

We Don't Need No Stinkin' Elegies: Hillbillies Talk Back

by Rachel Jennings

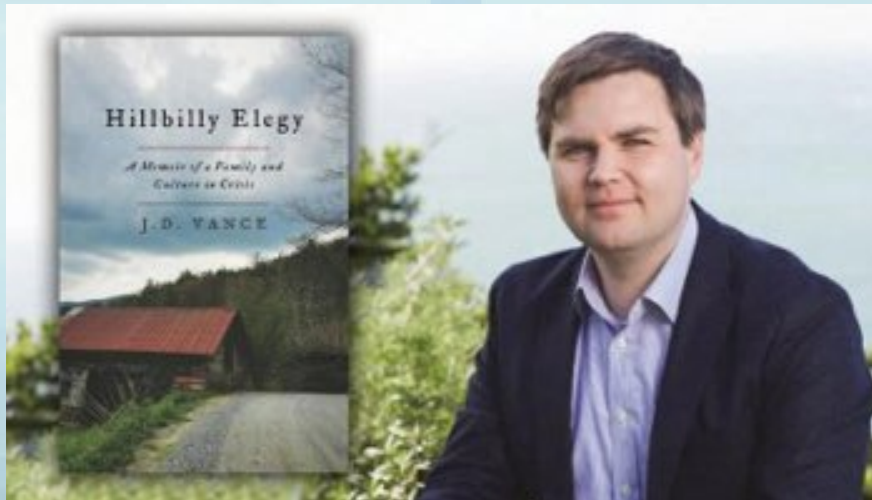
When Donald J. Trump chose J. D. Vance as his running mate on Monday, July 15, I had a sinking feeling in my gut. Vance's name had been circulated for months, so it was not a huge surprise. For all those months, though, I had refused to entertain the possibility. "What a freakin' nightmare," I lamented in a Facebook post when denial was no longer an option. "Not so long ago, this creep was explaining to everyone why hillbillies were to blame for Trump. Ugh! I'm not in a good place to deal with people's anti-hillbilly crap right now. It's nightmare stuff." As someone with deep roots in East Tennessee, I felt vulnerable and almost despondent. Only half-way through the summer and I would have to endure media-driven debates about Trump's Vice-Presidential pick through Election Day on November 5th. An actual Trump victory was too horrifying to consider—not just because Trump is a fascist psychopath but also because centrist Democrats, enlightened by J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), would blame likely Appalachian people for every hellish crisis of a second Trump Presidential term.

Despite such fears and anxieties, I soon discovered that attitudes have shifted dramatically since Trump's first Presidential nomination. Television pundits on cable news no longer pontificate about white working-class (often used interchangeably with "Appalachian") anger and resentment as the root cause of Trump-ism. Whereas J. D. Vance was the unquestioned media authority on Appalachia in 2016, magazines and news sites now publish fierce critiques of Vance featuring a wide range of knowledgeable Appalachian voices. In *The Guardian*, for example, Neema Avashia has written "I'm from Appalachia. J. D. Vance Doesn't Represent Us—He Only Represents Himself." (July 16th). Acknowledging that she is "south Asian, the child of Indian immigrants who settled in Appalachia in the 1970s, because work in the chemical industry brought them there," Avashia argues that she is more truly Appalachian than Vance, who is "white, Christian, and has longstanding generational ties to the region." Vance, she asserts, "does not represent Appalachia." In a single article, then, Avashia deconstructs middle-class

liberals' assumption that Appalachians are by definition white, racist, and unworthy of respect. Much earlier, on May 6, 2022, Michael Kruse had published a scathing article about Vance, "He's Dangerous. So Is His Book," which warns readers about Vance's political ambitions, flawed understanding of Appalachia, and willingness to embrace MAGA behavior and attitudes. By 2022, as Kruse's title suggests, Vance's embrace of Trumpism and election to public office as a right-wing Republican had changed many Democrats' view of the Hillbilly Elegy author. Suggesting Kruse's willingness to engage in serious research about Appalachia—Kruse's article relies heavily on his interview with renowned Appalachian author Silas House. Journalists now were writing more nuanced articles that did replicate obvious stereotypes about Appalachian Republican voters.

Even more than changes in the mainstream media, I have observed a radical shift among progressives who post on social media. Reflected in my relationships with Facebook friends, this change has had deeply personal ramifications. Unlike 2016, when J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* first hit the New York Times bestseller list and insinuated itself into the US psyche, I have not been bombarded with anti-hillbilly Facebook memes or with viral online articles dissecting Appalachians' dysfunction and backwardness. Thus, I have not lost my temper on Facebook or had heated Facebook exchanges with long-time friends attracted to Vance's "honest" and "frank" portrayal of his Appalachian family.

Instead, since J. D. Vance was chosen as Trump's running mate, what I have witnessed is a joyful tidal wave of anti-Vance ridicule and mockery. Suddenly, Vance is no longer "one of the decent conservatives" or a Republican who "open-minded" people will take seriously. Of course, the key difference between now and 2016 is that Vance does not now identify as a "Never Trumper" Republican. Fairly early in Trump's Presidency, Vance began to embrace Trump and the entire MAGA movement. Like other MAGA politicians, he humiliated himself by reversing course, directly repudiating former opinions, and publicly kowtowing to Trump. He once Tweeted that Trump was an "idiot" and was "reprehensible." In fact, he described Trump as "America's Hitler." As Trump's running mate, though, Vance re-



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peats all of Trump's talking points, including the lie that the 2020 election was stolen. Thus, middle-class liberals no longer look to Vance for an explanation of why Trump attracts so many voters. Betrayed by Vance, mainstream liberals are prepared with mea culpas for former statements that denigrated Appalachian people.

Instead of posting anti-hillbilly memes, Facebook and X users now throw shade at Vance with memes that adopt an Appalachian persona. One Facebook meme features a photo of Granny and Jed Clampett from *The Beverly Hillbillies*, the once-popular 1960s sitcom. "The JD feller's cornbread ain't quite done in the middle," Granny tells Jed. While the Clampetts were from the Ozarks rather than Appalachia, they embody all of the hillbilly stereotypes. Appalachian people often disagree about whether *The Beverly Hillbillies* was subversively camp or embodied the usual offensive stereotypes. It is a complex debate, but I personally give the current *Beverly Hillbillies*-themed meme credit for its cleverness in expressing solidarity with Appalachian people.

Likewise, I was delighted with an entire series of anti-J. D. Vance jokes that seemingly originated on X, formerly Twitter, such as "JD Vance washes his cast iron skillet," "Claims to be Appalachian / puts cast iron skillet in dishwasher," "JD Vance doesn't know how to snap and string beans," "JD Vance likes unsweetened tea," "JD Vance thinks 'bluegrass' is something the DARE officer warned him about," "JD Vance's Country Crock buckets are full of margarine," "JD Vance thinks reckon means a car accident," and "JD Vance thinks you cooked the green beans too long" (See *Don't Rock the Inbox*, July 23, 2024). Right before jokes about Vance's romantic attachment to couches took center stage, these Appalachia-centered jokes caught the public's attention as they pondered Vance as a Vice-Presidential nominee. Many of the posts include the hashtag "#HeAintFromHere. A few basic themes emerge in all of these jokes: Appalachian foodways, Appalachian music and culture, Appalachian language, and Appalachian simple living. As much as Appalachianship per se, however, the memes emphasize working-class culture and the dignity of humble origins. Many people, Appalachian or not, can relate to them. Apparently, according to *Don't Rock the Inbox*, the #HeAintFromHere memes originated after Democratic Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear, who told MSNBC, "Let me just tell you. JD Vance ain't from here." Progressive Kentuckians then took ownership of the phrase and created the hashtag.

While it is heartening to know the role of actual Appalachian people in creating and circulating the memes, however, I cannot be sure how popular the memes actually are in Appalachia. Happily, true, despite having an ugly glut of Trump voters, Appalachia does have left-leaning residents. One recalls, for example, the liberal comedian Trae Crowder, who once lived near my hometown in East Tennessee, or the country singer Tyler Childers, who actively campaigns for Governor Andy Beshear. Nevertheless, Republicans are still the majority in most of the Appalachian region. Progressive meme creators are a minority of Appalachians. Thus, the one sure conclusion one can glean from such memes seems to be that social media users across the US have discovered that Vance falsely presents himself as a working-class Appalachian when he is really from a middle-class suburban home in Ohio. In short, he is a fraud who achieved fame and recognition by trashing Appalachian people. Since many of my non-Appalachian Facebook friends were posting these memes, I took great comfort in their solidarity with Appalachian people.

The decision by Joe Biden not to run for President and the subsequent campaign of Kamala Harris and small-town Midwesterner Tim Walz have created a feeling of giddy euphoria within the US public. Given my own scruples about Harris, including grave concerns about her position towards Palestine, my own feelings are not giddy or euphoric. In fact, despite my deep relief and gratitude that liberal Democrats have rejected anti-Appalachian attitudes in favor of joy, I continue to feel anxiety and unease.

One reason for my stress, of course, is the continued popularity of Trump within Appalachia. The fact is that Central and Southern Appalachia voted for Trump by wide margins in both 2016 and 2020. The reasons are complex, ranging from the decline of coal and manufacturing to Evangelical Christianity to the Democratic Party's cynical manipulation of voters during the 1960s War on Poverty to the opioid epidemic. Rather than blame the billionaire Sachler family and pharmaceutical companies who dumped opioids into the region, many Appalachians, like Vance, are prone to blaming their neighbors' moral weakness and laziness. One understands this self-blame when knowing the circumstances of people's lived experience. My parents' neighbor, for example, once came to visit them solely for the purpose of stealing my mother's hydrocodone. While my parents were progressive voters, it was hard for my mother, especially, to look past this personal violation and acknowledge the larger system of corporate oppression. Thus, if Appalachia votes in November for Trump in overwhelming numbers, will the public lash out at Appalachian people, yet, again?

More than Appalachian attitudes and voting patterns, what most worries me is the continued faith in neoliberal ideology shown by both the mainstream media and middle-class liberals. As Lorraine Berry points out, in "J. D. Vance's Book, 'Hillbilly Elegy' Was a Con Job. Don't Let It Slide" (*Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 2024), she calls out the way Vance once "was venerated by journalists and book critics as a powerful voice representing long-overlooked Americans." Citing numerous articles, books, and TV programs that praised Vance while dismissing his critics and detractors, she warns journalists and pundits not to repeat the mistake now that Vance is Trump's running mate. When reading Laura Miller's "Trump's VP Pick Wrote a Bestselling Memoir. Rereading It Now Is Astonishing" (*Slate*, July 16, 2024), one sees the need for Lorraine Berry's warning. Rather than reconsider her admiration for *Hillbilly Elegy*, Miller faults Vance for abandoning his earlier insights. She writes, "All the qualities that made *Hillbilly Elegy* one of the best books I read in 2016—its brutal honesty, its challenges to the self-delusional and self-defeating aspects of hillbilly culture, its mournful ambivalence about the identity he's only partially left behind—have been shamelessly jettisoned by Vance for the sake of his political career." Despite ceaseless efforts by Appalachian activists and intellectuals to explain what is wrong with *Hillbilly Elegy*, Miller clings to her initial impression of Vance's "honesty" and "ambivalence." She only has praise for Vance's embrace of capitalism, sacrifice of cultural identity, and self-centered individualism.

Even more stress-inducing than the neoliberal mainstream media, however, are the social media posts that I continue to encounter on Facebook. In part, I still feel the sting of anti-Appalachian memes posted in 2016. Those memes featured the usual hillbilly stereotypes about incest, shiftlessness, lack of teeth, moonshine, and illiteracy. While there has been a radical shift towards Vance

and Appalachia since 2016, some progressive memes remain problematic. One Appalachia-friendly meme, for example, states, “Dolly Parton is from Appalachia. Dolly Parton grew up dirt poor. Dolly Parton worked her ass off to get where she is. Dolly Parton helps kids read and takes care of her people. Dolly Parton has done more to help Americans than most other people can claim. I’ll take Dolly Parton’s Appalachia over JD Vance’s Yale Law School venture capitalist Fascism every day.” To be clear, I adore Dolly Parton as much as anyone. I grew up watching Parton not only on The Porter Wagoner Show but on The Cas Walker Show, a local Knoxville production on which she appeared before hitting it big. As the meme suggests, Parton has spent millions of dollars to improve children’s literacy and education and other philanthropic efforts. Parton’s brand of country music, however, is driven by capitalist economics. From Dollywood theme park to hotels, restaurants, cake mixes and baking products, to books and tee-shirts, Parton is fundamentally a businesswoman. While her inclusive politics and style of business are more appealing than Vance’s authoritarian capitalist vision, Parton and Vance are mostly in the same ideological camp. The Appalachian people need more than Dollywood theme parks. What they need is more

community and mutual sharing. When I see such memes, I think that people’s views have not changed that much since 2016.

How do my Facebook friends really feel about Appalachia? This question is what I often ponder. While they “used to sympathize” with Appalachian people, one Facebook user commented in 2016, they no longer want anything to do with a region that supports Trump. “My family used to enjoy visiting the Appalachian mountains. We thought they were beautiful,” someone else wrote. “Now I hate Appalachia. Screw Appalachia.” BIO: *Rachel Jennings teaches English at San Antonio College and is active with the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (TCADP). Her wish is to see the end of the death penalty in Texas and the U.S. She is also a board member of the Esperanza.*

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EDITOR’S NOTE: *This article is an opinion piece and not an endorsement.*

To Save a Life, Update on Rolla Alaydi’s Family Trapped in Gaza

By Dianne Monroe

Gaza may be less headline news as I write this story, but the people of Gaza remain in an increasingly desperate situation. That includes my friend Rolla Alaydi’s extended family, trapped in this war of annihilation with no way out.

A lot has happened since March, when I first wrote about my friend Rolla and her determination to get her family (21 people including 13 children) out of Gaza.

Back in January Rolla started a GoFundMe to raise the funds needed to do this: By April the GoFundMe had raised enough money to file paperwork in Egypt to bring the family safely out of Gaza, along with immigration applications for them to enter the U.S. On April 28, Rolla flew to Egypt to begin this paperwork.

Then, on May 6 Israel invaded Rafah, closing the only way out of Gaza and destroying the family’s plans for a safe departure. Since the required paper work to leave Gaza and enter Egypt has been completed, the hope is that they will be among the first allowed to leave whenever the border reopens.

Now, the fundraiser is focused on supporting the family’s needs until they are able to leave. Funds are used to help provide food, clean water, medicine, e-sims to communicate and more. Perhaps most importantly, it offers hope, and the knowledge that people see and care about what happens to them.

So please donate, continue to donate, and share this link widely. Your donations make a big difference to the life of this resilient family.

<https://www.gofundme.com/f/help-rescue-my-family-from-humanitarian-crisis-in>

Since May, Israel’s war of annihilation against the people of Gaza has continued unabated. The family has been forced to move multiple times, trying to avoid Israel’s bombs.

Amazingly, all 21 members of this extended family are still alive. Yet, in Gaza, life hangs by a thread. On May 27, an Israeli air strike triggered a fire in a tent encampment in a “safe zone” near Rafah. Forty-five people were killed and dozens more wounded. Rolla’s sister-in-law and 3 young nephews were among the wounded, receiving burns and other injuries. Fortunately, they were not seriously hurt and will recover.

Through all of this, the family remains remarkably strong and resilient. They do this, in part, by practicing the values of generosity, community, and connection – both to people and the land. These are both Palestinian values and universal human values.

Rolla’s brother, Medhat, living with diabetes, combines what little his family has with others to prepare community meals. Together with his children, he planted a small garden next to their tent to grow fresh vegetables. He has let entire families stay in his

tent when they had to flee their tents to escape Israeli bombing. There’s much more this family does for others, even as their own condition is perilous.

Perhaps in giving to this family, we will receive more than we ever imagined.

Bio: Dianne Monroe is a writer, photographer and experiential educator. Formerly of San Antonio, she now lives in Sonoma County, California.



Rolla’s brother, Medhat, in his garden and her niece, Alma with a tomato.