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Queer Appalachian

Seth Cardwell

Queer Appalachian—a phrase that, within itself, contains two distinct identities, each inexorably opposed to the other. Can they co-exist? What possible harmony of interest links the two? As a child of Appalachia, born and bred in the heart of her coalfields, my childhood is dotted with memories of the communities of which I was a part, of the verdant arms of nature that encroached upon the slowly disintegrating coal camp houses—much like a web that threatened to ensnare and consume location’s past. My upbringing was one that indebted me to the struggle of my progenitors: to the hardships, the isolation, the sense of being an outsider within one’s own country. The other piece of me, the one that uniquely defines my own coming-of-age story, realizes a multi-faceted affair that puts my soul forever at odds with itself. I am different. I have been and am still unlike those that are around me, and the conflict with which I must contend is one that possesses no easy answer, it pits man against himself in the understanding of his own being. To this, I ask, what place is there in this world for such a paragon as ‘Queer Appalachian?’ How is it, I wonder, that I can come to terms with two inter-mingling identities that are so opposed to one another, especially when the former—the ‘Queer’—when combined with the latter, is discredited by the very political movements with which I long to associate?

The history of Appalachia is dotted with hardship. Its culture is painted with the richness of the struggles of her people. The children of Appalachia, stigmatized by much of their fellow countrymen, are misunderstood, underrepresented, and dissociated from the concepts that are so welcomingly endowed to those few fortunate souls that possess the materials and resources to embody the myth of the American dream. The story of Appalachia weaves a tapestry of deceit, exploitation of labor, and an endless cycle of poverty that ails her people. And to whom are these blames bestowed? Certainly not to the industries and politicians that have so systemically ripped these peoples of their dignity. They are rather affixed to the inhabitants of the landscape themselves, to the people that dot the hills and valleys of her fertile grounds. It is often assumed that Appalachians are connected to the land around them, and to an extent this is true. For much of my family’s history, and many others, the coal mines of bygone eras were the breadbasket of families that sought a life amongst the bustle of the industrious coalfields. The hills and hollows which I roamed as a child are vivid to me in my mind. The struggles of my ancestors, their toils

beneath the surface of the lush landscape, the exploitation of their labor, and the diminishment of their personal identities by industrial titans are with me constantly. The culture of Appalachia is, in a way, one of resentment—and rightfully so.

The peoples that have labored here for centuries, that have endured the isolation of the mountains, that have faced strife and misfortune, are miscredited by the very agency that brought them their sense of being. The industries that breathed the breath of life into these hills are the very same ones that have distanced an entire subset of peoples from their own identities. In the face of exploited labor and a diminished sense of self-actualization, Appalachia has developed a culture that while espousing pride in her history, rejects the notion of all that is unknown and embraces the very facets of her existence that have betrayed her people. In a paradoxical claim to identity, it acknowledges the struggles faced by her people while also crediting the same industries to their nature of hard-working perseverance.

As a multi-generational child of Appalachia, my story is woven into the hollows that I called home. My roots are grounded in the identity of endurance, in the steadfastness and dedication that are required to carry on the legacy of a people whose voice has been robbed from them for a larger part of their history. We are painted as callous, backward, and unintelligible in speech. We are gawked at as buffoons and taught to harbor insecurities about the very things that tie us to our story among these hills. We are dissociated from our own sense of being. This is my story. My childhood among these hills has impassioned me to desire change, to advocate for my people who for so long have unjustifiably had their rights and privileges stripped from them. I am *not* ashamed of my Appalachian heritage. In fact, it is the piece of my identity with which I am most enamored. I am a lover of Appalachia, her people, her dialect, her hills, hollows, and streams. I feel connected and grounded to the struggle that lies here—yet there is a piece of me with which this is forever at odds.

We in Appalachia, through socialization, are taught from a young age to distrust those most unlike ourselves, to view outsiders with a sense of caution. Arguably, this is where the notion of our so-called backwardness originates, but it is a trait that is reasonably grounded in its assumptions. For centuries, we have been exploited and deceived. We have been taught through pop culture to be ashamed of our identity and to mask it from the outside world. We have been the poster child of failure and of poverty. As a result, generations of our people have spent decades concealing the realities of our identity, denying the environment in which the notions of

ourselves were conceived, internalizing phobias towards our own culture. Not anymore. I, though engrained with this sense of wariness toward outsiders, seek to advocate change and understanding of the hardships that my people have faced. But how am I to do this when the other half of my identity marks me—a *native* Appalachian—as an outsider? How am I to embrace the facet of my identity that most infatuates me when it is met with an opposing half that deems me as the ‘other’ amongst my own people?

I knew from a young age that I was different, that I did not associate with the notion of heterosexuality. I, as a gay man, a Queer Appalachian, was taught from a young age to reject both halves of my identity. To oppose the entirety of myself and what I understood it to be in this world was my prescribed destiny. Despite being equally proud and unashamed of either half, I was subconsciously filled to the brim with the narrative that the pieces that defined my own sense of being were unwelcome in this world and reserved no place among ‘refined’ society. The mental and emotional struggle of this dichotomous relationship has pitted me against myself on numerous occasions. Exacerbated by my upbringing in a Pentecostal Church, my Queer identity remained suppressed throughout my adolescent years as I grappled with the complexities of my character. I knew who I was and what I could achieve, but the two predominant pieces of my identity afforded me no place in achieving a sense of comfortability in my own home.

This immense internal strife reached a fever pitch when I became interested in politics. In thinking that I had found a place where I could embrace all facets of my identity, I was blindsided by an additional layer of prejudice as a result of the unlikely combination of my upbringing and sexual identity. Possessing a liberal mindset and valuing the furtherance of my education, I was struck by the inconsistencies among ‘progressive’ movements in which I longed to be a part. How, I was brought to ask, can the same like-minded people that proclaim to promote inclusivity and diversity, stereotype Appalachians in the same way as mainstream society? What were all of these comments flooding social media every time West Virginia was brought up in the news? Where, then, was my safe place to be found? Was my comfortability within my own skin something that needed further analyzing? As I write, a myriad of questions of the like continue to flood across the pages of my mind. I still have yet to overcome this obstacle and reconcile my thoughts.

Increasingly, I found that my Queer identity, which was initially afforded a place of comfort in progressive politics, was oftentimes omitted when found to be in co-existence with

my Appalachian identity. I cannot understand why progressive movements have sought to shut out the same identities that they proclaim as striving to reach with their message. How are Queer youth in Appalachia expected to combat this obstacle? We are constantly in an uphill struggle for advocacy in our hometowns. We are alienated from both our national and regional identity. The former due to the stereotyping of our culture, and the latter due to the close mindedness that plagues the roots of our people. While I proudly display my Appalachian upbringing, it is forever at odds with my Queer identity. It is arguable, and I stand in firm defense of this, that one cannot truly claim to love something unless they can also acknowledge the flaws that are inherent in its being. This is how I feel about my Appalachian heritage. I am proud of my upbringing and display the traits that I most admire, but I weep for the close mindedness with which my fellow Appalachians view the world. The lenses that we have developed are undeniably flawed, and it is this that I have struggled to come to terms with in recognizing my whole being.

When us, as Queer Appalachians crave a break in the isolation and flaws of our own culture, we are once again rejected by the movements that attempt to postulate the ‘difficulties’ in understanding how to reach us. When we are vocal, we are criticized. In our Appalachian identity, we are shamed for our sexual identity and often condemned to the far recesses of society. In our Queer identity, we are discredited for our upbringing, deemed uneducated, and patronized for our dialect. We are minimized, as both Appalachians and as Queer folk. Our cries for help go unnoticed. The distinctness of our culture is irreconcilable with the nature of our being. The cycle of condemnation repeats itself. Just as generational poverty and exploitation have plagued our Appalachian identity, so too our Queer identity is plagued by society’s rejection—either alone or in concert with our Appalachian heritage.

Can we then, be blamed for our hesitance to be vocal? Must we, as Queer Appalachians, disown some part of our own identity in order to be heard? Must we go on shunning ourselves? How can I embrace my identity in a culture that has decided to reject what it does not understand?

Where do we go from here? Curiosity is a distinctly human trait, and it is what drives us toward knowledge and discovery. Yet, something as simple as accepting one’s identity becomes lost in the complexities of institutional prejudice. I cannot understand how I am supposed to embrace the part of my Queer identity that desires to break societal molds and advocate for change for the places and people that I love when my own people often reject me. I cannot

reconcile how to advocate for my Queer identity without losing the piece of my identity that is connected to my upbringing, the piece that tells me to reject all that is different and to embrace only what is known. This, in all of its paradoxical beauty, is the struggle of the Queer Appalachian.