Arts

New Book Curates A Response To 'Hillbilly Elegy'

By Jody DiPerna | February 19, 2019 | No Comments

'Aunt Rita along the King Coal Highway, Mingo County, West Virginia' (Photo by: Roger May)

"This isn't about de-valuing J.D. Vance's experience," Meredith McCarroll said about the new book *Appalachian Reckoning: A Region Responds to Hillbilly Elegy*, out from West Virginia University Press this month. "But it is about creating a chorus around his solo voice to show that there's more to say about the region than his perspective can give us."

J.D. Vance's blockbuster hit book, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, (Harper Press, 2016), became a cultural and political phenomena and was listed on the NYT Bestseller List for nonfiction for many, many weeks. It was recently announced that Ron Howard is adapting it into a movie for Netflix.

McCarroll, a child of the mountains of western North Carolina, and the director of writing and rhetoric at Bowdoin College, teamed up with Anthony Harkins, a professor of history at Western Kentucky University, to gather this collection. The result is a blend of academic thinking, as well as good old-fashioned storytelling which includes essays, poetry and photography.

Some of the essays are a direct repudiation of Vance's book, most notably Ivy Brashear's '*Keep Your "Elegy": The Appalachia I Know Is Very Much Alive*,' which confronts the extractive plunder of Appalachia which created harsh economic conditions many still face today, as well as personal stories about her indomitable Grandma. Elizabeth Catte's [author of *What You're Getting Wrong about Appalachia* (Belt Press)] '*Stereotypes on the Syllabus*' is a fascinating interrogation of how Vance's book has become the singular, overused go-to on Appalachia, particularly on campuses.

In this section, the book very much directly addresses what Harkins describes as, "visions of all the people being trapped in a desolate present without any change, that they all have the same experience, that the experiences of people in coal company towns is the only experience. The book tries to highlight the diversity of experiences of people in the area, the experience of people who leave the region, as well as those who stay or come back."

The experience of black Appalachians is either excised or completely left out of nearly all depictions of the region. William H. Turner, a leading scholar on the African-American experience in Appalachia, corrects that with his essay, '*Black Hillbillies Have No Time for Elegies*.'

Equally powerful are the Affrilachian poets included. The voices of Keith S. Wilson, Kelly Norman Ellis and Ricardo Nazario Y Colon explode the notion that Appalachia is a monochromatic monolith.

Well known to Appalachian scholars and admirers is Roger May, a writer and photographer based in Charleston, West Virginia and the creator of the Looking at Appalachia project. His entry, just a simple paragraph and attached photo of his '*Aunt Rita along the King Coal Highway, Mingo County, West Virginia*,' is moving and deeply personal in a way that makes it easy to connect with him.

"Too often it [Appalachia] gets framed as completely a world apart and only the issues they face, both the joys and the pains, are somehow only there." said Harkins of the universality of region. "I think it's a really important counter-response to [visions of] impoverished looking, sad looking children trapped economically and socially."

In this way, some contributors elide Vance's presentation of the region and its people and capture more distinctly American themes. Communities protesting the development of more prisons is a hot topic both inside and outside of Appalachia and is captured nicely here by photographer Lou Murrey. Rebecca Kiger's contribution, "*Olivia's Ninth Birthday Party*," which is just that, a tender photograph of a birthday party at Grand Vue Park in Moundsville, West Virginia.

It's a fine line to walk. To set down and make a record of the experience of Appalachians that is both universally American and also unique to the mountains and hollows and creeks that shape that experience. There is melancholy in these mountainous regions. There is strife and resistance. But there is also joy and rambunctiousness.

"If you look closely at Appalachia, it is incredibly diverse. It is a place where there is struggle and there are challenges. It is also a place where there is hope. There is opportunity," said McCarroll. "In some ways it is universal and connected to the rest of America. And in many ways, because the experience of growing up in Appalachia is not completely different than the experience of growing up in America — sometimes it gets asked that way. This book is a way of passing the mic around, collecting lots of different perspectives and showing different points of view. It just immediately complicates this really rich and diverse region."

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