

***Appalachia in the Classroom Teaching the Region –
Theresa L. Burriss and Patricia M. Gantt (editors).
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Appalachia in the Classroom: Teaching the Region, edited by Theresa L. Burriss and Patricia M. Gantt was published in 2013 by Ohio University Press. The book, representing the work of fourteen contributors, is divided into four parts, each focusing on a specific aspect of the region – Appalachian history, literature and folktales, novels and poetry, and prose.

The first part starts with Emily Satterwhite's "Intro to Appalachian Studies: Navigating Myths of Appalachian Exceptionalism;" the author discusses the Agrarian Myth which she challenges from different perspectives such as land ownership and family labor, country music and dance, slavery farming. In "Listening to Black Appalachian Laundrywomen: Teaching with Photographs, Letters, Diaries and Lost Voices," Elizabeth S.D. Engelhardt argues that the culture of dissemblance should also include black Appalachian Women "whose stories were misrepresented and outright stolen or fictionalized" (38); John C. Inscoe in "The Southern Highlands according to Hollywood: Teaching Appalachian History through Film" uses a wide range of movies to analyse the way in which the history of the Mountain South has been presented.

The second part begins with Abram Locklear's "Building Bridges with Ron Rash's *The World Made Straight: Results from One University and High School Partnership*" which analyses Ron Rash's novel as challenging commonly held ideas about mountain people; in "The Feast Hall, the Arsenal and the Mirror: Teaching Literature to Students at Risk," Jeff Mann presents his professional evolution and beliefs by resorting to the three metaphors included in the title that connect literature to survival, fight to protect one's individuality and lack of representation. Linda Tate (*I Hear Appalachia Singing: Teaching Appalachian Literature in a General Education American Literature Course*) uses Appalachian literature to help students to understand how to connect their life in the modern world to their past; she describes her course which includes a variety of American voices – poets,

philosophers, novelists, scholars and musicians. In the next essay, entitled “‘Way Back Yonder’ but Not So Far Away: Teaching Appalachian Folktales,” Tina Hanlon argues that folktales should be used in college courses because of the many advantages they offer: they are memorable, illustrate the links between different cultures, and help students to move from childhood to adult life.

The third part analyses three novels: *The Far Family* (Patricia Gantt: Teaching Modern Appalachia in Wilma Dykeman’s *The Far Family*), *I am One of You Forever* (Ricky L.Cox: Fred Chappel’s *I Am One of You Forever* as a Subject for Literary Analysis and an Alternative Image of Mid-Twentieth-Century Appalachia) and *Prodigal Summer* (Felicia Mitchell: Startling Morals: Teaching Ecofiction with Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer*). *The Far Family* is the story of several generation of a family having mountain roots; the novel raises universal human concerns about responsibilities to ourselves and to the ones around us, our society and world and considers the way in which we decide on our priorities and react to the demands of the people we love. *I Am One of You Forever* is a novel in four parts or a collection of short stories dealing with the “process of achieving belonging and maturing emotionally” (Cox 2013, 160). *Prodigal Summer* is considered in terms of ecofiction (a combination between novel writing and ecology whose aim is to point out current environmental problem and provide alternatives) and ecocriticism (a collection of theories that are held together by specific literary and environmental ideals and which make the connection between environment and the study of literary texts).

Part Four opens with R. Park Lanier Jr. who, in his essay “Appalachian Poetry: A Field Guide for Teachers,” proposes three types of poetry that can help readers to better understand Appalachian poems: political poems – indicating “an antiestablishment attitude” and fighting exploitation, pastoral poems – which suggest melancholy and celebrate the region and its people and thirdly, the pastoral poem, a type of confessional poetry describing personal feelings and history. Theresa Burriss (From Harlem Home to Affrilachia: Teaching the Literary Journey) presents Affrilachian writers, Black Appalachian poets and short story writers (Frank X Walker, Nikky Finney, Crystal Wilkinson) who celebrate experiences and stories that have been neglected for a long time, placing them in the wider context of fight against white American hegemony. Grace Toney Edwards (Teaching the Poetry and Prose of Marilou Awiatka) comments on the literary creation of Marilou Awiatka, an Appalachian writer of prose and poems having Cherokee ancestry and Appalachian heritage. Her work, difficult to categorize into genres, is analyzed from a biographical and thematic perspective. Robert M. West’s essay entitled “Toward ‘Crystal-Tight Arrays:’ Teaching the Evolving Art of Robert Morgan’s Poetry” describes the writer’s artistic evolution in terms of sound and structure; a poet and prose writer, Morgan finds a personal way to differentiate between the two, resorting to rhythm and rhyme to write his poems.

According to During, cultural studies is an engaged discipline because it “is not neutral in relation to the exclusions, injustices and prejudices that it observes,” because it “enhances and celebrates cultural experiences coming from a variety of cultural forms” and thirdly, because it deals with culture “as a part of everyday life” (During 2005, 1) and the essays included in this volume all have these features.

Although approaching a wide range of topics, there are two underlying ideas that bring all the contributions in the book together, namely the love of the authors for the Appalachian region and their interest in teaching it to their students: “... to help Appalachian students develop pride and self-esteem and to teach non-Appalachian students how worthy of respect that region is (Mann 2013, 91).

One of the major aims of the contributors is to persuade students to overcome the stereotypes related to the Appalachian region and to make them aware of the richness and variety of its culture, its distinct and complex character. They believe that Appalachian Studies should reflect the living culture of the region which is in a very dynamic relationship with local, national and international influences.

The teaching methodology centers around interdisciplinarity – geography, history, environmental studies, sociology, business, literature, music; students are encouraged to make their own discoveries and question their previous conceptions and frameworks:

The strength to say who you are, to grow as you will, respectfully but determinedly to refuse the pressures to assimilate and to conform – how does a teacher help a student find that strength? (Mann 2013, 90)

The book is very rich in teaching activities and suggestions. Contributors present their teaching experience:

I am offering what comes before daily lesson planning: a concrete and deeply personal example of how my research, teaching and archival collecting inform my upper-division university classroom (Engelhardt 2013, 36),

and offer solutions for teaching particular topics:

Some perspective on this second violation of literary convention, the narration of events out of order, can be gained by asking students to jot down memorable events in their own childhood. This usually shows that principles other than strict chronology, such as associations with people, places, and other events, can influence the order in which we might narrate the events of our own preteen lives (Cox 2013, 156).

They describe the stages of their courses, each with its aim and activities and even working sheets (Emily Satterwhite), mention successful classroom activities – Travelling Teachers in which an individual rotates among small groups, teaching a new aspect of a work until he or she has made the full circle of the classroom (Gantt 2013, 132) and offer teaching tips:

Early in the study of Awiatka’s writing, have students make a personalized “Spirit Shield” in honor of Native American literature and culture. Drawing with colored pencils, crayons, markers or paints, students depict geographically the images and values that are most important to them – the “stuff that feeds the student’s spirit”. (Edwards 2013, 235)

The wealth of teaching materials is also impressive: archives, manuscripts, movies, photographs, diaries, documentaries, audio recordings, field trips, school partnerships. The book is aimed to teachers, students and professionals in many subjects and areas such as literature, health care, business, educators, administrative officials, environmentalists, people living inside and outside the region. Reading it means learning about Appalachia, coming to better appreciate the region and understanding the challenges of being a teacher.

References

During, Simon. 2005. *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction*. Routledge.