WHAT A WAY TO MAKE A LIVING

Lessons from Dolly

BY ELIZABETH CATTE

I CLAIM AN INHERITANCE TO AN intellectual project that has sustained several generations of Appalachian writers: to write about my home not only as a living, breathing region with a distinct history and traditions, but also as an idea.

The most forceful claim to this inheritance came in 1978, in a work by Henry Shapiro called *Appalachia on Our Mind*. Shapiro wrote with great precision about the ways that powerful individuals hid their attitudes and beliefs in ideas about Appalachia, often aggrandized as a strange and peculiar place whose true character only the well-educated or entrepreneurial could deduce. As William Goodell Frost, president of Berea College, wrote of mountain people in 1899 for *The Atlantic Monthly*, “They are an anachronism, and it will require a scientific spirit and some historic sense to enable us to appreciate their situation and character.” Local color writers, academics, missionaries, folklorists, industrialists, and social workers all had a hand in shaping the popular image of Appalachia as a place forgotten by both time and progress.

I encountered my own version of this phenomenon early in life, not in a classroom but a theme park. Henry Shapiro was a brilliant thinker, but for me nothing illustrates the invention of Appalachia better than Dollywood. I am a child of Dollywood, coming of age when the park was brand new. My childhood tasted like fudge and felt like bee stings and wet jeans. I learned how to drive as Dolly looked down upon me from billboards that advertised the growing mountain empire made in her image. As the park expanded, so did the range of tourist offerings in Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge. Each new venture stayed true to brand. Commodified representations of mountain life, equal parts archaic, exciting,

Illustrations by Daniel Fishel

and humorous tugged at the longing and nostalgia of tourists to experience a simpler way of life, uncontaminated by politics, unrest, and pressing social issues

I grew up in a world of piped-in wood smoke and overalls, pancakes, ham biscuits, and anthropomorphic bears. I marked out seasons through the cycle of tourist attractions—winter meant Dolly's Christmas village and spring was for synchronous fireflies—and the traffic they generated. I sold tickets to jamborees and clogging festivals as part of school fundraisers, and at least once my church pressed me into service weaving handmade white-birch baskets to sell to tourists. I also learned that I was allergic to white birch, a revelation that made me neurotic about living up to my mountain credentials.

Other cracks in the façade emerged. I was more a fan of Britpop than bluegrass. My grandmother, and I hope she forgives me for writing this, wasn't very good at making fried pies. I wore Doc Martens, not overalls. A fear of ticks kept me indoors. I never saw a bear in the wild, much less enticed one to drink a Coke in reenactment of a bygone tourist attraction. I can't clog, but I can rate all drugstore shades of black lipstick on a scale of coverage and durability.

I had a special grievance against the way that attractions presented moonshining to tourists. Moonshining is a complicated industry often distilled, pun intended, into representations that yokel-ize producers past and present. The quintessential cheap souvenir of the mountains is a fridge magnet version of a hillbilly bootlegger in all his shoeless and cross-eyed glory, clutching a ceramic jug embossed with xxx. Both the federal government and licensed alcohol producers had a vested interested in mythologizing moonshiners as unsanitary and intellectually-dim poisoners because

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moonshining deprived these stakeholders of revenue streams. Their trade filled a practical gap in the mountain economy and sustained important regional foodways. To caricature it as sinister or haphazardly performed is a deep insult.

My great-grandfather made moonshine and sold it widely in southwest Virginia and east Tennessee in the 1930s and beyond, and even spent time in federal prison for the manufacture of illegal alcohol. He often did his business in suits, not overalls. He and his associates were not only chemists, but also farmers, electricians, and mechanics—all trades that make the production of alcohol more efficient, from building a car that could outrun police to growing corn and fruit that would smooth the taste.

And yet, I was and still am drawn to this imagined homeland, this fantasy of Appalachia. The sanitized, consumable idea of it. No one hurts, and the rockslides are all staged. Our industries—mining and timber, for example—are adventurous and rugged, not exploitative. The only pain is leaving this fantasy world, and the sweet longing to return to it someday, knowing that it will be much as we left it.

Real life makes no such guarantees. In my family, things changed for the worse. Homelands vanished. The village of my grandmother's people lies at the bottom of a man-made lake created by the Tennessee Valley Authority in the name of progress, homes forever submerged along with the bones of those who built them. When Dolly bought the park in 1986, one of her first additions was a replica of her childhood home. The recreation stands proudly near the entrance to the park and it snuggles visitors in small rooms that are portals to Dolly's childhood. How could we begrudge her this when so many of us would do the same?

Growing up in the shadow of Dollywood taught me a number of important lessons. I learned that I was what people called a hillbilly, despite my black lipstick and boots. This designation had less to do with my ancestry or upbringing and more to do with fact that hillbillies need to exist because they are profitable. Our traditions have a market value, assigned by a system that props up cultural offerings from theme parks to memoirs.

We have a place in the world that has an economic function, and we are very good at making other people money. No one in my family has enriched a coal boss in a generation, but the idea of my ancestors working in the mines remains lucrative, the setup for a thrill-ride. My pop-culture twin—the one who makes hand-made baskets competently, who has a delicious twang and submits to poverty knowing no difference and no oppressor—is more valuable than me.

Although I'll always love Dolly, what I came to understand, quite painfully, was that I sulked around Dollywood (and Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg) not to look *at* Appalachia but away from it. The idea of Appalachia—with a benevolent system of capitalism, where only ideas and not resources are extracted, where belonging can be sold or purchased, and where we experience only joy and never sorrow—is potent.

I WROTE A BOOK about the idea of Appalachia, and the function of the region in our contemporary conversations about politics and social issues. From endless reported pieces about Trump Country to the popularity of *Hillbilly Elegy* and author J.D. Vance's ascendency as the region's explainer-in-chief, I recognized the creation of new Appalachian branding when I saw it. Dolly fed me sugar-coated representations of Appalachia, but living in her world provided the fuel for recognizing aggrandizements of a less wholesome source and purpose. I knew how easy it was to remake Appalachia in one's own image and then sell it. I knew how effortlessly Appalachia could be packaged, reinterpreted. And I knew how profitable it could be.

I wrote frankly about extraction and exploitation, and about destruction and sorrow. I wrote about who caused them and why. I did my best by Henry Shapiro, tracking the attitudes and beliefs hidden

in these new ideas about Appalachia that hinted at deficiencies in our culture. They came to us already feeling a hundred years old. I tackled questions that had long bothered me, like why Appalachia is often presented as all-white, whether the presentation comes via a theme park or election coverage or a bestseller.

I longed for more people to know the stories of resilient folks who brought their faith, labor, anger, and ideas to the fore for the good of the poor and common people.

And so I added them back. I wrote bluntly: "Since Vance and his fans have made it acceptable to remake Appalachia in one's own image, let me do the same and create a volume with an image made in my own. Far from being monolithic, helpless, and degraded, this image of Appalachia is radical and diverse. This image of Appalachia does not deflect the problems of the region but simply recognizes the voices and actions of those who have struggled against them, often sacrificing their health, comfort, and even their lives. It is an image projected by bodies against machines and bodies on picket lines and bodies that most assuredly are not always white. This image of Appalachia won't be coming to a theater near you courtesy of Ron Howard, and we are all better for it."

One of the stories I often retell is about the fight against strip-mining in Eastern Kentucky. In the 1970s, almost half of all coal extracted in the United States was obtained via strip-mining. For those unaware, strip-mining is a less labor intensive, and thus cheaper, process that requires the exposure of a coal seam through the surface of rock rather than underground. Coal operators gash mountains and scrape the coal out, loosened by explosives, with industrial equipment. Erosion and flooding are common side effects of the destruction, as is environmental contamination from the oil, fuel, and chemicals expelled by explosives and construction equipment. The subterranean minerals exposed during the process, like iron, are corrosive and poison vegetation and water.

"The entire region will look more and more like the flayed back of a man, the lifeless or heavily damaged pulp of a miscreant who sinned against industrial America," *The New York Times* wrote of the process.

"Poor though the land is, the county's chief resource for the support of its large and growing population is its farms," the United States Department of Agriculture commented on Knott County, Kentucky, in 1937. The fuel demands of War World II and improvements in rail transportation rapidly extended the geographic boundaries of Kentucky's coal country, transforming the economies of previously untouched areas like Knott County from subsistence farming to coal dependency over the course of a decade.

Many local farmers discovered that they did not possess exclusive rights to their own land. A provision inserted into many deeds at the time of sale or transfer separated surface and mineral rights, and farmers often owned only the former. Their family might own everything above the ground, but a coal company owned everything beneath it. Coal companies destroyed crops, ruined pasture, and rendered land barren in pursuit of mineral rights. Parts of eastern Kentucky became what residents described as a war zone, as both the statehouse and the courthouse declined to help people find relief against these abusive practices.

The people of eastern Kentucky—where strip-mining intensified in the 1960s and 1970s—challenged the practice and its legal protections in courts and through the state legislature, with little success. Such was the dominion of the

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coal industry and its ability to purchase politicians and judges. Mining companies continued to destroy the land and the small world built upon it. Homes, stores, gardens, even graveyards. "Acts of God," the coal operators said, as if God would make a mother watch while bulldozers sliced open the graves of her children because the shortest route to a mining site was through a cemetery.

In November 1965, an eighty-one-year-old Old Regular Baptist preacher named "Uncle" Dan Gibson from Knott County—who normally spent his free time making coffins—held off seventeen state policemen on his land. Coal companies often requested armed reinforcements when setting up operations on contested land, and this practice has a long history in the coalfields. With the dual protections of faith and firepower, he held the land. State police arrested Uncle Dan, but the coal company never came back.

Uncle Dan was a founding member of the Appalachian Group to Save the Land and the People and he was not the only elder member to put his body in the path of destruction. The Widow Ollie Combs sat in front of a bulldozer on her land and forced state police officers to carry her down a mountain. The police also arrested a newspaper photographer present at the scene for good measure, although he posted bail more quickly than Combs and later photographed her solitary Thanksgiving meal in jail. The protest—and the images—helped rouse support for anti-strip-mining legislation. The governor ordered state police to refuse assistance to coal operators in nonviolent disputes. Some county courts tried to set limits on mining activities, which higher courts struck down without exception.

Some of the tactics employed by organizations like the Appalachian Group to Save the Land and People, like armed resistance, now feel firmly of the past,

but others do not. The tactics of their opponents feel familiar, too. Throughout the late winter and early spring of this year, a sixty-one-year-old woman named Red Terry occupied a makeshift treehouse for over a month to halt construction of the Mountain Valley Pipeline on Bent Mountain, Virginia, near where I currently live. The Mountain Valley Pipeline will carry natural gas through a region already overburdened by natural gas pipelines, and resistance to this project and the state's other planned pipeline is strong.

Federal authorities granted Mountain Valley Pipeline partners the right of eminent domain to Terry's land, forcing her to provide an easement for pipeline construction. The state police acted as a willing arm of pipeline developers and guarded her, on land that she owns, to prevent community members from bringing her food and water.

Another protestor, who uses the pseudonym Nutty, occupied a similar blockade for fifty-six days to protect the Jefferson National Forest from the pipeline. State and federal authorities also cut her off from food, water, and medical attention.

Unlike Terry, Nutty didn't lay claim to the land she protected. "This land was already stolen," she said. Her occupation took place on Haudenosaunee, Cherokee, and Shawnee land that is currently the Jefferson National Forest. "Let's dig deeper...facing the violent histories that still find their home in the present," she said, connecting forced migration of indigenous peoples to the modern seizure of land for corporate profit.

MY GRANDFATHER WAS the most important person in my life, but when I was younger I was frightened and ashamed of the community that raised him. I did not see his home the way that he saw it. He was from the southwest Virginia coalfields. His favorite aunt, whom we visited often, lived at the top of a mountain and earned twenty-five cents per ton from coal extracted beneath her. We often had to leave our car at the base of the mountain and walk up to the house; such was the condition of roads prone to flooding and rockslides. Our trips almost always included a visit to a nursing home or hospital, to check on people too young to have bodies that old. The church where my grandfather served as a deacon still practiced line-singing. If you've never heard line-singing, I can only describe it as the sound of pure sorrow.

"I have no promise of tomorrow," the congregation sang, and I believed it.

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Even as a child, I saw my family through the pages of *Life* magazine. I imagined how diligent photographers, working in that iconic 1960s War on Poverty style, would see us, and I felt ashamed. Over time, as I learned how that poverty, destruction, and sickness came to be, I realized that I had internalized attitudes that were both unfair and widely held. It is true that the sins of corporate greed and truths of hardship are contained in those images, but to consume them is to consume a parade of bodies and land that could not withstand destruction. How many people have come to resent our kin, our homes, because the lens loves the drama of failure? Because the shutter clicks for sorrow, not joy? Because those images are of us but never for us?

When I started graduate school, I came across an image of my grandfather's community in a cache of photographs taken by New Deal photographers in the 1930s. It's a wonderful image, my absolute favorite. It shows interior of a café in Haysi, Virginia.

There's a couple sitting inside a photo booth, having their pictures made. Their faces are aglow with warm light. A young woman is watching. Perhaps she is waiting her turn, or just interested in the workings of a machine that would feel very futuristic in a town like Haysi. What I like best is that no one is looking at the government photographer. This isn't a poverty portrait. It telegraphs, strongly, that "the image we are making of ourselves is more interesting than yours."

I yielded to obsession with this image, because it conveyed a reality about the region that I had long struggled with: How we see ourselves is often at odds with the way that others see us. This reality is unavoidable, but we must be honest that the most exploitative images are often the most popular and enduring.

When my grandfather died, just before my book came out, I allowed myself the briefest of daydreams that I would find in his papers or photographs an image of him taken in that photo booth, young and with his life ahead of him. I didn't, of course, and we said goodbye to him with line-singing that still sounded sorrowful but also tender, a language that belonged to us.

I get a lot of mail now. People write to me, just to share. They tell me about how they were called to ministry or why they left home, how they could fix things, how they lost their accents and got them back. Sometimes my partner and I go and see them, and sometimes they come and visit us.

And then one day I received a note from a woman named Summer Runyon. The subject line read: "Haysi Photo Booth." She had written because she'd read my book, which contains a section that talks about the photo booth image and how it liberated me from some of the shame I carried. It made her remember an image of her ninety-four-year-old grandmother, taken when she was a young woman, and her grandmother's brother, who would soon die in World War II. They were not the couple in the New Deal photographer's image, but came to be photographed several years later. Summer told me that she loved the image but always found its origins puzzling—how did her grandmother obtain these photographs in Haysi, Virginia, with very little money to spend? I solved the mystery for her, but she gave me something far more important.

I couldn't have the image that I wanted of my grandfather, but I now had one of her grandmother, young and with her life ahead of her. "I will be keeping the picture and this story in your book for my daughter to find when she inherits my Appalachian books one day," she let me know.

In making a new inheritance, we practiced resurrection. I move forward in this region with the love my grandfather had for his community. And although it is not possible for me to see it how he saw it, I can see it in my favorite image, now with a twin: Layered, complicated, containing stories within stories that invite us to look more closely, not away.

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