ASA Steering Committee Response to Y’ALL statement
5 July 2018

The Appalachian Studies Association thanks Y’ALL for the thoughtful statement it offered in response to ASA 2018 conference session 10.8, “Are We Losing a Generation? Poverty and the Opioid Crisis in Rural and Urban Appalachia.” We value our organization’s diversity, including the intergenerational diversity that Y’ALL and STAY—which has issued its own statement—help to strengthen. We affirm our continuing commitment to collaborate with Y’ALL, within and beyond the Steering Committee, to continue ASA’s vital work exploring and serving the Appalachian region.

We appreciate Y’ALL’s reference to our shared organization’s mission statement: “The mission of the Appalachian Studies Association is to promote and engage dialogue, research, scholarship, education, creative expression, and action among a diverse and inclusive group of scholars, educators, practitioners, grassroots activists, students, individuals, groups and institutions. Our mission is driven by our commitment to foster quality of life, democratic participation and appreciation of Appalachian experiences regionally, nationally and internationally.” We also applaud Y’ALL for its attention to ASA by-laws, including basic policies such as “the Association intends to be a forum for divergent views, illuminating issues, providing information, and encouraging an awareness of the complexity of issues facing the people of Appalachia.”

One ongoing challenge of the organizational priorities expressed in these statements is how to honor our simultaneous commitments. We value democratic participation, diversity, and inclusion, as well as honest dialogue and engagement with complex and often controversial issues. True sharing and listening in any diverse gathering inevitably leads to disagreement. Where lives are literally at stake—as so many of us know all too well they are in the current opioid crisis—discussion must take on increased urgency.

Our annual conference goals are always to create spaces for dialogue among people of diverse ideologies, backgrounds, and perspectives; to make those spaces safe for all voices to be heard; and to insure that all conference participants can feel respected and included. These goals shape every conference session, from keynotes and plenaries to workshops, roundtables, panels, poster sessions, exhibits, performances, participatory projects, site visits, and other conference activities.

We thank the 2018 program committee, the Urban Appalachian Community Coalition, and the team of hard-working volunteers who made the Cincinnati conference possible. Many ASA members have told us they found the 2018 conference rich, vibrant, innovative, and inspiring. The work of conference organizers created opportunities for us all to have precisely these kinds of healthy dialogues about complicated issues.

The ASA 2018 program committee accepted session 10.8 with overall conference goals in mind, seeing it as an outgrowth of core organization commitments, not a violation of them. The session aimed to “re-stitch the seams” by drawing attention to a key issue devastating both rural and urban Appalachian communities. The program committee intended to focus attention on the opioid crisis through this session, but the roundtable, regrettably, seems to have had the opposite
effect. Certainly few participants—speakers and audience members alike--came away feeling heard, respected and included. The Appalachian Studies Association Steering Committee regrets that outcome.

We embrace, however, the lively discussions of important issues the session precipitated. We encourage our membership to continue these conversations, and ask them to do so in a spirit of mutual respect.

The two key issues this session raised— the role of democratic participation and the provision of an environment for respectful discourse -- are important to us, and we are confident that the Steering Committee can address them honestly and collaboratively in our conversations over the next several months. Y’ALL’s statement gives us a place to start. The Steering Committee believes that the events of the conference and the subsequent discussions about those events provide ASA with an opportunity to move forward to strengthen the organization in important ways.

Finally, we thank Y’ALL for the constructive specific suggestions offered in the “moving forward” section of its statement. At its 2018 summer retreat, the ASA Steering Committee will be addressing an array of concerns that emerged from the 2018 conference, including suggestions made by Y’ALL and other groups.