

## Session for the General Anthropology Division

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108<sup>th</sup> Meeting - American Anthropological Association – Philadelphia, PA – From 02 - 06 December 2009

### ***The End/s of Identity: Deconstructing Appalachia***

Session Organizer/Chair: Brian A. Hoey, Ph.D., Associate Professor  
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The conference theme inspires a session that considers the end/s of identity and role of anthropologists as pioneers in the study of identity formation and politicization. This session takes the multi-state region known as Appalachia as a case in point. Our intent is to examine this role both in helping to shape how Appalachia has come to be characterized as a distinct, coherent, and culturally homogenous region as well in challenging this essentialism by attempting to trace the relationships between identity and power. Through the work of earlier generations of anthropologists and other social scientists, Appalachia is seen in popular imagination as a kind of repository, a reified national “attic” inhabited by cultural remnants, survivors from a frontier past. In seeking to explain Appalachia’s distinctiveness and, in particular, its endemic poverty, scholars have applied such theories as the “culture of poverty” and internal colonialism. These approaches have emphasized either ideological or structural factors in the region’s apparent cultural and economic isolation from mainstream America.

In both cases, the people of Appalachia become an “other,” only in this case one found on the geographic inside. Indeed, it is this presumed otherness at home that has proven so attractive to ethnographers intent on documenting the lives of those who, by virtue of what is interpreted as persistent traditionalism or exploitation at the hands of absentee capitalists controllers, have remained outside the culturally progressive, urbanizing trends that swept most of the rest of the country over the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

To what end have these understandings, and the identity that emerges from them, been applied? We can point to prevailing media representations ranging from movies to news reports that reinforce stereotypes of Appalachian people as uneducated, religiously fundamental, and backward – reports that include recent coverage of Barak Obama’s candidacy in the Democratic primary and headlines suggesting a predictable, entrenched racism. While these representations are important in providing a vernacular by which Appalachia is discussed both within and outside the region, arguably more significant in terms of its impact on everyday life in Appalachia has been national policy aimed at addressing its poverty. These policies include economic development initiatives focusing on infrastructure, from transportation to health care, and “modernization” efforts intended to train residents in the necessary skills to participate in industry and contemporary American civil society.

This session is designed to critically examine ways that Appalachia has been constructed as a *place* and near mythic identity by scholars, writers, politicians, and journalists as well as how that identity is variously embraced and challenged by its residents in their own struggles to define or redefine themselves. In our consideration of these issues, our approaches range from the historical to ethnographic – exploring sources from the archival to everyday. Our guiding theme will be the ways in which a prevailing Appalachian identity is invented or reinvented and to imagine, in the process, ways that our discipline is also open to invention or reinvention in its relationship to traditional subjects, including the project of Appalachia itself.

### **Session Members – Abstracts & Bios**

**BRIAN A. HOEY** (Marshall University)

TITLE: (Re) constructing West Virginia: Place-based Identity in the New Economy

ABSTRACT: As a *place*, West Virginia sits just south of the fabled Mason-Dixon Line, which despite basic territorial origins has become a symbolic division, a rough cultural boundary, and an assumed ideological watershed. Where

West Virginia should be placed on this imaginary divide is not always clear in the popular imagination. Having long played a significant role in the railroad industry, natural resource extraction, and the struggles of labor, West Virginia also stands at the “Rust Belt’s” fuzzy edge, a term used to conjure images of decaying industrial places from another economic era. West Virginia has suffered a great deal of out-migration during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as young people abandon industries of their forebears that once defined entire communities. Despite a recent history of often-bleak economic conditions, these communities may be places to examine new forms of entrepreneurship, community building, and place-marketing according to emerging cultural and economic models. The grassroots efforts of increasing numbers of local activists stand in sharp contrast to the dominant order of the Industrial Era and sharply at odds with popular images of the State. Rather than encouraging capital and social investment by relying simply on rolling back taxes and providing cheap land and labor to attract large employers, an alternative approach attempts to preserve or enhance quality of life in order to attract migrants who pursue lifestyle choices that emphasize quality of life and livability. This paper will explore ways that West Virginians are challenging prevailing images and conditions to attract and retain these members of the so-called creative class.

BIO: Brian Hoey is an Associate Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Marshall University. He received his B.A. in Human Ecology from the College of the Atlantic and Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Michigan. His dissertation research explored non-economic migration where downsized and downshifting corporate workers relocate as a means of "starting over" in geographic places they believe provide the necessary personal refuge to rethink work, family and personal obligations. In addition to a continuing interest in career change, personal identity and the moral meanings of work, Hoey has a longstanding interest in the anthropology of space and place and, in particular, therapeutic ideals attached to particular natural and built environments. He also conducts research in Indonesia where fieldwork in planned settlements of government sponsored migrants reveal the contested nature of constructing personally and culturally meaningful space within the process of community building. Hoey has published on these and other topics in the *American Ethnologist*, *Journal of Anthropological Research*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, and *Ethnology*.

**SAMUEL R. COOK** (Virginia Tech)

TITLE: All that is Native and Refined: Anthropology at Home and Critical Regionalism

ABSTRACT: This paper offers critical reflections from an anthropologist who is Native to the mountain South concerning motives and manifestations of working in one’s “home” territory. The author examines his own rationale for becoming an anthropologist and attempting to apply his disciplinary knowledge to political economic problems in the Appalachian region. While problematizing the concept of “Native anthropology,” the author explicates the complexities of larger issues of identity formation and the ever-present risk of essentializing Appalachian culture in regional studies. The author’s initial research in the region embraced prevailing theories of internal colonialism and dependency to challenge established culture of poverty models that had guided policy initiatives at state, local, and national levels. However, the author found that his fervent acceptance of the former reflected his own political biases which, in turn, often stood in contrast to local responses and assessments of political economic circumstances. These challenges forced the author to reassess his activist trajectory and to consider regional issues in the broader context of globalism, a theoretical avenue that is sparsely and alarmingly underused in contemporary Appalachian Studies literature. Embracing Ana Tsing’s concept of “global frictions,” the author argues that local responses to global forces are simultaneously situated in locally unique ways while constituting far more complex, if not unpredictable manifestations than can be explained through generalized models of victimization or regional culture, thus calling into question the very concepts of “Appalachia” or “Appalachian.”

BIO: Sam Cook is an Associate Professor in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Tech. He received his Ph.D. in Comparative Cultural Studies at the University of Arizona. His interests include American

Indian and Appalachian Studies. He is the author of *Monacans and Miners: Native American and Coal Mining Communities in Appalachia*.

**BRYAN McNEIL** (American University)

TITLE: Place Contested: Is West Virginia “Coal” or “Mountains”?

ABSTRACT: Organizing opposition to destructive coal industry practices, chief among them mountaintop removal mining, has produced nothing less than new, renewed, and/or reinterpreted definitions of community, place, history, environment, and economy. Activists from incredibly diverse backgrounds and experiences continue to articulate discourses of development, place, and community that challenge Big Coal’s position of dominance over the region. This paper analyzes competing discourses surrounding mining issues from industry, activists, and the regulatory community. Incorporating Aihwa Ong’s concept of graduated citizenship, this paper contemplates discourses of place, and attempts to “place” the activist community and its discursive arguments within the highly contested field of government policies related to development, economy, environment, and regulation.

BIO: Bryan McNeil is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at American University in Washington, D.C. He received his PhD in Anthropology from the University of North Carolina. His dissertation focused on the community activism in the dispute over mountaintop removal coal mining in West Virginia. Major themes in the research include environment, economy, development, labor, class, and identity. A forthcoming book entitled *Combating Mountaintop Removal: New Trends in Activism* is under contract at University of Illinois Press.

**JOHN WOOD** (University of North Carolina – Asheville)

TITLE: Mountain Races

ABSTRACT: Jim Crow segregation was always about place – separate schools, separate seats on buses, separate eateries, separate neighborhoods. Though racism in the southern Appalachian city of Asheville, North Carolina was supposed to have been milder than at lower elevations of the Deep South, its color lines were sharp and strict. This paper explores the culture of race relations in Asheville from the end of segregation through Urban Renewal efforts of the 1960s, Model Cities renovations of the 1970s, and the more recent gentrification of the 1990s – waves of change that all managed to scatter and weaken the city’s African-American community. The paper addresses black-white relations within their Appalachian context. For in Asheville, race has always been complicated by class divisions between old white elites and relatively poor white mountaineers, between prominent black business leaders and black working and servant classes, between wealthy newcomers such as George Vanderbilt at the end of the 19th Century, the more recent retirees from up north, and dot.com transplants from the west coast. Add to the mix a fast-growing population of immigrant Latinos and it is hard to make any easy generalizations about race relations in Asheville or its lingering Appalachian character. The paper sets out instead to recount the stories that particular people tell about particular places in and around Asheville and then mines these stories for insights to the way Asheville’s different residents understand their city and each other.

BIO: John Wood teaches anthropology at UNC-Asheville, in Asheville, North Carolina. Much of his field research has focused on Gabra nomads in northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia. Several years ago he shifted his research to the study of race and racism in post-Apartheid South Africa and the post-Jim Crow American south. Before turning midcareer to anthropology, Wood was a journalist.

**MARY HUFFORD** (University of Pennsylvania)

Dr. Hufford will be joining the session as discussant.

BIO: Mary Hufford is Director of the Center for Folklore and Ethnography. She has published widely on folklore, cultural policy and ecological crisis, including an edited volume, *Conserving Culture: A New Discourse on Heritage*. Her regional studies in central Appalachia and in southern New Jersey reflect her broader interest in discourses on nature, environment, and the body, and the production of social imaginaries.

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