Locals on local color: Imagining identity in Appalachia.

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# <u>In lieu of</u> an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Locals on Local Color

Imagining Identity in Appalachia

Certain Appalachian stere otypes were widely accepted by the early twentieth century, yet most people in the United States had never visited the region. Although information about the area was limited and came largely through a few channels, a general consensus about Appalachia nonetheless emerged in the popular

culture: Appalachia was a place apart, a different and sometimes dangerous place, a place whose people possessed only the mere rudiments of civilization. Largely created by outsiders, this popular image of the region emerged during the late-nine teenth and early-twentieth centuries in the writing of short-story authors, novelists, missionaries, social workers, handicraft organizers, and academics whose work forged a remarkably enduring stere otype of the region and its people.

Where were Appalachian people in this process? Much recent analysis of the social construction of Appalachian identity has them silent and passive, objects of description and scrutiny who themselves contributed little to the popular conception of Appalachia. Were they in fact unaware of the stere otype, as the notion of Appalachian ignorance and illiteracy might suggest? Did their isolation hinder access to the media that perpetuated such stere otypes?

There was in fact an Appalachian reaction to the social construction of identity, but because it occurred on a local rather than a national scale, its influence on popular conceptions of Appalachia was muted. Instead, the writings of outsiders, mainly local colorists and the early academics who studied the region, created a canonical set of ideas about Appalachia. Using similar descriptive language these authors freely exchanged themes and imagery across the boundary between fiction and nonfiction, creating tropes that continue to resonate in American popular culture, influencing depictions of mountain folk in movies, television shows, and comic strips.

One specific descriptive essay about a southern Appalachian community, written in 1913 by Harold W. Foght, an educational reformer and academic, illustrates this process. His depiction of this community owes more to imagery borrowed from local-color novels than to first-hand observation. An explanation for this seeming violation of academic integrity can be found in the ideology of rural educational reform and the then-current methodology for promoting it. The republication of the essay within the mountain community itself gave this group of Appalachians a chance to read and comment on a highly stereotyped depiction of themselves. Editorials and letters printed in the county newspaper provide a rare opportunity to assess Appalachian awareness of the dynamics of information and power that dominated the region's relations with mainstream America. Local reactions vehemently rejected Foght's depiction of the Appalachian stereotype, but the unequal access to information networks by Appalachians and outsiders ultimately determined whose version of Appalachia was accepted. [End Page 28] [Begin Page 30]

# Appalachian Images

Stock images of Appalachians permeate popular culture. Movies, television, comic strips, and postcards feature the lanky, gun-toting, grizzle-bearded man with a jug of moonshine in one hand and a coon dog at his feet, the archetypal patriarch of the mountains. Other familiar characters include the sallow matriarch, corncob pipe planted firmly between her lips; a genial and gangling youth, physically powerful but intellectually naive; and a buxom and almost equally dim female counterpart. Snuffy Smith, The Beverly Hillbillies, and Li'l Abner informed America about hillbillies. 1

Through such portrayals, the media transform everyday objects of mountain life into icons of popular culture. Shotgun, corncob pipe, and banjo serve as shorthand for a host of preconceptions about Appalachians. The corncob pipe perpetually upon Granny's lips transgresses female behavioral norms, underscoring the degradation of mountain culture. Most people outside the region would have viewed hunting as a leisure activity rather than a vital contribution to subsistence; thus, shotgun and coon dog become emblematic of the Appalachian male's shiftlessness. A shotgun also signifies mountain justice, which may be a synonym either for lawlessness or for an individualistic code of honor associated with feuding, one of the most persistent Appalachian stere otypes. Appalachians have long been described as extreme individualists who value personal integrity...

ESSAY

# Locals on Local Color Imagining Identity in Appalachia

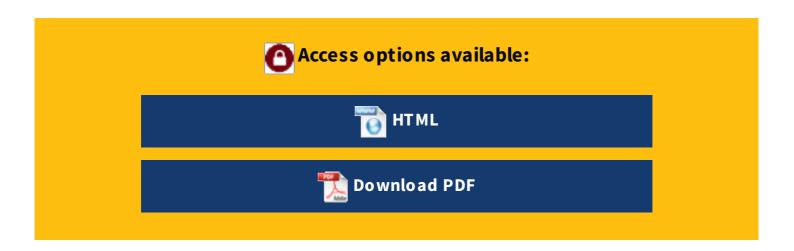
by Katie Algeo



American popular culture has long defined Appalachia as an extraordinarily outlandish place.

From Deliverance, copyright 1972 by Warner Bruthers Innoporated, nearbsy of the Museum of

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