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Commodifying My Culture: An “Appalachian” Reflects on Her Role in Sustaining a Limited Discourse of Appalachia

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Amanda Fickey

Commodifying My Culture:

An "Appalachian" Reflects on Her Role in Sustaining a Limited Discourse of Appalachia

I grew up a coalminer's daughter, eating leftover Little Debbie cakes from my father's lunch pail. I remember feeling a strong sense of security in Eastern Kentucky, surrounded by majestic mountains which kept me safe. I also remember growing up with a sense of civic duty, participating in 4-H, Save the Children, JROTC, and the East Kentucky Leadership Network. I did not grow up feeling different, impoverished or insignificant nor did I grow up thinking that I was part of an American sub-culture, as so many scholars have labeled my home. In fact, I had no idea that this discursive construction of Appalachia existed.

I grew up with a desire to help others, with an appreciation for the past and how it could help me understand possibilities for the future. I grew up knowing that the world was open to me and that I was not restricted or isolated by the mountains surrounding me. Like most youth of Eastern Kentucky, afraid to leave my family and friends and at the same time afraid not to, I left the mountains and headed to Lexington. However, at the University of Kentucky I learned that others saw me differently. I began to recognize the distinction my fellow students made between individuals from Eastern Kentucky and those from other portions of the state. My accent, for example, was a primary distinction that was often pointed out. Of course, I quickly learned that the discourse that existed

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about Appalachia, that the region was different, impoverished and even backwards, was associated with my accent. This cultural characteristic that I had brought with me somehow attached these negative stereotypes to me as an individual, although these views of my home had never been my own.

Thus, I found a need to create pride within myself and a need to perpetuate an appreciation for Appalachian culture. At Western Kentucky University, where I completed my Master's degree I learned the trades of the Folklorist, Oral Historian, and Historic Preservationist and added these to my History toolkit that I had started at the University of Kentucky. Surely I could do no wrong with so much training, at least it seemed that way to me. However, what I failed to understand as a student at Western was how my work in these disciplines had the potential to contribute to this stereotypical and negative discourse of Appalachia, a discourse that represents the region as traditional, impoverished and isolated, geographically and culturally apart.

Out into the field I went, eager to make a difference. I worked extensively throughout the region of Eastern Kentucky as an arts and culture outreach coordinator. I worked with arts organizations and institutions, I visited each settlement school, I planned and facilitated art fairs, I completed National Register of Historic Places nominations, and I conducted oral history interviews. The work I produced through these projects assisted in perpetuating the discourse and cultural identity of Appalachia. When conducting workshops for arts organizations, I would train local artists in entrepreneurial methods, such as how to sell their handmade crafts inside and outside of the region. When I completed National Register nominations, my research was used to encourage outsiders to visit these historic places because they had been preserved. Within these spaces, individuals could view older architecture, typical of Appalachia and more specifically of Eastern Kentucky. I was essentially promoting and facilitating the consumption of my own culture.

While in the field, I stopped one day to visit a small county fair held at a local technology center. The fair was being held by the county's UK extension office. It was here that I had an important epiphany. At this fair I saw a sketch of Riza Hawkeye. At that moment, I stopped and I asked myself, *what am I preserving and for whom am I engaging in these practices?* For those of you who don't know, Riza Hawkeye is an anime character from *Fullmetal Alchemist*. Anime, by the way, simply refers to Japanese Animation. The picture was drawn by Morgan, a young girl from Eastern Kentucky. The picture was dead on, a great rendition of Riza, but it had not received a ribbon... I stood and awkwardly stared at the picture, asking myself if it was appropriate to draw anime in Appalachia. After a while, I asked the county 4-H Agent to give Morgan my business card and ask Morgan to send me her picture. Fortunately, Morgan was willing to send me this picture, which now holds a special place on the wall in my apartment.

Dulcimers, quilts, baskets... all products that are marketed and portrayed as traditional and all items which would sell well in Berea or at various art fairs throughout the state and beyond. I could continue to preserve and promote only these "traditional" or "authentic" crafts, but what about this anime drawing? In my efforts to preserve and protect what I had considered traditional or authentic Appalachian art forms, I was rendering work like Morgan's picture invisible. It is quite significant that Morgan enjoys Japanese Animation and she too is representative of Appalachia. I had been perpetuating a discourse of Appalachia, particularly Eastern Kentucky that presented this culture as

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frozen and crystallized in time. Within this discourse the networks and flows that would have allowed Morgan to be aware of Japanese Animation were hidden. I was continuing the work of so many interventionists in the region before me of preserving particular aspects of a culture which could easily be accommodated into the craft industry of the region, but what was I doing for/to Morgan? This of course led me to ask myself, why was I not celebrating crafters who make new and original artwork along with crafters who use traditional methods and patterns? Rather than perpetuating ideas of traditionalism and perhaps even fatalism in my work, I realized that I must strive to recognize this diversity of Appalachian culture which I had until this point excluded.

I find myself once again in Lexington, once again a student at the University of Kentucky, this time adding a Doctoral degree in Geography to my toolkit. I have been drawn to the field of Economic Geography, because I am interested in addressing questions of consumption and production practices within Kentucky's craft industry, and looking more broadly at questions of economic development in rural regions. I am now committed to deconstructing the discourse of Appalachia, examining the ways in which the region's economy has always been connected to the broader economy, thus breaking down the notion of isolationism that has plagued this region. I no longer romanticize "traditional" or "authentic" forms of small-scale craft production; rather I examine small-scale and large-scale forms of production with an equal amount of vigor. Nor do I engage in preservation projects which may benefit only local elites. I am now fully aware and cognizant of the forms of creative destruction that preservation projects may create.

I suppose the lesson to be learned from this cautionary tale, for me anyway, is that I must always be committed to reflecting on each theory I employ, each article I write, and each interview I conduct... I will always be reflecting on how I might be commodifying my own culture for consumption and the role I play in sustaining the discourse on Appalachia.

Amanda Fickey is currently a Ph.D. student in the Department of Geography at the University of Kentucky. Her research interests include economic geography, political economy, alternative economic spaces, diverse economies and regional economic development policy. Amanda's dissertation research examines conventional economic development practices and alternative economic strategies within Eastern Kentucky's handicraft industry.

Celebrity Culture and the Rise of the Ordinary: Interview with Dr. Joshua Gamson

Conducted by David Hoopes and Drew Heverin
7 March 2009

dC: Dr. Gamson, we've been beginning each interview in this series with a question based on the title of our journal, *Consuming Culture*. This short phrase is relatively ambiguous; it refers both to cultures that consume and to the consumption of culture. From your standpoint as a sociologist and specialist in media studies, how do you interpret our theme?

JG: When I hear that term, I think of cultures in which consuming is central to social experience, where shopping, buying and getting commodities is central to social existence, where consumption is part of how people make their identities, part of how people connect with one another. It's where people mark their individual identities and collective identities with products.

dC: Do you think that this is characteristic of all contemporary cultures?

JG: Well, I focus on American culture, so that is certainly my frame of reference. I suppose that's also my shortcoming. But I think of market-based cultures, capitalist societies where advertising and marketing are dominant and become the model for a lot of other parts of one's experience.

Joshua Gamson is Professor of Sociology at the University of San Francisco, and author of the books Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America, Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity, the Stonewall Book, the Award-winning The Fabulous Sylvester and numerous scholarly and non-scholarly articles. In 2009, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship. He lives in Oakland with his husband and their two daughters.