Y’ALL Statement Regarding J.D. Vance Roundtable
To: ASA Leadership; Urban Appalachian Community Coalition; Wendy Welch; ASA Membership
From: Y’ALL Membership
Date: Friday, April 20, 2018

Context

On Thursday, April 12th, members of Y’ALL (Young Appalachian Leaders and Learners) met to discuss J.D. Vance’s invited participation in a roundtable called “Are We Losing a Generation? Poverty and the Opioid Crisis in Rural and Urban Appalachia,” how that roundtable was handled, and what it means for the future of Appalachian Studies.

After reported objections and deliberations, a roundtable consisting of Wendy Welch and J.D. Vance, convened by Tom Wagner, was approved to discuss the opioid crisis in Appalachia. This session took place during the final day of the 2018 Appalachian Studies Association conference. Protests against Vance’s presence began as the convener of the roundtable was introducing Vance, encouraging the audience to save questions about *Hillbilly Elegy* for after the session, attempting to keep the roundtable focused on the subject of opioids. Members of the audience began to speak out against Vance being given a platform to speak at the conference, and the convener responded by declaring that, as academics, we should all be willing to listen and critically engage in discussion with anyone regardless of their beliefs. As Vance began to deliver his speech, a number of audience members stood up, turned their chairs around, and protested in silence with their backs turned to Vance until he concluded his remarks. Vocal protests resumed during the question and answer portion of the roundtable with a group of activists singing “Which Side Are You On?” As Vance took questions, a handful of people stood with their backs turned to Vance, put their heads down, or shouted comments in rebuttal to Vance’s assertions. The singing was met with a number of calls to stop, to “shush”, and to respect Vance and others in attendance. On multiple occasions, both convener and attendees who were not protesting referred to protesters as children and told them to be “mature.” We refrain from attempting to summarize the events directly after the panel in one letter, but we encourage individuals to share their stories, and we will continue to create spaces for these accounts to be heard.

After two hours of discussion and several statements received from Y’ALL membership, it is clear to Y’ALL leadership that many of our members are upset with the entire situation resulting from this conference session. Several common frustrations were expressed, including the silencing of activists, poor roundtable moderation by the convener, and ethical concerns regarding the nature of the roundtable. The following passage will summarize each of these points, discuss members’ concerns with them, and conclude with long and short term suggestions with regards to the associations future practices.

Concerns

First, and perhaps the most troubling concern Y’ALL has with the events of this roundtable, is the silencing of young activists in the room. We find this action so troubling due to its conflict with the stated mission of the Association, as well as policies listed in the bylaws. ASA is an organization founded upon the convergence of academics and activists who seek to discuss and explore the Appalachian Region. Likewise, Y’ALL encourages inclusivity and respects the voices, opinions, and values of all ASA membership. The roundtable convener, as well as roundtable attendees, repeatedly attempted to silence, disrespect, and criticize a small group of younger, predominantly female bodied association members who chose to stand up for
their values. We understand that some association members did not feel this was an appropriate way to protest. All of our membership is not in agreement with the tactics used by the protesting members, but we come together to urge those who do not support them to understand where these actions came from. It was deeply painful for these members that J.D. Vance was invited to speak on an issue that is very personal for many of them.

Additionally, we are bothered that the roundtable convener responded by stating that, “This is an academic conference.” The Appalachian Studies Association is not only, in fact, an academic conference. The mission of the 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.” This mission claims to be “driven by our commitment to foster quality of life, democratic participation and appreciation of Appalachian experiences regionally, nationally and internationally.” The actions taken by the panel convener do not reflect this mission.

We do not believe that inviting J.D. Vance to speak on a roundtable about the opioid crisis is a productive way to engage in a conversation that is so pertinent to our region. Vance’s perspective was not appropriately situated within a broader field of expertise on opioids that already exists, and to claim so is offensive to the actual experts who study and write on this topic, as well as the actual activists who have their feet on the ground and are working to save lives in the field. Placing him on this panel legitimizes his dangerous opinions on the subject, such as suggestions to increase arrests of those suffering from addiction as a method for combatting the crisis. Claiming that Vance’s non-profit, Our Ohio Renewal, which purports to be “dedicated to promoting the ideas and addressing the problems identified in J.D. Vance’s New York Times’ #1 Bestseller, Hillbilly Elegy,” is not sufficient justification for supporting his participation in the roundtable. Further, Vance’s affiliation in the final conference program was not with Our Ohio Renewal, but with his venture capital seed fund Rise of the Rest, which invests “catalytic capital in the most promising seed stage companies located outside of Silicon Valley, New York City and Boston.” We believe that this appearance as a venture fund representative makes him unqualified to discuss the opioid crisis, and also comes very close to violating Article VI.A of the ASA bylaws, which declares that the association shall be noncommercial.

In addition to these concerns, Y’ALL does not support any person who is oppressive of the people of the Appalachian Region speaking or presenting at the conference. While we maintain our support for the values expressed in ASA’s basic policies, specifically that “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,” we do not endorse any attempts to bring in speakers, paid or unpaid, who are directly responsible for the continued oppression and dehumanization of people in Appalachia.

We take comments like, “Maybe I’ll bring in Don Blankenship next year” very seriously, which the convener told one of our members after the panel. This creates an unsafe environment that may not be welcoming to many who contribute to ASA, stands counter to the missions of the association, and grants legitimacy to the very worldviews that we work so hard to resist.

Moving Forward

Stemming from these concerns, Y’ALL has several propositions for the betterment of the association. These include a guide for convener education, the establishment of an ad hoc ethics
committee, and annual spaces for intergenerational dialogue, among other concerns that will be
detailed.

Firstly, if a problematic celebrity figure such as J.D. Vance is considered as a presenter,
ASA must have a transparent and intentional process in place to allow for democratic
deliberations. These conversations must address the harm of such individuals. In order to do so,
associational ethics must be established, as suggested in point four. We believe that separating
Vance from his memoir is not only impossible, but dangerous. The opinions and experiences
espoused in his memoir are what he is an expert on and are the divergent views that ASA should
be engaging. We should not pretend he is an expert on opioids as an attempt to quell drama, but
instead we should do our jobs as academics and activists and engage in these issues directly,
rather than cover them up.

Second, Y’ALL extends an apology to Wendy Welch and calls for ASA to extend its own. It
was unfair and disrespectful to place an expert on the subject who has put in tireless work on the
ground alongside someone who is not as qualified or educated on the subject. We believe that
this de-legitimizes Dr. Welch’s work and overshadows it. We also acknowledge that Dr. Welch
was put in a position where she had to attempt to moderate an extremely tense room. This was
also unfair. We apologize to Dr. Welch and assert that her work is invaluable to combating the
opioid crisis.

Third, Y’ALL calls for convener education. We acknowledge that not every panel or
roundtable will contain the same propensity for intense emotions and disagreements, but
everyone who intends to moderate or convene a session should have a basic understanding of
how to moderate such an environment and of the ethical guidelines that should govern that space.
Hostility towards audience participants is not an appropriate way to handle such situations.

Fourth, Y’ALL calls for the creation of an ad hoc ethics committee that would establish a
set of guidelines that reviewers can utilize to ensure that all accepted proposals are fair, just, and
equitable. Problematic research or presenters should be properly evaluated to ensure that
research does not reinforce harmful myths and misconceptions about the region and that speakers
are not hostile towards conference participants.

Lastly, Y’ALL establishes a commitment to engage in a two-part meeting in the future:
the first part to meet with our membership, and the second part to encourage and provide space
for purposeful intergenerational dialogue. We also encourage that these intergenerational
dialogues happen outside of the conference with the purpose to accommodate more ASA
members allowing for deeper levels of engagement.

Thank you for listening to these concerns and recommendations. We hope that by taking
these issues and recommendations into meaningful deliberation and consideration, we can
collectively focus not on blame, but on forward moving actions to better recognize the potential
of ASA within the future of the region. We feel that the spaces we create must be intentional,
intergenerational, and willing to change if they are not responding to the needs of the association.
We urge everyone who feels strongly about the issues we bring forward in this statement to get
involved--join Association subcommittees, ad hoc committees, engage with Y’ALL on social
media platforms, come to monthly Y’ALL hangout sessions, join reading clubs, support
localized movements (to name a just few ways)-- and work to help build the Appalachia of
tomorrow.

-Y’ALL
Jacob Meadows (co-chair)
Korick Sisomphone (co-chair)
Lesly-Marie Buer (co-chair, 2016-2018)
Jordan Laney (co-chair 2015-2017)
Kathryn Engle (founding co-chair, 2014-2016)
Brittany Means Carowick (founding co-chair, 2014-2015; ASA Awards Chair)
Skye McFarland (Active Officer, 2014-Present)
Josh McClenneney (member)
Dave Walker (member)
Kehren Barbour (ASA Scholarship Chair, 2016-2017)
Kelsey Wagner (member)
Emma Parrish (member)
Sarah Craycraft (member)
Ellie Dudding (member)
Zach Kopkin (member)
Joey Aloi (member)
Elizabeth Catte (member)
Josh Howard (member)
Ben Duvall-Irwin (member)
Jamie Jackson (member)
Lou Murrey (member)
Misty Skaggs (author/Appalachian scholar)
Benjamin Putland (member)