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Elizabeth K Trout

What is the nature of Appalachian Identity?

Identity is influential in the fashioning of an individual's perceptions of themselves, of others, and of the world around them. This identity is largely shaped by an individual's particular region. The Appalachian region shapes those who live there in this same way. Those holding onto an Appalachian identity have distinct characteristics that set them apart from others (Alexander, & Berry, 2010, pg. 51). These characteristics can be categorized into broader categories to be better understood. Appalachian identity can be discussed through three epitomes: region, race, and language.

The first notion of region can be viewed in two different ways: the physical geography and the sense of place. "People often hold multiple, nested identities...that...vary considerably [according to] how strongly they identify with various geographic areas" (Cooper, Knotts, & Livingston, 2010 pg. 30). The geography of Appalachia is marked physically by the Appalachian Mountains. Esther Gottlieb (2001) studied the role of these mountains in the lives of the mountain residents. She found that "the 'mountains' in West Virginia [were] a major trope of regional identity" (pg. 349). The mountains represent a sense of protection, and are associated with a desire to stay close to the mountains that create their home (pg. 349). This connection and love of the land has created great sentiment for those living within the Appalachians. Cooper, Knotts, and Elders (2011) found that "elevation [was] positively associated with Appalachian identification, lending credence to the notion that elevation and topography are central to understanding...Appalachia." (pg.467). Their findings signify that there is a relationship between the elevation of one's residence and the emotional connection one has to being of Appalachian identity. The higher the elevation of one's residence in Appalachia, the more likely they are to

identify themselves as Appalachian, thus proving that physical geography plays a great role in creating Appalachian identity. Cooper and Knotts (2010) along with Livingston found that those strongly identifying as Appalachians were more likely to want to preserve the land (pg. 34). Thus, even in the practice of basic policy, a love of the physical land characterizes Appalachian identity. The physical geography of the region, the Appalachian Mountains is a key element of Appalachian identity.

Region is not only defined by physical geography, but also the sense of place the region provides for its residents. Tal Stanley (2011) discussed built environment as well as human culture and history in his definition of place (pg. 357). His definition helps one understand what creates this sense of place. Having a sense of place is more closely connected to having an emotional connection to the region, the built environment. Steve Fisher (2012) asserts that “being Appalachian means something different depending on who you are” (pg. 59). One such variable is the time one has spent in the region. For example, Cooper, Knotts, and Livingston (2010) found that individuals who had spent a greater percentage of their lives in Appalachia were more likely to identify as Appalachian (pg. 32). Satterwhite (2010) corroborates this in her discussion of long-term residency as an entryway to insider status as an Appalachian (pg. 5). The time spent in the region creates the emotional connection, which in turn creates identity. This social identity is “part of an individual’s self-concept derived from knowledge and the ‘emotional significance’ or her or his membership in social groups” (Cooper, Knotts, & Elders, 2011, pg. 8). Time opens up the community to membership, creating opportunities to encourage identity.

Obermiller (2012) writes on the subject of community in Appalachia stating that “Appalachian identity is often rooted in a sense of peoplehood” (pg. 33). He also states that “associational

identity can be just as effective as a place-based identity” (pg. 33). This associative quality to Appalachian identity is part of what generates the sense of place. Gottlieb (2001) found that those she interviewed spoke of “the ‘place’ they [were] coming from, their dwelling and the community” (pg. 346). Thus her work furthers the assertion that a sense of place can be found outside of physical geography for Appalachian identifiers. “A sense of place is intricately woven into literature, politics, social patterns of the region and provides the fabric from which both personal and regional identities are shaped.” (Gottlieb, 2001 pg. 342). This emotional resonance is what makes the physical land so special. Alexander and Berry (2010) found that “place still seems to matter among these 15,000 people who trace their lives back to Appalachia, to the earth loved more than any other earth” (pg. 10). During the course of the interviews for her 2001 study, Gottlieb found that there was “a strong sense of place as in ‘this is home to me’” (pg. 346). Strong Appalachian identifiers “treat[ed] ‘home’ as an ideal centered way of living where the region as ‘home’ has the status of a stable world of its own.” (Gottlieb, pg. 346). In the case of Appalachia, home means the mountains and thus the sense of place is grounded in the physical geography. Steve Fisher encapsulates this relationship between geography and sense of place when he writes “Claiming Appalachia has given me a place and a people and a sense of who I am and who I want to become and has brought focus and commitment to work and politics” (pg. 9). Subsequently region as a foundation for Appalachian identity has two complimentary parts, physical geography and a sense of place.

The next facet of Appalachian identity is racial demography. Demography is essential to understanding any regionality or identity. However, Appalachian racial demographic is more complex. Griffin (2004) said that “the racial demography of Appalachia moreover is both quite varied-some places are nearly all white, while others especially urban areas, exhibit substantial

racial and ethnic diversity” (pg. 8). However, juxtaposed to this finding, Alexander and Berry (2010) reported that 99 percent of those self-reporting Appalachian ancestry on the 2000 census were white (pg. 10). Additionally, 93 percent of the population in the counties where Dannenberg’s study took place were white (2010, pg. 5). This dichotomy can be explained by the fact that “African Americans tend to emphasize racial identity over regional identity” (Cooper, Knotts, & Livingston, 2010, pg. 32). Cooper and Knotts (2013) found once again that racial identity was valued more than regional identity for most African Americans (pg. 7). This phenomenon would explain the disparity between actual racial diversity and the diversity in Appalachian identifiers. Due to this phenomenon, Appalachian identity plays an ambiguous role in the lives of African American residents (Obermiller, 2012, pg. 33). It is important to understand the ambiguous and dichotomous role that race plays in the study of Appalachian identity.

The third and final element of Appalachian identity is language. The unique Appalachian dialect has been dubbed ‘Appalachian English’ and has acted as an integral part of Appalachian identity. However, as Dannenberg (2010) discovered, the dialect is moving away from previously common word usages that had characterized Appalachia. In her study of Mercer and Monroe counties’ Appalachian dialectical practices Dannenberg found that while the usages were still present and tied to Appalachia they had declined from 1976 to 2000 (pg. 11). Dannenberg attributed this to negative stereotypes associated with Appalachian English from outside of the region at the time (pg. 17). Similarly Hazen, Hamilton and Vacovsky (2011) found that when tracing a particular grammar usage, i.e. the demonstrative them, they could see a decline the usage (pg. 100). They too attributed this decline to stereotypes and stigmatization. Gottlieb (2001) discovered similar truths in her interviews with Appalachians when the

interviewees mentioned their experiences with negative stereotypes (pg. 352). The stereotypes of Appalachia are predominantly negative and their effect is powerful. Both Dannenberg and Hazen et al. observed a decline in the Appalachian English. This language, while still indicative of Appalachian identity, is not as pronounced as in previous eras. What this means to the future of Appalachian identity remains to be seen, but this phenomenon does prove that language is an important facet of Appalachian identity.

Appalachian identity is a unique self-concept. Guided by the presence of a region in both a physical sense and a sense of place- race and dialectical language, the identification 'Appalachian' takes on a broader meaning. This term connects the residents of a region to that physical region, the people, and themselves. For this reason, the study of Appalachian identity is important and can help one understand regional identity as a whole. Thus, the study of this regional identity as studied through region, race and language proves to aid in the defining of Appalachian identity.

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