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### Review of Liberia, South Carolina: An African American Appalachian Community, by John M. Coggeshall

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Reviewed by:

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Liberia, South Carolina: An African American Appalachian Community. By John M. Coggeshall. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. Pp. xi, 269.)

Examining 150 years of history of a small, rural African American community, John M. Coggeshall's *Liberia, South Carolina: An African American Appalachian Community*, contributes to recent studies elevating Black Appalachian voices, perspectives, and cultures previously historically elided. Located in the Oolenoy Valley in Pickens County in the Blue Ridge region of western South Carolina, Liberia, like a lot of isolated, rural communities, exists less "as a legally defined entity and more a culturally defined area of recognized neighborly ties" (2). From the antebellum period forward to the present, long-standing social, familial, and cultural ties existed between the region's white and black residents, complicating the construction of memory and truth by whites who wrote local histories based on the ways "they wished things to be, not the way things actually were" (21). Thus, like many black Appalachian communities, white local histories, sources, and memories shaped and framed the portrayals and character of generations of African Americans who toiled, tilled, occupied, and owned the land.

Inspired by the "Behind the Veil" oral history project, Coggeshall, a professor of anthropology at Clemson University, in collaboration with Liberia resident Mable Owens Clark and her family, friends, and neighbors, chronicles the struggles and successes of five generations of the Owens family to reframe the historical record. Acknowledging the "contestation over alternative perspectives of truth, in both present reality and past history" (6), Coggeshall endeavors to allow Liberia's black people "to tell their own story in their own words" (23). Grounded in anthropological and sociological methods, informed by hours of oral history, impressive research, and critical readings of white-authored sources, Coggeshall's book presents Liberia as a test case of an alternative history comprised of living Black counter-memories, passed on through oral histories, that challenge the historical record of black incapacity, obsequiousness, and erasure. These memories help reveal a shared sense of self, place, and purpose linked to the land, its continued occupation, **[End Page 83]** and ownership. The Liberia "community" emerges, then, as a "hidden transcript" of the social and cultural strategies of black persistence and resistance (24).

The great value of this microhistory is the level of intimacy and continuity (and discontinuity) accessed by the oral transcripts of the lives and experiences of Liberia's multiple and intertwined families, contextualized by historical periodization. The generational voices of the Owenses, McJunkins, Kemps, Gowans, and Williamses detail a distinct Black Appalachian identity, born out of struggle and success and animated by the foundational relationship to ancestry lands. Key to this process is the actions of the community's black women. Utilizing studies by black feminist theorists, Coggeshall powerfully demonstrates the centrality of black women to the community's vitality. Oral history also provides evidence of the abiding importance of the community black churches, many founded by former Liberian slaves. Coggeshall illuminates the central role played by Soapstone Baptist Church (Liberia's "mother" church), founded in 1860 by Black landowners, as the nexus through which the web of black spiritual,

religious, social, and institutional relations operated and, as evidenced by its rebuilding after a 1967 burning, continue to manifest.

By documenting the rich, nuanced, and moving history of Liberia's black ancestors and residents, their relationship to and reliance on the land, and the ambient interpersonal relationships and web of kin relations that actualized and bound them over five generations, Coggeshall demonstrably validates the historical presence, resiliency, and contributions of a rural Black Appalachian community to the region and nation. Deeply researched and sensitively rendered, this important contribution deserves to be widely read.

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