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A History of Resilience is a History of Resistance

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History of Resilience is a History of Resistance

by **Melissa Ooten**

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As an historian, I'm struck by the emphasis this documentary places on non-humans—be it animals, plants, soil, or mountains—although as a native of Appalachia, that doesn't surprise me. The film is billed as "America's first environmental history series" and as such, it gives us a bold, unique template of how to talk holistically about the concept of place and the specific place of Appalachia. While it may be particularly prescient to talk about the broader concept of place through ecology

and other facets when analyzing the history of Appalachia, surely it is no less important when talking about almost any region of the globe, given that even cityscapes have a history of wilderness alongside native inhabitants and the complexities of how growth affected both the natural and human environments of that place (such as *Nature's Metropolis*, William Cronon's study of Chicago.)

Two themes in particular stand out. First is the concept of boundaries and borders surrounding Appalachia. "Who is Appalachian?" and "where is Appalachia?" can be contentious questions wrapped up in long-held views of often negative stereotypes of the region's people. Having spent the first two decades of my life in East Tennessee, I grew up telling people that I was from Southern Appalachia (rather than Tennessee), and only later did I realize how much imposed state boundaries can fracture our thinking around a sense of place. Yet others from regions that I—and most—would consider Appalachia are often quick to point out how eastern Ohio or perhaps the city of Roanoke, Virginia, lie outside the bounds of the region and how they, in turn, could not possibly be from Appalachia. These questions of place and why and how we identify with the region—or why and how we don't—are significant, and we see these points illustrated throughout the course of the documentary.

As various interviewers point out, surveyors imposed "simple order" on Appalachia by drawing imaginary, arbitrary lines of demarcation where none existed. Thus, we have to think about why we have no state of Appalachia (whose state flag, Barbara Kingsolver suggests, might bear a salamander) and how Appalachia's history—both its people and its mountains—may have been differently situated had the Southern Appalachians constituted a state rather than being bifurcated into several different states, each of which often thought of (and sometimes still thinks of) that section of the state as its outcast or castoff region (with the exception of West Virginia, which lies entirely within Southern Appalachia). We only need to look at how little Southwest Virginia

factors into the politics of Virginia and the paltry resources it receives, even taking into account population differences, than other areas of the state to see this intrastate polarization at work. Or East Tennessee, the site of the one of the nation's first abolitionist newspapers, which tried—unsuccessfully—to secede from the rest of Tennessee in order to remain Union during the Civil War. The film points out that Appalachia often served as a “resource colony,” which sacrificed the land and people of Appalachia for the good of those elsewhere, especially in cities, but even individual states exploited the section of Appalachia within its own borders in large part for the betterment of state residents who lived outside of Appalachia. These boundaries and borders are necessarily tied to the land, and we see how white settlers, with their ideas of land ownership, disrupted the Cherokee's ideology in which the concept of owning a resource as great as the land made no sense. We later see how politicians and land speculators created another exploitative situation by buying millions of acres of lands that they had every intention of exploiting to the maximum commercial profit.

Second, the continuous thread of resistance is woven throughout, although I do wish that more time had been spent on some of the complexities of several briefly mentioned issues (Harrah's Casino, which was bitterly debated within the Eastern Band of the Cherokee as was the later vote that allowed alcohol sales at the casino, is but one case in point). From the Cherokees who stayed during the massive removal ordered by Andrew Jackson in the late 1830s to present-day grassroots activists, organizing to resist hegemonic power is a continual theme of Appalachian history. Today, with three-quarters of the land held by outside entities, Appalachians still organize to protest and resist mountaintop removal, forest clear cuts, and recently, the Massey coal plant in West Virginia and the Dominion Power coal plant construction site in Wise County, Virginia. The film rightfully reports the names of the lost mountains, again emphasizing how the land and every living substance that the land supports is as much a part of Appalachia as its people.

I do wish more subtle issues of race and class had been made overt. With a few exceptions, African Americans and others, including those of mixed race heritages (the Melungeons, for example) are given short notice here. Class issues get more screen time, particularly with the contradiction of railroad baron George Vanderbilt's 200+room castle, Biltmore, in Asheville, NC, which sat in stark contrast to the one-room cabins of the region's inhabitants (and it still sits in stark contrast to surrounding homes). Overall, this documentary does not seem to want to delve deeply into issues that split Appalachians themselves.

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It successfully incorporates the history of Cherokee people juxtaposed against white settlers, but it otherwise falls short in digging into issues that deeply divide Appalachians. (Even coal mines, after all, have their Appalachian defenders.) I'm also astounded at the virtual absence of religion. Music is mentioned only in brief, yet few could miss the beautiful soundtrack that accompanies the footage throughout. But in a region where religion historically and currently holds such significance, it seemed to be a glaring omission, even if the production's focus is primarily an environmental one.

The film appropriately begins and ends with Cherokee people as the first humans to inhabit this land and as a still vibrant community in Appalachia. Again, I wish the film would have pushed the envelope more with its ending. By focusing on the possible revival of the Chestnut tree, it highlights hope for the future through Appalachian resilience (a theme throughout), but it seems to me that a more appropriate and necessary conclusion would have gone back to the theme of resistance. Drawing upon centuries of protest by Cherokee people, coal miners, poor people demanding better living conditions, and present day grassroots activists working for economic and environmental justice, it is perhaps only this long-held activist tradition of protest that can preserve the Appalachian environment and what its inhabitants hold so dear for future generations.

Doug Reichart Powell responds: You rightly note that “organizing to resist hegemonic power is a continual theme of Appalachian history,” and I think it's good to see *that* history getting a better airing. However, I think we should bear in mind that it is a, not the, continual theme. The progressive narrative of Appalachian history is certainly well-grounded in historical events, but it doesn't seem to get much purchase in a region that was home to so many of the small number of counties that voted for McCain over Obama by a wider margin than they voted for Bush 43 over Kerry. (It plays a lot better, in my experience, with liberal professionals—the kind likely to be PBS contributors, likely to DVR a natural history documentary—than it does with the home folks.) With the cultural counter-history built into the documentary's natural history, a viewer might come to think political innovation “grows” in Appalachia, the sociopolitical equivalent of the region's biodiversity. But there sure aren't very many local political scenes that bear out such an impression. “Even coal mines,” you write, “have their Appalachian defenders.” I wonder if that should read “*especially* coal mines”?

Anna Creadick responds: I agree with your comments on many counts. Your observation that ecology is “surely ... no less important when talking about almost any region of the globe” is an example of exceptionalism that raised questions for me, too. I also agree that the film's focus on resistance and resilience is a strength. But I especially appreciate your observation that the documentary “does not seem to want to delve deeply into issues that split Appalachians themselves.” As you say, “even coal mines ... have their Ap-

palachian defenders” (and employees, if dwindling in number). Even in their relationships to the land/environment, Appalachian people have deep and abiding differences. As only one small example, my mother is in a constant state of combat with her neighbors and/or local officials over such matters as billboards, heavy equipment companies, or high-rise condos violating what she (but by no means everyone) sees as precious scenic mountain vistas. What do we lose when we gloss over these divisions? Watching the horrific aerial footage of mountaintop removals, I found myself pondering who, exactly, drives those colossal dozers, who owns, who owes, who profits from this practice? More than a few are mountaineers themselves.

I like your point about the “virtual absence” of religion. This is especially confusing when religion is a force which can establish people’s environmental frames of reference. It’s a matter of ethics, after all. I, for example, was raised a tree-squeezing transcendentalist. Reagan’s Secretary of the Interior James G. Watt, on the other hand, didn’t find environmental protection such a pressing issue since the End Times were nigh.

Geoff Buckley responds: This piece really makes me think of the place I call home now. In so many ways, southeastern Ohio is betwixt and between—a peripheral part of Appalachia but a “rural backwater” and “energy sacrifice zone” in the eyes of lawmakers in Columbus.

...the interdependence of land and culture emerges as one of the film’s take-away lessons.