rural versus urban Appalachia. In the spirit of deconstruction, however, must educators choose an either/or dichotomy? A “both/and” approach seems much more useful, for Appalachia comprises insiders and outsiders, rural and urban, Northern, Central, and Southern, black, white, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian. And again, it’s important to emphasize that the Appalachian culture is alive and evolving, continuing to respond to and incorporate local, national, and international influences. The contributors to this work clearly believe a distinct Appalachian region exists and have focused on the cultural, historical, literary, economic, environmental, and political circumstances that bind the residents.

As a result, they offer pedagogies to reach the twenty-first-century student. While some contributors focus on their specific students and how those students have responded to the materials, others take a more general approach in offering teaching tips that could be adapted to different types of schools or students. It’s important to note, however, that with both types of chapters, the editors did not want to present lesson plans that were too prescriptive or canned. Appalachian Studies, and really education in general, should not promote a one-pedagogy-fits-all approach because it cannot. We value academic freedom and promote individual teaching strategies and choices. In fact, not all contributors to this collection even teach Appalachian Studies in Appalachia. The educators hail from as far as Texas and Utah. They range from the seasoned and retired to the new and nascent. Additionally, students attending a large public Research I institution can be quite different from students at a small private liberal arts college.

Nevertheless, the editors did want to offer practical strategies that educators could acquire by simply reading these chapters and then trying them in their own classrooms. The most obvious educators the collection will appeal to are those already teaching Appalachian Studies or who have a desire to start. Even those who may have been incorporating regional materials for several years will find unique pedagogical approaches that can energize and freshen their teaching. Education professors will find the collection useful as they share with student teachers the value of place-based education and how certain faculty members go about implementing it in their classrooms. Because *Appalachia in the Classroom* is a pedagogy book, education majors can analyze and critique the methods put forth by the contributors and at the same time expand their own teaching repertoire. All of the chapters will be

useful to instructors in two-year and four-year postsecondary institutions, and even some graduate faculty will benefit from the teaching ideas contained in the collection. Some chapters, however, may not be appropriate for high school students due to the adult content of the arts and literature. Outside the traditional classroom, the text would be a great resource for Appalachian cultural competency trainers as they educate health-care providers, business professionals, human resource specialists, and community organizers. Such professionals would benefit from the contributors' discussion and analysis of the region, its inhabitants, and the environmental, political, and social factors affecting day-to-day living. When I conduct these trainings, I always incorporate poetry into my presentation, and as a result, many participants ask me to provide an Appalachian reading list of poetry, short stories, and novels. Whatever the level of teaching or intended audience, *Appalachia in the Classroom* seeks to inspire educators to try new strategies with their students.

This collection is timely in that many of the chapters intentionally problematize neat categorization of Appalachia and Appalachian Studies, a distinct postmodern move, while drawing from fresh research and teaching methodologies. Moreover, the contributors offer teaching strategies on topics and literature that range in dates from several decades old to newly published or discovered. *Appalachia in the Classroom* is different from other recent and useful edited collections, such as *An American Vein: Critical Readings in Appalachian Literature* (Miller, Hatfield, and Norman 2005) and *A Handbook to Appalachia: An Introduction to the Region* (Edwards, Asbury, and Cox 2006), yet it complements these texts and others. While the first of these is devoted to the use of literary theory and criticism in the service of Appalachian poetry and prose, the second is focused on providing students with a broad overview of topics that help explain the region. Attempting to fill a need with practical how-to teaching strategies, *Appalachia in the Classroom* contributors draw primarily from literature, along with history, film, folktales, and photographs and diaries, to educate students and demonstrate several ways those materials can be used to do so. We believe instructors from various disciplines not only will find ready-to-implement delivery strategies but also will use these pedagogical approaches as catalysts to create their own, which could very well make their way into a second volume. After all, one collection cannot even come close to incorporating the vast body of work on Appalachia that exists now.

Readers will find that the book is divided into sections, with chapters grouped according to themes. "Creative Teaching of Appalachian History" serves as the beginning section and lays a foundation for the entire collection.

In Emily Satterwhite's contribution, "Intro to Appalachian Studies: Navigating Myths of Appalachian Exceptionalism," she discusses the necessity of not only dispelling certain students' pervasive negative stereotypes of the region but also problematizing other students' overly romanticized views, which can be just as limiting and downright erroneous. As with any culture and place, complexities and contradictions, strengths and weaknesses abound in Appalachia. Satterwhite stresses the importance of teaching the truth of the region and challenging students to think critically about the power of myth creation and persistence, whether in Appalachia or in any other culture.

Elizabeth Engelhardt offers a most unique subject matter and provocative approach to teaching it as she exhumes stories of black Appalachian laundrywomen through photographs, letters, and diaries. At the start of her chapter, she situates her research within the tradition of African American scholars who have documented the resistance of black women to reveal too much of their stories for reasons of privacy and self-protection. Engelhardt goes on to deconstruct photographs of Appalachian African American laundrywomen, and the accompanying text provided by the white women photographers who were their employers. Through an evaluation of black female, and racially charged, archetypes, such as the mammy, Engelhardt highlights the intersection of race, class, and gender issues in a real, material way.

John Inscocoe takes on Hollywood in his chapter as he offers various approaches to teaching Appalachian history through film. Dealing with nine films, ranging in date from the early 1940s to 2003, Inscocoe summarizes each and then provides specific pedagogical methods he has found useful when teaching the films. Whether grappling with universal moral dilemmas and gender conflicts or focusing on issues unique to Appalachia, he furnishes educators with ideas that enable them to compare and contrast the films, as well as evaluate the films' merits and shortcomings. All in all, Inscocoe demonstrates how film brings a rich dimension to teaching and depicts yet another interpretation of the Appalachian region.

Erica Abrams Locklear launches the second section of the collection, "Appalachian Literature and Folktales In and Out of the Classroom." In her chapter she provides an intriguing example of collaboration between college and high school students focused on one novel, Ron Rash's *The World Made Straight* (2006). Of particular relevance is the novel's setting in Western North Carolina, where both groups of students attend school. Not only does such a partnership naturally generate mentor/mentee relations, thereby stimulating thoughts of college attainment in first-generation students, but it also

empowers the high school students as they serve as local tour guides for the college class. Despite some of the challenges Abrams Locklear and her cooperating high school teacher, Angela Sanderson, encountered, the experiential learning opportunities and partnered learning that resulted from their collaboration serve as a solid model to emulate.

Part autobiography, part teaching strategy, Jeff Mann's chapter begins with the metaphor of feasting, or plain and simple eating, to describe the immense satisfaction that occurs when students ingest great Appalachian literature. As Mann discovered the poetry and prose of his home, a region he had so desperately tried to escape, he experienced a literary awakening that he in turn shares with his own students, especially those at risk and marginalized. His experiences as a gay Appalachian man have fostered empathy for students who are oppressed for various reasons, and his purposeful selection of Appalachian texts, such as Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker* ([1954] 2009), prompt class discussion on topics such as assimilation and the social pressure to conform.

Linda Tate extols the value of integrating Appalachian literature into a general education American literature class and uses author Lee Smith as role model and guide as she encourages students to consider the stories that have shaped the students' lives. Despite Tate's primary use of canonical, widely anthologized American writers, she saves the Appalachian writers for the end of the semester; in that way, students can situate these authors into the larger American literary tradition and recognize the consistent desire of all the authors to tell stories, to share their perspective of the human condition. Tate utilizes video clips, along with written passages, of Lee Smith telling her own story of finding her Appalachian voice, thereby inspiring students to take pride in their Appalachian heritage.

In her chapter, Tina Hanlon rejects the notion that folktales appeal only to children, and in the process validates the worthiness of this great, rich, and long oral tradition for serious scholarly study. Methodically spelling out both the strengths and the challenges of using this literary genre in the classroom, Hanlon provides historical, world contexts for many well-known folktales, while specifically celebrating those that have made their way to Appalachia or even originated in the region, such as Cherokee tales shared by Marilou Awiakta. Hanlon is quick to point out the tremendous experiential learning opportunities associated with teaching folktales due to the many storytelling festivals in the area, while also presenting contemporary assignments for modern-day students.

The third section of the collection, “The Novel in Appalachia,” offers three contributors who focus on vastly different works and authors from different time periods. Selecting one of Wilma Dykeman’s lesser-known and -taught novels, Patricia Gantt enumerates multiple themes and lessons *The Far Family* (1966) offers students. While she distinguishes this work from Dykeman’s other fiction and nonfiction, Gantt demonstrates how the novel is united with the others through its great attention to detail and its authenticity of Appalachian culture. Of particular importance is Dykeman’s treatment of the “insidious racism” found in the region, a reality that has existed since the first people of color entered the mountains more than a hundred years ago. *The Far Family* can well serve as catalyst for class discussions of racism, civil rights, and social justice.

Ricky Cox tackles the difficult-to-categorize work *I Am One of You Forever* (1985), by Fred Chappell. Despite the author’s claim that the book is indeed a novel, Cox points out that students will find much to debate about this assertion, along with seemingly random insertions of magical realism or tall-tale qualities. Such issues lead students to question the reliability not only of the narrator but also of the author himself. Moreover, Cox notes that Chappell’s “novel” offers a different, though just as valid, picture of Appalachia in the mid-twentieth century when compared to Arnow’s *The Dollmaker* ([1954] 2009) and James Still’s *River of Earth* ([1940] 1978). Gender roles and expectations, as well as class privilege, provide even more fodder for literary analysis and critique, thereby providing students with much to consider in their formal papers and in-class discussions.

Felicia Mitchell extols the value of using literature to study the environment and ecology as she examines Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *Prodigal Summer* (2000). Identifying Kingsolver as an established “literary activist,” Mitchell places the author within the environmental literary tradition of Rachel Carson. She classifies the issues raised in Kingsolver’s novels as a branch of deep ecology and proceeds to provide question prompts useful for thinking critically and ethically about the environment. In the rest of the chapter, Mitchell examines the various characters in *Prodigal Summer*, as well as their sometimes conflicting eco-philosophies. And finally, Mitchell highlights some challenges teachers of ecofiction may encounter, such as the resistant, contrary student. Yet opportunities for civil debate, centered on humans’ role in protecting the environment, or even their place within it, abound when ecofiction is incorporated into curricula.

In the final section, “Appalachian Poetry and Prose,” the contributors present a sampling of the vast writing talents in the region. Parks Lanier provides readers a broad and sweeping introduction to Appalachian poetry, including a catalog of writers that extends from such historical staples as Louise McNeill, James Still, and Jesse Stuart to contemporary favorites like Darnell Arnoult, Ron Rash, and Frank X Walker. Lanier’s chapter is useful to literature teachers as he illuminates various and distinct characteristics of Appalachian poetry, as well as discusses basic literary concepts in the poetry, whether tone or dialect. Importantly, he highlights the role of nature and religion in many Appalachian poets’ work, citing Jim Wayne Miller’s (1980) “Brier Sermon” as one oft-used example.

In contrast to Lanier’s vast poetry sampler, Theresa Burriss homes in on a specific group of relatively new writers on the Appalachian literary landscape as she focuses on three of the Affrilachian writers, Frank X Walker, Nikky Finney, and Crystal Wilkinson. She points out the cultural, political, and literary links between writers of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, tying them to the emergence of the Affrilachian writers in the early 1990s, and demonstrates how their writing specifically draws inspiration from those earlier African American literary periods. In the process, Burriss also situates the writers within a larger Appalachian tradition as the Affrilachians strive to dispel reductive caricatures and stereotypes of the region and make a place for Appalachians of color not only in the literary canon but also in the general history books.

In her chapter on Cherokee Appalachian Marilou Awiakta, Grace Toney Edwards provides key biographical information on this multigenre author before delving into her poetry and prose. Edwards sprinkles “Teaching Tips” at various points throughout the essay, which prove most helpful to new educators yet also prompt veterans to reevaluate old, staid delivery of material. Utilizing both *Abiding Appalachia* ([1978] 2006) and *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother’s Wisdom* (1993), Edwards addresses topics such as Native American philosophy, history, and custom, along with specific literary issues, including identifying themes and genres. She clearly articulates the richness of Awiakta’s work and the wealth of creative and critical thought available to be mined therein.

In the final chapter of the collection, Robert West discusses the poetic evolution of Robert Morgan, one of the most highly celebrated Appalachian authors, who began writing poetry in the late 1960s with an intense attention to “compression and brevity.” In the process, West provides educators lacking

confidence in teaching poetry recommendations for supplemental texts to make sense of Morgan's formal poetic styles and to situate Morgan's work within a larger historical global context. West goes on to discuss how Morgan became more conversational in his poems, which led to a natural exploration of prose writing, first through short stories and then with novels and nonfiction. In the spirit of coming full circle, however, West documents how Morgan now dedicates himself to meter in all of his most recently published poems. West's analysis of Robert Morgan's stylistic changes, primarily in his poetic oeuvre, can easily be applied to many Appalachian authors as students come to understand their creative development and growth.

Given the abundance of books on Appalachia produced over the past couple of centuries, and in particular the latter twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, one book-length project can respond to only a limited amount of material. But it is a start and offers a variety of authors, approaches, and considerations for teaching Appalachia. Selecting Connie Aiken's poem "Steam" to serve as the epigraph to the collection, editor Pat Gantt was drawn to the poet's intentional linking of the individual to the universal. A natural element, steam/water, bonds women across the globe, from Appalachia to Africa, despite the women's superficial differences. Indeed, their common humanity is celebrated. And all of this is a key aspect of great literature and teaching, no matter the subject or region. As Pat explained to me recently, employing the words of Wilma Dykeman, who was describing her own mother, "Connie Aiken is 'of the leaf and flower of Appalachia.'" Clearly, such a poet establishes the right tone and timbre for a collection on teaching Appalachia.

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