

The One and the Many, Unity and Diversity: Philosophical Approaches for Appalachian Studies

The discipline of Philosophy has traditionally been understood as an abstract study of universal truths. This would seem to put it in contrast with attention to specific places and times necessary for Appalachian Studies. But there are just as many Philosophies as there are Appalachias, and the long history in Philosophy of the problem of the one and the many has much to offer concerning the way we can find unity in and through diversity in Appalachia. These three papers offer different approaches to the role of language, narrative, and discourse in understanding what it means to be an Appalachian and to live the good life in Appalachia.

The first paper, “Appalachian Identity as Narrative Identity” draws on hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s account of the narrative nature of personal identity to try to explain what it means to be an Appalachian person. It argues that place-based narratives transform the diverse moments of our lives into a coherent, unified self.

The second paper, “All That Feeds Us” presents poetry as a focal practice which can unite Appalachians in a common view of the good life. Focal things – like diverse Appalachian plants – when revealed through the deictic discourse of Marc Harshmann’s poetry are seen as essential to a place-based, social, understanding of the good life.

The third paper engages with studies of social movements to explore the ways in which narratives circulating in political discourse interact with individuals’ identities to shape peoples’ interpretation of a shared social context. Controversies arise in part because strip-mining pits two sources of identity against one another—the labor-based heritage of coal mining, and the environment-based heritage of the mountain forest. In the past, these have co-existed. Since strip mining makes mutually exclusive these two sources of identity, social movement activity brings to the fore contested dimensions of a shared heritage, and poses distinctive challenges for the emergence of solidarity. The paper finishes by considering the implications of such complexities for environmental justice theory.

Appalachian Identity as Narrative Identity

Much work in the field of Appalachian Studies seems to require the assumption that there is something that it is to be an Appalachian person. This paper draws on Paul Ricoeur's account of personal identity as narrative identity to attempt to understand what Appalachian identity is. Ricoeur argues that, although there is a pre-narrative quality to human life itself, a narrative is required to synthesize the many different heterogeneous elements that make up our lives into a coherent whole. In creating the narratives that are our life stories, we draw not only on the pre-narrative character of life, but also on larger social and historical narratives.

From this account of Ricoeur's, I move on to discuss the way that narratives about Appalachia form and inform a concept of identity. I then compare and contrast this account of Appalachian narrative identity with other accounts of identity formation. I argue that we can only understand Appalachian identity as a type of narrative identity; it is through the historical, fictional, sociological, and artistic stories we tell about Appalachia that we understand what it means to be an Appalachian person or institution. I then turn to the work of Edward Casey on place to sketch out the way in which the lived experience of place intertwines with and informs narratives. I conclude with an account of Appalachian identity that accounts both for the narrative formation of identity and the place-based nature both of these narratives and of the experiences which inform them.

All That Feeds Us: Familiar Plants and Focal Practice in the Poetry of Marc Harshman

Abstract

This paper has the dual goal of briefly introducing philosopher Albert Borgmann's concept of focal practices and outlining the presence and potential for such practices in the work of West Virginia Poet Laureate Marc Harshman. Focal practices provide meaning and a means of orienting one's life; they provide a central good around which one can organize what is important and what is not.

There are a number of specifically Appalachian focal things and practices mentioned in Harshman's poetry. I suggest, however, that Harshman models an activity of observing and creatively celebrating particular plants in the Appalachian landscape that is a distinct focal practice. Moreover, it is a practice that Appalachian readers can participate in as co-celebrants of their shared landscape.

Through this shared practice, a community's appreciation of the Appalachian landscape itself can become an orienting guide for how members choose to alter the landscape, for determining what they are able to sacrifice and what they are committed to save. With Harshman as a fitting example, I conclude with the claim that this celebration of specific plants is a widespread and familiar trait of Appalachian literature and song. Understanding this existing trait in terms of a focal practice provides new motivation to continue observing, writing, and singing together with greater purpose.

Unity and Diversity

Relating to this year's theme of *Unity and Diversity*, this essay affirms that Appalachian biodiversity is among the chief goods of the region and that traditions of celebrating this rich landscape not only bring Appalachian people together in common practice, but also serve to unify a vision of our common good.

Strip Mining and the Severing of Appalachian Identity

The most recent anti-strip mining movement in Appalachia has given rise to intense polarization and conflict in coalfield communities among people who appear to be similarly situated in the political, economic, and social structures that shape their lives. When people are affected in similar ways, we would expect greater agreement among impacted residents regarding the consequences of coal industry practices. What explains the vitriol of this controversy, and what does it suggest for theories of justice that inform our attempts to create positive social change?

This paper engages with studies of social movements to explore the ways in which narratives circulating in political discourse interact with individuals' identities to shape peoples' interpretation of a shared social context. Controversies arise in part because strip-mining pits two sources of identity against one another—the labor-based heritage of coal mining, and the environment-based heritage of the mountain forest. In the past, these have co-existed. Since strip mining makes mutually exclusive these two sources of identity, social movement activity brings to the fore contested dimensions of a shared heritage, and poses distinctive challenges for the emergence of solidarity.

The paper finishes by considering the implications of such complexities for environmental justice theory. Unless the divisions within communities are made central to the work of Appalachian social movement actors, distributive and participatory justice will be impossible to achieve in practice; a further component of restorative justice that meets this challenge therefore must be thematized and advocated.