

A review of *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia* by Elizabeth Catte

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Rural issues are experiencing a revival in the media and among scholars even as the number of people living in rural areas declines, both in the U.S. and in the world. While the word “rural” is used to describe much of the world, there is wide variation in what rural is like from one place to another. One much studied rural area is the Appalachian region of the U.S., in many ways a quintessential example of rural because of images of sparsely populated land and a unique culture. The literature on Appalachia is substantial and three recent books purport to further our understanding of a region that includes 25 million people, 700,000 square miles, more than 400 counties, all of West Virginia, and parts of 12 other states.

The three books are J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (2016), Steven Stoll’s *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia* (2017), and Elizabeth Catte’s *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia* (2018). Each is different in its approach to the subject. While the focus of this review is on Catte’s work, a brief word about the other two is important for context.

Hillbilly Elegy is a New York Times bestselling memoir of the author’s growing up in Kentucky and Ohio. It is presented as the story of the region, and the author as one who raised himself up and out of a “culture in crisis” to graduate from Yale Law School. The message is that while conditions of life in Appalachia are onerous, people can rise above them if they apply themselves. The book was widely praised, often by those with limited knowledge of Appalachia, but also widely condemned. It is the basis for an edited volume *Appalachian reckoning: A region responds to Hillbilly Elegy* (Harkins & McCarroll, 2019) explicitly countering what its contributors believe is an overly simplistic picture of Appalachia. Vance is a gifted writer making it easy to be drawn into the narrative without questioning it. Even the pejorative word hillbilly in the title provides a clue as to how he views the region’s culture. This ignores the many cultural advances and social movements that took root there (e.g., Biggers, 2006).

Ramp Hollow is a meticulous (over 400 pages) study of the Appalachian region stretching over a period of 400 years. Historian Steven Stoll focuses on the broader social forces that drive people from their land. While Stoll’s emphasis is on Appalachia, he argues the forces in operation in Appalachia can also be seen in other parts of the globe. Much of the book was



almost certainly written before the publication of *Hillbilly Elegy*, but the author does interject a brief but clear rejection of Vance's perspective:

Vance's book is inspiring as a memoir, but it might be construed as saying that the tragedy of Appalachia is the sum of its individual failings or the insularity of its families. Domestic violence, drug abuse, and hopelessness on such a scale have social causes. They require solutions that do not place the burden on the sufferers themselves to transcend their circumstances (p. 278).

What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia is relatively brief at only 146 pages and in a book measuring only five inches wide and seven inches tall. That size restriction was imposed on Catte by the publisher (Kelly 2018), but the book benefits from this limitation by requiring the author to emphasize parsimony over verbiage. There is hardly a page without some valuable tidbit of information, drawing on a wealth of sources, from both academic and popular culture. As a historian, Catte draws extensively on the past to better understand the present. The compact size of the book is an advantage for those who want a quick introduction to Appalachian culture. The compact size also makes it ideal as supplemental reading for those teaching a course that includes coverage of Appalachia.

Like Vance, Catte grew up in Appalachia and has the advantage of lived experience in the region. Vance claims to have a family connection to the Hatfield-McCoy feud and Catte claims to have lived near where the feud occurred. Despite the common backgrounds of Vance and Catte, *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia* shares many of the sensibilities of *Ramp Hollow*, and many of Stoll's objections to the simplistic depiction of Appalachian culture and people in Vance's book.

The narrative of *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia* is driven by two things. First, Catte challenges the one-dimensional image of Appalachia by pundits and the media leading up to and following the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016, and labeling Appalachia as Trump Country. Second, the book is a direct response to *Hillbilly Elegy*, which itself has been used to advance the notion of Appalachia as Trump Country. These two factors came together as Vance was frequently called upon by the media to explain the success of Trump in the region. Having devoted the first two thirds of Catte's book to these two points, the final third covers more traditional territory of the association among land, people, and justice.

Catte lists a host of issues lost or ignored in stereotypical descriptions of Appalachia. For example, Trump was and continues to be popular among Appalachians, but there were also pockets of supporters for progressives like Bernie Sanders. Based on media coverage one would not have known that. Portrayals of Trump land suggest a place exclusively populated by poor, unemployed, and uneducated whites, as if there were no minority residents and, as Vance

suggests, no racism. Catte argues the one-dimensional image of Appalachia put forward by Vance is intentional, as reflected in his use of Colin Woodward's term "Greater Appalachia." This term is used to describe an Appalachia shaped by a (white) Scots-Irish culture. Catte quotes Woodward (2012) in describing this culture as ". . . formed in a state of near constant danger and upheaval, characterized by a warrior ethic and commitment to personal sovereignty and individual liberty" (Catte, p. 67).

Although Appalachia includes more than 400 counties, press coverage might lead one to believe that the livelihood of Appalachians was exclusively dependent on coal mining and entitlement programs. When coal miners are depicted the images are of abject poverty and misery, but as Catte notes, coal miners today earn between \$60,000 and \$90,000 a year. This puts them economically in a position similar to blue collar workers. Those coal miners are neither lazy nor ignorant of how the region's resources have been exploited. As jobs in the coal mines go away, they have not been replaced by well-paying alternatives, but this is through no fault of the coal miners or their families. When the stories turn to struggling local economies the focus is often on how citizens rely on government aid, without recognizing the extent of corporate welfare.

As with just about any critique of the world view advanced in *Hillbilly Elegy*, Catte draws on history to show how the region has been plundered to the benefit of outsiders and the detriment of locals. "In one county, for example, corporations that owned 70 percent of the land contributed just 4 percent of the county's property tax stream" (Catte, p. 123). Pillaging the region of its natural resources while offering its citizens little in return is well traveled terrain in the literature on Appalachia, but it is essential to understanding the region. Unlike Vance, whose residents of Appalachia seem both hapless and hopeless, Catte cites examples of Appalachians standing up to corporate raiders, as seen in longstanding efforts to stop mountaintop removal as a method coal mining that requires fewer workers and exacts extensive environmental damage.

There are several limitations to the book. For one, the book is built around two contemporary events, the publication of *Hillbilly Elegy* and Trump's election. While the author does an admirable job of detailing historical events that led Appalachia to become the place it is today, basing the book on these contemporary events may make the book less relevant to readers 10 or 20 years from now. The second limitation is one common to rural researchers. On the one hand, Catte rightly criticizes others for treating the vast area that is Appalachia as if it were a single undifferentiated entity. While her book makes periodic nods to differences among Appalachian citizens regarding race, politics, and employment, in the end this reader is still left with the sense that Appalachia is a single place both culturally and economically homogenous. Capturing the essence of rural while fully exploring rural variability is difficult. It is a problem that rural researchers routinely face, and it is not one easily resolved.

Catte makes persuasive arguments to counter Vance's perspective, but there is an irony in this. If it were not for *Hillbilly Elegy* and the celebrity it brought its author, Catte might never have been driven to write her book. Similarly, Harkin and McCarroll's fine edited compilation of essays in response to *Hillbilly Elegy* might never have come to be. Stoll's *Ramp Hollow*, while not a direct response to Vance, will undoubtedly gain much deserved attention as a result of Vance bringing national visibility to the region. Tom Hanks is said to have a Hollywood movie in the works based on *Hillbilly Elegy*. That might distress critics of the book, it may also lead many to seek out more information about Appalachia and discover well-crafted critiques of long-held stereotypes, including the book *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia*.

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