

Decolonizing Appalachia: Postcolonial Theology in a U.S. American Region¹

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“The majority of mountain people are unprincipled ruffians. . . . There are two remedies only — education or extermination. Mountaineers, like the red Indian, must learn this lesson.” (Metropolitan newspaper editorial, ca. 1920²)

In the short space I have here I would like to share some reflections on the possibility of viewing the Appalachian region of the United States through the lens of de/colonization as part of the irruption of new and newer expressions of postcolonial theo-political work. I write as a white, middle-class male who was raised from the age of nine months in the Appalachian state of West Virginia, and who lived there until 2006 when I moved to Toronto, Canada to begin a doctoral degree in theology. At the end of 2009 I moved back to West Virginia to continue my degree research, probing a) the usefulness of postcolonial studies for theological reflection on human and ecological oppression, resistance and liberation in Appalachia, and b) the usefulness of Appalachian experience(s) for a more complex understanding of internal and neo-colonialisms in the United States.

At its best, postcolonialism has maintained an openness in its applicability to diverse contexts of “coloniality.” Far from being a theory relevant only to the former colonies of European and U.S. American empires, postcolonialism is understood as the analysis of the experience of colonized and colonizer alike, and as an oppositional politics that challenges colonialist and imperialistic mentalities wherever they exist, in diverse spaces within both the “First” and “Third” Worlds. “In short,” writes theologian Daniel Pilario, “wherever hegemonic colonial power imposes itself, the shadow of postcolonial discourse follows.”³ This has opened up reflection on “Postcolonial America” and has inspired postcolonial theologies within the United States and other colonizing nations.⁴ As I became aware of the recent explosion of postcolonial theological perspectives in the first part of my doctoral studies, I began to feel a strong resonance between the themes and perspectives of postcolonial theory and politics and my own experience of “growing up Appalachian.” At the same time, I had seen not one reference to Appalachia among the various and diverse expressions of U.S. postcolonial theology. In response to this lacuna, my present research probes the usefulness of post/decolonial theory and politics for Appalachian realities, and in particular for elaborating a local liberationist theology for the decolonization and healing of Appalachia.

Of course the term “Appalachia” calls to mind a number of images. On the one hand, the term refers to a region of the United States whose political/economic lines were drawn by the federal Appalachian Regional Commission primarily with reference to indicators of economic

¹ This essay was originally written at the invitation of the Postcolonial Theology Network for the purposes of internal discussion in an online forum. I am thankful for the helpful comments I received in that forum. The Postcolonial Theology Network is preparing to launch a website at <http://www.postcolonialnetworks.com>.

² Cited in Rodger Cunningham, *Apples on the Flood: Minority Discourse and Appalachia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 111.

³ Daniel Franklin Pilario, “Mapping Postcolonial Theory: Appropriations in Contemporary Theology,” *Hapag* 3, no. 1–2 (2006): 9–51.

⁴ Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera, eds., *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004).

distress. The cultural, ethnic, and geographical definitions are much more fluid and debated. Roughly, the region consists of the entire state of West Virginia, and portions of the states surrounding it: Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, North and South Carolina, Georgia, etc. Others have said that “Appalachia” refers to any place where there is coal under the ground.

Scholars and activists working on issues of social justice in Appalachia have long used the image of “colonialism” to describe their regional experience. In what should be a familiar pattern to Postcolonial Theology Network readers, in the 1970s and ‘80s, Appalachian scholars began to challenge views of the region that relied on “culture of poverty”⁵ and “development”⁶ assumptions in favor of revisionist narratives of regional history viewed through Marxist and postmodern lenses.⁷ Such scholarly and activist work showed how images of the region circulated in literature, popular culture, narratives of national history, and the missionary work of Christian churches have functioned socially and politically to render an entire people inferior and thus worthy of exploitation and “civilizing” projects. Coinciding with the physical colonization of the region through resource extraction and industry – especially the coal industry – was the invention of Appalachia as a distinct region within the United States. Allen Batteau, for example, writes:

The image of Appalachia as a strange land and peculiar people was elaborated at the very same time that the relationships of external domination and control of the Southern Mountain Region’s natural and human resources were being elaborated.... For better or worse... the imagery of Appalachia and the social forms of its propagation are implicated in federal policy and the stance that public and private social agencies have taken toward the region.... Appalachia — read-about Appalachia, personally experienced Appalachia, laughed-at Appalachia, inspired-by Appalachia — is just as much a social construction as the cowboy or, for that matter, the Indian. This invention was accomplished not in a professor’s study but in the hurly-burly of politics and commerce and industry. And further, it was pursued with some very specific political ends in view.⁸

⁵ Harry M. Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area*, Reprint (Ashland, KY: Jesse Stuart Foundation, 2001); Jack Weller, *Yesterday’s People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966); Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1981).

⁶ See the website of the Appalachian Regional Commission for an example of the development view: <http://www.arc.gov/>.

⁷ Just a few examples include: Henry Shapiro, D., *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870–1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978); Helen Matthews Lewis, Linda Johnson, and Donald Askins, eds., *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case* (Boone, NC: The Appalachian Consortium Press, 1978); John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980); David E. Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer: People, Power, and Planning in Appalachia*, rev. ed. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1994); David E. Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region*, Fred W. Morrison Series in Southern Studies (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Cunningham, *Apples on the Flood*; Allen W. Batteau, *The Invention of Appalachia* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1990).

⁸ Batteau, *The Invention of Appalachia*, 15–6.

Through complex historical, textual, political, and economic what developed and continues to exist today is a two-sided and contradictory image of Appalachians: that of a romanticized proud people steeped in tradition and “original” American values, or its opposite, a culture of backward, ignorant, and violent savages. Both images have been intimately related to definitions of mainstream American middle-class values, either by providing sentimentalized, “inspiring” images of the nation’s origins, or by presenting an image of the boundaries of civilization.

And just as Appalachian stereotypes developed in tandem with the beginnings of economic exploitation in the region, the same stereotypes continue to serve the interests of capitalism and U.S. political and cultural imperialism. Although many communities in Appalachia are suffering from the effects of deindustrialization, Appalachia remains a commodity for multinational corporations, as politicians such as West Virginia’s Governor Joe Manchin “sell” Appalachian poverty to companies by advertising the region’s low wages, “docile” work force, low unionization rates, etc.⁹ Appalachian communities continue to be controlled to a large extent by the interests of “Big Coal,” facilitated by corporately owned politicians.¹⁰ Resource-rich communities in Appalachia, like so many others in the United States, also continue to bear the burden of environmental injustice such as the ongoing practice of mountaintop removal mining, all for the “common good” of America’s “energy security.”¹¹

So it is not surprising to many Appalachian people today to see Dick Cheney making jokes about West Virginia and incest during a speech in front of the National Press Club,¹² or to see MTV Studios finance a “documentary” about *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*,¹³ at the same time that public consciousness is being raised more and more every day about the effects of mountaintop removal coal mining on ecosystems and human communities in Central Appalachia. Such cultural phenomena are ultimately helpful in keeping alive the suggestion that for all the injustices that Appalachian people have suffered throughout their history, they likely deserve it or bring it upon themselves in one way or another.

But Appalachian people have not merely been the victims of capitalist-driven injustice. There is fascinating history of radical oppositional politics in Appalachia which continues to be told and is indeed being remade every day. Scholars and activists alike in Appalachia are increasingly engaging in decolonizing praxis in people’s movements that resist the destruction of land and resources through the coal industry, and work to reclaim control over their lives and communities at the grassroots. Recent expressions of Appalachian Studies literature, while retaining the language of colonization, have moved away from earlier simplistic “internal colony” models, and are now drawing upon the insights of world systems/periphery theory (David Walls), studies of social movements (Stephen Fischer, Stephen Foster, Dwight Billings),

⁹ Eve S. Weinbaum, *To Move a Mountain: Fighting the Global Economy in Appalachia* (New York: The New Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Jeff Goodell, *Big Coal: The Dirty Secret Behind America’s Energy Future* (Boston: Mariner/Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

¹¹ Eric Reece, *Lost Mountain: A Year in the Vanishing Wilderness: Radical Strip Mining and the Devastation of Appalachia* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006); Shirley Stewart Burns, *Bringing Down the Mountains: The Impact of Mountaintop Removal on Southern West Virginia Communities* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2007); Tom Butler and George Wuerthner, eds., *Plundering Appalachia: The Tragedy of Mountaintop-Removal Coal Mining* (San Rafael, CA: Earth Aware, 2009).

¹² See <http://www.newsandsentinel.com/page/content.detail/id/49937.html?isap=1&nav=5071>.

¹³ The trailer is viewable at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3ysuG2O0zw>.

postcolonial thought (Rodger Cunningham, Barbara Kunkle), gender studies (Mary Anglin, Jacquelyn Hall, Sally Maggard), globalization studies (Herbert Reid, John Gaventa), place studies and critical regionalism (Douglas Reichert Powell), and post-development studies (Lora Smith). Cunningham and Kunkle's work is the most explicit in viewing Appalachia through postcolonial lenses.¹⁴ The best of these works draw from a combination of these theoretical streams, such as Samuel Cook's use of world systems, internal colonization and post-development approaches in his analysis of the effects of colonization on multiple cultures within Appalachia.¹⁵ Although there has been an explosion of diverse theoretical perspectives taken in Appalachian studies, overall in recent years there has been a shared shift in perspective among most Appalachian scholars. In this new perspective, many Appalachianists have "reversed the telescope"¹⁶ looking not just at the internal dynamics of the region but at Appalachia in a global context. Those looking at Appalachia through the lenses of postcolonial studies are seeing that "Appalachia" is a region that like so many others has its roots in the expansion of empire, land appropriation, nation-building, and processes of "othering."

These more recent expressions of Appalachian scholarship are also noting, slowly but surely, the resources that religious communities and traditions provide to Appalachian activists. While Appalachian scholars have often pointed out that Christian churches have played a role in the colonization of Appalachia, churches and theologies have always been connected to movements toward its decolonization as well as scholars like Dwight Billings have shown.¹⁷ I have been exploring post-Vatican II Roman Catholic social justice teaching and grassroots activism, especially the work of the Catholic Committee of Appalachia who organized the writing of two influential pastoral letters of the Appalachian bishops ("This Land is Home to Me" in 1975 and "At Home In the Web of Life" in 1995¹⁸), which, unlike the vast majority of ecclesial documents, were written "from below" so to speak. The CCA's social justice and ministerial work has been situated within ecumenical social justice networks, such as the Commission on Religion in Appalachia (CORA). These movements and theologies represent unique expressions within the global irruptions of "new voices" in theology and in the churches.

At the same time, much time has passed since the irruption of these movements. CORA, for example, is no more, and the CCA is much much smaller and much much grayer than it was

¹⁴ Rodger Cunningham, "Appalachianism and Orientalism: Reflections on Reading Edward Said," *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association* 1 (1989): 125–32; Rodger Cunningham, "The View from the Castle: Reflections on the *Kentucky Cycle* Phenomenon," in *Backtalk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes*, ed. Dwight B. Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford (Louisville, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 300–12; Rodger Cunningham, "Appalachian Studies Among the Posts," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 377–86; Rodger Cunningham, "Southern Appalachia Considered from a Postcolonial Perspective" (2006), Available at <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/poldiscourse/cunningham1.html> (accessed June 16, 2010); Barbara L. Kunkle, "Appalachia and the Imagination of Empire," Ph.D. diss. (Bowling Green University, 1997).

¹⁵ Samuel R. Cook, *Monacans and Miners: Native American and Coal Mining Communities in Appalachia* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000) See also Stephen L. Fisher, *Fighting Back in Appalachia: Traditions of Resistance and Change* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993) and Dwight B. Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford, eds., *Backtalk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999).

¹⁶ John Gaventa, "Appalachian Studies in Global Context: Reflections on the Beginnings - Challenges for the Future," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 79–90.

¹⁷ Dwight Billings, "Religion as Opposition: A Gramscian Analysis," *American Journal of Sociology* 96 (July 1990): 1–31.

¹⁸ Both documents are widely available online.

in the 1970s and '80s. In many ways, the days in which the first pastoral letter animated the activity of whole dioceses has passed. Ecclesiological shifts in the Roman Catholic Church since the papacy of John Paul II have taken their toll on social justice movements in many contexts, and not just in Appalachia. But the “new” Appalachian social movements including radical eco-justice groups which have risen up in recent years are youthful and energetic, and their increasing focus on direct action and connections with larger, global eco-justice movements are hopeful signs of political resistance and healing. And these new movements can provide the churches in Appalachia with new life as they can be viewed as further irruptions of the Spirit beyond earlier, and perhaps more restricting, ecclesiastical programming.

There are at least two potential dangers in reflecting theologically on Appalachia with the help of postcolonial theory. And I am particularly interested in responses from Postcolonial Theology Network participants that can help me to think more deeply about this project, either by presenting criticisms or points of intersection. First, Leela Gandhi and others have challenged the way scholars in settler colonies use the discourse of “colonialism” in a loose way to describe the experiences of their societies, when there is quite a difference between these experiences and those of colonies that suffered direct military-political domination. Such scholars “confer a seamless and indiscriminating postcoloniality on both white settler cultures and on those indigenous peoples displaced through their encounter with these cultures.” She continues: “There is a fundamental incommensurability between the predominantly cultural ‘subordination’ of settler culture in Australia, and the predominantly administrative and militaristic subordination of colonised culture in Africa and Asia. A theory of postcolonialism which suppresses differences like these is ultimately flawed as an ethical and political intervention into conditions of power and inequality.”¹⁹ As I continue my research and writing on “decolonizing Appalachia,” I anticipate objections to my use of the postcolonial optic to reflect on Appalachian experience on precisely these grounds, if not others. I think it was this kind of critique that led a colleague of mine, a Latino-Canadian theologian, to remind me that “We must not forget that there are people who are oppressed much more than Appalachian people are.”

The warnings of Gandhi notwithstanding, I have found that other postcolonial writers, as well as Latin American decolonial thought and the perspectives of many American Indian writers and activists, are much more generous in seeing potential for intersection with the experiences of peoples who occupy a complex space of being both oppressor and oppressed simultaneously, such as many of the communities of Appalachia. American Indian scholar and activist Ward Churchill, for example, has pointed out on many occasions that the experience of poor people in Appalachia is a kind of internal colonialism that bears resemblance to the experience of Native peoples of North America.²⁰ It is perhaps this built-in impulse of post/decolonial thinking to move beyond competitive relations between peoples and movements and towards intercultural, postcolonial encounters which value both difference and commonality that makes postcolonialism an attractive perspective for Appalachian researchers and activists like myself. But I understand that my own research needs to be as concrete as possible in describing the ways in which colonizing capitalist modernity has taken form in various Appalachian communities so

¹⁹ Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 169–70.

²⁰ Ward Churchill, “Suppression of Indigenous Sovereignty in 20th Century United States,” *Z Magazine*, May 1997, Available at <http://www.zcommunications.org/suppression-of-indigenous-sovereignty-in-20th-century-united-states-by-ward-churchill>.

that it is clear how I am using the term and why. I should also make explicit that I am not seeking to appropriate the theories of radically oppressed peoples, or to take up these perspectives or languages lightly, but in order to see how similar dynamics have been enacted in radically different places for different reasons and with different effects. I will have to be careful that I am held accountable in my own engagement of post/decolonial theories and practices such that my own work is not simply a kind of colonization of others' theories but is done in a true spirit of encounter and dialogue. And my project must include analysis not only on colonization of Appalachia but Appalachian America's complicity with and participation in colonization, imperialism, orientalism/othering, etc.

A second danger involves the context of my work within this particular historical moment in the United States. Walter Mignolo has pointed out the way that revolutionary movements have been appropriated by those who have an interest in promoting the narratives and imperial structures of Euro-American modernity. There is a need, he says, to delink these revolutionary movements from the narrative of modernity. A similar kind of delinking is necessary in Appalachian Studies and in any potential postcolonial Appalachian theology, as Appalachian identity, movements, and even radicalism are continually appropriated as part of the dominant American narrative, even by well meaning people. With the rise of "red state" politics, xenophobic nationalism, the re-emergence of visible white racism, and traditionalist "ruralism" and militia mentalities, I want to be careful that the work that I am doing on the church and social movements in Appalachia will explicitly delink from such movements, and from the dominant "American" narrative as a whole, in order to avoid such appropriations. As Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz talks about the narratives of Latinas as "subversive narratives," I want the narratives of Appalachia in my work to be similarly subversive, allowing space for the emergence of excluded voices who "talk back" to the powers of capitalism, empire, and the "American Dream" by shining a light on some of the people on whose backs the "American Dream" is built.

As I move forward, tentatively and carefully, in this research, I remain convinced that a postcolonial theology from the Appalachian context can make a small contribution toward the construction of a global "decolonial imaginary,"²¹ the horizon toward which all of our work as postcolonial theologians is oriented. Postcolonial studies provides helpful tools for ever more liberating political and ecclesial praxis even in those complex spaces of exclusion within the heart of the world's empires, spaces like "Appalachia." And the insights of Appalachian Studies scholars and radical Appalachian activists can provide new knowledges for the movement of postcolonialism as a whole for understanding and resisting the dynamics of modernity that have produced diverse experiences of coloniality.

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²¹ Hjamil A. Martinez-Vazquez, "The Postcolonizing Project: Constructing a Decolonial Imaginary from the Borderlands," *Journal of World Christianity* 1, no. 1 (2009): 1-28.

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