

Why Hillbillies Matter in Social Studies: *Hillbilly Elegy* and Why WE Must Respond

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In 2016, J. D. Vance, a previously unknown author, surprisingly hit the bestseller's list with his memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. However, historically scholars have pushed back against the stereotypes that Vance portrays and have argued for a narrative that embraces the diversity of the Appalachian region. Using content analysis, this research study investigated the frequency and context of key terms related to Appalachia across the K-12 social studies standards of states labeled as being part of the region by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). Results illustrate the lack of inclusion of these terms and that, when included, they do not represent the rich history or culture of the region. These results suggest that researchers, teacher educators, and teachers should consider the ways in which standards define curriculum on topics such as Appalachia and how these definitions interact with the powerful narratives being portrayed within our mainstream democracy. Guidance and suggestions for disrupting Appalachian stereotypes within social studies education are provided.

Keywords: Appalachia, *Hillbilly Elegy*, social studies

Appalachia is not the 'other America' that the national stereotypes would have us believe; instead, it may be more of a bellwether of the challenges facing our larger society. . . Popular stereotypes have tended to blame the land or the culture of Appalachia for regional disparities, but the real uneven ground of Appalachia has been the consequence of structural inequalities based on class, race, and gender, and on political corruption, land abuse, and greed.

—Ronald D. Eller, *Uneven ground: Appalachia since 1945*

In 2016, J. D. Vance surprisingly hit the bestseller list with his memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. Since then, policymakers have used Vance's memoir to support conservative fiscal policy, and media outlets have used it as an explanation for the election of President Donald Trump. As Vance became an unwanted spokesperson for the region, historian Elizabeth Catte reminds us that "the story of Appalachia cannot be separated from the story of

the United States and the historical forces that have shaped us" (McEvers, 2018, para. 5).

Even with its popularity, *Hillbilly Elegy* has been met with sharp critiques, particularly by Appalachian sociologists, historians, artists, activists, and citizens. Historian T. R. C. Hutton (2019) explained that Vance's book wasn't written for the average Appalachian,

but rather [for] a middle- and upper-class readership more than happy to learn that white American poverty has nothing to do with them or with any structural problems in American economy and society and everything to do with poor white folks' inherent vices (p. 23).

Historically, scholars have chronicled the diversity of the Appalachian region, pushing back against the stereotype of the white, blue collar, dysfunctional hillbilly that Vance portrays (Catte, 2018; Eller, 1982, 2008; Harkins, 2004; McCarroll, 2018). Still, the popularity of Vance's book reminds

us that the “hillbilly” is an easy scapegoat to the problems of our democracy and nation and a distraction from the structural problems of poverty.

Thus, there is a need for a more critical reflection and democratic discourse regarding the current state of our nation and the othering of Appalachia. Although social studies education has taken on many of the structural barriers that oppress our citizenry (i.e., race, gender, sexuality), there has yet to be a full examination of the ways in which class and, in particular, the intersections of whiteness and poverty contribute to an ever-polarizing America. In this article, I argue for the inclusion of the voices of hillbillies into the conversation of social studies curriculum and pedagogy while asking other teacher educators to join me as I speak truth to power and address the myth of Appalachian Trump country. Results suggest that these myths, narratives, and stories of Appalachia are likely linked to the direct exclusion of the hillbilly voice from our social studies standards and curriculum. For social studies teachers and teacher educators to respond directly to these national dialogues, I argue that there must be ways to bridge the gap between the work of Appalachian scholars and our social studies curriculum. I provide guidance on what such pedagogy might look like.

The Historic Othering of Appalachia

Come and listen to my story about a man
named Jed

A poor mountaineer, barely kept his family fed.

—Paul Henning, *The Ballad of Jed Clampett*

The historical colonization and othering of the Appalachian region and its people has been well documented by historians and sociologists (Eller, 1982; Lewis et al., 1978; Shapiro, 1978). In their 1978 groundbreaking work, *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case*, Lewis, Johnson, and Askins chronicle the history of exploitation of the economies, land, and minerals from the Appalachian region. They argue that the exploitation is a form of inner colonialism happening within the United States to a region of people who were seen as inferior. Furthermore, Shapiro (1978) asserted that there was (and ostensibly still is) a myth of Appalachia othering created by

missionaries, progressive reformers, and others who drew their own conclusions about what they witnessed in the region against their own narratives of America and progress. Stimulated by local color literature¹, progressives and missionaries used these narratives to justify their “uplift” of those living in the mountains, all of which provided fodder for the “discovery” of Appalachia during the 1960s and the War on Poverty.

However, since the 1970s, historians and sociologists have worked diligently to change this narrative of Appalachian othering. In his groundbreaking work *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880–1930*, Eller (1982) chronicled the progression of the lumber and coal industries into Appalachia. Countering the narrative that inhabitants of the region before 1880 were merely hillbillies frozen in time, Eller argued that mountaineers were involved in lively trade. He explained that as the region shifted toward industry, mountaineers became agents not only of their own employment with lumber companies or coal operators but also were active participants in union formation and union strikes against these same corporations. Other scholars noted the long history of resistance and labor strikes within the region (Banks, 1999; Billings et al., 1999; Gaventa, 1982; Maggard 1999; Stewart, 2018). Appalachian scholars have also long explored the breadth and diversity of the region, examining the lives of African Americans, Native Americans, the LGBTQA+ community, and the strong tradition of activism within the region (Carney, 2005; Catte, 2018; Cook, 2000; Hubbs, 2014; Inscocoe, 2001; Lewis, 1987; Rice & Tedesco, 2015).

However, the recent attention to Appalachia brought about through the election of Donald Trump and the popularity of *Hillbilly Elegy* has once again mainstreamed ideas of Appalachian otherness. As sociologist Dwight Billings (2019) suggests, without reflection and critical attention to these issues, “Appalachia became what I [Billings] call ‘Trumpalachia,’ a media-constructed mythological realm, backward and homogenous” (p. 51). Thus, the essentialism and universalism expressed in *Hillbilly Elegy* “promotes toxic politics that will only further oppress the hillbillies that J. D. Vance

professes to love and speak for” (Billings, 2019, p. 55). Furthermore, the silencing of diverse Appalachian voices, experiences, and histories has severe consequences to our broader understandings of “Trumpalachia.” As Catte (2018) noted,

If it is appropriate to label a small but visible subgroup as unambiguously representative of 25 million people inhabiting a geographic region spanning over 700,000 square miles, then we should ask a number of questions. Where were the “Bernie Country” pieces about Appalachia? There are more people in Appalachia who would identify as African American than Scots-Irish, so where were the essays that dove into the complex negotiations of Appalachian-ness and blackness through the lens of the election? I associate contemporary eastern Kentucky with grassroots prison abolition, so where were the essays about how a presumed Trump victory would imperil that work? West Virginia has the highest concentration of transgender teenagers in the country, so why didn’t anyone examine this facet of “Trump Country” and how the election might reverberate in their lives? In April, filmmakers in West Virginia hosted the fourth Appalachian Queer Film Festival. How did that play out at the close of Trump’s first one hundred days in office? (p. 52)

Dialogues such as these are missing from our analysis of the 2016 election, our understandings of poverty and rural America, and most importantly from our understandings about the effects that such silencing has on our social studies teachers and students. For us to fully embrace democratic discourse within the social studies, then there must be critical reflection and dialogue about these silences and myths. And yet, these mountaineers and their histories are seemingly removed from our social studies curriculum and perhaps more importantly, our research. As a former social studies teacher, current teacher educator, and proud Appalachian hillbilly, I asked, in what ways are hillbillies represented in social studies standards for states that are labeled “Appalachian”?

Conceptual Framework

The Academy is not tuned in to rural America, and it is time we start talking about it.

—Dr. Adam Jordan & Dr. Todd Hawley,
Including “All Y’all”

This study borrows the ideas and the frameworks of boundary theory as represented in Wray’s 2006 work *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness*. Wray details the history of the term “white trash,” which he uses to liberally encompass any and all words that identify poor whites into a social group. Wray’s book chronicles the historical development and usage of terms such as “poor white trash” that trace their roots to colonial America. Wray details the term’s expansion into the South during Reconstruction and explains how the term became a part of the national dialogue through the political arguments of the late 19th century and early 20th century concerning eugenics and eradicating hookworm disease. By tracing this lineage, Wray argues that what was once a social difference along the boundary lines of class and race became a way to use social domination and power through political and legal structures (i.e., reform movements, laws, medical personnel, and politicians labeling poor whites as lazy, dirty, or feebleminded). Using boundary theory and historical inquiry, Wray connects historical events to the boundaries of class and whiteness in order to illuminate the lines of social power, domination, and inequality.

Wray’s historical and theoretical framework connects directly to the history of othering within the Appalachian region. Hillbillies as aforementioned have long been seen not only at these boundary lines of whiteness and class but also have been used as an “other” group in order to further political and national dialogues surrounding the nation’s ills (i.e., War on Poverty and Trumpalachia). Furthermore, hillbillies are often seen as the monolithic identity of the Appalachian region. Such othering allows political and national dialogues to look past the ways in which social capital has been used against those living in the region in order to further exploit its people, economics, and resources. From timber and coal extraction to the directed efforts to purposefully spread opioids into

the region, the region faces numerous structural barriers that directly affect its diverse peoples (Macy, 2018). Catte (2018) notes:

The average Appalachian is not, then, a white, hypermasculine coal miner facing the inevitable loss of economic strength and social status, but the average Appalachian's worldview may be impacted by individuals with cultural capital who are constantly assuming we are all made in that image (p. 14).

Using this framework of boundary theory, Appalachian otherness, and historical inquiry allowed me to examine the ways in which the social differences marked by the term hillbilly are ignored by the social domination and inequality represented within the social studies standards of Appalachian states.

Method

It doesn't come from nowhere. And it doesn't come from individual genius, which I think is overrated. It comes out of the language.

—Wendell Berry, as cited in Petursich, *Going Home with Wendell Berry*

In this content analysis (Krippendorf, 2013), I analyzed the state standards from the 13 U.S. states identified as being part of the Appalachian region by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). I aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What is the frequency of common terms associated with Appalachia in the social studies standards of ARC defined states?
2. What is the context of the terms as they are used within the social studies standards of ARC defined states?

Using content analysis allowed me to focus on both the frequency of the terms within the standards but also to make “inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorf, 2013, p. 24). I focused my analysis on the 13 states that were specifically outlined as being part of the Appalachian Region from the Appalachian Regional Commission. According to the ARC,

The Appalachian Region, as defined in ARC's authorizing legislation, is a 205,000-square-mile region that follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi. It includes all of West Virginia and parts of 12 other states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Forty-two percent of the Region's population is rural, compared with 20 percent of the national population. (para. 1)

The ARC notes that the Appalachian Region is diverse both geographically and economically. They explain that within Appalachia, “some communities have successfully diversified their economies, while others still require basic infrastructure such as roads and water and sewer systems” (ARC, para. 3). Of the 420 counties within the Appalachian Region, 80 rank as being the most economically depressed and rank within the worst 10 percent of the nation's counties.

Because each of the 13 states had varying definitions for what subjects were included in the social studies, I relied upon each state's designation when standards were retrieved from the state's Department of Education's websites. After examining the literature in Appalachian history and Appalachian studies, I formed a list of ten *a priori* codes related to the history, geography, government, and economics of the region. Table 1 outlines each of the *a priori* codes and the term's connection to Appalachian scholarship.

Using each *a priori* code as a unit of analysis, I then searched for each term within each set of state standards. For each state, I recorded not only the frequency of the use of the term but also the context of each term. For the context, I noted the grade level and content subject in which the term was used as well as a description of how the term was included within the standard.

Table 1*A Priori codes Used as Unit of Analysis*

Term	Connection to Appalachian Scholarship
Appalachia/n	Name for the geographic region that stretches between Mississippi to New York (ARC). Other scholars have noted that the use of Appalachian refers to a culture (Catte, 2018; Eller, 1982, 2008).
Coal	The history, economy, and diversity of coal mining within the Appalachian region has been well documented by Appalachian scholars, economists, and historians (Cook, 2000; Eller, 1982; Lewis, 1987; Scott, 2010; Shifflett, 1995).
Feud	The stereotype of family feuds continues to persist within the Appalachian region (e.g., Hatfields and McCoys), but scholars have examined the history of feuding in the region (Blee & Billings, 1999; Hutton, 2013; Stewart, 2018; Waller, 1988).
Hillbilly	The most well-known stereotype of the Appalachian region. The term's history and its proliferation across literacy, media, and social norms has long been studied by Appalachian scholars (Ballard, 1999; Gaventa, 1982, 2019; Harkins, 2008).
Mining	Appalachian scholars have focused heavily on the economic, geographic, and historical impacts of mining within the region (Billings & Blee, 2000; Eller, 1982; Scott, 2010; Williams, 2002).
Mountaineer	A term used commonly in West Virginia, but also regionally to describe a person from the Appalachian region. Was part of the state motto for West Virginia as it broke with Virginia to stay with the Union during the civil war (Eisenberg, 2020). Used both in stereotypes and as a description of resilience (Eller, 1982; Shapiro, 1978; Wilson, 1999).
Poverty	An economic marker of the region as outlined currently by the ARC and the lists of economically distressed counties. A marker of the region historically by national legislation such as the "War on Poverty" (Billings & Blee, 2000; Kiffmeyer, 2008).
Rural	42% of the region's population is rural according to the ARC and it is an underlying theme of the discussion around the region's identity (Straw & Blethen, 2004; Williams, 2002).
Scots-Irish	There is a documented history of the ways in which people of Scots-Irish descent moved into the region in the late 18th century as well as challenges against this narrative (Lewis, 1987; Dunaway, 1996; Williams, 2002).
Strike	Scholars have long documented the ways in which Appalachians have resisted and used collective bargaining tactics in their activism (Banks, 1999; Gaventa, 1982; Maggard, 1999; Stewart et al., 2018).

I organized the data by tallying the frequency of each term across all 13 states' social studies standards. Then I analyzed the descriptions of the context for each term by looking for underlying patterns and themes across the 13 states. I frequently disassembled and reassembled the data in order to code by terms, context patterns, state, and grade levels (Yin, 2011).

Limitations and Reflexivity

I recognize the limitations within this study that influence the generalizations that can be extrapolated from these results. I recognize that although standards serve as the first reference point for many teachers, numerous individual teachers use these as the minimum requirements of what should be taught and are able to create dynamic and powerful social studies curriculum for their students that stretch beyond the standards. Furthermore, I acknowledge the inherent limitation in examining only the standards of the 13 states described as the Appalachian Region by the ARC and by my choices in *a priori* codes. I note that other researchers could have made different methodological decisions that could shape their findings differently.

The decisions I made were inherently linked to my beliefs as a researcher but were also influenced by my personal life. I not only grew up within the Appalachian Region but can also trace hundreds of years of my ancestry to the area. I strongly identify as being Appalachian and am proud of my heritage. In my personal and scholarly work, I have committed to studying Appalachian history and sociology and am deeply dedicated to the goal of changing the narrative surrounding Appalachia. However, I also believe that my personal connection and devotion to these goals, and to Appalachia, situate me in the place of the insider and allow me to communicate to the ivory towers what I hear at home in the hollers.

Results

Where I come from the mountain flowers grow wild
 The blue grass sways like it's goin out of style
 God fearin' people simple and real
 'Cause up on the ridge folks that's the deal
 Well my daddy worked down in the dark coal mine
 Shovelin' that coal one shovel at a time
 Never made a lot money din't have much
 But we're high on life and rich in love

—Loretta Lynn, *High on a Mountaintop*

Lack of Appalachian Words

Across the 13 states, the specific terms were found with varying frequencies. The context in which those terms occurred is important, but that will be discussed at a later point in the paper. The term Appalachia was only used in one instance by Maryland to refer to the Appalachian region. Aside from that specific instance, the term Appalachia was absent from the standards. However, the term Appalachian was used 15 times by seven different states. Coal was used by six different states and mentioned 16 different times. The words feud and hillbilly were absent from every state's standards. Mining was mentioned 20 different times by eight different states, and interestingly, poverty was mentioned 19 times by nine different states. Rural was the most used term, appearing 35 different times and found in 12 states' standards. Scots-Irish appeared only two times and was only used by two states, North Carolina and Virginia. Lastly, the term strike was used eight different times by five separate states.

The Stories That Are Told

Throughout all of the state standards, there are numerous stories that are being told about the importance of the history, geography, politics, and economics of the Appalachian region. Overall, I found that the stories or ideas that are presented in the standards do not align with the current research on the region as a whole. Some of the words that most strongly align to the national dialogue of the Appalachian region, Appalachia, rural, and poverty,

Table 2
Frequency Count of Appalachian Related Terms

Term	Frequency in which each term is used	Number of states that used the term	Names of the states that used the term
Appalachia/ Appalachian	1 Appalachia 15 Appalachian	7	Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Tennessee, Virginia
Coal	16	6	Alabama, Maryland, New York, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia
Feud	0	0	N/A
Hillbilly	0	0	N/A
Mining	20	8	Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, Tennessee, West Virginia
Poverty	19	9	Alabama, Georgia, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, South Carolina, Tennessee, West Virginia
Rural	35	12	Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia
Scots-Irish	2	2	North Carolina, Virginia
Strike	8	5	Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, West Virginia

are not presented in the standards as being connected to the rich history and culture of the Appalachian region. Although this might be helpful in terms of not presenting overarching stereotypes about the poor rural Appalachian family, it does nothing to create a social studies curriculum that explains the rich history, activism, and complex geography and economics of the region.

When examining the standards for the term Appalachia or Appalachian, it appears as though there are numerous examples as I found the term a total of 16 times throughout the states. However, when questioning the context of how the term was being used, it became clear that it was being used

as a geographic marker. Twelve of the 16 mentions are in the context of just the Appalachian Mountain Range, two were in the context of the Appalachian Plateau, and one was as a regional descriptor. Further, when exploring what students would be asked to do with reference to these geographic markers, they were mostly being required to locate them as a physical feature. For example, in the third grade standards for Tennessee, students are asked to “identify major physical features on a map,” and under “mountains,” it lists “Appalachian” as a range to identify (p. 3 standard 3-22). In Georgia’s high school world geography standards, students are asked to consider how physical features shape settlement patterns. Standard SSWG1a reads,

Identify and describe climates and locations of major physical features of North America. Explain how these physical characteristics impact settlement patterns including, but not limited to, the Mississippi River System, the Appalachian and Rocky Mountains, and the Canadian Shield (p. 136).

Moreover, only six of the 13 states include the word Appalachia/n even though all of the states contain at least part of the Appalachian Mountains within their borders. There is no dissection or mention of what constitutes the Appalachian Region or why it would be important for these particular states to discuss the federal definition of the Appalachian Region given by the Appalachian Regional Commission.

Rural was the most cited word throughout all of the standards. It was also the most heavily used across the states as only Pennsylvania's standards did not have the term included. However, the term was most often used as a contrasting binary to urban regions or places. Of the 36 mentions, 25 were in the context of students either examining or understanding rural versus urban. Students were mostly asked to investigate the differences, growth, and migration from rural areas to urban areas in the context of industrialization. The following examples in Table 3 highlight some of the ways students were asked to examine settlement patterns or migration from rural to urban areas throughout the various states' standards.

Table 3

Context Examples of the Use of the Term Rural

State	Grade Level/Course	Standard
Alabama	7th Grade Geography	Classify spatial patterns of settlement in different regions of the world, including types and sizes of settlement patterns. Examples: types—linear, clustered, grid sizes—large urban, small urban, and rural areas (p. 45).
Maryland	3rd Grade Geography	Describe population distribution of places and regions such as rural and urban (p. 4).
Mississippi	High School World History	Investigate the mass movement of rural-to-urban migration as a result of industrialization (p. 62).
South Carolina	3rd Grade South Carolina Studies	Explain the causes and impact of emigration from South Carolina and internal migration from rural areas to the cities, including discrimination and unemployment; poor sanitation and transportation services; and the lack of electricity and other modern conveniences in rural locations (p. 27).

There are a few instances where the standards ask for students to examine life in rural areas, and Georgia, South Carolina, and Virginia all include historical references to the Tennessee Valley Authority and rural electrification in standards about the New Deal. Kentucky is the only state that asks students to dive deep into what rural and urban mean in a larger societal context. In Kentucky's high school geography standards, it reads, "evaluate reasons for stereotypes (e.g., all cities are dangerous and dirty; rural areas are poor)" (p. 699). Allowing space for students to consider the definitions, stereotypes, and meanings of rural and urban is a high-level task that should be present in all of the standards.

Poverty is a term that is most heavily associated with the Appalachian region in public and societal context. And while there was a high number of frequency counts across the standards for the term (19 counts), it is mostly presented as a societal problem at large and not one connected to the individual states, governments, or social stratification. Eight of the 13 states use the term but in a variety of ways. The standards in Alabama and South Carolina reference the term in relationship to the historic widespread poverty in the Great Depression. Georgia's only mention is in reference to reasons for Latin American migration, and Tennessee only mentions it as a historic reference to the War on Poverty. Maryland, New York, and West Virginia all deal with poverty in more analytical ways. Specifically, the standards look at the relationship between governments and poverty, the economic challenges to lawmakers, and even theories of poverty. For example, Maryland's seventh grade civics standard 3A reads, "evaluate the effectiveness of the various policies of governments in addressing issues, such as health, poverty, crime, security, and environmental concerns" (p. 1).

The irony in examining the contexts of the *term poverty* in the Mississippi standards was that although the state is ranked as the poorest in the United States, the usage of the term was highly problematic. Mississippi was the only state to align the term poverty with the term African American. There was a general theme that the civil rights movement improved economic life for African

Americans and, yet, that it is a current contemporary problem for African Americans and also those in urban spaces.

The ways in which each of the terms are presented tell strong stories about what the terms mean and the importance of the terms in relationship to the content that is being presented by the standards and by educators. These stories often diminish the complexity of these terms and provide a singular and problematic historic and contemporary narrative to students.

The Stories That Are Left Out

While coal had many mentions within the standards, the context of those mentions was usually the referencing of coal as a natural resource or connected to industry. It was not used in terms of how it connected to specific locations within the Appalachian region that are known for mining, such as Eastern Kentucky, Southwest Virginia, West Virginia, Western North Carolina, and Eastern Tennessee. Similarly, mining was rarely mentioned in the context of Appalachia but was usually discussed in terms of industrialization, the impact of mining, mining as a way to extract natural resources, mining as an effect of the idea of manifest destiny, and mining as a result of human/environment interaction. West Virginia, however, mentioned mining disasters within their standards (particularly within eighth grade geography standards). With the amount of natural resource extraction and notable environmental/mining disasters that have taken place in Eastern Kentucky, Southwest Virginia, West Virginia, Western North Carolina and Eastern Tennessee, one would expect to see mining at the forefront of social studies standards in those states at the very least, but such stories are absent.

Relatedly, strike was discussed as it related to the Pullman strike, textile strikes, as well as a silver strike, but most standards that addressed the term strike were unrelated to Appalachia. The only state that somewhat addressed strike in the context of Appalachia was West Virginia. Even then, West Virginia only stated that strikes were connected to the economy and history of West Virginia, but no specific details were given as to how strikes were connected to their economy or history. Even though

groups like the United Mine Workers Association (UMWA) fought tirelessly for the rights of miners in Appalachia through the use of strikes, no such stories are found within the standards.

Additionally, Scots-Irish was barely mentioned at all. As identified above, only two states discussed this term, North Carolina and Virginia. North Carolina discussed the term as it related to the

origin of beliefs in the state along with connections to the Highland-Scots. Virginia addressed Scots-Irish in terms of how colonial America represented European immigration. While the presence of traditional music, culture, and storytelling related to the identity of Scots-Irish in the Appalachian region has been a hallmark of Appalachia, none of those narratives are found within the standards.

Table 4

Frequencies of All Terms by Grade Level or Course

Grade Level/Course	Frequency Counts of <u>All</u> Terms by Grade Level**
Kindergarten	1
1st Grade	2
2nd Grade	6
3rd Grade	11
4th Grade	6
5th Grade	3
6th Grade	4
7th Grade	8
8th Grade	15
High School U.S. History	18
High School World or Global History	7
High School Geography/World Geography	13
High School Economics	4
High School American Government	2
High School State History/Studies	7 (4 Virginia; 2 Tennessee; 1 Mississippi)
High School Sociology (Elective)	4
High School Elective (non-sociology)	1 (Law-Related Ed) 2 (African American Studies) 1 (Contemporary Studies) 1 (Minority Studies)

*Many of the state standards for high school are not grade leveled but are separated by course subject. I chose to follow this same model in the frequency counts by grade level.

** Of all 11 terms, there was a total frequency count of all terms across all state standards of n=116

The stories that are not being told in the social studies standards related to coal, mining, strikes, and the Scots-Irish are troubling. Much of Appalachian history and culture has been shaped by these aspects, and their absence in the standards is equated with the erasure of history related to the Appalachian region and people. Folk singers, poets, and writers have worked to preserve such history, but currently students are not being taught about any of these narratives. The history of the Appalachian region and people, which is diverse, eclectic, and filled with creativity and resistance, is being erased through the absence of Appalachia within the standards.

Whom Are We Telling the Stories To?

When examining the frequencies and contexts of the usages of each term in the state standards, there were common themes not only around which stories were being told or left out but also around who they were being told to. The 11 terms were mentioned a total of 116 times across all of the states, but when examining which grade level they were mentioned in, it became clear that most of the content was present at the secondary level. Table 4 explains how many times terms were mentioned by grade level or course.

Of the 116 frequency counts, 41 were in grades K-7 while 75 were in grades 8-12. Not surprisingly, the highest number of terms per grade level (18) were found within high school U.S. history. When examining the highest count (11) in third grade, only six states had terms within their third grade standards. Three of the six of these states focused on geography at this grade level (Alabama, Maryland, and Tennessee), two were U.S.-focused (Georgia and West Virginia), and one was focused on state history (South Carolina). A similar theme occurs when looking at the eighth grade counts. Although the count of terms was fairly high (15), it was across only five states. Three of these states focused on state history (Georgia, South Carolina, and West Virginia) while the other two were focused on U.S. history in the eighth grade (Maryland and Tennessee). Because the counts are focused mostly in the secondary grades and within U.S. history, geography, and state history, there are

particular grade levels and courses that these stories are being shared within. Table 5 highlights which grade levels each term was found in across all of the states.

Most terms can be found across multiple grade levels and across grade bands (Elementary, Middle, Secondary). However, both Scots-Irish and strike are only found in grades 8-12 and the term poverty is found 16 of its 19 times in grades 7-12 and only three times at the elementary level. Although the intention of the standards or the standards writers was not investigated, the lack of inclusion of these terms in elementary level standards signals a possible withholding of controversial content.

Discussion

Appalachia's problems are neither unique nor a product of some strange and peculiar culture — in fact, they're deeply interconnected with the political and economic life of the nation as a whole. The lessons of its past speak to fundamental inequalities within American society today that must be acknowledged if we are to build a different future.

—Ronald D. Eller, *Fixing Appalachia is the First Step to Fixing America*

Despite the vast attention given to Appalachia by both scholars (e.g., Billings, 2019; Catte, 2018; Eller, 2008) and popular authors (e.g., Vance, 2016), its absence in our social studies standards and curriculum is shocking. Although this may not be purposeful, the lack of connection to terms and themes that help to define the region within the standards is vastly underwhelming. Eller (2008) explained that often it is easier for states and our nation to distance themselves and disconnect from Appalachia because of the unsettling issues that plague the region (i.e., poverty, addiction, destruction of the environment, and undereducation). Thus, in order to change the narratives, standards, and curriculum in social studies education, we have to be willing to investigate the history, culture, and economics of poor whites in the first place.

Table 5
Individual Term Frequencies across All States by Grade Level

	K	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	High School
Appalachia										1
Appalachian			2	3	2				3	3
Coal			1	2		1	1	1	1	3
Feud										
Hillbilly										
Mining			1	1	2	1	1	2	1	8
Mountaineer										
Poverty				1	1		1	1		7
Rural	1	1	3	2		1	1	1	3	9
Scots-Irish									1	1
Strike									2	3
TOTAL BY GRADE LEVEL*	1	1	7	9	5	3	4	5	11	35

* For each grade level, per each term, n=13, the number of states examined.

By connecting historical events to issues such as class and whiteness, Wray (2006) provides a lens to help to explain both the ills of the Appalachian region but also the power structures that continue to dominate the region. West Virginia does not mention the word Appalachia in its standards, and when the term is mentioned in other state's standards, the region is related only to its geographic physical features (mountains and plateaus). Such a glaring absence raises questions about the reasons for alienation. Eller (2008) argued that many people within Appalachia do not use the term Appalachia unless they are talking about the town of Appalachia, located in Wise County, Virginia. However, examining the region's deep history as a place of extracting minerals, timber, and educated people (see Vazzana & Rudi-Poloshka,

2019) provides a space for social studies educators to discuss the boundary relationships between whiteness and class and to investigate social domination and power (Wray, 2006).

The national dialogues surrounding Appalachia often dismiss the region's history, culture, and economics and instead rely upon stereotypes about the white poor coal miner to enhance their conservative and/or liberal agendas (Catte, 2016; Wray, 2006). Such absences and stereotypes do little to help teach Appalachians about the place they call home. Social studies educators have long argued that seeing yourself in the narratives and fabric of history allows students to better develop complex historical understandings (see Epstein, 1998). Therefore, if as educators we really want to be a field that is inclusive of ALL voices, we need to

include the voices and history from the hollers, mountains, crevices, and crannies to really teach about and highlight the Appalachian region in ways that explore their unique boundary positions. Labeling the region as a group of Trump supporting, ignorant, white trash subsequently silences an entire group of people (Catte, 2008; Wray, 2006). If as social studies educators, we are serious about understanding our national dialogues, trends in politics, the depths of our nation's ills, and understanding the various ways in which social difference occurs, then hillbillies must be included in our standards and curriculum so that the full breadth and diversity of the region, and many more that are similar to it, may be examined in ways that stretch beyond the stereotypes.

Conclusions

Keep in mind that a man's just as good as his word
 It takes twice as long to build bridges you've
 burned
 And there's hurt you can cause time alone cannot
 heal
 Keep your nose on the grindstone and out of
 the pills.

—Tyler Childers, *Nose on the Grindstone*

Educators, in many ways, are the front lines of resistance. The numerous teacher strikes across the country in the past year highlight the ways that educators are taking informed action to stand up for their rights and goals. I argue that as social studies teacher educators and researchers, we should do the same. It is easy for the academy, liberals, and conservatives to blame the election of Donald Trump on the ignorant racist hillbilly, but the truth is more complicated. Carnes and Lupu (2017) noted that many of the voters without college educations who supported Trump were relatively affluent, and Billings (2019) explained that data from the primaries show that Trump supporters' yearly incomes averaged \$72,000. As social studies educators, our failure to address these issues and the failure to speak against the narrative of Trumpalochia does not only silence an entire region of people, but it misguides us into accepting false narratives about our democracy and citizenry. Addressing these myths and countering the voices of those such as Vance is the only way for us as a

field to heal the pain and hurt caused by these stereotypes and others like them. In order to open up this discourse, I provide the following as suggestions for social studies teacher educators and K-12 social studies teachers who would like to join me in this fight.

1. Assign critical readings about Appalachia such as *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia*, *Appalachian Reckoning*, *Transforming Places: Lessons from Appalachia*, *Uneven Ground*, *Appalachians and Race*, *Back Talk from Appalachia*, *Power and Powerlessness*.
2. If a teacher assigns *Hillbilly Elegy*, I suggest that it needs to be assigned along with the previous readings or with one of the many contemporary articles or blogs that challenge Vance's narrative.
3. Educators can follow the #therealappalachiasyllabus on Twitter for ideas about how to further disrupt the hillbilly stereotype.
4. An assignment around Appalachia could involve students listing perceptions of Appalachia, reading the suggested materials above, and then revisiting those perceptions as a class to discuss the dangers in stereotyping any group or culture of people.
5. Assignments on Appalachia should reflect the rich history of artistry, musicians, writers, and resisters who occupy the region.
6. Social studies researchers should focus attention on researching rural social studies education and the particular problems that regions such as Appalachia face.
7. There should be a direct challenge on the state, district, and classroom level against the exclusion of Appalachian voices in the social studies curriculum by both teacher educators and teachers.

Lastly, I challenge our social studies field to put our noses on the grindstone and begin the difficult work of helping us tackle this new line of inquiry.

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End Note

ⁱ Local color literature is often characterized as regional fiction and poetry that focuses on the dialects, customs, and characters of a region. Shapiro (1978) used the term to describe the short story writings of missionaries and others who came to Appalachia and wrote about the people in the region in ways that created a “strangeness” and othering of the region by dividing it from the American ideals of nationality and progress.