

Catte, Elizabeth (2018) *What You're Getting Wrong about Appalachia*, Belt Publishing, Cleveland, OH.

Stoll, Steven (2017) *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia*, Hill and Wang, New York, NY.

Reviews by Paul E. Reed

Since the publication of J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elogy*, and the subsequent election of President Donald Trump, there has been a revival of interest in Appalachia. During the election and in the post-election grasping at 'how and why' Trump was elected, the US has been inundated by stories from 'Trump Country,' and Appalachia has appeared as the locus of attention. Sadly, the words of John C. Campbell from 1921 still ring true: 'let us come now to the Highlands, a land about which perhaps more things are known that are not true as any other part of the country.' Many of these attempts at explanation have, like *Elogy*, fallen prey to stereotypical notions about Appalachia, or as Henry Shapiro might say, the 'invented Appalachia.' Fortunately, two recent publications have emerged that attempt to counter such narratives: Elizabeth Catte's *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia* and Steven Stoll's *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia*.

Elizabeth Catte's *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia* focuses on countering some of the present circulating narratives, which are rooted in Appalachia's past, both real and imagined. Her book is divided into three parts, each treating a different circulating narrative. In Part One, she examines the recent past and how the coverage of many events, such as the 2016 Presidential election, claim to reflect Appalachian voices. However, upon closer inspection, these accounts rarely include the voices of Appalachian people, and when they do, they oftentimes appear in order to support the previously-held conclusions and/or agenda of the writer. Even in 2016, when we might anticipate that journalists and writers would know better, the power of the circulating tropes is still mighty, even among some of the world's foremost journalistic entities.

Part Two takes on *Hillbilly Elogy*, and critiques both the book and the author. Catte convincingly demonstrates that Vance's personal story is just that, personal. Where he errs is projecting his personal life experience onto that of the entire region. In doing so, his personal tragedies and hardships are transformed from a single family's serious issues to reflections of the region's culture. This projection echoes the 'poverty culture' thesis of books like Jack Weller's *Yesterday's People*, productions like Robert Schenkkan's *The Kentucky Cycle* (which engendered a book

response *Back Talk From Appalachia* (Billings, Norman, and Ledford 1999)), and other works that take the view that a culture causes poverty. Catte also points out that Vance's particular viewpoint about Appalachia is partly informed by thinly-veiled racism, as his depictions of the region rely on Scots-Irish ethnicity and racial homogeneity. Additionally, Vance uses work by conservative scholar Charles Murray and other academics who traffic in dubious ethnic stereotyping, to support some of his conclusions.

The final section of the book is a celebration of the long history of Appalachia's resistance against oppression, fights for justice, and activism for many progressive causes. Oddly, many recent portraits of Appalachia recognize the past protests and past resistance, such as Blair Mountain¹. However, so many of the more recent fights against exploitation, injustice, and oppression are missing and or ignored. Obviously, this section counters the narrative that the entire region is homogenous 'Trump Country,' as it shows many examples of community action that emphasize fighting back against industrialization and exploitation. Catte highlights grassroots activism, such as the Appalachian Group to Save the Land and People, and more formal groups, such as the Highlander Folk School - whose former students include activist luminaries Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Pete Seeger, and Ralph Abernathy.

In sum, the book offers a contemporary refutation of many of the stereotypes circulating about Appalachia. Its strengths include Catte's writing, which is clear and erudite without becoming stodgy. Her research is strong, and her ability to weave the more radical with the more well-known activism is admirable. In Parts Two and Three, she is at her finest. Directly confronting the issues in *Elegy* evokes the anger many Appalachian activists and intellectuals feel toward that particular work, while also underscoring how much Vance trafficked in tropes. In Part Three, my personal favorite section, her orthographic descriptions of photos, and situating the images in the stream of ongoing activism, is magisterial.

One minor critique of the book is that Catte sometimes romanticizes modern Appalachia. While there has been much resistance from the region and that activism is still going strong, there is also a fair bit of modern acquiescence to particular political viewpoints - for example, West Virginia did go to Donald Trump by roughly 42 percentage points. A bit more engagement with these uncomfortable realities might have tempered some of the romanticization.

Whereas Catte's book was aimed at contemporary issues and readers, another book helps to illuminate Appalachia's deeper political and economic past. Steven Stoll's *Ramp Hollow* seeks to describe how and why Appalachia became impoverished, countering the idea that it was an inherently poor region or that its culture somehow doomed it to be poor. While his book is not a direct rebuttal to Vance, through countering the 'culture of poverty' explanation that Vance uses, Stoll effectively traces how rapacious capitalism and exploitative industry combined to systematically impoverish the region, and crucially, maintain the poverty.

The main idea of *Ramp Hollow* is that in the post-Revolutionary War Appalachia, the mountain people were subsistence agrarians operating outside of the burgeoning capitalistic economy in the new nation. Through utilizing their own property and the 'commons', Appalachian people were not subject to entering the capitalistic markets and wage labor. However, as the nation developed and

¹ <https://www.history.com/news/americas-largest-labor-uprising-the-battle-of-blair-mountain>

the common lands (which were usually held by absentee landowners) were steadily enclosed, the agrarian peasant subsistence economy was destroyed. This enclosure and subsequent dispossession, what Stoll calls 'slow violence', forced the Appalachian people to enter the market economy and engage in wage labor.

Later, in the aftermath of the Civil War, the absentee elites and, crucially, regional elites, moved to control and exploit the natural resources of the region - timber and coal. This part of the story is widely known and, sadly, familiar. At first, timber was stripped from land of absentee landowners. This destruction of the common removed one of the main sources for the makeshift agrarian economy. Later, resources were literally sold from under the feet of the landowner, and rights to extract were gained through coercion and manipulation. When the companies arrived to possess the mineral in the ground, the surface owner had little recourse. Thus, the process of dispossession continued apace, which resulted in many more Appalachian people being forced to enter the forests and the mines as laborers. Timber towns and coal towns forced the recently dispossessed to work for wages, oftentimes scrip that was only usable in company stores. Stoll vividly describes how the companies would often encourage gardening (reminiscent of the older agrarian economy) so as to be able to pay the workers even less, since their income was now being supplemented.

As Stoll moves into the 20th century, the dispossession is basically complete. Modern regional realities - corruption, pollution, exploitation - are consequences of the process of enclosure and dispossession that began in the past. He concludes with thoughts on how to fight back.

The strengths of the book are Stoll's use and command of primary sources and the ways he connects Appalachia to the rest of the world. He uses vivid passages from letters from smallholders (owners of small plots of land), dry prose from contracts stripping land, and harsh condemnation of agrarians from elites. Additionally, he connects Appalachia to 16th century England and to 21st century Mali. Stoll meticulously traces how lords used enclosure in 16th century England to first own land and then to turn land into profit. The loss of the commons forced the English peasant class to become peons. Stoll also emphasizes that this is not just an historical process, but rather an ongoing one. More recently, sugarcane companies in Mali worked to dispossess land along the Niger River, aided by the United States Agency for International Development, international banks, foreign investors, and the government of Mali itself. At *Ramp Hollow's* writing, the project has failed to come to fruition; however, the parallels are clear in all three cases.

My criticism of the book may be one more of taste than substance. Chapter 5 focuses on literature and art that depict aspects of the dispossession. Stoll traces how peasants and the makeshift agrarian economy appeared in various artistic works, from Henry David Thoreau to Ralph Waldo Emerson to George Inness to John Fox Jr. Stoll analyzes their prose or art to suss out details about dispossession and agrarian life, and the ensuing tension. However, I found this interlude somewhat unnecessary, as the realities depicted in the rest of the book did not need the artistic flourish. Or, alternatively, I think Stoll could have expanded this interlude into a separate work itself.

To sum, both *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia* and *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia* provide much-needed nuance to discussions and understandings of the region. Catts emphasizes the present complexity, while Stoll elucidates how we got here. Taken together, both

books counter most of the prevailing notions of Appalachia. Practitioners of working-class studies can benefit from Catte's analysis and rebuttal of contemporary media coverage. Her erudite responses help to shed light on how deeply held pervasive stereotypes about both the people and culture of impoverished regions can be, even in our modern age. Stoll's work can help academics and activists see the historical precursors and precedents for modern issues of class. His ability to showcase how the ruling class has used legal and political clout to dispossess and exploit the working class has implications for all. Students of the Appalachian region, or anyone really, should have both in their libraries.

Reviewer Bio

Paul E. Reed is an assistant professor of phonetics and phonology in the Department of Communicative Disorders at the University of Alabama. His research focuses on the intersection of language and place-based attachment in the American South and especially Appalachia. His linguistic research has appeared in the *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, *American Speech*, *the Southern Journal of Linguistics*.

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