Appalachia mountains as seen from Kayford Mount south of Charleston, West Virginia, on Aug. 19, 2014. (CNS photo/Tyler Orsburn)

by Michael J. Iafrate

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May 23, 2018

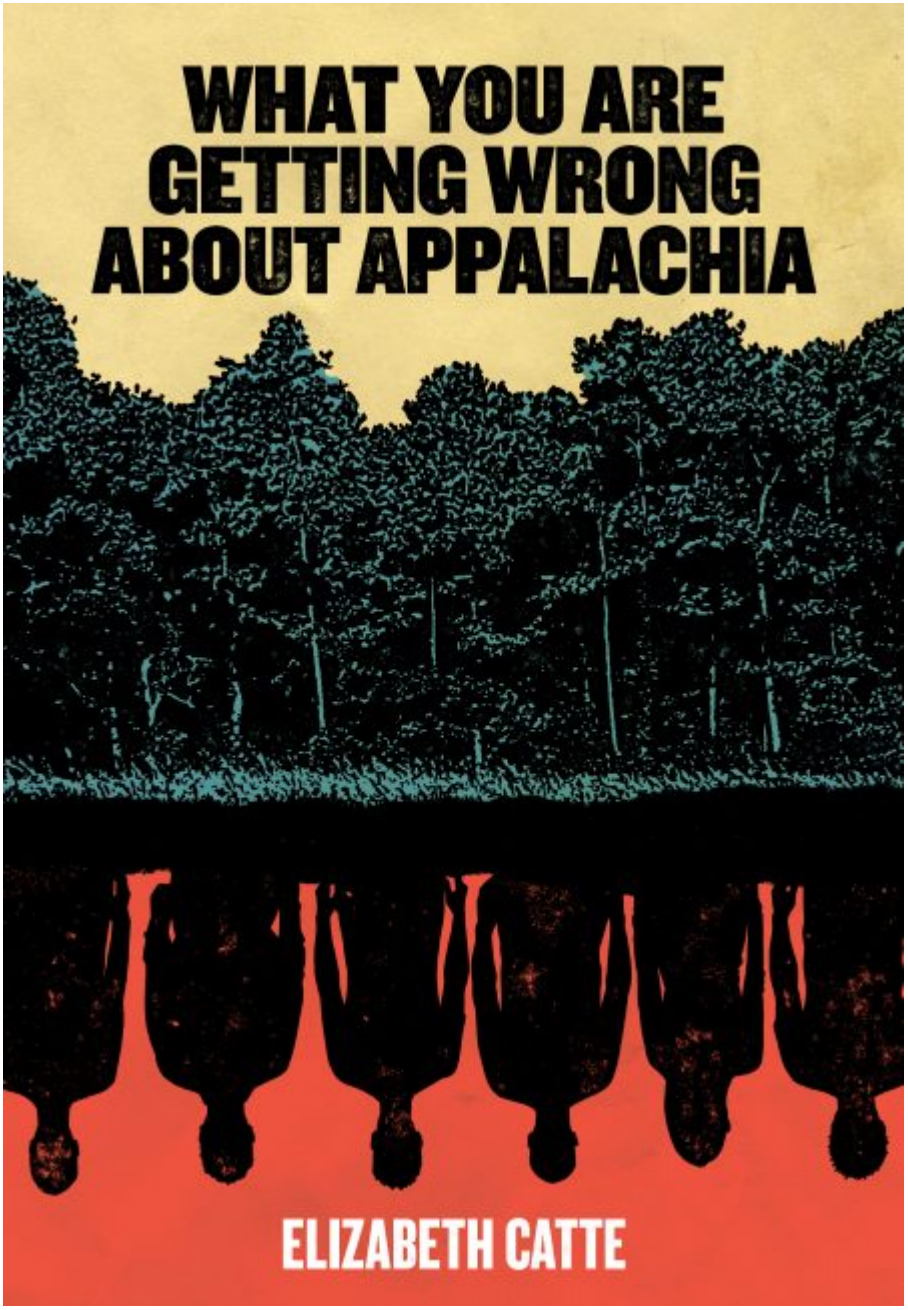
RAMP HOLLOW

The Ordeal *of* Appalachia

STEVEN STOLL

Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia

RAMP HOLLOW: THE ORDEAL OF APPALACHIA
Steven Stoll
432 pages; Hill and Wang
$30.00



WHAT YOU ARE GETTING WRONG ABOUT APPALACHIA

WHAT YOU ARE GETTING WRONG ABOUT APPALACHIA
Elizabeth Catte
150 pages; Belt Publishing

$14.00

Appalachia is back. No, I don't mean the trends like the latest Old Crow Medicine Show album or Whole Foods stocking wild ramps on their shelves. I mean another wave of media fixation with interpreting Appalachia and its "issues": the rural roots of the opioid epidemic, President Donald Trump's consistently strong regional popularity, continuing rhetoric about a perceived "war on coal" and so on. Concerns like these continue to gnaw at our national consciousness, and people crave convincing explanations for "why Appalachia is the way it is."

Hillbilly Elegy, a 2016 memoir by J.D. Vance, soon to hit movie screens in an adaptation by Ron Howard, has provided some people with the explanation they seek. Vance's explicitly apolitical story of his self-driven uplift from a life of poverty and abuse in Appalachian Ohio to the ranks of a Yale-educated attorney remains on the bestseller list while Vance makes the interview and lecture circuit. In my own church activist work, based in West Virginia but connecting with folks around the country, people of faith often ask about *Hillbilly Elegy*, wondering if its insights have any credibility.

Vance's *fervorino* encourages his fellow "hillbillies" to "wake the hell up" and realize that Appalachia's problems "were not created by governments or corporations or anyone else. We created them, and only we can fix them." In this, *Elegy* recalls the perspective sociologist Rupert Vance, who wrote in the introduction to the 1960s Appalachian primer *Yesterday's People*, "To change the mountains is to change the mountain personality." The phrase is a crystallization of the kind of blame-the-victim moralism popular at the time, even among church workers, and which lives on in bestselling mountain memoirs.

Two recent books "talk back" to the current revival of Appalachian culture of poverty story peddled by Vance and his ilk. Steven Stoll's *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia* and Elizabeth Catte's *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia* each in their own way refocus the discussion on the *causes* of Appalachia's problems and raise new questions about the stories we tell about them.

Stoll, a Fordham University historian, argues in *Ramp Hollow* that the classic portrayal of Appalachia, revived by Vance, as a preserve of "yesterday's people" won't do. Appalachia is not an isolated, inherently poor region, nor is it a degenerate culture badly in need of a change of values. Rather, its problems have historically

traceable causes that bear similarity to those of other regions suffering from the "slow violence" of dispossession, namely the loss of control over land and resources, and with that the ability to have a say in their lives. The story is well-known in Appalachian studies circles, but Stoll's telling is wider in scope, viewing the region as one among many global victims of a widely held assumption: "the idea that historical progress require[s] taking land away from agrarians and giving it to others."

This idea convinces us that history progresses through universal stages in which subsistence economies — agrarian communities who "make their livings by hunting, foraging, farming, gardening, and exchanging for the things they cannot grow or fashion themselves" — give way to the more "advanced" and "civilized" stage of capitalist modernity. Accordingly, agrarians are seen as barbaric obstacles to development requiring intervention through dispossession, which integrates agrarians into "civilization."

Children at the 2015 annual gathering of the Catholic Committee of Appalachia, held Sept. 18-20 in Charleston, West Virginia (Lydia Noyes)

Stoll argues that pre- and post-Revolutionary War European settlers in the Appalachian mountains were an example of an agrarian peasant culture, many of whom fled the poverty of countries like Great Britain where lords took control of land through enclosure, barring peasant access to the commons that provided the ecological base for a subsistence way of life.

Settlers were able to escape dispossession and continue an agrarian way of life by becoming the violent dispossessors of indigenous lands. Enclosure continued on this continent as the claims of elite land speculators came into conflict with those of agrarian settlers. So began another stage of dispossession and the gradual stripping away of access to the ecological base, which made a subsistence way of life increasingly untenable and the integration of the mountains into a national money system possible.

By the Civil War, elites scrambled to gain control over previously overlooked resources. The central villains will be familiar to those who have come to view Appalachia as a "sacrifice zone": colonial elites, politicians and coal barons who facilitate the exploitation of a region's resources and people. Extraction companies exploited the new economic vulnerability through manipulation, allowing desperate farmers to retain surface land rights and save their households if they would sell rights to the minerals below.

In Stoll's words, "The confluence of money, private property, and political power accomplished what no invading army could have. It delivered an ax to the neck of the peasant economy within half a century."

Soon enough, what was once supplemental income from wages became the source of subsistence as farmers mined coal to survive, with wages now supplemented by the yield from their home gardens. The coal town system furthered debt and control through company-owned services, stores and currency ("scrip"), while dispossessed African-American farmers were forced into sharecropping, producing an indebtedness that paralleled slavery.

Stoll describes current regional realities — mountaintop removal mining, chemical spills and political corruption — as the fulfillment of this story of economic vulnerability brought on by a coal-dominated regional economy. But he also rightly reads the story of Appalachia as connected to similar forms of "development though dispossession" throughout the world and offers some interesting, if perhaps far-fetched, solutions for communities to reclaim the commons.

If *Ramp Hollow* is a deep history that touches on contemporary issues, Elizabeth Catte's *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia* is a detailed critique of recent discourse about Appalachia that skillfully draws on history. Catte, too, is a historian, but her book is less a history of Appalachia and more of a history of the stories told about Appalachia that demonstrates how these long-held myths have always obscured more than they reveal. Catte sets out to challenge the predominant view of Appalachia as culturally, ethnically and politically homogenous, largely in response to *Hillbilly Elegy*, but also to recent media coverage of the region. Though not a memoir, Catte writes from her own experience of Appalachia. The book not only debunks Appalachian stereotypes, but provides deeper and more insightful analysis — and a stronger call to action — than most Appalachian writers.

Part 1 examines media portrayals of Appalachia over the last decade, such as the Sago mine disaster and the labeling of West Virginia as "Trump Country" during the 2016 presidential campaign. Catte shows how Appalachian voices are either missing from these accounts or, if they are present, are shaped by the agenda of the writers. Such narratives, she argues, are merely the latest in a long history of the "invention" of Appalachia by writers for different purposes.

Part 2 takes on *Hillbilly Elegy* directly, critiquing both the book and Vance's status as the region's new spokesperson. Catte demonstrates how his analysis is skewed by personal experience, riddled with damaging stereotypes and misguided in its emphasis on individual and family behaviors rather than economics. But she goes further than most regional critics by revealing Vance's implicit and often overlooked racism as he gives new legs to the long-held regional myth of Scots-Irish racial purity (a myth that progressives in the region often likewise embrace) by citing the work of Charles Murray and Razib Khan.

The book's final part refutes the myth of Appalachian fatalism through a celebration of Appalachian movements against injustice. Catte cites early examples of mountain resistance to industrialization as well as later community action initiatives like the Highlander Center and the Appalachian Volunteers who made an ethical commitment to listen to the voices of the region's poor and were radicalized in the process. She points to current organizations and movements (such as Appalshop, the movement against mountaintop removal mining, and religious groups like the Catholic Committee of Appalachia) as the descendants of early mountain radicalism who continue to shape a new Appalachian story and embody a new Appalachian politics.

The New River Gorge Bridge in West Virginia (National Park Service / Louise McLaughlin)

These books come at just the right time as Appalachia continues to play a role in national debates around race, poverty, labor, energy and diversity, and as new regional movements seem to be strengthening. Each gives deep historical context and summarizes the issues at stake for people on the ground working for justice, but finds its central purpose in helping to dismantle the harmful stories that still get in the way. Each is accessible and will find audiences far beyond insular Appalachian scholar and activist circles, while making contributions to scholarly debates, pushing beyond and even challenging some familiar tropes within the discourse.

Both books romanticize their Appalachias to a degree. *Ramp Hollow* tends to romanticize Appalachia's agrarian past, falling into some familiar traps. Although Stoll's narrative contains some nuance, when it comes down to it, "Agrarian Appalachians" are the "good guys" and "industrial outsiders" are the "bad guys." This is made possible, in part, by lumping together varying experiences as "agrarian dispossession," which are said to "bear resemblance" or "rhyme." The similarities between white settlers, Natives and campesinos are at times overstated, alluding to white settler violence against Native people, but not addressing the ways that dispossessed white Appalachians continue to benefit from colonization. Catte deals with this issue in a more direct way, arguing that "colonization" explanations of Appalachia can promote a regional myth of racial innocence that ignores the fact that dispossessed Appalachians were themselves violent dispossessors.

If Stoll romanticizes Appalachia's past, Catte tends to romanticize the Appalachia of the present. In lifting up voices otherwise ignored by the media, politicians and other "experts," Catte perhaps overstates the region's diversity and the degree to which radical politics "thrives" here. As a West Virginian myself, Catte's dismissal of "Trump Country" narratives as mere projections leaves me unsatisfied. Catte is right to highlight an overlooked presence of Appalachian radicalism, but ingrained conservatism, racism and sexism in the region are realities to be engaged instead of dismissed as the fantasy of outsiders.

Yet despite this tendency, Catte is careful not to proclaim that she has discovered the "real" Appalachia, and her insight that "many things about Appalachia may be true simultaneously" is perhaps the most refreshing point in the book. A common strength of both books is their desire to move past outdated ideas of Appalachian exceptionalism, progressive versions included.

Twenty years ago, Helen Lewis wrote, "It's time to be creative, dream new dreams, and develop new models. Let us plan for resurrection, not designate the region as a further sacrifice area." Today, that choice is still before us. As I write this review, former Massey Energy Co. coal baron Don Blankenship, fresh out of prison for his role in systemic, deadly mine safety violations, is touring West Virginia in a Senate bid, just as a statewide teacher strike sparked a movement for serious change on a number of political fronts.

"Appalachia" is invented and reinvented in history with every political choice that is made. Stoll's and Catte's contributions help us see the issues more clearly by unveiling their long histories. We are telling and living into a new Appalachian story. As we say in West Virginia, something's rising.

[Michael J. Iafrate is a theologian, songwriter and activist from West Virginia. He is a doctoral candidate at the University of St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, and serves as co-coordinator of the Catholic Committee of Appalachia.]

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