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The Local Voices of Appalachian Activism

Throughout most of American history, the region of Appalachia has been stereotyped as backward, impoverished, and uneducated by outsiders who have not stepped foot in the area. More so, since the early 20th century, media portrayals and political rhetoric have misrepresented Appalachia as a region trapped in time with themes of impoverished, isolated, and in dire need of rescue from their "backward" behavior and culture. These stereotypical depictions often field national initiatives that framed Appalachians as incapable of helping themselves, so it was up to the outsiders to support, which led to the increase of outsider-led initiatives. For clarity, "Outsider-led initiatives" refer to programs or projects initiated and managed by individuals or organizations outside the Appalachian region, such as the federal government-led War on Poverty. While well-intentioned to support the region, these initiatives often intend to "fix" it rather than help it get back on its feet. Nevertheless, grassroots activism has sprouted up in Appalachia over the last century to secure local voices of the region through labor movements, authentic storytelling, and community organizations. This emphasis on storytelling as a tool for reclaiming Appalachian identity is a key aspect of grassroots activism, as it empowers local communities to shape their narratives and challenge misrepresentations. These include the Harlan County Strikes, the Highlander Folk School, and the work of Appalshop. Despite outsider-led efforts to transform the area of Appalachia, the most effective form of activism gradually rose from insider-driven efforts such as grassroots labor movements, local community organizations such as the Appalachian Volunteers, and cultural projects like Appalshop, which all have reclaimed Appalachian identity for Appalachians from misrepresentation and stereotypes to tell their stories without outside influence.

With the introduction of the War on Poverty, a federal government-led initiative aimed at reducing poverty in the United States, Appalachia was thrust into the national spotlight. The initiative brought many resources and aid to the region. However, its failure to address the deep-rooted issues within the Appalachian community is a stark reminder of the urgent need for change. One of the best examples of this would be the Appalachian Volunteers (AV). This federally funded organization, established in 1964, was a significant part of the War on Poverty. The AV, comprised mainly of white college students, was tasked with providing education and resources to the region. However, their approach was often criticized for its lack of understanding of the local culture and its condescending attitude towards the people they were trying to help. The AV, despite its good intentions, failed to connect with the local community due to its outsider-led nature and lack of cultural sensitivity. For instance, early volunteers such as Jack Weller, a Presbyterian missionary, were given a book called *Yesterday's People*, which looked down upon Appalachians and their culture: "Education is an answer, yes,' Weller wrote, 'but what can be done with families who have lived with generations of antipathy?" (Martin, *Appalachian Volunteers* 5). This quotation demonstrates the condescending mindset that, unfortunately, many volunteers were taught how to deal with the people they were supporting as backward and uneducated, with an unwillingness to learn. Indeed, many volunteers fell into this close-minded perspective. However, some have realized these limitations. Many AVs had little training in community engagement, which led them to be unequipped to deal with projects in Appalachia. For example, an early AV, Sue Ella Easterling, reflected on how unprepared she felt for college and activism, noting, "...I really did not know—I mean I was really struggling" (Martin, *Appalachian Volunteers* 3). With the AV model prioritizing technical aid over forming meaningful local relationships, volunteers often left before their presence was properly fulfilled, which impeded their long-term impact and sometimes led to feelings of marginalization and isolation from local Appalachians. Despite the meaningful relationships numerous AVs formed with Appalachian locals, the overall AV program reflected the War on Poverty's broad failure: instead of connecting with the community, it focused on technical assistance while refining power imbalances between outsiders and local Appalachians.

Contrasting outsider-led initiatives, such as the War on Poverty and its broader failure to address deep systemic issues in Appalachia, were grassroots labor movements emerging from within Appalachia. These local labor movements stem from within Appalachian communities

from the early 20th century as an authentic form of activism rather than one led from outside the region. These efforts arose organically from the working-class community of miners, factory workers, millhands, and their families rather than from out-of-touch institutions and politicians. As an example, textile worker Sam Finley in East Marion, North Carolina expertly describes the desperation behind union organizing: "...they got to where the people couldn't stand it no longer. That's when they got to hunting somebody to organize them as a union" (Martin, *New Labor Movement* 6). The following strike, driven by inhumane working conditions and mining company pressure, unfortunately ended in tragedy when sheriff deputies shot unarmed strikers, killing six and wounding many more. The following trial acquitted the sheriff's deputies of their heinous crimes due to the immense corporate influence, labor activist Vesta Finley and witness to the tragedy remarks: "We knew it was a one-sided thing. The jury was more or less picked by the people that were on the side of the industry" (Martin, *New Labor Movement* 9). Despite the long fight for labor rights, humane working conditions, and overall violence and injustice inflicted on the working class, local workers persisted in their struggles by attending education programs, organizing unions in their communities, and protesting against injustices. Even if many of these strikes failed in their objectives, they inspired future generations of workers by laying the groundwork for pioneering organizing strategies and underscoring the need for justice in Appalachia against poor working conditions. These grassroots labor movements, grounded in firsthand knowledge and painful experience of corporate exploitation and a stoic determination of resistance, exemplify the inspiring courage of the most effective and authentic activism in Appalachia that came from within the region rather than outside.

While outsider-led government initiatives and grassroots labor movements certainly played significant roles in Appalachian activism, the most transformative idea was through storytelling itself. Appalshop, founded in 1969 in Whitesburg, Kentucky, emerged from the War on Poverty initiative but rapidly morphed into a community-driven media collective that focused on authentic storytelling from Appalachians to tell their own stories. Appalshop equipped everyday average people with storytelling tools: camera, editing tools, and media platforms to share their perspectives while contrasting the "overtly negative" stereotypes misrepresented by mainstream American culture (Herdman 3). Emphasizing this point, Catherine N. Herdman highlighted Appalshop's importance in doing this: "...placing cameras, printing technology, drama, and visual art in the hands of Appalachians," which allowed them "to speak for

themselves—first to each other and eventually to the nation" (Herdman 4). The power of storytelling, as demonstrated by Appalshop, allowed Appalachians to challenge their stereotypical behaviors of being dependent, backward, and uneducated, and empowered them to tell their own stories.

Moreover, Appalshop's work extensively concentrated on Appalachia's deep systemic issues: labor exploitation, environmental destruction, and cultural erasure, through multiple forms of media such as film, radio, and theater. Perhaps one of its most iconic productions was *Harlan County, USA* (1976). This film documented a coal miners' strike through the perspective of resilience and courage rather than one of victimhood and helplessness. Rather than past portrayals of strikes being overtly hostile, this film reframed the miners as agents of change who risked their lives for justice against tyranny and oppression. Another Appalshop production, *Strangers and Kin* (1984), directly combated traditional outsider-led misrepresentation of Appalachians for many decades, questioning so-called experts who claimed to analyze the region. While Appalshop's work was to preserve Appalachian history and culture, it also reshaped it. It morphed cultural production into a form of activism that was perhaps the most effective for Appalachian activism. Herdman emphasizes Appalshop's direct role: "...countered characterizations and the stereotypes they generated and reinforced," revealing Appalachian life's complexity and resilience (Herdman 3).

To tie it in together, unlike the government-led Appalachian Volunteers or broader federal programs as part of the War on Poverty, Appalshop was not a short-term initiative. It was a long-term investment that grew from within Appalachia, evolving with it through the decades. It continues operating today, providing local Appalachians a critical voice to stand up for their culture. By supplying the necessary storytelling tools for community discussion and artistic expression, Appalshop did its part in helping to reclaim Appalachian identity based on Appalachia's terms rather than outsiders. In doing this, Appalshop proved that activism does not always have to happen through confrontation or government aid, but that sometimes the most powerful way to empower people is to give the people the right to have a voice.

To conclude, the history of Appalachian activism reveals that the most transformative, formative agents of change did not stem from the federal government in Washington, D.C., but

rather from the people of the Appalachian mountains themselves. While outsider-led initiatives such as the War on Poverty concentrated on addressing economic hardship and were well-intentioned, they often failed to comprehend the sociocultural context and needs of the communities they intended to serve. Contrasting this, grassroots labor movements and cultural projects such as Appalshop emerged from Appalachians' lived experiences, which built lasting momentum to empower Appalachian culture that continues into the present. Workers in East Marion risked everything to struggle against unjust working conditions and exploitative labor practices. At the same time, Appalshop used film, radio, and theater as forms of storytelling to reshape the entire narrative of Appalachian culture and identity. These authentic movements illustrate that Appalachian activism was more than merely resistance against injustice, but about reclamation, community, and self-representation. Even today, Appalachians face economic, sociopolitical, and environmental challenges. With this said, Appalachians' past lessons remain vital: instead of letting outsider-led efforts dictate their livelihoods, they should tell their stories and fight for their futures.

Works Cited

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