

“Affrilachia” The Missing Step for African-Americans in Appalachia

Introduction

Have you ever been in a house that had something just egregiously wrong with it? Something massively unsafe and uncomfortable and against code, but everyone in the house had been there a long time and was used to it? "Oh yeah, I almost forgot to tell you, there's a missing step on the unlit staircase with no railings. But it's okay because we all just remember to jump over it."¹

In 1991, Mr. Frank X. Walker² – a native of Danville, Kentucky (a city in Kentucky’s famed Bluegrass Region south of Lexington), Associate Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Kentucky, and a widely acclaimed and published poet, coined the word "Affrilachia," stressing that the term exposed the significance of the up till then “invisible African-Americans in the Appalachian Region,” particularly their indistinctness on the white Appalachian literary landscape.

Mr. Walker constructed Affrilachia as “both a physical and spiritual place, undefined and unrealized,” to speak to “the union of Appalachian identity and the region's African-American culture and history.”³ For all intents and purposes, Mr. Walker suggests that it was at this time that he took responsibility to fill this void, to bring the cultures of people of color in the Appalachian Region into existence. It would appear that all literary, scholarly, and otherwise unremarkable and pedestrian and mundane details about African-Americans of the Region prior to Mr. Walker’s epiphany did not count.

Before broadcasting his discovery of “Affrilachia ... to make the invisible visible” – something his fellow Affrilachian poet Nikky Finney likened to the “founding of a country”⁴ – Mr.

¹ The Pervocracy. Friday, June 22, 2012

² Spriggs, Bianca. “Frank X. Walker: Exemplar of Affrilachia.” Appalachian Heritage. Volume 39, Number 4, Fall 2011 pp 21-25pp.

³ <http://www.theaffrilachianpoets.com/history.html>

⁴ Lansana, Quraysh Ali. “Soul in them there hills.” <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Soul+in+them+there+Hills.-a072275236>

Walker should have looked at a bountiful body of resources that documented the presence of African Americans in Appalachia, going back to references about them in the mid-1500s when they arrived as slaves to Spanish and French explorers of what became known as the Appalachian Region.⁵ Black artisans, from early times, played a significant role in the development and dynamic change of Appalachian culture and society, contributing to regional music, oral history and folk art. From 1977, with the founding of the Appalachian Studies Association, and as regional scholarship has progressed, more attention has been paid to Appalachian African Americans and the roles they have played in Appalachian culture. There was certainly a lot to be done when Mr. Walker began publicizing his term “Affrilachia,” but he was neither accurate nor truthful when he alleged that there were no black people present and that there was an out-and-out missing body of literature by and about them in the Appalachian Region.⁶

What follows are questions about the accuracy and authenticity of “Affrilachia” and “Affrilachian” in terms outside poetic and creative license – since they refer the Appalachian Region⁷ as “home and/or identify strongly with the trials and triumphs of being of this region.”⁸ Problems arise with Mr. Walker’s chaotic and random references to the geography and inhabitants of the region as well as with the extent to which he has promoted the term – virtually -- in a manner that dismisses most of the information that preceded his divining of this new place and people and those who identified with them, the “Affrilachian Poets.”

Finally, this paper notes how some prominent regional scholars – particularly the commentators of the Appalachian literary space – have been conspicuous for their lack of concern that Mr. Walker and the Affrilachian Poets, for the most part, do not have lived experiences in the

⁵ Perdue, Theta. “Red and Black in the Southern Appalachians,” in Blacks in Appalachia, William H. Turner and Edward J. Cabbell. Editors. University Press of Kentucky. Lexington. (pp. 23-30)

⁶ The W.L. Eury Special Collection in the Carol Grontes Belk Library and Information Commons located at Appalachian State University and the Southern Appalachian Archives at Berea College housed extensive evidence of blacks’ presence in Appalachia in 1990.

⁷ For a list of the Appalachian Regional Commission’s designated Appalachian counties, see <https://www.arc.gov/research/RegionalDataandResearch.asp>

⁸ Ibid

Appalachia Region and nor have or do most of them write about landscapes, families, and communities in.⁹

Nothing here is projected as a study, an evaluation, or an interpretation – and least of all, a disparagement – of what is popularly referred to as “Affrilachian literature,” not as a genre, such as the poets and writers of the Harlem Renaissance era to whom the Affrilachian Poets often compare themselves.¹⁰ This analysis, using a sociology of knowledge framework, looks at how Mr. Walker has constructed and promoted “Affrilachia” as a physical and spiritual space while eliding certain anthropological, epistemological, historical, geographical, psychological, and sociological actualities and truths. In this detection, a partial discourse on situated knowledge is offered and I charge Mr. Walker with positioning “Affrilachia” on some excessive myths and stereotypes.¹¹

**THE AFFRILACHIAN WAY AND THE FIRST APPALACHIAN AFRICAN-AMERICAN POET:
EFFIE WALLER SMITH (1879-1960)**

First, where would “Affrilachia” be had Mr. Walker looked in his own backyard, so to speak, to grasp the literary life of Effie Waller Smith, the first published Appalachian African-American poet of the early twentieth century. Ms. Smith was born to former slaves in the rural mountain community of Chloe Creek in Pike County, Kentucky, published three volumes of poetry: *Songs Of the Month* (1904), *Rhymes From the Cumberland* (1904), and *Rosemary and Pansies* (1909). A graduate of Kentucky State University, Waller’s poetry appeared in Harper’s Weekly.¹²

⁹ Burris, Theresa. “Claiming Literary Space: The Affrilachian Poets,” in: *An American Vein: Critical Readings in Appalachian Literature*, eds. Danny Miller, Sharon Hatfield, and Gurney Norman. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ “The Affrilachian Poets: A History of the Word.”
<http://www.theaffrilachianpoets.com/history.html>

¹¹ Haraway, Donna. “*Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.*” *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3. (Autumn, 1988), pp. 575-599).

¹² David Deskins (Editor). *The Collected Works of Effie Waller Smith*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

**THE AFFRILACHIAN WAY AND THE FOUNDER OF BLACK HISTORY MONTH:
CARTER G. WOODSON (1875-1950)**

Carter G. Woodson, African-American, who worked as a coal miner and graduated high school in Huntington, WV, is perhaps the best known graduate of Berea College (1903). Dr. Woodson was in the Appalachia landscape long before “Affrilachia” came into popular parlance. After Berea, Woodson studied at the University of Chicago where, in addition to a second bachelor’s degree, he earned a Master’s degree in European History, then at the Sorbonne in Paris and finally at Harvard University where he earned a Ph.D. in history. Woodson was the founder of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History and was one of the first scholars to study African-American history. A founder of *The Journal of Negro History* in 1915, Woodson has been cited as the father of black history. In February 1926 he launched the celebration of "Negro History Week"; it was the precursor of Black History Month

Woodson pointed out in his work, published a century ago this year, how the frontier western counties of West Virginia had long drifted away from slave-holding eastern Virginia, and that many on this side of the mountains had little sympathy for the plantation owners who went on to run the Confederacy.¹³ Either if Mr. Walker missed in his research on Appalachia – or simply ignored – the monumental event in Harper’s Ferry, WV where abolitionist John Brown led a group of slaves to raid a Federal arsenal in 1859 triggering the Civil War, it is understandable if he also did not notice that the NAACP, which recognized him with its Image Award in 2013, had its origins in the Mountain State also, through the Niagara Movement.¹⁴

¹³ Woodson, Carter G. “Freedom and Slavery in Appalachian America,” in Blacks in Appalachia. Turner and Cabbell, Editors.

¹⁴ See: “No Black Folks, No West Virginia.”

<http://www.publicnewsservice.org/2013-06-14/civil-rights/no-black-folks-no-wv-the-african-american-key-to-state-history/a32971-1>

THE AFFRILACHIAN WAY AND DEPRESSION-ERA POET MURIEL RUKEYSER

It is completely ironic that Mr. Walker, a poet, positioned his need to identify with Appalachian blacks on a dictionary-induced deduction that there was nothing of substance in the literary vein about blacks in the Region when it was the work of Depression-Era poet – Muriel Rukeyser – that drew worldwide attention to two incidents involving blacks in Appalachian history and literature: the Scottsboro trial in Alabama and the Gauley Bridge tragedy in West Virginia.¹⁵

Ms. Rukeyser, like Mr. Walker, was an American bard, born in New York City, and was a radical political activist, best known for her poems on equality, feminism, and social justice. Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* is considered “the most ambitious and least understood work of Depression-era American verse.” It commemorates the worst industrial accident in U.S. history, the Gauley Tunnel tragedy. In this dreadful disaster, an undetermined number of men—likely somewhere between 700 and 800—died of acute silicosis, a lung disorder caused by prolonged inhalation of silica dust, after working on a tunnel project in Fayette County, West Virginia, in the early 1930s. At Hawk's Nest, near Gauley Bridge, West Virginia in the late 1920s, the majority of the employees were African-Americans. By this standard, Ms. Rukeyser qualifies, posthumously, as an honorary member of the Affrilachian Poets.

THE AFFRILACHIAN WAY RUNS FROM HARLAN TO MAYSVILLE, KENTUCKY

In terms of topography and natural features, Mr. Walker reduces to nothing key variances in Appalachian geography as well as significant differences between urban and rural areas, people with limited resources as compared to the middle class, and variances in the educational levels and lifestyles among and between the nearly 3 million African-Americans who live in the Appalachian

¹⁵ Famous American Trials: The Scottsboro Boys' Trials, 1931-1937. See: <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/scottsboro/scottsb.htm> and <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/muriel-rukeyser>

Region.¹⁶ Is it rural, such as Bean Station, TN, or urban, which describes Birmingham, AL. and Pittsburgh, PA – Appalachia’s two biggest cities – not to mention places like Winston-Salem, NC or Greenville, SC, or is the cultural space “mountain,” like Asheville, NC or “coal camp,” like Benham, Kentucky, in Harlan County, or nearby Lynch, or Gary, WV, its sister city, because both these model coal company towns were owned by United States Steel?

For example, Mr. Walker conflates the whole of “Affrilachia” into a comprehensive and all-inclusive space when he fuses otherwise geographically and culturally distinct areas of Kentucky, as he does, for example, in the poem “Kentucke:” “I too am of these hills/My folks/have corn rowed/tobacco/laid track/strip mined/from Harlan to Maysville.”

Even the creative versifier in Mr. Walker should concede that “From Harlan to Maysville” is strenuous embellishment. These two very different places in Kentucky (four hours, or two-hundred fifteen miles apart), one (Harlan) in the ARC-designated Appalachian region, the other (Maysville, on the Ohio River) not. These lines from “Kentucke,” which anchored *Affrilachia* – Mr. Walker’s groundbreaking collection of poems – are prodigious examples of punning, but to leave the impression that “Affrilachia” covers genuinely and realistically a swath of the Bluegrass State “from Harlan to Maysville” is more than poetic aggrandizement, it is deceitfully misleading – and not just geographically.

When Mr. Walker handed me an autographed copy of his 2006-published book, *Black Box Poems*, I was bothered, to say the least, when the opening lines in “*Great Day in Harlan*,” which he dedicated to me, described black coal miners who “stood there at the mouth of shaft number five.” The misleading detail, the missing step: my native Harlan County, where my grandfather, father, uncles, and brother worked the coalfaces – has never had shaft mines. Blue Diamond Scotia Mine, in neighboring Letcher County, was a shaft as well as slope mine, and the same company also had a shaft/slope mine in Leatherwood, in Perry County. One might need to be from there to know that; if not, one – even a creative poet like Mr. Walker – should do the research.¹⁷

THE AFFRILACHIAN WAY: JUST ANOTHER WAY OF “OTHERING” APPALACHIA

¹⁶ Obermiller, Phillip J. and Michael E. Maloney. “The Uses and Misuses of Appalachian Culture.” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* Vol. 22, No. 1 (Spring 2016), pp. 103-112.

¹⁷ Walker, Frank X. *Black Box Poems*. Old Cove Press. Lexington, Kentucky. 2006

Appalachia has been a source of enduring myths and distortions and Mr. Walker's portrayal of the region misrepresents those mistaken beliefs even more, to an all new level, in blackface.

Affrilachian: "This word combines *African* (or *African-American*) and *Appalachian*, with an extra *f* thrown in to match the latter's two *p*'s (a poet coined the word, and poets can get away with that kind of thing). The Appalachian adjective relates to people or things that come from Appalachia, "a region characterized by marginal economy, isolation of its people from the U.S. mainstream, and distinctive folkways."¹⁸

That some parts of Appalachia have marginal economies, are isolated from the mainstream, and the inhabitants exhibit distinctive folkways defines not only parts of Appalachia, but it refers just as well to rural parts of the Great Plains and in the West, such as in Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

Just as the local color writers did¹⁹, Mr. Walker, as narrator, combines romanticism and realism to deliver *Affrilachia* into existence with a very hip and cool new word, i.e., "poets can get away with that kind of thing," and "Walker understands that he who controls the language, that he who does the naming, [also] controls the social, economic, and cultural life of a people and their potential."²⁰

With Appalachian as adjective put side by side to the image of an all-white space, Walker then frames blacks – in the interplay – as the "Other." Next, Walker expands this imperfect landscape by saying: "Affrilachia is an ever-evolving cultural landscape poised to render the invisible visible. Affrilachia embraces a multicultural influence, a spectrum of people who consider Appalachia home and/or identify strongly with the trials and triumphs of being of this

¹⁸ Jones, Parmisha. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/parneshiajones>. See also: <http://wordspy.com/index.php?word=affrilachian>

¹⁹ Williams, John A. *Appalachia: A History*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. (2002)

²⁰ Shurbutt, S. Bailey. *Voices from Affrilachia: The Poetry and Storytelling of Frank X Walker*. See: www.shepherd.edu/ahwirweb/walker/essay.doc

region.” From these creation points, Affrilachia becomes a classic example of reduction ad absurdum, except, of course, in a poetic sense.

AFFRILACHIA THE ARTICLE OF TRADE

The FAQ²¹ tab on the Affrilachian Poets website provides the most illuminating substantiations of how the argument for the reality of Affrilachia – as a place – depends almost entirely on assumptions that are false, incongruous, inconsistent, nebulous, and untenable – a kind of proof by contradiction:

Q1: Are the Affrilachian Poets a "black group" only?

A: The Affrilachian Poets have a myriad of ethnicities among our ranks. Our members claim heritage from all around the world: Africa, Europe, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean.

Q2: If the word "Affrilachian" has "Africa" in it, why do the Affrilachian Poets include members from other nationalities?

A: Affrilachia is a cultural space stemming from a specific region and embracing the concept that Appalachia plays host to a spectrum of racial and cultural identity. The term provides a door to a much broader conversation that involves a cross-section of people who can claim a number of nationalities, not just that of African descent.

Q3: What if I identify as Affrilachian? Can I use the term to refer to myself?

A: Of course! The word is in the dictionary!²² The more people who inundate the world with the concept of Affrilachia, the closer we are to overthrowing the unfortunate stereotypes of a homogenized region.

Q4: Can I call myself an Affrilachian Poet?

A: Unfortunately, the brand of The Affrilachian Poets is taken and refers to this specific community of writers, but if you are a poet who also happens to consider yourself Affrilachian, more power to you! We just ask that you clarify your distinction from our brand in any publicity material to avoid confusion.

Q5: How does one become a member of the Affrilachian Poets?

²¹ <http://www.theaffrilachianpoets.com/history.html>

²² “Affrilachian.” *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 3rd ed. Eds. Angus Stevenson and Christine A. Lindberg. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010: 27. ASU PE1628.N429

A: Through an internal process. However, the Affrilachian Poets rarely recruit new members. That said, we're not the only multicultural writing group out there! Check out: Cave Canem, Callaloo, Kundiman, and Letras Latinas, just to name a few!

The response to Q3 magnifies the assumption that most people *still* maintain the view that Appalachia is homogeneous (all white), while disregarding the literature to the contrary. The two-part answer to Q4 and Q5 demonstrates both the highest form of hubris as well as a blatant contradiction: a poet *cannot* call him or herself an Affrilachian Poet as that is “a brand that is taken,” but, if a person simply *considers* themselves an Affrilachian, then it’s acceptable (evidently so long as such aspirants distinguish themselves from *real* Affrilachian Poets, a members-only assembly). The distinction between “branded” and “non-branded” Affrilachian poets safeguards territorial encroachment. The question becomes: If *anybody* can be an Affrilachian, what sets those who identify as Affrilachians apart from everybody else?

Mr. Walker spoke about the place in his work where “research ends and conjuring begins.”²³

CXD: How do you think about the interplay between your work as an objective historian and a visionary poet? Is there a place where research ends and conjuring begins?

FXW: I’m always honored when schools and colleges use my Historical Poetry as supplemental textbooks when studying history, but I have no illusions about the fictitious nature of my work. No matter how effective the speaking voice or individual poem may come across, it is its roots and references to actual history that give these kind of poems legitimacy. Once the historical poem hits the page, its history and poetry must live in the same place at the same time and communicate in a credible way. There is absolutely a place where the research ends and the conjuring begins. The research always comes first. The poet/researcher must first exhaust themselves [sic] with the details. They must become an expert on their subject before

²³ Frank X. Walker: Conversation with CX Dillhunt and Drew Dillhunt, see: <http://versewisconsin.org/Issue110/prose/walker.html>

sitting down to write the poem. They must discover and know more about their subject than they ever plan to share in the overall narrative.

Going back to “where research ends and conjuring begins,” when it comes to Appalachia, Mr. Walker seems to have done much more conjuring – sleight of hand and illusion -- than research. For example, Mr. Walker did not follow his own directive, for had he exhausted himself with the details and become an expert on Appalachia, he would have discovered that fully a decade before he began to revel in [his] Affrilachia, to “make the invisible visible,” Ed Cabbell had already published “*Black Invisibility and Racism in Appalachia: An Informal Survey*.”²⁴ Mr. Cabbell, an African-American born and raised in Eckman – McDowell County – West Virginia, produced his Master’s thesis titled, “*References and Resources on Black Appalachians: A Bibliography*” in 1982 at Appalachian State University under the mentorship of Dr. Patricia Beaver.

Had Mr. Walker investigated the life of the WV-born Cabbell while birthing his Affrilachia brand, he would have had pause not to believe nor to promulgate the idea that blacks had no presence or agency in Appalachia, to include his misinformed opinion that the literary landscape of the region was all white. In the late 1960s, Mr. Cabbell, upon his induction as “A West Virginia History Hero,” was distinguished as “one of the last true coal camp kids and a descendant of the Haley family of *Roots* fame, who taught history at the college level for more than 25 years. He is the backbone of the John Henry Center for Culture and History Exchange (JHCHE), where programs he developed attempt to balance entertainment, social activism and the history of black Appalachians. His poetry was most recently published in the anthology *Wild Sweet Notes* and his programs have been recognized at the Smithsonian Institution.” Berea College recognized Mr. Cabbell as “the single most important creator and framer of the black experience in Appalachia, an

²⁴ Cabbell, Edward J. “Black Invisibility and Racism in Appalachia: An Informal Survey.” *Appalachian Journal* Vol. 8, No. 1 (AUTUMN 1980), pp. 48-54

active torchbearer for raising awareness about the black Appalachian presence and experience extending back to his mid-1960s undergraduate days at Concord College in Athens, West Virginia.”²⁵

Mr. Cabbell founded and headed a number of organizations beginning in the mid-1960s, to include the John Henry Memorial Foundation through which he hosted the annual John Henry Memorial Festival in addition to establishing the Princeton, WV- based John Henry Museum “for preserving Appalachian African American heritage.” In addition to his work as a poet and musician who performed, *a capella*, Negro Spirituals at the 2000 and 2001 Celebration of Traditional Music Festival(s) at Berea College, Cabbell also wrote frequently in the 1970s and 80s in grassroots-focused publications such as *Mountain Life and Work*; and, as a public intellectual, he captured stories from a broad range of rural black Appalachian life and culture reporting for WV’s famed periodical, *Goldenseal: The Magazine for WV Traditional Life*.²⁶

In a 1985-published essay titled “*The Demography of Black Appalachia*,”²⁷ I wrote a detailed profile which was packed with the appropriate data to show the presence of blacks in the region. Berea College history professor Robert Stuckert researched Black populations in southern Appalachia in 1860 underscoring what he called “the size and diversity of the region's Black population.” This article describes the cultural and settlement patterns of people of color in

²⁵ See: <http://community.berea.edu/hutchinslibrary/specialcollections/amfp/EdCabbell.pdf>

²⁶ "The Soulful Side of Mountain Life": Ten Years of the John Henry Festival , 9:3, p.67; “Uncle Homer Walker,” 6:3; p70 and “Where Could I Go But to the Lord?” Shape-note Singing Among Blacks in Southern West Virginia.” 7:4; p. 65 (*Goldenseal*)

²⁷ Turner, William H. and Edward J. Cabbell. Blacks in Appalachia. Lexington. University Press of Kentucky. 1985

Appalachia and traces their historical development, occupational changes, and the effects of urbanization [on the Black populations of Appalachia].”²⁸

Even if Mr. Walker was not aware of and did not do the research to back his claim that nothing of significance about blacks in the Appalachian sectors of his native Kentucky existed prior to the entry of Affrilachia in the dictionary and popular vocabulary, the evidence was there in West Virginia, where reports on the educational, economic, and social conditions of its African American citizens was published yearly between 1921 and 1957 by the Bureau of Negro Welfare and Statistics.²⁹ Black miners and their families – in critical mass – shaped communities in West Virginia like Keystone, Gary, Welch, and Princeton, places that became the centers of the struggle for unions, better education, and expanded civil rights.

That African Americans lacked agency in asserting their historical presence and contributions to Appalachia prior to the coming of Affrilachia is also refuted in the exceptional voice and scholarly work of Dr. Ancella R. Bickley, the co-editor of *Memphis Tennessee Garrison: The Remarkable Story of a Black Appalachian Woman*. Garrison (1890-1988), an innovative teacher, administrative worker at U.S. Steel, and vice president of the National Board of the NAACP at the height of the civil rights struggle, was a remarkable woman who portrayed a courageous people who organized to improve their working conditions, send their children to school and then to college, to own land, and support a wide range of cultural and political activities in Appalachia.³⁰

²⁸ Stuckert, Robert P. “Black Populations of the Southern Appalachian Mountains.” *Phylon* (1960-) Vol. 48, No. 2 (2nd Qtr., 1987), pp. 141-151

²⁹ Reynolds, Colin. “The Rise and Fall of West Virginia’s Bureau of Negro Welfare and Statistics, 1921-1957.” *West Virginia History: A Journal of Regional Studies*. New Series, Volume 9, Number 1, Spring, 2015 pp. 1-22

³⁰ Bickley, Ancella R. and Lynda A. Ewen. (Editors) Memphis Tennessee Garrison: The Remarkable Story of a Black Appalachian Woman. Athens. Ohio University Press. 2001.

In 1971, twenty years before the coming of the brand Affrilachia – when Mr. Walker was ten years old – Hillsville, Virginia native and Berea graduate James Branscombe observed:

One group of Appalachians who are consistently overlooked and underserved by the institutions of the region is the blacks. While the percentage of blacks in the region as a whole is low, about eight percent, they make up the entire population of many isolated small hollows and ghost coal towns abandoned by the corporations and welfare and poverty agencies. Because the backbreaking jobs that brought black imports into the region are gone and because of the discrimination and competition with the majority of poor white people for jobs and welfare funds, their existence is a poor one indeed. As yet, no agency or journalist has documented the presence and needs of these people, let alone described the culture of a minority group in the midst of another cultural minority.³¹

Again, Mr. Cabbell's 1982 master's thesis, which filled part of the void spoken of by Mr. Branscombe, was published a decade *before* Mr. Walker's Affrilachia entered the lexicon. Cabbell's thesis abridged at least two dozen creative literary pieces that are grounded, authentically, in the black Appalachian landscape. Mr. Cabbell compiled for Blacks in Appalachia a "Resource Guide" of a) cultural and service organizations, b) films and filmstrips, c) recordings by traditional (old time) black Appalachian musicians, d) presentations of the Legend of John Henry, e) fictional literature (two dozen books, including William N. Harben's 1907 novel, Mam' Linda: A Novel, about a black woman in Appalachia), as well as f) a summary of sixty-six theses and dissertations focused on the presence of blacks in Appalachia.

That the Affrilachianists did not observe or have knowledge of Mr. Cabbell's work evokes the metaphysical question of what happens to unperceived existences and of the unobserved

³¹ Branscombe, James G. "Annihilating the Hillbilly: The Appalachian's Struggle with American Institutions," in Journal of the Committee of Southern Churchmen. Winter 1971, 40.

worlds.³² It's an old riddle: "If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?"

With all due respect to the applause and fame Mr. Walker has relished in since he coined the term Affrilachia a quarter century ago, the voluminous antecedents to his "discovery," including literary ones, were apparently *hidden* from him, or he stepped right over or around them. Mr. Walker asserted, despite the fact that even a cursory examination would have shown how unnecessary it was to do so, that he: "...accepted the responsibility of challenging the notion of a homogenous all-while literary landscape in this region."³³

There were enough manuscripts – including the literary category – in plain sight in 1991 for Mr. Walker to examine so that he would not have put his faith *solely* on the *Webster's Dictionary* definition of Appalachian, which, according to him, encompassed "only whites." The term "Affrilachia" was coined after Mr. Walker read that for one to be considered an Appalachian, they had to be a white resident of the mountainous region. He later went on to create the Affrilachian Poets literary movement in his home state.³⁴ Despite Mr. Walker's Isaac Newton-like realization (Affrilachia - the falling apple) there was – as has been documented here – a relatively copious and diverse and valued quantity of anthropological, demographic, historical, literary, and sociological knowledge about blacks in Appalachia for which Mr. Walker has been given excessive – and undue credit – for dreaming up.³⁵

THE AFFRILACHIAN WAY AND THE APPALACHIAN LITERARY GATEKEEPERS

³² Berkeley, George. A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge See: <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/berkeley1710.pdf>

³³ <http://enculturation.net/naming-affrilachia>

³⁴ blackamericaweb.com/2014/07/31/little-known-black-history-fact-frank-x-walker/

³⁵ <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=epiphany>

Those who over the years who have highly praised the work of the Affrilachianists, specifically Mr. Walker, do so without looking at the *missing steps* in Affrilachia as a social, albeit a poetic, construct, in terms of its credibility and plausibility.³⁶ Gurney Norman, Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Kentucky for nearly four decades – and Mr. Walker’s undergraduate advisor – had a heavy hand in seeding Affrilachia in Appalachian literary circles. Understandably, Mr. Norman was one of the first to endorse and validate Affrilachia: “If the dominant culture doesn’t recognize you, refuses you space within its coterie, then create your own niche.”³⁷

Mr. Norman holds a deservedly high place in Appalachian literary circles. The reviewer of his 1977 classic, Kinfolks: The Wilgus Tales --- which won the Weatherford Award for non-fiction from the Appalachian Studies Association – called it “one of the great unknown gems of contemporary literature,” christening Norman “the Mark Twain of Appalachia!”³⁸

Professor Norman’s stamp of approval on Affrilachia is fastened on the underside by the fact that he was born in Grundy, Virginia, grew up in the southern Appalachian Mountains, and was raised alternately by his maternal grandparents in Southwest Virginia and his paternal grandparents in Eastern Kentucky. What Mr. Walker does not have in terms of a “connection to the land,” the man whom he calls his “literary father” does. Mr. Walker was selected as the 2013-2014 Kentucky Poet Laureate, as was his mentor and advocate, Mr. Norman, four years earlier.

Norman owns Old Cove Press which published Walker’s first volume of poetry, *Affrilachia*, in 2000, a year after he founded the publishing company which focuses on poetry, fiction, and art from Kentucky and its surrounding region. On the back jacket of “*Affrilachia*,” the marketing blurb reads:

“Frank X Walker’s path breaking book of poems *Affrilachia* is a classic of Appalachian and

³⁶32 See: Wampler, Angela. “Affrilachia: Black Artists in our Region.” *Art Alliance Mountain Empire*. <http://artsmagazine.info/articles.php?view=detail&id=2008052420513782157>

³⁷ Burris, Theresa. “Claiming Literary Space: The Affrilachian Poets,” in: *An American Vein: Critical Readings in Appalachian Literature*, eds. Danny Miller, Sharon Hatfield, and Gurney Norman. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005).

³⁸ See: <https://books.google.com/books/about/Kinfolks.html?id=MiyHQAACAAJ>

African-American literature. Walker created the word Affrilachia to help make visible the experience of African-Americans living in the rural and Appalachian South. The book is widely used in classrooms and is one of the foundational works of the Affrilachian Poets, a community of writers offering fresh ways to think about diversity in the Appalachian region and beyond.”³⁹

On the observation of the Tenth Anniversary of the Affrilachian Poets, in 2001, Walker said: "UK Professor Gurney Norman, a white man, has been there from the beginning. He has advised and supported us over the years, so we made him an honorary member."⁴⁰ Mr. Norman, with a lived experience is Southwest Virginia and Eastern Kentucky must have known that there were critical masses of blacks in the coal camps of Grundy, Virginia and Jenkins, Kentucky, where he was raised. It is a mystery why Professor Norman did not say to his student in 1991, “Frank, there *are* and *always have been* black people in my part of Appalachia; don’t believe what you saw in the dictionary.” Mr. Norman may wish to return a favor to the poet he trained and make Mr. Walker an honorary Appalachian.

Though she began her article on writings of “Affrilachian” women with a verification that Effie Waller Smith was the first Appalachian African American bard-of-note, Shaina D. Y. Taylor⁴¹ made note that Mr. Walker sheltered in “Affrilachia” in 1991, literarily speaking, because at the time he was “lacking a semantic identity.” Then too, it is just as likely that Mr. Walker chose his offbeat construct – Affrilachia -- because he knew he would escape criticism. The Appalachian group that embraced Nikky Finney in Walker’s presence, it seems, was assertively in quest of being more inclusive; and, besides, Walker made it clear that he was fascinated and obsessed with being accepted by the

³⁹ <http://oldcove.com/> -- accessed August 25, 2016.

⁴⁰ <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Soul+in+them+there+Hills.-a072275236>

⁴¹ Shaina D. Y. Taylor. “Gender, Race, and Place: Plurality and Diversity in the Writings of Affrilachian Women.” http://www.marshall.edu/carterwoodson/Shaina_tayoor.asp

network of white Appalachian writers represented by his mentor, Gurney Norman. Perhaps Ms. Taylor did not know that Walker was not born and raised in Appalachia, or, maybe, it didn't matter to her; either way, she quoted him as follows:

“As an African-American who lived in Appalachia, I felt as if I were being locked out of something important to me. Something that had always been a part of who I am. Refusing to remain invisible, Walker coined a term that would serve as the title for the identity he and countless other African other African Americans who inhabit the hills had searched for...”⁴²

Describing the Affrilachian poets in the very much clichéd and stereotyped expression, “Soul in them there hills,” Quraysh Ali Lansana, editor of *Black Issues Book Review*, described how shocked Mr. Walker was when he looked up the word “Appalachian” in the then-current edition of Webster's New World Dictionary in 1991 when he witnessed how a conference titled “The Best of Appalachian Writing” was changed to “The Best of Southern Writing” when English faculty member and poet, African American Nikky Finney, was added to the lineup of presenters. After reading the description of Appalachia, Mr. Walker surmised “It meant I could never be, could never consider myself Appalachian.” That “didn't make a great deal of sense to Walker, despite knowing that he was a native of Danville and a descendent of three generations of black Kentuckians from the foothills of the mountain range.”⁴³

Said Walker, “I felt as if I were being locked out of something important to me. Something that had always been a part of who I am. I could never afford a therapist, so I went to my journal to help me make sense of it.”⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Lansana, Quraysh Ali, “Soul in them there hills.” *Black Issues Book Review* 3, No 2 (2001).

What is missing here, logically, is the fact that where Mr. Walker was born and raised and has spent the bulk of his life – in or close to Lexington Kentucky’s Bluegrass Region – is, in the idiom of the mountain South, *nowhere near* “the foothills of the mountain range.” In the early 1990s, Mr. Walker and his erstwhile cloistered group of friends and advisors had a desperate need for a logical place to stake their identity; and, semantically, “Affrilachia” branded and gave them the distinctiveness and visibility they lacked otherwise. Earlier in a piece titled “Affrilachia: A History of the Word,” Walker “learned he did not exist,” prior to 1991, when he dreamt up the word.⁴⁵ Not unexpectedly, Mr. Walker dedicated the poem “Affrilachia” to Mr. Norman.

Mr. Lansana recalled how “Walker took his new term, “Affrilachian” to the writing group where there was an electric response, *something* about the word that the group connected with...” It is not too much of a leap of logic to conclude that Affrilachian attached the hopeful

... some of the bluegrass
is black
enough to know
that being colored and all
is generally lost
somewhere between
the dukes of hazzard
and the beverly hillbillies
but
if you think
makin shine from corn
is as hard as kentucky coal
imagine being
an Affrilachian
poet
--from Affrilachia

group of creative writers to people of color in the Appalachian Mountains because the other geographical places and cultural spaces associated with blacks were *taken* up, so to speak! In addition, Affrilachia engaged the curiosity, naiveté and gullibility of Generation Xers – and others not so young – whose working knowledge about African American history and culture, in general, is quite limited and even less so on the topic of black people in Appalachia.⁴⁶ Following Mr. Walker’s logic, it is difficult to imagine being an “Affrilachian” poet because, as the website notes, “the Affrilachian Poets rarely recruit

new members.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ “How Much U.S. History Do Americans Actually Know? Less Than You Think.”

Read more:

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-much-us-history-do-americans-actually-know-less-you-think-180955431/#u5GC2JXSAVKJqxD9.99>

⁴⁷ See Q5 on Page 8, above.

“AFFRI-LACHIAN” OR “AFFRI-LAYCHIAN?”

The most acclaimed of the Affrilachian Poets, Nikky Finney, whose book *Head Off & Split*, won the National Book Award for Poetry in 2011, said, “Being an Affrilachian poets means that these black poets have *founded* a country.”⁴⁸ To Ms. Finney’s point -- Affrilachia as a *founded* country – does have a tad of the élan and flair of the Gullah or Geechee; the term that identifies the black people who live on the coast of her native South Carolina. With the poet’s penchant for spoken embroidery, Affrilachia – the invention – became something that was not only quite catchy, but it gave Walker a certain privileged status to even devise his own flag, had he cared to do so.

And, since Appalachia extends into the core of the American South, “Affrilachia” takes on the panache of “Black Belt Blacks,” those African-Americans found across the band of fertile land between Central Alabama and Northeast Mississippi – parts of which include ARC-designated counties, cutting near the Mississippi home region of Affrilachian Poet Kelly Ellis Norman.

Ms. Norman – professor of creative writing at Chicago State University – composed a poem titled “*Affrilachia: For the Black Appalachians*” in which she referred to Mildred Jeter – black -- and her childhood sweetheart, a white construction worker, Richard Loving. The Lovings won a case heard in 1967 by the Supreme Court, which struck Virginia’s anti-miscegenation laws, recognizing their interracial marriage. The only problem – the missing step – in terms of realism and validity: where the Lovings lived is a bit more than an hour almost directly south of Washington, DC, in Caroline County, near Fredericksburg, Virginia, which is *nowhere near* any of Virginia’s Appalachian counties.

When the Affrilachian Poets presented me during the twentieth anniversary of its launch with its Carter G. Woodson Award, I was given a handsomely-framed copy of Ms. Ellis’ Appalachian name-dropping verse, “*Affrilachia: For the Black Appalachians.*” On my first read of it, which I did while listening to the person handing over the award, I tripped over this abominable

⁴⁸ Lansana, Quraysh Ali. “Soul in them there hills.” <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Soul+in+them+there+Hills.-a072275236>

blooper: the Lovings as archetypes of the Black Appalachian experience: an outstandingly shocking missed geographical step.

When Ron D. Eller wrote “we are all Appalachians,”⁴⁹ he specified lived experience as first-hand accounts and impressions of living as a member of a particular group, extrapolated here to describe a marginalized minority group. When women talk about what it is like to be female in a predominantly white male-dominated society, they are describing *their* lived experience which men have not and cannot live and cannot “speak to” with authenticity, genuineness, reliability, and realism.

In the same sentence where he said Affrilachia incorporated “a mountain range ... along the East Coast from Mississippi to New York,” Mr. Walker said his contrived space is also an “ever-evolving cultural landscape (which is) poised to render the invisible visible, embraces a myriad of ethnicities [who] claim heritage from all around the world: Africa, Europe, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean.”⁵⁰ Appalachia, inside this stretch, is no longer about people of color in the Appalachian region, but rather it morphs into an ever-fluid, multicultural, uber-diverse, group.

Lived experience in Appalachia is apparently a settled point for Mr. Walker. Living in Appalachia or having had a lived experience in the region is not important to him. However, Mr. Walker and the Affrilachian Poets have chosen to “be” Appalachian even though they do not have the lived experiences of their subjects: the marginalized, coal-blooded black (mountain) people for whom and about whose experiences they purport to speak and with whom they identify.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the bulk of Mr. Walker’s work is not grounded in Appalachia, or should I rather say, Affrilachia. Dr. Paul C. Taylor, one of the founding members of the Affrilachian poets and professor of philosophy at Penn State, in a presentation titled “Call Me

⁴⁹ Eller, Ronald D. Uneven Ground: Appalachian Since 1945. (2008) by University Press of Kentucky. Lexington

⁵⁰ <http://www.theaffrilachianpoets.com/>

Out My Name: Inventing Affrilachia” – delivered at the twentieth anniversary celebration of the group at the University of Kentucky in March 2011 – stated that the act of *identifying* with the region and *calling oneself* “Affrilachian” were the *sin qua non* conditions driving his fellow writers’ works, that neither the frame of reference nor the substance of the work needed to be grounded in the Appalachian Region, only that the work focus, broadly, on identity, family roots, and place. A word search for “Appalachia” in the works of the thirty-three members on Affrilachian Poets website in the summer of 2016 revealed that that place is *not* Appalachia.

Mr. Walker’s works follow Taylor’s guiding principle without a glitch: Isaac Murphy: I Dedicate this Ride is about an Africa-American jockey from Lexington, Kentucky who won the Kentucky Derby several times. When Winter Comes and Buffalo Dance are focused on York, a black man who accompanied Lewis and Clark on their trip to the Pacific Northwest. America: What’s My Name is a critique of what Mr. Walker calls “the elitist mystique of the literary menu.” The book for which the NAACP gave Mr. Walker its Image Award in 2014, Turn Me Loose: The Unghosting of Medgar Evers: poems is about the renowned head of a Mississippi chapter of the NAACP and a civil rights martyr. Except in the jacket liners of these works, the words “Affrilachian” and “Appalachian” do not appear. The question is answered: If works are not set in the Appalachian Region and characters and narratives are not specific to the region, then the work should not be regarded as Appalachian, or Affrilachian, for that matter.

According to his impressive websites, Mr. Walker has lectured, conducted workshops, read poetry and exhibited at over 300 national conferences and universities including the Verbal Arts Centre in Derry, Northern Ireland; Santiago, Cuba; University of California at Berkeley; Notre Dame; Louisiana State University at Alexandria; University of Washington; Virginia Tech; Radford University; and Appalachian State University. He was not invited to all these places unless the word got around that he is a dazzling wordsmith, but with the “all white” stereotype of Appalachia on

which Mr. Walker suggests most people organize their perspective of the Region, it stands to reason that any intellectually curious person would make inquiries about exactly what an “Affrilachian Poet” represents, what sets one apart from other poets whose work is determined or influenced by a geographical designation, however imprecise and ill-defined. They might well expect an Affrilachian poet to introduce them to this enigmatic-sounding nameplace, “Affrilachia.” It could be asked, “What Affrilachians – these people of color – are like, in contrast to other African Americans, who live, give or take a hundred or so miles away? Do Mr. Walker’s audiences in these widespread places know about the missing steps – where there are no railings onto which to hold – to which I am referring? Native purists like me are bound to wonder if Mr. Walker and his companions lead a discussion on whether it’s pronounced “Affri-Latchian” or “Affri-Laychian?” Or, do they say instead, “It’s ok because we all will remember to just jump over those steps and enjoy the poetry.”

The ARC contributed mightily to the confusion over the questions of exactly what and where Appalachia is by including some highly dissimilar geographically and culturally districts under the rubric of Appalachia, going back to 1965. In a way, the ever-expanding boundaries of Appalachia by the ARC legitimizes Mr. Walker’s albeit bizarre statement that Appalachia in Kentucky extends from “Harlan to Maysville.” Mr. Walker is indifferent to what Eller has long emphasized: Appalachia is a lived experience that contains the historical roots of people who have a shared experience in the place. In fact, as an aside, there is a Kentucky ARC county – Edmondson – that is even further west (of Kentucky’s Bluegrass Region) than is Mr. Walker’s home county (Boyle). County politicians in Edmondson lobbied, successfully, to be counted – like Harlan and Pike counties – in order to receive funds to fight the scourge of methamphetamines and opioids.

AFFRILACHIAN POETS ALSO HAVE COAL-BLOODED VOICES

In 2001, Walker produced a documentary titled *Coal Black Voices*, extending the metaphor and begging further the question of his group’s “attachment to the land.” To the trusting listener, the

words coal and black, taken together, denote the coal mines of Appalachia, but not in this case. Besides Ms. Crystal Wilkinson – a poet and writer who grew up in rural Casey County, Kentucky – Ms. Crystal Good is the only other Affrilachian Poet on the group’s website that I can determine to have an attachment to the land (Appalachia). Ms. Good of Huntington, WV, describes herself as “an Affrilachian artist, poet, author, and advocate thriving in the heart of Appalachia.” In an article highly critical of the presentation on which this essay is based, Ms. Good defined herself as “a six generation West Virginian and I live in the ARC-defined geographical limitations. I write, research and create story lines about Black folks in West Virginia [and] I engage in advocacy for Blacks in Appalachia.”⁵¹

Mr. Walker and all other members of the “Affrilachian Poets” – except Ms. Wilkinson and Ms. Good – do not mention these important sockets into which lived experiences are plugged in their talking points and online personas. It is the absence of this linkage – one of the missing steps – that shows how Mr. Walker’s construct, however creative, inventive, and original, is just another example of “othering” Appalachia. However, he got no calls of reproach.

University of Kentucky sociologist Dwight Billings – a WV native – and Gurney Norman, among other Appalachian scholars, denounced Robert Schenkkan for his work Kentucky Cycle, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992.

"On the one hand, its (Appalachia's) population has been represented as a cultural other, out of step with mainstream life. On the other hand, its economy has been pictured either as an empty space of backwardness waiting to be filled by capitalism, or, conversely, as a zone of total dependency and exploitation, a metaphor for all that is wrong with the American political economy." Either portrayal, Billings argues, are "essentialist" views

⁵¹ Good, Crystal. “Artist, Entrepreneur, Advocate.” <http://crystalgood.net/>

that reduce the complexity of Appalachia and its people to a one-dimensional preconception.⁵²

Inferentially, Mr. Walker portrays and represents Appalachian blacks as an allegory on the stage of “backwardness” and “dependency” and his creative construct “Affrilachia,” is the very soul of essentialism. However, I have found no critiques of “Affrilachia” along the lines of my own disapproval of the term. The community of Appalachian scholars, activists, and artists have protected Mr. Walker by treating the ambiguities and illogicalities of Affrilachia like a missing stair to be walked around or jumped over, never asking “what is missing here?” After twenty-five years of constant repetition of the word and its associated images, phrases, and marketed products, its saturation on social media, e.g., Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, Pinterest, the widely-circulated documentary *Coal Black Voices* (and the teaching tools based on it), the word “Affrilachia” has become a literary trope, a rhetorical device, a motif, and for some, a cliché, an accepted fact of life, i.e. “The word is in the dictionary! The more people who inundate the world with the concept of Affrilachia, the closer we are to ...”

Mr. Walker – as Mr. Robert Schenkkan does with the mythological families in Kentucky’s Cumberland Plateau -- views people of color in the Appalachian Region as a “category” whom he has assigned intrinsically different and characteristic natures and dispositions. Fortunately, at least, none of what I have read from Mr. Walker and the Affrilachian Poets tries to make up a primal and colorful Affrilachian identity, some fictitious types (or worse, stereotypes) constructed to give birth

⁵² Billings, Dwight B., Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford. Foreword by Ron Eller. Back Talk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes. University Press of Kentucky (1999). Lexington)

to regional racial authenticity, characters communicating in some “*nachel*” black mountain discourse, some simulated sounds, some hypnotizing Harlan County lingo.

Whether or not poets and creative writers should be held to standards that govern documentation and accuracy is a matter of long standing debate. But, there should be little debate that Mr. Walker’s construct – Affrilachia – falls into the category of reification and misplaced concreteness. Affrilachia is an abstraction that Mr. Walker has marketed, literally, and in terms of literature, as if it were a concrete physical and cultural space.⁵³

No one disputes that Mr. Walker is an outstanding poet, but he is just as much a fanciful cultural marketer – particularly of himself through his expansive online persona. Mr. Walker is an artreprenuer – the builder of a successful creative business. An AffrilachianPoet Tee-Shirt is promoted on Zazzle.com as “comfortable, casual and loose fitting...wears well on anyone. Select a design from our marketplace or customize it to make it uniquely yours!” To buy an Affrilachian Poets Tee Shirt, one simply goes to <http://shirts.meetees.com/Affrilachian-Poets.html>.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Frank X Walker had every right to coin the word “Affrilachia,” to fotch together the puzzle pieces of this then-unknown region and to encase inside its boundaries the people (Affrilachians) whom the term labels, and to further bring together his creative chums (Affrilachian Poets, aka, “Coal Black Voices”), and to construct and activate a social media-driven marketing campaign that propels what has become, over the last twenty-five years, a relatively thriving cultural cottage industry.

⁵³ Aufderheide, Patricia, Katharine Coles, Peter Jaszi, and Jennifer Urban. Code of best practices in fair use for poetry. centerforsocialmedia.org/poetry • poetryfoundation.org/fairuse

What Mr. Walker could not do with his right and freedom of artistic expression is insulate himself from the questions and criticisms raised in this essay – and prior ones – of how the advancement of “Affrilachia” raises queries about the requirement that the body of his work – like any other way through which we comprehend the Appalachian region and racial identity -- must be held accountable in terms of authenticity and intellectual honesty.⁵⁴

Mr. Frank X. Walker has, for all intents and purposes, appropriated and commoditized (Black) Appalachia as a cultural prop for his creative work. Even as I have never been totally at ease with the label “Appalachia,” I am willing to accept it when I think it has some utility in the political arena, in making a positive difference in the lives of people. For that reason, I will give the Affrilachia Poets the benefits of my doubts if they will commit to spending time grounding their identity and work in the Appalachian Region, and contribute to the agency of the people to do for themselves what they – the Affrilachian Poets – claim to do for them.

The social consequences – the life chances – of being an African American in Appalachia still counts. It adds up in places like Keystone, in McDowell County, WV, and in Beckley and Huntington and Charleston. There continue to be large and critical numbers of black people in a few places in Eastern Kentucky, places like Hazard, Middlesboro, Harlan, Benham and Lynch. There is an altogether different history and culture of people of color in the Southern Region of Appalachia, as defined by the ARC. The greater numbers and growing populations of black people are in counties with names like Talladega, Tallapoosa, and Tuscaloosa in Alabama, and Chickasaw, Choctaw, Clay, Itawamba, Noxubee, Oktibbeha, Panola, Pontotoc, Tippah, Tishomingo, and Yalobusha in Mississippi. It would make quite a difference in the lives of African Americans living in those places if their voices were heard. As activists, the Affrilachian Poets and their devotees and

⁵⁴ Turner, William H. “Affrilachia As Brand,” in Appalachian Heritage. Fall 2011. V 39, Issue #4. Pg. 27

enthusiasts in the network of the Appalachian Studies Association and Appalachian College Association⁵⁵ can make that happen by organizing spoken word events on their campuses and invite – and train – local black voices.

I challenge the Affrilachian Poets to help people of color who live in the Region to find the words to address the issues raised by their lived experiences; lest they get lost in the cacophony of the diasporas, the inter-sectionals, and the trans-regional voices that the Affrilachians have positioned themselves to represent. I would like to see writers – Affrilachian or otherwise – go into the mountains of Eastern Kentucky, SW Virginia, and Southern WV and hear and record and help to refine the voices of those with lived experiences in the mountains.⁵⁶ I would be quite surprised, however, if any of these people referred to themselves as Appalachians, let alone “Affrilachians.”

Mr. Walker, in an undated interview conducted on Wisconsin Public Radio by fellow poet CX Dillhunt,⁵⁷ was asked this very question:

How do you respond when someone asks about Affrilachia? How do you ensure this word you’ve brought into the world is filled up with the meaning you intended for it?

FXW: I used to think that the only insurance I had was the Oxford English Dictionary definition and the ongoing work and activity of the members of the Affrilachian Poets, but I recently became a board member of the Appalachian Studies Association. I hope to use the opportunity to further promote our ideas about inclusiveness in the region. I have answered the Affrilachia boundary questions so often that I actually enjoy dispelling myths about the region and teaching people how important out migrants from the region are and how their presence has influenced the cities they’ve settled in.

⁵⁵ For a list of the 35-member Appalachian Colleges Association, see <http://www.acaweb.org/>

⁵⁶ See Ewalt, Wendy. *Appalachia: A Self-Portrait* (Edited) Foreword by Robert Coles, Text by Loyal Jones, (Frankfort, KY: Gnomon Press for Appalshop, 1979)

⁵⁷ Frank X. Walker: Conversation with CX Dillhunt and Drew Dillhunt, see: <http://versewisconsin.org/Issue110/prose/walker.html>

Unfortunately, Mr. Walker's response is rather vague and unconvincing; he says he will address more the question of where Appalachia is, or rather, where Affrilachia starts and stops than talk about the people to whom his creative term refers. He ends his answer addressing how he intends to teach people about migrants *from* the Region. Is this a new stairway, with a new set of missing steps? What will he call them and their new places?

I say to Mr. Walker, with all due respect when it comes to the term "Affrilachia," that he will find very few, if any, people – white or black – who refer to themselves (even) as Appalachians. I go with the words of Mrs. Betty Robinson, African American, now 75 and one of the first women – white or black – to be a coal miner in her native Harlan County, Kentucky, who said, when I asked her if she identified as an Appalachian in an interview 30 years ago:

She said, "Now Bill, you know darn well I'm a Baptist."⁵⁸

About the author.

William H. Turner co-edited Blacks in Appalachia (1984) with Edward J. Cabbell, is a longtime member of the Appalachian Studies Association, the 2009 recipient of the Cratis D. Williams/James S. Brown Service Award. At Berea College, he was the first Roland and Dottie Goode Distinguished Professor of Black & Appalachian Studies (1988) and served at its NEH Distinguished Professor of Appalachian Studies and Regional Ambassador from 2007-2012. Currently, he is Research Scientist Leader in the Cooperative Agricultural Research Center, College of Agriculture and Human Sciences, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, Texas where he studies race and inequality in Texas.

⁵⁸ Turner, William H. "Affrilachia as Brand," in Appalachian Heritage, Fall 2011. V 39, Issue #4. Pg. 27. Mr. Walker's photograph is on the cover of this issue of *AH*, which is dedicated to his writing.