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Correction Appended

## **Barack Obama's 'Appalachian problem'; Is this just a new way to explain away a people the country forgets - often?**

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Once again the American media's compulsion to entertain rather than to understand has projected Appalachia to center stage of national politics.

Hillary Clinton's landslide victory in the West Virginia Democratic primary has provided yet another opportunity to reduce economic and political issues in Appalachia to time-honored tropes about cultural differentness. Within the past week, an embarrassment of journalists, bloggers and late-night television hosts have turned Sen. Clinton's support among blue-collar voters in West Virginia into a confirmation of the white "otherness" of Appalachian culture rather than an expression of fundamental (and more complex) issues of class, gender and race or even political organization in the Mountain State.

Newhouse News correspondent Jonathan Tilove even suggested that Sen. Barack Obama has an "Appalachian problem" that goes beyond race to the peculiarities of "Appalachia's whites and the Scots-Irish who settled there and forever branded its culture."

Popular stereotypes and misreading of Appalachian history have long provided a convenient excuse to ignore Appalachia or to justify public and private attempts to bring the region into the cultural mainstream. Thus, the argument is offered that Clinton's appeal in Appalachia should not be taken too seriously since mountain voters represent those "other whites" whose heritage has led them to be suspicious, pugnacious and a little less civilized than the Anglo-Puritan whites of the Northeast.

Sen. Barack Obama could not possibly succeed among these highly individualistic, uneducated and unrefined mountain whites whose ancestors resisted slavery and Southern nationalism during the Civil War. This independent spirit, suggest the pundits, will lead the hillbillies to vote for Scotch-Irish Appalachian John McCain, born in Appalachian Mississippi.

Such characterizations of Appalachia not only obscure the historical diversity of the region and project a static view of human culture but also ignore most of the recent scholarship on Appalachia that contradicts the idea of Appalachian "otherness" and attributes its history and economic problems to political struggles that have shaped the rest of the nation.

Far from being the repository of Scotch-Irish culture, ignorance born of geographic isolation or backwardness nurtured by anti-modernism, contemporary Appalachia is a much more diverse and historically complex place. Appalachian poverty, education, health

care and environmental problems are much more a product of the history of development patterns in the region than of any common Appalachian culture, and Appalachian voting patterns are much more reflection of fundamental class, racial and gender differences in America than they are of any ethnic heritage within the region.

Racism does continue to influence the voting patterns of some whites in Appalachia, and the lower levels of formal education in the region do continue to fuel bigotry and prejudice, not only toward blacks but toward Muslims and ethnic immigrants as well. But prejudice is by no means unique to whites in Appalachia, and it is often a reflection of more deeply seated insecurities that are rooted in gender and class.

For blue-collar voters in Appalachia, economic concerns, not Appalachian identity, shaped their decisions at the polls. Job insecurity, rising food and gas prices, and uncertain access to health care and education turned Appalachian voters toward the more working-class message of Hillary Clinton, especially among women who occupy the center of the modern mountain economy. Perhaps because of the race issue, Obama conceded West Virginia to Clinton, who was able to use the local Democratic political machinery to her advantage.

Unlike John Kennedy, who came to Appalachia during the 1960 primary season to confront anti-Catholicism directly, the Obama strategy of side-stepping the race issue (so recently raised by the Reverend Wright controversy) left the playing field to the opposition. Kennedy quickly learned that economic distress was of greater concern to mountain voters than religious difference, and by appealing to those concerns, he carried the state.

Obama has yet to learn this basic truth about Appalachia. The cultural conservatism that has often fueled a misunderstanding of the region's history and problems is grounded in economic conditions, hopes and values that reflect those of the larger society. Appalachia is only the "other America" if we want to ignore the contradictions and challenges of our time. We do so at our own peril.

Eller is a professor of history at the University of Kentucky and the author of "Miners, Millhands and Mountaineers: The Industrialization of the Appalachian South." He wrote this essay for the Daily Yonder (dailyyonder.com), a news site focused on rural issues.

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**CORRECTION:** The commentary "**Barack Obama's 'Appalachian problem'**" by Ron Eller in the May 18 Gazette-Mail incorrectly referred to Sen. John McCain's birthplace. The commentary should have said McCain's family has roots in Appalachian Mississippi. McCain was born in the Panama Canal Zone.

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