
Finding your Voice and Making a Home

with Appalachian Author and Duke's Mayonnaise Lover Meredith McCarroll



From the Tar Heel State to Coastal Maine, Meredith McCarroll's story is one of exploration, soul searching, and homecoming. Author of *Unwhite: Appalachia, Race, and Film* and Co-Editor of *Appalachian Reckoning: A Region Responds to Hillbilly Elegy*, McCarroll is a powerhouse for tearing down the Appalachian single story. Join us as we talk through leaving home, writing, self-reflection, and the little things that make Appalachia home no matter the distance.



Tell me your story. I would love to hear about your journey leaving Appalachia.

So I grew up in a small town in the mountains that I love, and it's a town where my family had been for at least five generations. A lot of the friends I had in school went to college so I did too and I ended up at Appalachian State University, which was really important because it helped me see myself as from the mountains. I loved my small town but I definitely had a sense that I don't think I could have even voiced that I needed to leave and have this New England experience, and so I went to Boston.

How was it being away from Appalachia for the first time?

That was a time that I felt my Appalachian-ness in a negative way. Even now being at Bowdoin College, there are times when I will step away from a faculty meeting and feel so vulnerable. I mean, you've probably experienced this Savanna, but like, New Englanders are weird. They don't share about themselves in a personal way- the way that I do.

We left off at Boston. How did we get to Maine from there?

I did choose to come back home. I chose to go to University of Tennessee. And frankly, that was more about my Granny than

anything. My Granny and I were really close. I knew she wouldn't be alive for much longer so I thought, "I want to get closer to home so that I can spend as much time with her as possible." It just felt easy.

I settled there but I had a really good job offer at a place where the values were really lined up with mine. So as a family we chose to make this huge move. Moving away was harder than I thought it would be.

Now I feel like I can hold both places that I've come to love. But there's no denying that I feel like a tug back to back to Appalachia and back to the region.

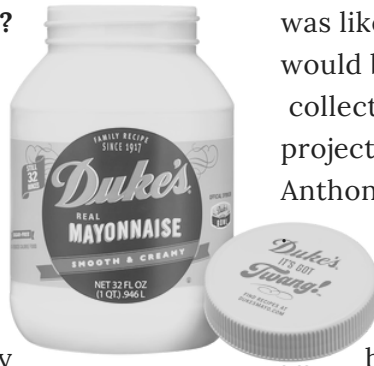
Do you care to elaborate on that tug?

My desire to return home has definitely evolved over time. Partly, because my Mom died. My Mom was a big part of what kept me tied to Western North Carolina.

So without her there, I both feel more and less of a pull there. I feel less of a pull because there's nobody saying, "Hey, you want to come down this weekend?" But I feel more of a pull because for the first time in five generations, there's nobody in my family in Haywood County, and that feels like this vacuum, that's like sucking me back in.

That's such a powerful metaphor. I saw on your Twitter that someone had sent you a care package from home. What things remind you of home the most?

I know the picture you are talking about. Someone from home sent me some Duke's Mayonnaise. I guess you can't get Duke's outside of the South. My comfort foods, turnip greens, which makes my whole family want to leave the house when I cook them, because they have such a strong smell. It's like turnip greens, and cornbread and pinto beans.



I also think about a quilt that my granny made me when I went to college. It brings me comfort in a physical way. Knowing that she hand stitched this quilt for me and now that she's gone, just having having that tie through something that she made is nice. If my house was on fire, I would get that quilt.

Pinto beans are a favorite of mine too, for sure. My go to item are these BBQ chips, Grippos.

Switching gears a little, let's talk about writing. What was it like for you writing Appalachian Reckoning?

Well, I wrote "On And On: Appalachian Accent And Academic Power" and it came out in Southern Cultures. It kind of blew up and go reprinted in The Guardian. I was like, whoa, thousands of people have shared this, what is happening? When you write for an academic audience, you expect like 50 people to read your article.

Then someone from West Virginia University Press approached me and asked me if I wanted to expand that piece into a memoir. I was like, oh, this story isn't unique. But I would be interested in working on a collection. So I ended up working on the project the same time as my Co-Editor, Anthony Harkins, and we decided to merge projects.

We wanted to respond to JD Vance but we were also trying to lift up the region. When I read Hillbilly Elegy, the subtitle of the book is where I had an issue. It is called *Hillbilly Elegy: a Memoir of a Culture in Crisis*. You can't really write a memoir of a culture. So I see Appalachian Reckoning as taking the mic from one person and passing it around, or kind of creating a chorus instead of just giving one person the spotlight so that he can speak on behalf of a 13 state region.

When I read this book it led me to think about what it meant for me to write and also stay true to my roots.

What was it like for you writing that essay?

I think it's taken me a really long time to decide that I can write in my own way. And, and luckily, I've found readers who are glad that I'm writing in my own way.

My last question, what advice would you give students who are trying to find their voice in writing?

I think centering readership is the main thing. Ask yourself is this something you want to read? I think being really clear about who your reader is can help with that.

-SG