

The Activist History Review  
THE FUTURE IS ANOTHER COUNTRY



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## I'm From Around Here, Too

I'm becoming. I'm becoming authentic. I'm becoming solid in the fact that I am good at my job, that I deserve to be in front of these students each day, just as much as any white, cishet male counterparts with degrees from way up North. I'm becoming solid in the understanding that by accepting my own identities (and the privileges and oppressions that come with them) I can clear space for my students to do the same.

by Alana M. Anton

The Maw Maw of one of my best friends died this past week. I wished I had a black wide-brimmed hat to wear with my tea length faux double-breasted black dress. Where's a better place to be dramatic than the southern funeral of a well-loved old woman? Hair as high as my undercut would allow would have to do — as close to God as a heathen can get, I reckoned. The service was lovely. There were more back slaps than wet eyes; more laughter than tears. And not that much black, because it's 97 degrees in the shade here lately and the rain comes to refill the humidity each afternoon. There was the familiar flourish of a Southern Baptist pianist playing shape notes or, more likely, by ear. The well-loved warble of a church choir lady who's sung longer behind the pulpit than I've been alive. There was dinner on the grounds with macaroni and cheese, chicken labeled "a little bit spicy," and a coconut cake with exactly the correct amount of sugar. I ask if I can have my tea half sweet and half unsweetened and the petite elderly woman watching the drink table, with its red solo cups and five different flavors of Coke from Sprite to Dr. Pepper, just looked at me and says, "Let me pour you some sweet, honey."

On the way home I pass the lot that used to be a Hardee's. It's a luxury apartment complex now. Luxury apartments in Douglas County, Georgia. Could you ever have imagined?

"You will be too much for some people. Those aren't your people." – Glennon Melton, founder and president of Together Rising, a nonprofit for women and children in crisis

I'm trying to do something else as well. I'm becoming. I'm becoming authentic. I'm becoming solid in the fact that I am good at my job, that I deserve to be in front of these students each day, just as much as any white, cis-male counterparts with degrees from way up North.

I'm becoming solid in the understanding that by accepting my own identities (and the privileges and oppressions that come with them) I can clear space for my students to do the same.

I'm from Douglasville, Georgia. The Piedmont more than the mountains, really. My family spent so much time in the mountains, Hiawassee and Blairsville, that they've always felt like home to me. We went to the North Georgia Mountain State Fair and the Sorghum Festival most every year. Later on in Murphy, North Carolina, my parents bought a one room cabin on a little mountain where we took family trips several times a year. The mountains have been my happy place all my life. I know what it is to have the stereotypes about where you're from come to define you not only from the outside, but from within.

Raised in the Southern Baptist Church, I self-identified and leaned into all the stereotypes: country music, anti-abortion, homophobic, living in a strict family environment. I had Confederate flags all over my bedroom.

It took time and growth, and ultimately the discovery of sociology, to start to dismantle my racism, my internalized misogyny and queerphobia, my ableism, and internalized classism. That work is never done. As bell hooks (2004) reminds us in [The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love](#), "we are given continual guidance about the ways we can best fulfill" the roles of the "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy." Of course, I feel ashamed of that history of me, but shame and guilt cannot dismantle oppressive systems. They're useless emotions that prevent us from digging deeper into our own privilege. I've tried hiding them away. I've tried to be the "best" at anti-racism, the "best" at doing the work.

I believe a revolutionary classroom starts by dismantling what it means to be in that classroom. I'm trying to tear down the very idea of who is allowed to stand in front of students with the authority to guide the conversations that take place there.

I'm done with that now. I've stopped trying to be "the best". I've stopped hiding all the parts of myself in the classroom. The work continues each day and some days are more successful than others. My students are me, for the most part. They are rural, they are the mountains, the country, and often the forgotten folks. Latinx people are the largest reason Appalachia's population drain hasn't completely fallen through the floor. My second-generation students, Latinlachians, will have an identity here. I hope to help them lean into that.

I work in Hall County, one of the Sundown Towns profiled in [Blood at the Root](#). This county is, finally, after so much effort to maintain white supremacy here, regaining a population of Black residents. These students have never heard of Frank X Walker and [Affrilachia](#), but they know who they are. And they are from here. My queer students, like me, love the Heavenly Highway Hymnal, while they struggle with the trauma inflicted upon them by storefront country churches down the way from the Family Dollar. I struggle with that, too, and I say so... before I break into Power in the Blood as a tangent on religion and music as an aspect of culture. Fabulachians, we have a place here, too.



Douglasville, Georgia. Courtesy of [Zercher Realty Partners](#).

I know a lot of academics from poor or working-class backgrounds feel some kind of way about bridging these two personal worlds that they occupy, worlds that are increasingly seen as incompatible. Academia occupying elitist real estate atop the great ivory tower, and "regular"

folx down below remaining a part of the mythical “white working class.” Both descriptions bear some truth and that truth becomes part of the anxiety.

But I know, like most of my brethren, that these truths aren’t the whole story. My Grandmother (Grandmama to me and later Gigi to my son) Nora Lynn taught me to read. She is originally from Michigan, a second-generation immigrant-American whose grandparents landed at Ellis Island from Austria. She was a problematic woman who would fight anyone who dared call her a “Yankee.” I was born on her birthday and we shared a special bond. She could be combative and racist, while also taking no shit from any men in her life. She taught all us girls to read before age four. She walked me to the library almost every day in the summer. She signed me up for the reading challenges and acted out the story of Little Red Riding Hood as the wolf to scare me. She always had a book or three on her bedside table. She was smart as a whip and happy to tell you to go find a switch on a less good day. I put these memories of her personality in the past tense as she is not that woman anymore in her mind. Age and the trials of caring for four children in the 50’s and 60’s — along with a husband who died of complications from Parkinson’s disease — has stolen much of who she was. I wish she had a little more clarity these days, so she could see what her encouragement produced in me.

I begin my first day of classes with a pretty simple introduction about myself.

“My name is Alana, you can call me Alana. If you’re from here and that makes you uncomfortable, Professor is fine. I’m a leftist, I’m real country, and I’m real queer. Welcome to Sociology.”

“From here” means the North Georgia mountains, where saying “yes ma’am” and “yes sir” are clearly understood social mores with similarly understood social sanctions. I try to break down authoritarian notions of the classroom, but the socialization of Southern manners doesn’t really break for any of us.

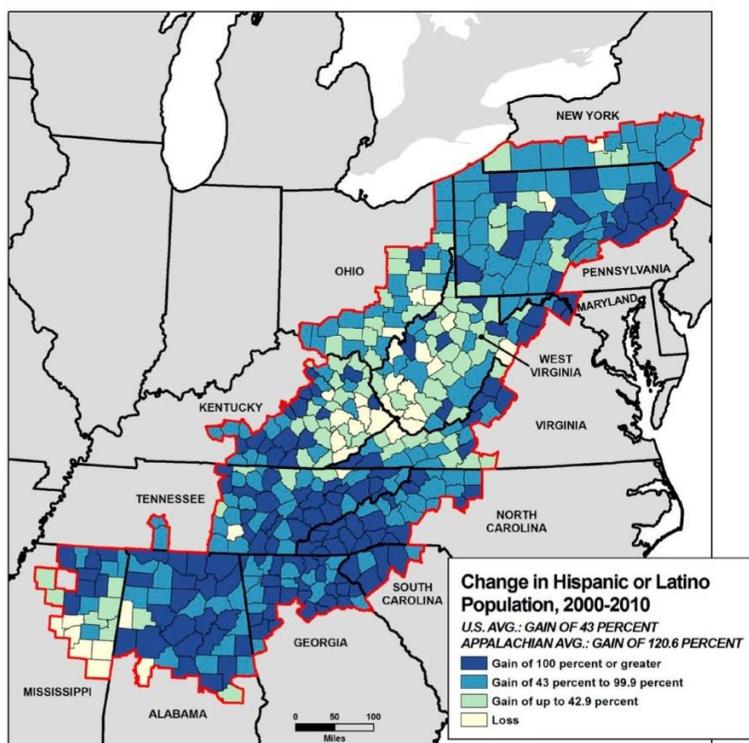
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No one teaches you how to teach in grad school. There might be some pedagogy courses if your program offers them, but the idea that teaching will be a focus ahead of research has not found

its way into a well-rounded graduate education (even though this is the lived reality for most academics). I struggled those first couple of years. I sweated. A lot. I managed panic attacks in the classroom every day. It was so hard to suppress who I am. To curb my accent or demand a certain type of hierarchy in my courses was antithetical to who I am. My anxiety worsened and the coping skills I used to deal with it became really unhealthy. [I drank too much](#) and [Imposter Syndrome](#) became an identity.

Some people think the way I open my class is “too much.” That I’m playing into any number of conservative stereotypes and fears about liberal professors in the classroom. Maybe it is and maybe I am. But there’s something here I’m trying to do. And if I want to talk about my experiences being a Southern Appalachian in the classroom, it has to start with how I center my identities in the classroom — and being country or hillbilly is one of them. I believe a revolutionary classroom starts by dismantling what it means to be in that classroom. I’m trying to tear down the very idea of who is allowed to stand in front of students with the authority to guide the conversations that take place there.

Figure 3.5: Change in the Hispanic or Latino Population in the Appalachian Region, 2000-2010



Map Title: Change in the Hispanic or Latino Population in the Appalachian Region, 2000-2010  
Data Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 and 2010 Decennial Censuses.

Appalachia's Hispanic population more than doubled between 2000 and 2010—nearly triple the national rate of growth for this group. Indeed, Hispanic growth matched or exceeded the national average in more than 300 Appalachian counties and more than doubled in 150 of them. It is important to note that virtually all of these counties have small Latino populations, which would account for their large percentage increases. And there were 34 counties—largely in central Appalachia—where the Hispanic population actually declined during the past decade. In most of these counties, the Latino population declines simply mirrored what was happening among all residents.

I want academia to really grapple with its elitism. We say we want to foster well-rounded education for all who cross that campus threshold, but we gatekeep in ways that uphold white supremacy, patriarchy, and classism. My students have often been failed by their k-12 education. They can write, but haven't been given much direction in how to do so. They've never been given room to question authority and have their real lived experiences validated.

Some of these students are the future of academia and we lose out on critical perspectives when we attempt to push back on a stereotype of elitism rather than acknowledge its there and do the work to dismantle it. I do a lot of unofficial mentoring because students connect with me. This should be an assumed service available to them, not a welcome surprise that was completely unexpected.

I want to push back against the idea that those stereotypes are the full description of who we are; rednecks, hillbillies, country-folk. My students are my kinfolk. I feel grateful and dare I say

#blessed to share my space with them. To recognize the racism, classism, ableism, and sexism in this region while wallowing in the breathtaking beauty of the dogwoods, mountain laurel and hills outside our institutional walls. To love who we are together and love each other and to love our struggle, together.



Alana Berry is starting her seventh year of lecturing in sociology and her sixth at the University of North Georgia, Gainesville. She is a queer, white, cis woman constantly seeking to decolonize her classroom. In her third year of her PhD candidacy at Georgia State University, she is a race and sexuality scholar focusing on how the identity of “Appalachian” is understood by communities traditionally excluded from research and popular understandings of the region, particularly how class, ability, and gender intersect with the identities of Black Appalachians (Affrilachians), Latinx Appalachians (Latinlachians), and queer Appalachians (Fabulachians). She is an abortion funder and individual member of the National Network of Abortion Funds, a mother of an 11 year old boy, and loves to cook collards and cornbread.