Fixin' To Tell: Cultural Preservation, Multiculturalism, And A Delicate Double Commitment In Appalshop's "Insider" Activism

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FIXIN’ TO TELL:
CULTURAL PRESERVATION, MULTICULTURALISM, AND A DELICATE
DOUBLE COMMITMENT IN APPALSHOP’S “INSIDER” ACTIVISM

A Thesis
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by
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ABSTRACT

From global non-profits to local community centers, many groups working with and from within mis- and under-represented populations have embraced documentary media in activist work as a tool for undermining stereotypes and engendering positive identity formation. Despite steady increases in community-based documentary work, such programs remain relatively underscrutinized, with the majority of scholarship praising the liberatory potentials of documentary self-representation. Further, of the many programs implementing community-based documentary work as a tool for social change, I found very few based in rural regions of the Southern U.S. Likewise, in scholarly discourse associated with such programs, the South, in general, remains an understudied region.

The one exception to this rule is Appalshop, a community media organization based in Whitesburg, Kentucky. While Appalshop is widely celebrated for its documentary activist work, this thesis is primarily concerned with Appalshop’s organizational self-representation and how particular assumptions therein may inform, and problematize, their contemporary activist goals. I examine Appalshop’s organizational identity, especially as it manifests in concepts of tradition and cultural authenticity, in the utilization of positive stereotypes, and in an asserted commitment to the “value of diversity.” I consider how Appalshop’s particular approach to place-based identity may perpetuate a process of cultural exclusion that is rooted in early strategies to define and “fix” southern Appalachia.
In the following chapters, I first provide an overview of the particular social and political ideologies undergirding common perceptions of Appalachian culture, beginning with particular attention to outside influences and then briefly introducing an internal movement in opposition that emerged in the early 1970s, at which point Appalshop becomes my central focus. The next two chapters comprise a two-part critique of Appalshop: First, exploring a perceived commitment to authentic Appalachian culture central to their work, and, second, considering how this commitment to authenticity undermines their organization’s contemporary commitment to the “value of diversity.” In conclusion, I consult scholarship on cultural heritage tourism and poststructuralist feminist discourse on education and identity in order to begin to imagine alternatives approaches to doing implementing community-based documentary education programming in rural Southern contexts. This work is an exploration into the potential of community-based documentary work to engender radical thought and action, with the hope that it might contribute to a larger project: a framework for self-sustaining documentary education programs, specifically suited to rural communities in the South.
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INTRODUCTION

Although this thesis is about Appalachia, it began in the Mississippi Delta. Over the past year and a half, I have been working to implement a documentary (photography and video) education program with young people at the Tutwiler Community Education Center in Tutwiler, Mississippi – a rural town located in Tallahatchie County in the Mississippi Delta. Among many things, this work was an exploration into the potential of community-based documentary work to engender radical thought and action, with the hope that it might contribute to a larger project: a framework for self-sustaining documentary education programs, specifically suited to rural communities in the South.

THE DELTA

The Delta’s storied past of racial violence and economic disparity has become integral to representations of the region, creating a persistent reputation that is frequently evoked by contemporary regional politics and social injustices. An exceptionally fertile region, the Delta’s rich soil has been the setting for the exploitation of generations of black Mississippians. The first settlers encountered a virtually impenetrable swamp, a jungle-like terrain, densely populated by wildlife.1 These conditions meant that the early development of the region was relatively slow, but over

time the landscape was tamed, first by slave labor and then through various emergent channels of exploitative business dealings at the expense of the region’s African American population. From the early nineteenth century, a wealthy planter elite was established in the region, possessing the large numbers of enslaved blacks needed to work the land.\(^2\) During the period following the Civil War, the Delta attracted large numbers of African Americans with its still-unclaimed land and promise of agricultural potential.\(^3\) However, hopes were met with the harsh reality of an extremely racially segregated Delta society, where instead of achieving upward mobility, blacks faced economic ruin, political disfranchisement, racial violence and lynching, and a general lack of power. At the same time, cotton was booming, and the Delta planters continued to accrue great wealth, widening economic disparities and establishing a dominance of the region’s political and economic life that would last for generations.

The legacies of slavery, Jim Crow, and the violent white resistance to the mid-century Civil Rights Movement continue to color perceptions of the Delta, and of Mississippi in general. At the same time, contemporary social relations and economic conditions do little to repair its reputation. In 2009, a study on the region revealed that, ranked against other U.S. states, Mississippi had the lowest life expectancy, the highest population of adults without high school degrees, and the lowest incomes among the employed.\(^4\) The report also found that Mississippi is one of four states (with Louisiana,

\(^2\) Wilson, "Mississippi Delta."


Nebraska, and Alabama) in the nation with the greatest disparities between black and white residents’ health, wealth, and education.\(^5\) Although this study focused on the entire state of Mississippi, the report’s largely negative statistics-based assessments are greatly influenced by the conditions within the Delta region. To that effect, in an informational pamphlet Harvard Law School’s Mississippi Delta Project reported that were it not for the Delta, Mississippi’s negative health rates would be comparable to national averages.\(^6\) The Mississippi Delta is among the poorest regions in the United States.

In an attempt to alleviate the socioeconomic issues facing the Delta, and Mississippi, there have been efforts to rebrand the state. Various organizations, both on statewide and local levels, are currently working to boost a creative economy that relies on disseminating a new image through Mississippi’s cultural assets, most prominently those that have come out of the state’s most infamously impoverished region: The Mississippi Delta. However, an unintended result of packaging the Delta’s cultural heritage for touristic purposes may be the perpetuation of the very stereotypes that many in the region wish to dispel. The most prominent tourism sites in the Delta are divided, with antebellum culture and a mostly white literary tradition falling on one side of the color line, and the Delta Blues falling on the other. While the region’s historic racial disparities are often accepted as the roots of the Delta’s prolific creative output, historic and current divisions between the region’s African American and white populations are blatant in contemporary representations and tourist expectations. In

\(^5\) "A Portrait of Mississippi," 5.

\(^6\) Harvard Law School, "Harvard Law School Mississippi Delta Project: Information Session" (September 10, 2009).
short, the promotion of cultural tourism in the Mississippi Delta Region is complicated because in many ways the cultural products it celebrates were born out of a heritage of racial and economic disparity that still persists today.

The Delta’s storied past, and present, are also responsible for its potential cultural tourism, but what is most celebrated has roots in slavery, poverty, and racism. This aspect of a tourism industry in the Delta complicates efforts to revitalize, or even vitalize, its economically struggling communities. The benefits of alleviating poverty are myriad, but to outsiders, these improvements may undermine the visual “authenticity” of poor rural cultural landscapes. In order to thrive, cultural heritage tourism developers cater to tourist expectations of cultural authenticity, which in the Delta are persistently based on disparities between white and blacks residents.

Assessing the relationship between tourism and place identity, Kevin Fox Gotham states that, “Tourism practices [are] an important source of authenticity invention.” In his study of tourism in New Orleans, Gotham identifies a reliance, in cultural tourism, on “a series of formulaic images” that are used to “collapse” local traditions and practices into “consumer demand-driven” representations that impart a sense of authentic cultural experience. The blues and literary tourism industries in the Delta—the former represented as authentically African American and the latter primarily focusing on white Delta authors and intellectuals—is similarly “collapsed.” Such simplified representations of authentic Delta culture do little to highlight the actual significance of the region’s cultural contributions. Likewise, reiterations of

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stereotypical Delta culture—divided so often by race—do nothing to generate a departure from these same circumstances, in their contemporary forms.

As a result of the need to be packaged as a tourist-attracting cultural product, Tutwiler, like many other Delta towns, lays claim to being the “birthplace of the blues.” The preponderance of so-defined Blues heritage tourism sites throughout the Delta, and the lack of equally visible alternative narratives (save for a vast array of discourse on undereducation and poverty in the region), appealed to me as a place to experiment with documentary education aimed at creating avenues for new conversations.

**DOCUMENTARY AND COMMUNITY-BASED ACTIVISM**

As increased access to media making tools has grown and changed so too has the application of documentary media. The technological advances that have led to increased accessibility to the consumption and production of media representations have in turn escalated the public’s consumption of documentary expression.9 Documentary media and aesthetics are increasingly adopted/co-opted by mainstream media - be it in more traditionally recognizable forms, or in the form of reality television, while online platforms like YouTube have created a venue for all types. Such increases in accessibility and familiarity have also proliferated the use of documentary media in activist work. From global non-profits to local community-based organizations many groups working within and from mis- and under-represented populations have embraced this shift by initiating documentary media-based programming into their advocacy and activist work.

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While media literacy programs implement digital technologies in many different ways, documentary making has emerged as central to a majority of widespread media initiatives. In a survey of media-based programs for youth in the United States, documentary video emerged as the dominant genre, with 83% of respondents reporting it as a focal point in their work. A similar report found digital storytelling to be “a primary way in which youth used technology to express themselves.”

Such programs utilize documentary media-making as a means of creative self-expression that highlights first hand knowledge, lived experience, and local and personal concerns that might otherwise go unnoticed in dominant discourses. Community-based documentary programs utilize “insider” perspectives in response to more traditional (“outsider”) forms of documentary making in an attempt to provide a venue for communities to shape their own representations based on the issues that they themselves find important. The media produced is meant to undermine stereotypes and provoke viewers “to recognize the reality of the speaker.”

Upon beginning my thesis research, my intentions were to analyze various documentary education programs in the hopes of beginning to understand how this work might be carried to its full potential, particularly in the rural South. Given the specificities of the Delta, its geopolitical boundaries, its racialized history and present, I began by looking within the Delta itself. However, despite being an extremely

documented landscape, my search for community documentary work turned up close to nothing. It seems that most youth-oriented programs in the region are more concerned more with educating future blues musicians than future media-makers. The one program I did find, Barefoot Workshops, was far from what I was looking for. Based in New York, Barefoot hosts documentary filmmaking “intensives” in Clarksdale, Mississippi (which cost around $3700). Participants are invited to “stand in cotton fields and listen to stories about the difficult life of sharecroppers,” because, according to Barefoot, the Delta is full of “people waiting to share their personal stories of hardships, inspiration and triumph.”

Displaying a paternalism common to (white) benevolence in the region, Barefoot’s website states, “The experience you have telling someone’s story, and how that experience changes you, your subject, and the community is what Barefoot is all about. Students learn that the filmmaker/artist becomes ‘the keeper’ of a person’s story.”

This approach was precisely one I wanted to work against: extractive, exploitative, self-congratulatory, and not interested in the community itself in any meaningful way.

So, I began to look elsewhere. Of the vast array of organizations and programs implementing community-based documentary making as a tool for social change, I found very few that were based in rural parts of the Southern U.S. Likewise, in

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15 “Program Overview,” The Mississippi Delta, Barefoot Workshops.
scholarly discourse associated with such programs, the South, in general, remains an understudied region. While community-based documentary programs have been evaluated for their specific impact on rural areas in India, China, and many African countries, discourse on programs in the United States tends to focus exclusively on urban areas. The one exception I found to this rule was Appalshop, a community media organization based in Whitesburg, Kentucky.

Established in the late 1960s, Appalshop is today one of the largest and most revered documentary education programs in the country. Appalshop is also, specifically, committed deeply to the specificities of their regional setting: “Appalshop’s mission is to develop effective ways of using media to address the complex issues facing central Appalachia – a declining coal economy, a legacy of environmental damage, high unemployment rates, and poor educational opportunities and attainment.”

Like the Delta, Appalachia has been defined by an image of poverty and primitivism, giving the region a status as uniquely “Other.” Similarly, both regions are known for fostering distinct regional folk cultures, which have been commodified not only for touristic purposes but for cultural export and self-asserted identity formations as well. As I continued to research Appalshop’s relationship to the Appalachian region, it became clear to me that a study and critique of their contemporary efforts could be beneficial for presenting new approaches to rural community-based documentary.

To begin, the most immediately recognizable obstacle in producing counter-narrative documentary work in Delta or in Appalachia is the long-standing tendency to recognize these visual landscapes as inherently “Other” from the rest of the country, a tendency that, to various degrees, afflicts the entirety of the South. The process by which the Other is defined “rests on a complex hegemony of domination.” In the case of the South, such a representational process has specifically supported “the construction of a privileged national identity.” This dichotomous relationship renders “the South” and “America” as two united groups, at odds with one another. Considered within Stuart Hall’s discourse of the “West and the rest,” ”America” presides over societal orthodoxy and maintains an assumed obligation to facilitating the improvement of the “rest,” in this case “the South.” While the South is commonly imagined as a culturally cohesive landscape (peopled by “Southerners”), particular sub-regions have come to exemplify the region’s assigned Otherness. Situated within the southern half of the Appalachian Mountain Region is one such example, another located in western Mississippi, is the Delta.

While I aimed to focus on documentary in this thesis, what emerged through my investigation into Appalshop was a troubling impulse to utilize stereotypes (however positive they may seem) of regional cultural identity in their current programs, projects and initiatives. In my initial research, I found that while similar community-based

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media programs functioning in urban or suburban spaces (both in and out of the South) seem to rely on identities like “youth” or “LGBT” (not without their own sets representational issues), Appalshop seemed to call upon static definitions of geographically-defined culture. A reliance on “tradition” and the products and practices of a contemporary “folk” that exists in isolated rural spaces is equally exploited within the context of the Mississippi Delta, where revitalization and benevolence often rely on static definitions of place-based culture.

While Appalshop is widely considered in terms of its documentary work, and this was what drew me to consider it as a model for teaching documentary making in Tutwiler, this thesis concerns itself primarily with Appalshop’s self-representation (as embodied by programs, projects, statements, etc) and subsequent representation of Appalachian culture. I will examine these representations with specific attention to concepts of cultural authenticity and consider the ways in which Appalshop’s particular approach might perpetuate processes of cultural exclusion particular to the region’s history in their promoted image of Appalachia. The following thesis is a look at Appalshop’s organizational identity via its self-representational strategies, especially as it relates to the ideas of “tradition” and culture, the utilization of positive stereotypes, and an asserted commitment to the value of diversity. Broadly, the following work considers the relationships between how communities are represented, and how those same communities choose to represent themselves.

In the following chapters, I provide an overview of the region’s historical construction as an internal Other, with attention to the particular social and political ideologies undergirding this process. I then briefly introduce an internal movement in opposition to such constructions that emerged in the early 1970s, at which point Appalshop becomes my central focus. In a two-part critique of Appalshop’s current
organizational self-representation, I first establish a commitment to a concept of authentic culture in the region that draws on and echoes early constructions of Appalachia and early philanthropic work in the region. Second, prompted by studies of whiteness and the contemporary structures of white power in the United States, I will address how this commitment to an authentic culture, undermines Appalshop’s contemporary multicultural efforts. In conclusion, I consult poststructuralist feminist discourse on education and theories on documentary representation in a discussion of future considerations for rural documentary education programming.
CHAPTER I: DEFINING A REGION

The notion of a distinct culture, preserved in the mountains of southern Appalachia, emerged following the Civil War. The idea that Appalachia was culturally distinct began to take shape in the work of "local color" writers who, appealing to a northern fascination with the perceived difference of the South, exaggerated the region’s local customs and dialects. Set within an isolating mountain landscape, local color introduced an image of an Appalachian culture that remained unadulterated by modernization, plagued by poverty and the sometimes-dangerous social codes of a quasi-primitive society, but held together by tradition. In the decades that followed, the allure of this mysterious, preserved community attracted journalists, missionaries, reformers, folklorists, musicologists, and various other cultural scholars who flooded Appalachian with intentions to comprehend, judge, fix, and document the unique culture that had been “discovered” in the Mountain South.

Still persistent today, the image of Appalachia that developed as a result supported an idea that the region’s perceived idiosyncrasies were the naturally occurring consequences of geographic isolation and inherited cultural traits. In response, scholarly discourse on Appalachia has evolved to include critical views of the notion of a distinct and “authentic” culture. Such views render Appalachia, as it has come to be conceived, as an “invention” that has served particular political needs.

Historian Henry Shapiro traces the evolution of the region’s perceived difference. Rejecting the popularly celebrated concept of the region’s unbroken ties to a bygone era,
Shapiro describes how Appalachia’s “invention” resulted from the restructuring of political, economic and social landscapes of the United States that occurred between 1870 and 1920. His work highlights the numerous cultural and political negotiations that have created, and continue to maintain, a particular concept of the region and its inhabitants. These negotiations – the selective inclusion and exclusion that was necessary to create the concept of Appalachia and Appalachians – have come to constitute our understanding of, and assumptions about, the region and its inhabitants. Highlighting the invention of an authentic place-based culture in Appalachia, this approach denaturalizes exclusory definitions of regional culture. Shapiro’s study thus calls into question the concept of an authentic Appalachian identity, preserved due to isolation, and instead begins to disentangle the ideologically driven invention of this imagined cultural landscape.\footnote{Henry D. Shapiro, \textit{Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

**NATIONAL FEARS AND DESIRES AND AN EMERGENT REGIONAL CULTURE: PURITY AND DEPRAVITY IN APPALACHIA**

From its inception, the concept of Appalachia appealed to national fears and desires and helped support the status quo of national power structures. The concept of a preserved culture in the supposedly white region of Appalachia befit a nostalgic image of “pure” Americanness, while the region’s perceived negative qualities could serve in the creation of an internal Other, the manifestation of everything America was not (backward, uneducated, uncivilized, old fashioned). As interest grew and outside visitors increased so too did this mythos of Appalachia. Images of the authentic culture
that had been “discovered” in the region emerged in the form of two distinct yet interconnected stereotypes: defined by both rugged individualism and the moral depravity.

YESTERDAY’S PEOPLE

Many traveling to, and writing about, the region focused on what they perceived as distinctly backward, focusing on lack of hygiene, affinity for moonshine, and propensity for violence. In these accounts, Appalachians were defined, not by their preserved pioneer-like qualities, but by an apparent inability to cope with the present. According to Ian C. Hartman, news of post-Civil War family feuds – most famously, between the Hatfields and McCoys – played a significant role in how the nation perceived the region. Hartman asserts, “reports of feuding gave rise to the perception of widespread lawlessness, medieval backwardness, behavioral deficiency, and lax morality among the mountaineers.”

Notions of the “lawlessness” and “behavioral deficiency” of the region’s inhabitants were prevalent. According to an 1875 article by journalist Rebecca Harding Davis, the Appalachians “were not encumbered with dishes, knives, forks, beds, or any other impediment of civilization: they slept in hollow logs or in a hole filled with straw under loose boards of the floor.” Such depictions were commonplace, conveying a dramatized primitivism apparently foreign to the rest of the nation. The moral depravity of mountain people also came to the fore, often produced in support of


benevolence work. One such example is found in the writings of the Reverend Edward O. Guerrant, a prominent figure in missionary work in the region.22 After preaching throughout the mountains of eastern Kentucky in the 1882, Guerrant wrote of the region’s inhabitants, “The curse of poverty and the desolation of sin are over them all. Without our help they must perish.”23 But there was another popularly-accepted image of Appalachian life gaining ground at this time, one which stands in stark contrast to that of the Hillbilly—the other, more noble, but equally stereotyped image of the industrious mountaineer.

A BASTION OF PURITY

Depictions of Appalachian backwardness simultaneously complicated, and threatened, a more idealized and nostalgically rendered version of Appalachia as a region of white racial purity. The social and moral deficiency that supported a counter-image of national progress and modernity presented a dilemma for the dominant “perception, ideology, and rigorous enforcement of Anglo-Saxon superiority.”24 According to Hartman, widespread depictions of social dysfunction marked Appalachia as “a site of racial failure” at a time when social and political shifts were producing a widespread sense of anxiety amongst white Americans.25 In addition to depictions of Appalachian depravity, a counter-image emerged that portrayed the


23 Edward Owings Guerrant, (1892) quoted in Whisnant, All That is Native and Fine, 38.


region as a bastion of white racial “purity.” Reflected in the title of Williams Goodell Frost’s 1899 article, “Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains,” Appalachians came to represent a kind of nostalgic ideal, constituted by supposed unadulterated white bloodlines, true American stoicism, and a steadfast commitment to tradition that seemed to be quickly disappearing as the country modernized.

Such a conceptions emerged in response to a shifting national climate. By the 1870s, the “reckless speculation and overproduction” of industrial capitalism unraveled the progress it allegedly brought about, and ninety-nine percent of the U.S. population found themselves on the losing end of extreme economic disparity.26 Urbanization produced areas of extreme poverty, brutal working conditions, lack of access to healthy food, and outbreaks of disease, all of which contributed to a rise in overly romanticized notions of the past: a bucolic image of bygone agricultural America.27 In addition, significant demographic shifts that accompanied the nation’s internal and external expansion were key to the burgeoning popularity of a racialized image of southern Appalachia.28 David E. Whisnant has noted the particular significance of the “unkempt (and possibly radical)” Europeans moving/immigrating into urban areas in the North (and throughout the country) during the period of Appalachian “invention.”29 Similarly, historian Ian C. Hartman points out that, during this time, the nation’s “new status as an imperial power” became the “nightmare of its own success, a nightmare in

28 Hartman, “Appalachian Anxiety.”
29 Whisnant, All That is Native and Fine, 6.
which movement outward into the world threatens to incorporate the foreign and
dismantle the domestic sphere of the nation.”\textsuperscript{30} This nightmare was buttressed by the
migration of African Americans into northern and western parts of the country in
search of better lives and factory jobs. Struggling to come to terms with urban poverty
and overcrowding and the nation’s shifting demographics, American-born whites
sought solidarity amongst members of the self-proclaimed preeminent, and truly
American, white race.\textsuperscript{31}

During this time (although not unique to it) a prevailing ideology invested in
“Anglo-Saxon racial and cultural supremacy” undergirded a preponderance of social
and political endeavors being carried out on both national and regional scales, rooted in
a “deepening anxiety” shared by many white Americans.\textsuperscript{32} In particular, Hartman
reveals this anxiety as manifest in the academic and political undertakings of “a cohort
of Progressive Era intellectuals” that championed a narrative of white racial evolution
deemed the “Teutonic Thesis.” According to this “Thesis,” white American
preeminence found genetic origin in “aggressive, assertive, and expansionist Teutonic
and Nordic men,” endowing them with the traits necessary to ascend to a position of
powerful world leadership.\textsuperscript{33} As Hartman points out, the political, social and
intellectual outgrowth of this ideological framework included the birth of Frederick
Jackson Turner’s “Frontier Thesis” (that both praised and supported white American

\textsuperscript{30} Amy Kaplan, \textit{The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture} (Cambridge: Harvard

\textsuperscript{31} Schneider and Schneider, \textit{American Women in the Progressive Era}, 241.

\textsuperscript{32} Hartman, “Appalachian Anxiety,” 246, 230.

\textsuperscript{33} Hartman, “Appalachian Anxiety,” 230.
expansion), and Theodore Roosevelt’s “Boone and Crockett Club.” These archetypal exemplars of “frontier masculinity and unadulterated whiteness,” advocated by Roosevelt, invoked an idealized and preordained white male authority that appeared to be specifically American.³⁴

The newly burgeoning field of folklore helped to support just such an image. Shortly following the establishment of the Folklore Society of London in 1878 (one of the earliest organizations formed explicitly for the study of folklore), interest spread to the United States; in 1888, the American Folklore Society (AFS) was established. Early definitions of the “folk” described primitive cultural groups, situated within “civilized” society, as opposed to the supposedly primitive inhabitants of exotic, non-Christian locales, that remained isolated from contemporary knowledge and technologies. In America, “authentic” lore often featured a persevering while male character at odds with either nature or modernization. It was precisely this mythos of unadulterated (white) Americanness that flourished in conceptions of Appalachia, a region deemed “folklore’s natural habitat” by folklorist Richard Dorson.³⁵ In the image of a recently discovered cultural purity of the southern mountains, folklore could serve as a tool for supporting national ideologies; “a critical cultural force in shaping opinion and prejudice.”³⁶ According to Dorson, in North America “the growth of interest in folklore reveals an intimate dependence upon the rise of a nationalistic spirit.”³⁷ While the link

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³⁶ Alan Dundes, Interpreting Folklore (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), x.

between folklore and nationalism might be obvious, an important aspect of this folklore was the heroism of its white male characters, precisely the kind of folk hero to be found in much of the traditional Appalachian lore of the time.

The image of an assiduous and rugged white male that was “native” to Appalachia was an image that centered America’s most celebrated folklore. Most appealingly, perhaps, this image—a pioneering Anglo-Saxon man, forging a white world in an inhospitable terrain—provided a remedy to the looming contamination of white America by the growing and changing populations of non-whites and newly arriving Europeans. Hartman asserts, “Nowhere more than the region we now know as Appalachia did writers, social scientists, and journalists believe they had located a racial utopia, a place that remained free from the contaminants endemic to the convulsing industrial city or the troubling encounters that ensued as the United States seized distant and foreign lands.” The racialized construction of (white) Appalachian identity worked to “uphold the myth of Anglo-Saxon racial purity” by allowing the dominant discourse on the region to “systematically ignore or look beyond the sizable population of indigenous peoples” that had long resided in the region. In other words, the success of this campaign for white supremacy ostensibly depended upon overlooking the region’s non-white populations.

THE MYTH OF APPALACHIAN WHITENESS

As stereotypes of the region evolved to describe a contentious duality, Appalachia came to be viewed as both an enclave of racial purity and a disturbing

38 Hartman, “Appalachian Anxiety,” 231.
blemish on the American landscape; nevertheless one element of Appalachian-ness appears to have been indisputable: Appalachians were white. While the issue of race is largely excluded from the region’s representation, and especially when it comes to social issues (which instead tend to focus primarily on class) it was in fact a substantial stanchion upon which the formation of Appalachian culture was constructed in those early years. But the true situation existing in Appalachia was not so racially homogenous, or as isolated, as these writers claimed it to be. In fact, the growth of coal and timber industries in the region made it a popular destination for migrating southerners, and especially between 1870 and 1930 attracted African Americans from farther South to the region in search of better jobs.40

Hartman notes, “Industrialization on an even larger scale proceeded apace almost as soon as the [Civil War] concluded, and by 1910, 15% of West Virginians claimed an identity other than ‘native white’; while similar figures prevailed in Kentucky.”41 In addition, in the center of the extreme isolation purported in depictions of the region, such extractive industries led to the railroads in the region that had already begun connecting Appalachians to cities to the northeast with and west before the Civil War.42 However, despite the historical realities the concept of the region that was promoted in popular depictions by outsiders has endured as the dominant image.

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41 Hartman, “Appalachian Anxiety,” 236.
of Appalachia. Such information helps to underscore the selective exclusion that had to take place in order to define the region’s most storied qualities.

In addition to creating an imagined white-only cultural space in the mountains, the contention between the converse representations of the “old-stock mountaineer” and the “hillbilly” has ultimately served to divert attention away from the exclusion of non-white Appalachians in the region’s representation. From the start, description, documentation, celebration, and preservation of Appalachian culture has entailed the exclusion of the region’s non-white populations. In turn, this exclusion was central to propelling sustained interest in the region. Despite Native American, Black, and mixed-race communities in Appalachia, “outsider” accounts constructed a racially charged image of Appalachian identity (one that likened whiteness and Appalachianness) that continues to endure. The image of the Appalachian mountaineer formed by way of a privileged and narrowly conceived definition of folk traditions that imposed the values of outsiders onto the region and relied on selected traditions of the region’s white population, namely on those stereotypical figures of the hillbilly and the mountaineer.

Depictions of an “authentic” (white) cultural group in the southern mountains rendered Appalachians as the country’s “true ancestors” while the region’s poverty and backwardness were exaggerated and exploited in order to define Appalachia as primitive and, thus, simultaneously strengthen a counter-image of modern America. This dichotomy underscored a romanticized notion of the cultural origins of white America (descendant of the stoic mountaineer) and also emphasized what American


culture was not (backwards hillbilly), producing two seemingly at-odds and equally reductive, versions of Appalachian culture. The two divergent concepts of Appalachia that emerged—the backwards hillbilly and the “pure” old stock (American) mountaineer—both supported the ideology of the dominant power structures. Appalachia (and the South generally) could be championed as a nostalgic window to the past, one that celebrated the white mountaineer as its forefather while maintaining the idea that the nation did not suffer from the region’s subsequent social problems, affirming that, for the rest of the country, the past had been left behind in favor of a commitment to progress.
CHAPTER II: FIXING APPALACHIAN PROBLEMS, PRESERVING APPALACHIAN CULTURE

Such images of the region “successfully promoted Appalachia as ripe for industrial and missionary efforts.” Depictions of a primitive Appalachian society in desperate need of aid attracted the attention of missionaries, humanitarians who flooded the mountains, attempting to rescue Appalachia from itself. Early missionary efforts aimed to educate Appalachians in “Christian and American values, and in the ways of modern life.” According to American Studies scholar David E. Whisnant, an emergent philanthropy, working within “a narrowly conceived culture as their special concern” flourished. These efforts stand as significant examples of the “systemic cultural intervention” (carried out through efforts to solve Appalachian “problems”) that Whisnant has identified as central to concepts of Appalachian culture. The establishment of a conceived community of authentic folk in the region permeated and supported this philanthropic work. White upper-middle class northerners, along with some well-to-do locals, identified and celebrated and exaggerated the cultural traits that be fitted their concept of the region’s authentic culture, often relying heavily on those

45 Sharon Elizabeth Colley, “‘Getting Above Your Raising’: The Role of Social Class and Status in the Fiction of Lee Smith” (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 2002), 29.
46 Shapiro, Appalachia on Our Mind, 41.
47 Whisnant, All That’s Native and Fine, 13.
48 Whisnant, All That’s Native and Fine, 13.
stereotypes that could support their efforts. The region’s “traditional” products and practices were often central to both aiding the poor, uneducated and uncivilized while, importantly, preserving the region’s perceived cultural authenticity from the encroaching threat of modernization.\(^{49}\) This approach argued for the value of regional difference, especially in Appalachia, where residents were viewed as the “heirs to [the] strengths and values of pioneers.”\(^{50}\)

The region’s dichotomous representation, which paired an image of white racial purity with unremitting poverty and moral deficits, produced an equally conflicted response in the work of those that came to “fix” the region. Early efforts to preserve an authentic culture worked to appease two fundamental concerns simultaneously: whether this interventional work should help to modernize Appalachians or, instead, work to preserve the authentic folk culture of the mountaineers against the threat of modernization.\(^{51}\) An emphasis on the region’s folk status made it possible (or so it seemed) to do both: The cultural purity of the stoic mountaineer could be preserved, while the hillbilly could perhaps learn to quell its backwards ways through an understanding of its true worth.

**EARLY INTERVENTIONS**

During this period, the settlement school movement (which thrived between 1887 and 1910) produced hundreds of educational initiatives and institutions throughout the United States, dedicated to “[preserving] humanistic and spiritual

\(^{49}\) Whisnant, *All That’s Native and Fine*; Gaines, "Appalshop Documentaries."

\(^{50}\) Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind*, 120.

\(^{51}\) Gaines, “Appalshop Documentaries.”
values in a world dominated by materialism and urban industrialism.”52 In 1902, the first such school in the Southern Appalachian region was established in Hindman, Kentucky by two upper-middle class, white Kentucky women. The Hindman Settlement School identified, documented and preserved the “folk traditions” of the Appalachian as a means of regional uplift. Like other regional folk schools that were quickly becoming popular in the region, the school aimed to foster regional pride by educating locals “back to the community.”53 Specifically, this was carried out through teaching “traditional” crafts, music, and the dance of the region (i.e., their own culture), which had the added benefit of ensuring these practices not die out. These early interventions carried considerable influence in furthering the presentation of Appalachia as an authentic American folk community, preserved in the isolation of the mountain landscape.

The establishment of the Hindman School contributed, in part, to the arrival of musicologists and folklorists who came to document the distinct traditions of the region’s inhabitants. Whisnant notes a direct connection between Hindman and Cecil B. Sharp that resulted in the publication of Sharp’s and Olive Dame Campbell’s English Folk Songs from Southern Appalachia, in 1917.54 While the Hindman School had recognized the value of traditional crafts (like baskets and furniture) in both passing on "authentic" culture and potentially turning a profit, the work of folklorists and musicologists “established the value of Appalachian culture” (for both national and

53 Colley, "Getting Above Your Raising," 201.
54 Whisnant, All That’s Native and Fine.
regional audiences) through their documentation of the less tangible cultural artifacts found in folk music, dance, and lore. Apparent in this approach is a dubious preference for cultural authenticity in the mountains that relies on images of old-time “traditions” and a sense of Otherness. Rooted in the documentation, dissemination, preservation and commodification of so-called traditional culture (often aimed at solving regional “problems”), these initiatives significantly impacted how Appalachian culture was (and is) seen, (mis)understood, and embodied by both insiders and outsiders.

These early interventions were followed by decades of outsider interest and intervention aimed at solving the region’s perceived problems (the inability to modernize or the threat of modernization). Often, attempts to convey the urgency of Appalachia’s “problems” and efforts to locate the source of those “problems” in order to address them, utilized images of extreme poverty and destitution that became synonymous with Appalachian life.

During the 1960s and seventies, images of Appalachia’s persistent poverty and depravity again captured national attention. Following the publication of Harry Caudill’s best selling Night Comes to the Cumberlands (1962), Appalachia’s plight became a focal point, first for President Kennedy and then for President Johnson’s War on Poverty. Supporting a belief in the genetic roots of Appalachian poverty, Jack Weller’s Yesterday’s People (1965) proclaimed “the greatest challenge of Appalachia,” was

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55 Gaines, “Appalshop Documentaries.”

56 Karen P. Greiner, “Coming in From the Margin: Research Practices, Representation and the Ordinary,” The Qualitative Report 15, no. 5 (September 2010).
Appalachians themselves. And a 1964 issue of LIFE Magazine featured a 12-page spread of photographs depicting a landscape of “man-made desolation” where “The people, themselves — often disease-ridden and unschooled — are without jobs and even without hope.” Once again from outside the region, efforts aimed at comprehending the region’s dire conditions, coupled with voyeuristic fascination, reinvigorated dominant stereotypes of Appalachia. This attention overwhelmingly resulted in an image of Appalachians as chronically destitute and unremittingly primitive.

TELLING OUR OWN STORIES, SOLVING OUR OWN PROBLEMS: INSIDER EFFORTS AND THE FOUNDING OF APPALSHOP

Prompted by the resurgence of attention brought about by Caudill, Weller and the War on Poverty, the late 1960s early 1970s saw the emergence of an internal movement in Appalachia aimed at taking control of the region’s image, empowering local people and undermining stereotypical and degrading portrayals of Appalachians. It was during this time that the field of Appalachian Studies emerged, along with scholarly publications and academic journals committed to these ends. It was during this time that Appalshop was established in Whitesburg, Kentucky. Born out of a vocational training program, Appalshop asserted itself as a conduit for Appalachian

voices, committed to a belief that “Appalachian people must tell their own stories and solve their own problems.”

In 1967, funding from the War on Poverty’s Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) supported the establishment of the Community Film Workshop Council (CFWC) in New York City. The CFWC established vocational filmmaking programs for young people in economically poor and underserved communities. The CFWC implemented Community Film Workshops in Harlem, Los Angeles, Hartford, Puerto Rico, Chicago, Washington D.C., Santa Fe, and Whitesburg, Kentucky. As participants in the War on Poverty, such programs would fight economic disparity by preparing participants for filmmaking jobs in Chicago and New York City. Led by recent Yale graduate, Bill Richardson, the Community Film Workshop of Appalachia was established in the small coal-mining town of Whitesburg, Kentucky. In spite of the “idealistic vocationalism” of such OEO sponsored programs, which championed the “development of job skills in individuals over the creation of jobs,” the program that developed under Richardson was dedicated to “artistic expression in modern mass communication for social change.”

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63 Charbonneau, “Branching Out.”
64 Bill Richardson quoted in Charbonneau, “Branching Out,” 140.
When the program’s federal funding officially came to an end in 1971 (this date varies in some sources), the eight young participants, known later as the “Appal core,” decided to continue the media training program through outside funding sources. This reincarnation of the program was renamed Appalachian Film Workshop, and later shortened to Appalshop. Rather than vocational training for film industry jobs, Appalshop utilized documentary filmmaking in order to combat what they perceived as untrue and derogatory portrayals of the region by mass media. According to film studies scholar Stephen Michael Charbonneau “Appalshop’s early participants resisted this narrow emphasis on technical skills by embracing a form of communitarian expressivity—a media expressivity grounded in an imagined, regionally based collectivity.”

65 By documenting “traditional” practices and contemporary struggles (namely those associated with coal mining), Appalshop filmmakers sought to undermine negative portrayals of the region produced by outsiders while simultaneously promoting cultural pride in Appalachians.

Appalshop’s mission is indicative of a wider growth in efforts to speak truth to decades of outsider representations of the region by way of a privileged “insider” perspective. However, scholarly discourse critiques such work for its preferred narrative of cultural cohesion in Appalachia, similarly rooted in stereotypical representations. In her study of representational practices in Appalachia, Karen P. Greiner observes that “the tendency of authors who attempt to ‘correct the record’ on Appalachia, however, is often on [sic] in which negative, stereotypical portrayals are replaced by positive, but equally stereotypical representations of mountain life and

65 Charbonneau, “Branching Out,” 137.
people.”\textsuperscript{66} The counter-images such representations offer, produced by "insiders," in practice often do little to undermine the longstanding impulse to oversimplify the region; “a concept is never constructed by focusing on its opposite; doing so merely reinforces the binary and the structures of power it supports.”\textsuperscript{67} In other words, replacing a “negative stereotype” with a “positive” one doesn’t effectively put an end to stereotypes in general. It simply favors particular manifestations of those stereotypes.

With specific attention to Appalshop, documentary studies scholar Jane M. Gaines has analyzed the organization’s documentary films and identified a stereotypical “notion of an untouched culture in the mountains and in the mountaineers” that remains central to their work. According to Gaines, these films disseminate “particular assumptions about culture, nature, and the world,” namely those supporting a positive stereotype directly related to dominant perceptions of the region. Gaines’ essay provides a compelling critique of Appalshop that addresses an impulse to obscure regional class-distinctions in favor of a preferred image of strong cultural cohesion. However, her critique does not go beyond issues of class in the region. In failing to push the question of class further, Gaines exhibits common tendency in studies of the region: a failure to adequately assess social hierarchies in the region by overlooking the racial realities that also inform them.\textsuperscript{68}

\\textsuperscript{66} Greiner, “Coming in From the Margin,” 1196.

\textsuperscript{67} Elizabeth S. D. Engelhardt, Beyond Hill and Hollow: Original Readings in Appalachian Women’s Studies (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), quoted in Greiner, “Coming in From the Margin,” 1196.

\textsuperscript{68} Gaines, “Appalshop Documentaries.”
For example, one common stereotype, prevalent in insider counter-representations, portrays Appalachians as innately “strong and activist.” However, anthropologist and Appalachian studies scholar Mary K. Anglin asserts that while depictions of coal mining-related activism and union organizing in Appalachia have been utilized to undermine negative stereotypes of uneducated and backwards locals, such depictions have often failed to acknowledge the “local forms of racism within the context of Appalachian social movements.” And while the legacy of union organizing and activism is rich in Appalachia, its strengths are often held up to counter a stereotypical weakness in the popular consciousness of the region. But by avoiding the various levels of repression and cultural exclusion underway within the region itself, such representations overstate the “cohesive, adaptability and expressive aspects of white working class identities,” in turn perpetuating a whitewashed picture of Appalachian life. Anglin’s observation calls attention to the shortcomings of many of the representations that even scholars like Gaines tend to take at face value.

According to sociologist Barbara Ellen Smith, race in Appalachia has persisted as both “unmarked” and “unremarkable,” specifically within the field of Appalachian Studies. Smith asserts, “In Appalachian Studies, we reinforce the normalcy of whiteness by defining mountaineers in terms of their class and region (and occasionally gender), while rarely recognizing or analyzing their race—unless they are ‘not-

69 Greiner, “Coming in From the Margin,” 1196.
71 Anglin, "Erasures of the Past."
As Smith argues, the perceived white racial homogeneity of Appalachia and Appalachians has yet to provoke adequate attention to the ideological functions of race in the region, resulting in a “collective avoidance of whiteness” in scholarship on the region.74

Despite increased efforts to discredit the erroneous perception of racial homogeneity in Appalachia in studies of Cherokee and Creek Indians, enslaved and free blacks, Italians and Hungarians, mixed-race populations of Guineas and Melungeons, and contemporary populations of black Appalachians, and more recently, Latina/o residents, the label of a white region persists. While such studies have increased, the issue of race in Appalachia has remained largely simplified, often overlooked in favor or class-related struggles that supersede race-related struggles. Anglin asserts that deconstructing the image of “one subaltern in Appalachia” threatens the established conceptions of authentic Appalachian culture: “without erasing the past, there is no singular culture that can be identified as ‘authentic.’”75 A focus on race (whiteness) in Appalachia calls attention to the construction of the region’s mythic cultural authenticity. The threat of debunking this much-celebrated authenticity has perhaps contributed to apprehensions towards tampering with the region’s exclusory narrative.

In the following chapters, I will utilize Gaines’ assertion that Appalshop is “committed” to an “authentic” culture in the mountains in order to analyze the

74 Smith, “De-Gradations of Whiteness,” 44.
75 Anglin, “Erasures of the Past,” 78.
ideological underpinnings of Appalshop’s current programs/work and public persona. My analysis of Appalshop is particularly concerned with the current functionality of the white supremacist logic that was so integral to the “invention” of this authenticity in Appalachia. I will consider how dominant racial attitudes and definitions circulate in Appalshop’s work as the result of this commitment to authenticity. In her essay, Gaines asserts, “to see folk culture as ‘natural’ conceals the stages of its historical production, making it more difficult to grasp the possibilities for changing the course of the process of construction.”76 I hope to contribute to an effort to derail this “process of construction” by questioning how commonly accepted definitions of Appalachia and Appalachian culture naturalize white dominance and perpetuate exclusory definitions of culture.

I will examine a number of Appalshop’s current programs and initiatives with specific attention to how their asserted goals are framed within and represented by these programs, how these initiatives are presented to “outsiders,” and how Appalachian identity is defined therein. Specifically, my examination will follow the frameworks laid out in the previous chapter regarding authenticity and race in Appalachia. The value of a contemporary examination of Appalshop’s persistent regional identity priorities lies in the fact that they obscure the structural repression underway in Appalachia, and thus, “may keep Appalachians from seeing the resemblance between their struggle and the struggles of other oppressed groups.”77 Ultimately, by dismantling the views that the organization promotes, I hope to lay the

76 Gaines, “Appalshop Documentaries.”

77 Gaines, “Appalshop Documentaries.”
groundwork for more successful engagements with documentary media in rural populations that might work to uncover problems instead of reinscribing them.
CHAPTER III: “CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES WITH APPALACHIAN VOICES”:
TRADITION, COMMUNITY, AND ACTIVISM

Since its founding, Appalshop has grown into a “national multi-media arts and
cultural center” \(^{78}\) recognized as the “most successful sustained rural arts movement of
the past half-century.” \(^{79}\) Today, Appalshop boasts a multifaceted network of projects,
programs and partnerships supported by their belief that “Appalachian people must
tell their own stories and solve their own problems.” \(^{80}\) In addition to a continued
emphasis on producing documentary media (video and audio), Appalshop has
established a wide range of community initiatives including a community-based radio
station (WMMT-FM), a theater production company (Roadside Theater), a music
education program, multimedia and various cultural exchange programs engaging
groups from New York City to Indonesia. Through these programs Appalshop has
produced “over eighty albums/cassettes/CDs; one hundred films/videos; six national
radio series; five touring photo exhibits; fifty five theater productions and co-

\(^{78}\) “Appalachian Film Workshop/Appalshop Films Collection, 1969-Present,” Kentucky

\(^{79}\) Jeff Whetstone quoted in Art Menius, “Annual Appeal,” Appalshop Notes, December

\(^{80}\) "History," Appalshop.
productions; and four books.” As the self-proclaimed “leading producer of documentary films, music recordings, radio documentaries, and plays” in the region, Appalshop maintains an influential role in defining the region for both those outside its boundaries and those living within them.

The numerous programs and initiatives that constitute Appalshop’s current work remain committed to “[telling] stories the commercial cultural industries don’t tell” and “challenging stereotypes with Appalachian voices.” However, these efforts often rely on an image of Appalachia as a region “laden with fascinating cultural traditions” and containing an innate regional identity. In order to dismiss the region’s negative stereotype, Appalshop’s efforts maintain an image of Appalachian “difference” that relies on positive stereotypes rooted in the region’s earliest of representations. Though they claim to be disrupting the dominant culture’s negative associations with Appalachia, Appalshop chooses one of two stereotypes to champion, leaving their practices tethered to the decades-long and ultimately problematic work of some of the first “interveners” in the area.

While responses to Appalshop’s work have been overwhelmingly celebratory, Gaines identifies the ways in which their “delicate double commitment” between

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81 “Appalachian Film Workshop/Appalshop Films Collection, 1969-Present,” Kentucky Digital Library.


84 Whisnant, All That is Native and Fine, 6.
modernization and preservation echoes early philanthropic work in the region.\footnote{Gaines, “Appalshop Documentaries.”} Exemplified by Appalshop’s commitment to “addressing the issues shaping our future and sustaining the traditional culture of our home in the mountains,” this “double commitment” describes the contentious relationship between the organization’s media-based activism and a simultaneous focus on “traditional” culture and its preservation.\footnote{Menius, “Annual Appeal.”} Citing the work of Shapiro and Whisnant, Gaines argues that, approximately 100 years after the wave of culturally-focused benevolence that predominated in the region during the turn of the century, Appalshop’s films grappled with the same “dilemma” that faced these early philanthropists: preservation or modernization.\footnote{Gaines, “Appalshop Documentaries” ; Whisnant, \emph{All That is Native and Fine}.} Gaines suggests that Appalshop has remained "deeply committed to the notion of an untouched culture in the mountains and in the mountaineers.”\footnote{Gaines, “Appalshop Documentaries.”} Specifically, Gaines asserts that an “intense concentration on the folk product” in many of Appalshop’s films inadvertently works to “blot out” the organization’s more political goals.

This is because the version of Appalachia portrayed by much of Appalshop’s early documentary work upholds reductive notions of the region and its inhabitants as objective truth. In Gaines’ words, “If folk culture in the Appalachian Mountains has been historically produced or ‘invented’…the folk documentaries stand as a cinematic construction of a mythic construction."\footnote{Gaines, “Appalshop Documentaries.”} And just as Shapiro and Whisnant have
compellingly argued, this nostalgic rendering of Appalachian cultural identity is rooted in a dubious and exclusory political process.

Gaines asserts that from the start, Appalshop’s commitment to the region’s “authenticity” (promoted through positive stereotypes) remained concealed by their use of media. Gaines reveals the ways in which Appalshop’s use of film and their chosen stylistic approach has worked to conceal a preference for, and reinstating of, romanticized notions of Appalachian authenticity, even while they persistently claimed to bridge this popularly accepted dichotomy between modernity and tradition. Emblematic of Gaines’ claim, Appalshop currently stresses their use of and appreciation for technology. For example, the organization asserts that “the world is immeasurably enriched when local cultures” use “new technologies” in an effort to “tell their own stories.” Likewise, an annual “Digital Citizenship Lab” (a component of Appalachian Media Institute, Appalshop’s teen-oriented documentary education program) produces “collaborative multimedia projects related to [students’] experiences with Internet access in the region,” while various other issue-oriented projects include “things like broadband Internet access [and] alternative energy.”

However, despite this emphasis on media and technology, a greater emphasis is placed on simultaneously downplaying this contemporary self-image. Instead, a more “folksy” portrayal highlights the region’s supposed link to the past. As one example, to purchase a copy of one of Appalshop’s documentary films requires a visit to the online, “Appalshop General Store.” Similarly, on the webpage for Appalshop’s community

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90 “About Us,” Appalshop.

radio station (WMMT 88.7 FM), links to the station’s Facebook and Twitter accounts are located beneath the heading, “social network-y things,” accompanied by an image of a opossum using a computer (Figure 1). Appalshop’s self-representation strategies exhibit a stereotypical resistance to the modern world, and such images exemplify the ways in which Appalshop’s claims of modernity are coupled with, and often overshadowed by, a caricatured disconnection with, and trepidation towards, a threatening and undesirable modernity that looms in the world existing outside of Appalachia.

These attempts to undermine the use of modern technology through a folksy self-representation perpetuate stereotypes harkening back to early cultural interventions in the region. As noted by Whisnant and Gaines, early philanthropic work often struggled with a deep anxiety regarding the dangers that modernization (and they themselves, as “outsiders”) posed to the authentic and isolated culture in Appalachia. This depiction reveals a nostalgic concern for preserving a romanticized and authentic culture distinct to Appalachia that is reminiscent of earlier efforts. The notion that modernization threatened the culture of the region is rooted in stereotypical representations of Appalachia, which imagined it as an uncorrupted enclave of preserved ancestral traditions. Appalshop’s continued commitment to saving Appalachian traditions through documentation and education perpetuates a concept of an innate (and at the same time exclusory) cultural identity, while also revealing anxiety that it is under threat.
APPALACHIA FOR INSIDERS: A PROCESS OF CULTURAL TRANSMISSION

Appalshop’s self-representation presents a preferred version of regional culture and identity. Such self-representations supplement Appalshop’s documentary media production in an effort to educate people outside of the region about the real Appalachia, in opposition to stereotypical “outsider” portrayals. At the same time, these efforts are aimed at preserving that culture (that which has been deemed of value and in turn, authentic), for Appalachians themselves. Gaines has identified such an undertaking—which uses documentary media to “pass on” cultural practices—as a “cultural transmission process,” a practice, which forms a distinct element of Appalshop’s documentary, work. Unlike ethnographic film or field recording, which are geared towards an audience outside of those being documented, these films “replace transcriber-observers with cultural recipients, the next generation of Appalachians, heirs to the traditions which must be handed down before those
traditions get lost.”92 Such “transmissions” tend to privilege one “positive” stereotype of the region while rejecting the less desirable representations, and the practices that might inform them, as inauthentic. Therefore, Appalshop’s commitment to the region’s ability to “tell its own stories” and combat misrepresentations of its inhabitants ultimately relies on stereotypes, revealing a commitment to notions of a singular authenticity and a simplified view of Appalachian culture, even as they claim to disrupt such ideas.

Cultural transmission remains central to Appalshop’s goals; its presence is evident not just in the media produced, as Gaines observes, but also in current initiatives such as the Traditional Music Program. The Traditional Music Program (TMP) is constituted by a range of offerings including artist residencies, “Old Time” music performances and “jam sessions,” traditional storytelling and square dancing events, and special radio shows. Educating local people about their “musical heritage” is central to the TMP, and the majority of these offerings fulfill this educational purpose, geared towards local Appalachians, ranging from school children to senior citizens.93 Like the organizers of folk schools and folk revivals that intervened around the turn of the century, the TMP endeavors to improve the region through encouraging a sense of community pride that relies on the region’s authentic practices and traditions.

Furthermore, like early cultural interventions, the TMP is invested in maintaining “tradition” for future generations. One stated objective of the TMP is to “deepen and broaden traditional music education across the region through the development of curricular and program models for mountain string band instruments, storytelling and square dancing.” In this vein, Appalshop declares that the “heart and

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92 Gaines, “Appalshop Documentaries.”

soul” of the Traditional Music Program is reflected in their after-school music program, “Passing the Pick and Bow.” In an effort to pass on the region’s traditions, this program “[puts] banjos, fiddles, guitars and mandolins in the hands of nearly 100 students each year.” Students are trained in traditional Appalachian music traditions as well as in storytelling, singing, square dancing, and “old timey games.” Attempting to maintain the significance of these traditions, educational programs are also extended to local adults through Appalshop’s “Old Time Days” workshops. These daylong traditional music workshops (which also include “Old Time Days for Youth”) offer master classes with established, professional old-time musicians in support of Appalshop’s effort to “nurture the rich musical traditions of the area.”

With names like “Passing the Pick and Bow” and “Old Time Days,” such programming underscores a focus on the region’s collective link to the past (a positive stereotype), mirroring early conceptions of the region as “the ‘hold out’ from modernization.” The TMP draws on the same “philosophical premises” prevalent in insider representations of Appalachia: that “if an authentic culture ‘out there’ could only be retrieved, it could be used as a kind of ‘truth antidote’ against the forces which threaten its extinction.”

According to Gaines, a claim such as this “prefigures the demise of a way of life.” Attempts to “strengthen and support the infrastructure for traditional Appalachian music, story and dance,” and to teach “the art of traditional Appalachian

94 “Traditional Music,” Appalshop.
95 Gaines, “Appalshop Documentaries.”
96 Gaines, “Appalshop Documentaries.”
97 Gaines, “Appalshop Documentaries.”
music, story and dance as well as the history, culture and community of these arts” suggest the precariousness of the presumed heritage that it works to celebrate.98 Likewise, an asserted commitment to creating opportunities “for people in mountain communities to enjoy and interact with their musical heritage” by “bringing traditional Appalachian music into the daily lives” of people living in the region suggests the actual lack of these traditional practices within the typical contemporary Appalachian household.99

In the essay, “Eating the Other,” bell hooks explains the concept of imperialist nostalgia, citing the ways in which it works to forestall change in favor of the perpetuation of an imagined heritage. In reference to Renato Rosaldo’s definition the concept, wherein “people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed,”100 hooks writes, “‘imperialist nostalgia’ often obscures contemporary cultural strategies deployed not to mourn but to celebrate the sense of a continuum of ‘primitivism.’”101 This concept aptly describes the current cultural situation in Appalachia, where the cultural effects of a bygone era are treated as if they remain integral to life in the region, in ignorance of the fact that the region has changed since those practices were widespread. By focusing their efforts on the preservation of a nostalgic past, Appalshop avoids confronting the real issues facing much of the community it claims to represent.

98 “Traditional Music,” Appalshop.
APPALACHIA FOR OUTSIDERS: CULTURAL ROOTS AND STEREOTYPES

Considering the disconnect between the reality of Appalachia and Appalshop’s favored representations, one must question the value and the ultimate goal of their work, which champions an ideal instead of a reality. Perhaps the answer is to be found in Appalshop’s relationship to those outside the Appalachian region. As an extension of their cultural preservation and cultural transmission work, Appalshop has worked to maintain an image of the region’s “untouched culture” most often when presenting itself to outsiders. In addition to producing media supporting such representational work, Appalshop also invites outsiders into the region to witness Appalachian culture first hand. Events like Appalshop’s annual Seedtime on the Cumberland Festival, a weekend long experience of the region’s thriving cultural traditions (see Figure 2). Invoking images of Appalachia as a culturally-rich locale defined by a strong sense of tradition, and self-sufficiency, the festival strives for cultural preservation through cultural tourism.

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102 Gaines, “Appalshop Documentaries.”
The Seedtime event offers a clearly packaged and limited engagement with an exoticized region, but it is not the only example of Appalshop’s programs to craft such an experience. Another such example is the Roadside Theater, a performance space that offers “centuries-old archetypal tales” that persist “more intact in Appalachian communities than they were in the British Isles, where they originated.” On the Roadside Theater website, there is a clearly presented notion of Appalachia’s claim to an age-old history, existing in singularly pure cultural space. Besides the fact that claims such as that above are completely unfounded, they also work to distance the organization’s cultural work from the present-day, reemphasizing stereotypes of

Appalachia. And though the website proudly claims that the region’s tradition “has been able to resist the forces of homogenization and commercialization that seek to bottle and sell it,” the program itself engages in the very homogenizing activity it hopes to reject.  

The Roadside Theater traffics heavily in stereotypes, many of which are subtly invoked even as the organization attempts to speak against them; another program—that which deals most directly with questions of “insiders” and “outsiders” to the region—proves even more revealing of the embrace of a singular and imaginary Appalachian culture. The NYU/Appalshop Immersion—an exchange that placed college students from New York City in the apparently foreign mountain region—is an exemplary manifestation of the ways in which Appalshop presents Appalachia as a uniquely "Other" region within the American landscape. Because the program stresses the dichotomy of “urban” and “rural” most directly, a close study of its goals and of the experiences it works to produce reveals the relationship Appalshop presents between Appalachian culture and that of mainstream America.

In 2003, the NYU/Appalshop Immersion was co-created by Tisch School of the Arts professor, Jan Cohen-Cruz, and Appalshop’s then director Dudley Cocke as a component of the Tisch University Scholars program. Specifically, the Immersion program was formed as part of an attempt by Tisch to “shed the sense of entitlement” originally associated with the University Scholars program, which had been designed in


1965 to attract promising students with a full scholarships and annual University sponsored international excursions.\(^{106}\) To shed this entitlement, incoming freshman accepted into the program would travel to Whitesburg, Kentucky, where they would spend their spring break “[immersed] in the activist theory and practice of Appalshop.”\(^{107}\) During their stay, students would experience Appalachia through a “whirlwind of activities” including, traditional music performances, driving tours and visits to “significant Appalachian cultural sites including coal mining operations,” square dances, homemade regional cuisine, “story circles,” and seminars on the region’s folk and “community based arts.”\(^{108}\) In addition, the NYU students were scheduled to make guest appearances on Appalshop’s WMMT radio station and work to create “an original play, short film, set of photographs, music recording, or radio documentary” with Appalshop members and community partners.\(^{109}\)

In 2006, former Tisch University Scholar and NYU/Appalshop Immersion participant Jamie Haft wrote about the Immersion for a conference at California College of Art entitled, “Crafting a Vision for Art, Equity and Civic Engagement: Convening the Community Arts Field in Higher Education.” In her account of the Immersion, Haft explained that, by the end of their weeklong Appalshop experience, the Tisch students departed with “newly developed activist spirits.”\(^{110}\) And while her assessment is


\(^{110}\) Haft, "A Week-Long Immersion," 53
unwavering in its adulation for Appalshop and the Immersion program, Haft’s essay inadvertently opens several avenues for critiquing the program. Specifically, Haft’s assessment reveals the centrality of stereotypes to the group’s facilitated immersion into Appalachian culture. Haft’s descriptions of the program’s scheduled events and activities reveal an overarching effort to maintain a romanticized depiction of an innate Appalachian culture in the mountains that relies almost exclusively on common regional stereotypes of innate cultural heritage and an unbroken connection with a bygone era.

Throughout the weeklong Immersion, the NYU students were invited to take part in various regional traditions. For example, group reflection and creative exchanges are facilitated through “story circles,” defined by Appalshop’s Roadside Theater as “a group of people sitting in a circle, telling personal stories.”111 This practice, which purportedly “keys off the power of traditional Appalachian and Scotch-Irish storytelling,” was created by Appalshop’s theater wing, Roadside Theater.112 Similarly, the week’s meals are designed to impart a sense of authenticity that relies on positive stereotypes. Haft’s recollection of “traditional dishes,” “enjoyed in folding chairs and tables in a make-shift mess hall in the lobby of Appalshop,” helps to convey this point: “Imagine this: Beans – cooked in a big pot, transformed into soup – with cornbread for dipping – and homemade fudge for dessert...The burning question the


112 Haft, “A Week-Long Immersion,” 51
local cooks have for their New York dinner guests: Why in the world would anyone request vegetarian soup beans?”

At the end of the experience, locals joined the NYU students for an evening of “two-stepping and storytelling” at the program’s culminating “potluck supper and square dance.” Haft’s romanticized recollection of the week’s “most popular event,” reveals how the Immersion reinforced positive stereotypes: “NYU students are recounting tales from their exciting city lives to bright-eyed local teenagers…Kentuckians under the age of eight are teaching NYU students the dance steps they can do in their sleep, rolling their eyes in disbelief that university students can’t figure out how to do the Virginia Reel.” This positive stereotype-driven experience of Appalachian culture worked to reveal contemporary Appalachians as participants in an unbroken lineage of pure tradition.

In addition to stressing a sense of the region’s preserved authenticity, the Immersion worked to convey the value of a preserved cultural heritage in general. Haft notes, “[then-director of Appalshop Dudley] Cocke’s goal is to get students and faculty to think about their own cultural roots and identity.” This value was advocated most frequently through the concept of “rootedness,” which was opposed by the implied sense of “rootlessness” associated with urban life. Ultimately, though, the discussion

117 In a study on place memory, Margaret E. Farrar quotes a 1966 report by the United States Conference of Mayors, who argued that “the country was suffering from ‘a feeling of rootlessness’ resulting from “intensive postwar clearing and suburban build-out” (Farrar, 728).
of roots served as another way to strengthen the presentation of Appalachia as a place rendered totally authentic (unlike other geographic spaces) by its direct connection to its roots.

Students’ reflections of their experience in the Immersion revealed the program’s success in imparting the sense that cultural roots are valuable. Haft reflected on finding deeper-rooted sense of self as a result of the Immersion. Describing a Roadside Theater production put on for participants, she explains, “the plays of Appalshop's Roadside Theater [were] more powerful and authentic than anything I’d seen on mainstream stages.” This performance, “drawn from [the actors’] cultural roots,” led Haft to “feel the possibilities of creation springing from [her] own roots.” Similarly, one participant reflected that the Immersion experience made her realize that she felt “pretty far removed” from her “roots:” “I think I should really start thinking about where I come from, my people…I’ve never cared to learn until now.” For this student, a sense of rootlessness emerged in direct relationship to the rootedness she perceived in Appalachia, which instilled in her the value of a cultural authenticity.

Furthermore, the testimonies of students reflect a familiar insider/outsider dichotomy; participants’ reflections on their experience in the Immersion program reveal the counter stereotype of New York City/urban identity, utilized to support a positive stereotype of rural life in Appalachia. Students frequently expressed their time in Appalachia as the antithesis to their respective lives and experiences in New York.

119 Haft, "Cultural Roots and Knowledge."
City, revealing a simplified understanding of the region after completing the Immersion program.

During the week’s final story circle the NYU students reflected how the Immersion program had changed them, and on what they had learned about life in the Appalachians, as well as life in general:

“I’m thankful for my experience here because I feel like I got to slow down and think about my life, in ways that I seldom find time to do in New York.”\(^{121}\)

“It’s a weird thing being from New York ... everyone thinks identity is an individual thing, and if you’re not blazing your own path, tearing down traditions and creating something new, then it’s not worthwhile. Even people who have influences try to like, claim it as their own. It’s this shameful thing to be a part of something, especially at Tisch. It’s nice to see artists who are just naturally following in the tradition and in others’ footsteps.”\(^{122}\)

“I think that what Appalshop does is beautiful. Being a young artist in New York, in an environment such as we are in at NYU, it can become very ... the social lifestyle can become very judgmental, petty, material, very quickly.”\(^{123}\)

The Immersion’s ability to successfully portray the cultural value of Appalachia requires promoting and maintaining a non-Appalachian identity. In these statements,

\(^{121}\) Alicia Matusheski quoted in Haft, “A Week-Long Immersion,” 52.

\(^{122}\) Sean Calder quoted in Haft, “A Week-Long Immersion,” 52.

Appalachia’s historically derogatory status as Other is, in effect switched around; the sense of tight knit community and the slow pace of life in the mountains becomes the ideal, while the outside world is materialistic and cutthroat. Such a concept of Appalachia echoes the nostalgia associated with the region in the early years of its invention.

The positive stereotypes evident in all these activities exemplify the ways in which the Immersion program actively constructed Appalachian culture for the visiting NYU students. Haft’s essay includes a lengthy, and quite performative, statement from the program’s co-creator, then-director of Appalshop, Dudley Cocke that reveals an “insider” commitment to positive stereotypes. Addressing the visiting NYU students, he explains,

“There’s a phrase down here in the mountains that goes, ‘Don’t get above your raisin’. You can imagine that in planning this NYU immersion some friends and neighbors have said, ‘Why are you messing around with an elite university in New York City? You know that a large part of our poverty here was caused by just such privileged institutions. Looks to me, son, that you’re trying to get above your raisin’. I think this weeklong immersion and exchange is evidence that this is not about copping to some sort of elitism. It’s not what you’ve come here for, and we at Appalshop thank you for that.”

This statement from Cocke again favors a limiting view of Appalachian life; it conflates poverty with honor, and opposes the down-home essence of rural life with the dubious materialism of the urban realm. By innocently invoking such clichés, Cocke manages to

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capture the shortcomings of the entire program in a couple of sentences, highlighting the ways in which the Immersion has offered the New York students with only the much basic and homogenized view of Appalachia.

Programming such as the Immersion, the Traditional Music Program, and the Seedtime event reveal Appalshop’s commitment to positive stereotypes of region that promote a concept of innate Appalachianness geared at both insiders and outsiders. The image of Appalachian culture promoted by Appalshop’s work is defined by a narrow conception of what it means to be Appalachian; by utilizing the region’s long-standing status as Other and perpetuating stereotypes in order to maintain it, the organization limits what it means to be Appalachian, undermining its goal of “[telling] the region’s story in the voices of the people living there.”125

Returning to hook’s thoughts on imperialist nostalgia, Whisnant makes a related claim when he asserts that throughout history the celebration of an “authentic folk community” in Appalachia distracted from the structural repressions that were in fact responsible for the region’s poverty.

“By directing attention away from dominant structural realities, such as those associated with colonial subjugation or resource exploitation or class-based inequalities, ‘culture’ provides a convenient mask for other agendas of change and throws a warm glow upon the cold realities of social dislocation.”126


126 Whisnant, All that is Native and Fine, 260.
According the Whisnant, the early celebrations of a presumed authentic culture in Appalachia by interveners helped to obscure the exploitation/industrialization of the region also underway during this time. While likely lacking a direct intentionality, the parallels between such considerations and the celebratory representations offered by Appalshop are manifold. Today, the organization’s commitment to stereotypical representations of Appalachian authenticity might distract from the larger structural formations related to current environmental concerns threatening the region, or might work to continue to obscure the racial reality of Appalachian life, as such stereotypes actively obscure their racialized origins by presenting poor whites as minority.

While “positive” in that it works to oppose the hillbilly image of Appalachians, the stereotype promoted by Appalshop is nevertheless problematic. Derived, as it is, from early concepts of preserved culture in the mountains, such constructions of Appalachian identity fail to consider the notion of racial purity – meant to subdue a “deepening anxiety” regarding the future of white supremacy – historically embedded within them. With this in mind, an examination into Appalshop’s treatment of overtly race-related issues may help reveal, to fuller extent, the problems presented by their use of positive stereotypes. Indeed, the fundamental racial logic underpinning must of the organization’s activism and cultural work may in fact undermine the progressive social change it seeks to engender.
CHAPTER IV: THE VALUE OF DIVERSITY AND THE COST OF TRADITION:
APPALSHOP’S DELICATE DOUBLE COMMITMENT

“Whiteness…in all of its manifestations, is embodied racial power”

– Eduardo Bonilla-Silva

Appalshop’s work is defined by its locally oriented activism. However, in more recent years, this focus has expanded beyond regional boundaries in support of their goal to advocate “cultural diversity as a positive social value.” This “diversity” work is exemplified in programs such as the “Appalachia/Alaska cultural exchange” (2001), “Appalshop in China” (2003), “Appalachia, Hawaii” (2012), “Appalshop in Indonesia” (2008), to name just a few. Examples of such work are reflected in most of Appalshop’s various programs and initiatives, including Appalshop’s touring theater company (Roadside Theater), which requires its scheduled performance venues be “contractually committed to bringing an inclusive cross-section of its community to the performances and workshops.” In addition, beginning in the late 1990s, Appalshop’s commitment to the value of diversity has been reflected in programming associated with a quickly

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128 “About Us,” Appalshop.
growing population of Black and Latino inmates at close-by maximum-security prisons. However, the persistent invocation of stereotypes of “authentic” Appalachian life, the same that inform all of Appalshop’s cultural endeavors, complicates this “diversity” work. Again, their reluctance to fully address issues of race in their regional context exhibits a new form of what Gaines identified as Appalshop’s “delicate double commitment” between modernization and preservation, as displayed by their earlier work.

Today, a similar double commitment emerges, now between preservation and multiculturalism, resituating the tendency, which Gaines noticed in the early work of the organization. In Appalshop’s diversity work, a focus on race-related issues that fails to mention race exemplifies this tendency, lest it call attention to the racialized construction of celebrated traditions. In other words, the demonstrated centrality of whiteness in the “authentic” culture that Appalshop works to preserve stands in conflict to their expanded activist efforts. In order to fully comprehend the efficacy (and potential detrimental effects) of Appalshop’s diversity work, it is necessary to examine this work with particular attention to its underlying racial ideologies.

WHITENESS IN APPALACHIA

The field of Whiteness Studies, which began to take shape as an established field in the early 1990s, offers considerable insight for this investigation.\textsuperscript{130} Examining racism and processes of racialization from a structural perspective, such work looks to white identity and practices, as opposed to a common approach that looks to non-whites in

\textsuperscript{130} Although noting earlier studies by James Baldwin, W.E.B. Du Bois, and others, Smith asserts that attention to whiteness did not receive “sustained scholarly attention” until the 1991 publication of David Roediger’s \textit{The Wages of Whiteness}. 
order to understand racial repression. As Smith explains, “To be white is in part to be not mistreated on account of race, and that very absence of racial injustice enables whiteness to be normalized, or taken for granted as an expected state of affairs rather than recognized as a form of privilege.” The field of Whiteness Studies thusly reveals the “racially interested and motivated actions of whites” that have often gone underscrutinized due to the constructed invisibility of whiteness (i.e., whiteness is the norm).

In a similar way, while evaluating “how whiteness survives in a country that proclaims to be ‘beyond race,’” Eduardo Bonilla-Silva reveals the increasingly covert form of white supremacy in the post-civil rights United States. Bonilla-Silva explains that, in contrast to the “overt and usually explicitly racial practices” that maintained white supremacy in the past, today white racial domination is “accomplished through institutional, subtle, and apparently nonracial means.” According to Bonilla-Silva, the structure of “new racism” is defined by an ability to maintain racial hierarchies in concealed, almost invisible, ways. Thus, new racism enables perceptions that racial repression is less pervasive. Bonilla-Silva argues, however, that “by hiding their racial motif, new racism practices have become the present-day Trojan horse of white power,”

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making this racialized structure “as effective as slavery and Jim Crow in maintaining the racial status quo.”

Such covert racism is identified as central to the contemporary rise in practices, programs and attitudes claiming to be “multicultural” in nature, an identification that activist scholar Dylan Rodriguez refers to as the “multiculturization of white supremacy.” Rodriguez explains that through its promotion of diversity, multiculturalism in fact supports the “aggressive normativity of whiteness” (to paraphrase Rodriguez) within contemporary United States social and political formation. According to Rodriguez, “multiculturalism is, in this sense, a keystone for the rearticulation of white supremacy as a simultaneously (and often contradictory) incorporative and exclusionary regime of social ordering.” This contradictory inclusion and exclusion is exemplified in Appalshop’s diversity work in a tension between sameness and difference, which reveal ideologies and practices of new racism.

Sociologist and African American studies scholar Matthew W. Hughey’s work similarly reflects the covert nature of contemporary white racial power. Hughey examines how whites enact the “ingrained ideologies and practices intimately involve[d in] the construction of the meaning of whiteness and the legitimization of certain social arrangements,” citing his comparative study of members of white nationalists and white antiracist organizations. Hughey’s study ultimately revealed that even starkly

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137 Rodriguez, Forced Passages, 28.

opposed white identities remain “intimately connected with, and coalesced through, a reliance on similar racist ideologies, reactionary cultural repertoires and scripts, and material practices of domination.”\(^{139}\) The “hegemonic whiteness” revealed in Hughey’s research reflects the “almost invisible” nature of “postmodern white supremacy” that Bonilla-Silva has termed new racism.\(^{140}\)

Respectively, Bonilla-Silva and Hughey successfully underscore how racialized hierarchies persist in seemingly non-racial practices, assumptions and interactions. In particular, revealing that white identity formation in the United States is dictated by racial ideology that maintains a political and social infrastructure of white dominance and precludes assumptions that we currently live in a so-called post-racial society. These texts also provide a conceptual framework for revealing the ideological function of whiteness in Appalshop’s current diversity work, of which the most prominent examples are found in a series of overlapping initiatives that focus on the criminal justice system: *Holler to the Hood*, *Calls From Home*, and *Thousand Kites*. As Appalshop’s most racially focused work, these programs provide a viable avenue for examining how whiteness functions even within Appalshop’s presumably antiracist work.

**IMAGINING CULTURE, AVOIDING RACE: APPALSHOP’S DIVERSITY WORK**

Since the late 1990s, a number of projects and programs focused (vaguely at times) on the criminal justice system constitute the bulk Appalshop’s diversity work. Currently, this work is encompassed by Appalshop’s *Thousand Kites* project, which began in 1998 on Appalshop’s WMMT 88.7 FM radio station as the “rural Appalachian

\(^{139}\) Hughey, “(Dis)similarities,” 1290.

\(^{140}\) Hughey, “(Dis)similarities;” Bonilla-Silva, “New Racism.”
region’s only hip-hop radio program,” *Lights Out*. According to the project’s website, inmates “recently transferred from distant cities into two new, local SuperMax prisons” sent WMMT “hundreds of letters [that] described racism and human rights violations.”141 Prompted by these letters, the show’s hosts Amelia Kirby and Nick Szuberla (now the current director of *Thousand Kites*), transformed the hip hop radio show into *Holler to the Hood*, “an on-going multi-media project that explores the economic and social issues in low-income rural and urban communities through the lens of the criminal justice system.”142 “Using a variety of mediums (live performance, radio, video, and digital),” *Holler to the Hood* aimed to provide “the means for all those affected by the prison system to tell their story in their own voice.”143 Expanding the project’s focus on the region’s “prison boom,” *Holler to the Hood* was reimagined as *Thousand Kites*, “a national dialogue project addressing the criminal justice system” which took its name from a prison slang phrase, "shoot a kite,” meaning to send a message.144 Currently, *Thousand Kites*’ projects incorporate many elements of Appalshop’s various programs, including theater, documentary media production, and multiple radio call-in shows and music-related projects.

To underscore the centrality of race within such prison-focused work, it is helpful to refer again to Dylan Rodriguez. Rodriguez defines the contemporary U.S.

141 “About Us,” *Thousand Kites*, http://thousandkites.org/about-us/; This is one of only two places where I found the word “race” used anywhere the site (with the other begin a quote from an audience member regarding the a hip hop and “traditional” music collaboration project)


144 “About Us,” *Thousand Kites*. 
“prison boom” (noted by Thousand Kites) as “a regime of white-supremacist violence.”\textsuperscript{145} Rodriguez historicizes contemporary mass incarceration as a constituent force in maintaining recapitalized hierarchies descendent from chattel slavery. Specifically, he cites the extreme violent repression of radical black civil rights activism in the 1970s, the coinciding recession and massive unemployment proffered by widespread deindustrialization, and Ronald Reagan’s declaration of the War on Drugs in the following decade (among many other things) as central to current state of racialized imprisonment and criminality. In sum, Rodriguez argues that the prison boom must “be conceptualized as something akin to a white-supremacist ‘mode of production’ that proliferates and hierarchizes a site-specific technology of domination.”\textsuperscript{146}

With specific attention to Appalshop’s work, the “two, new local SuperMax prisons,” refer specifically to Red Onion State Prison and Wallens Ridge State Prison, which opened respectively in 1998 and 1999, both less than thirty minutes from Appalshop’s headquarters in Whitesburg.\textsuperscript{147} These two state prisons are notorious amongst human rights groups and prison activists for an explosive dynamic between a predominantly black and Latino inmate population and a staff of guards peopled by local whites. A 2001 report by Amnesty International outlined living conditions in both prisons, citing frequent racial abuses and dehumanizing tactics used by white guards. Examples in the report include the widespread use of racial slurs by guards, who

\textsuperscript{145} Rodriguez, \textit{Forced Passages}, 48.

\textsuperscript{146} Rodriguez, \textit{Forced Passages}, 48.

\textsuperscript{147} Virginia Department of Corrections, "Facilities (Major Institutions and Correctional Units)," https://vadoc.virginia.gov/facilities/default.shtm.
address non-white prisoners with “names such as ‘spic’, ‘nigger’, ‘porch monkey’ and ‘coon,’” and instances of “Correction Officers singing racial songs about hanging people.” Physical abuse against black and Latino inmates were also cited, including the use of stun guns and rubber bullets against non-white inmates who were “walking too fast or not walking in a straight line.” During one such incident, an inmate reported hearing a white guard yell, “Yo, Black boy, you in the wrong place. This is White man’s country.”

However, despite an emphasis on social injustices relating directly to systemic racial repression, *Holler to the Hood* and *Thousand Kites* consistently avoid mention of race in descriptions of their work, goals, and objectives. One such example can be perceived in a procession of name changes, wherein titles like *Lights Out* and *Holler to the Hood*, (the latter with its implication of black speech), were replaced with the perhaps more palatable *Calls From Home* and *Thousand Kites*, indicating an overarching apprehension towards racial themes. As such, the *Thousand Kites* website employs a vague terminology that diverts attention away from race, invoking a deracialized image of civil rights while avoiding correlations between race, white supremacy and mass incarceration that have become central to an increasingly widespread discourse on the contemporary United States prison crisis.

Bonilla-Silva identifies that the “avoidance of racial terminology” in race-related discourse and settings as key to the operational functionality of new racism. Specific to Appalachia, Smith has identified a trend in Appalachian Studies that reflects Bonilla-

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Silva’s claim. Arguing that, despite a general dismissal of race, such studies (which, as previously notes, emerged in opposition to negative portrayals of the region) commonly employ “racialist thinking” and reveal “race as a meaningful biological distinction” in regional identity formation in Appalachian. In this vein, Smith has identified a pervasive “race relations perspective” that perpetuates an assumption that race is “operative only in settings where people of color are present.” As a result, in predominantly white settings like Appalachia, as Smith points out, “race and racism are deemed irrelevant.” Thus, studies of Appalachia often obscure the ideological functionality of whiteness in the construction and maintenance of race-based hierarchies in the region (and in general), and Appalshop’s programs are no exception.

A PROBLEMATIC RURAL/URBAN DICHOTOMY

In addition to the implications of an avoidance of racial terminology in Appalshop’s diversity work, an investigation into a “hip hop and traditional” music collaboration project carried out by Thousand Kites serves as a particularly useful avenue for further exploring the organization’s approach to race. Namely, a series of conflicted portrayals of racialized differences reveal persistent stereotypes, while perceptions of cultural “sameness” qualify an anti-racist definition of regional identity. In this vein, the music collaboration project reveals the centrality of Hughey’s concept of hegemonic whiteness to the vision of Appalachian culture promoted by Appalshop. Hughey argues that “meaningful racial identity for whites is produced vis-à-vis the

150 Smith, “De-Gradations of Whiteness,” 47.
reproduction of, and appeal to, racist, essentialist, and reactionary inter- and intra-racial distinctions.” In other words, whites construct their whiteness (i.e., “embodied racial power”) through a process of identifying race-based similarity and difference between themselves and non-whites.

In practice, these distinctions manifest in the following way: inter-racial difference positions whites as superior and essentially different from non-whites, whereas intra-racial difference distinguishes apparently divergent forms of whiteness by way of degree in relation dominant ideals. An examination of the collaborative music project, and related events and audience response, reveals how such a process of “racial cohesion and difference” maintained and produced in Appalshop’s work. This project, which states its goal as “bringing hip-hop artists together with mountain musicians,” highlights the perceived disconnect between an “authentic” Appalachian culture and the presence of new, corrupting influences while also reflecting a sense of affability between these groups. Viewed through Hughey’s framework, the dominant racial ideologies circulating within this work (often obscured within the context of Appalachia) are brought to the fore.

As the clearest example of intra-racial distinction, the collaborative project, which at times equates hip-hop with “traditional” Appalachian music, implies that the “rural” whites of Appalachia are as marginalized as black communities elsewhere in the nation. Such an implication is not novel in Appalachian cultural projects; in fact, Smith has

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153 Hughey, “(Dis)similarities,” 1292.
154 Hughey, “(Dis)similarities,” 1290.
155 Hughey, “(Dis)similarities,” 1290.
156 “About Us,” Thousand Kites.
identified three predominant assumptions about race and whiteness within studies of
the region: (1) that race is “not an issue” in Appalachia because, instead, (2) class is the
“super-ordinate” dictate of social organization and political repression and, in this vein,
(3) poor whites in the region can be understood as “racial minorities.”157 While
attempting to maintain that class struggle defines Appalachian culture, such
representations perpetuate a problematic vision of racial purity long been attributed to
Appalachian life, but do so through by way of a convoluted analogism between racial
discrimination against non-whites and the mistreatment and misrepresentation of poor
whites in Appalachia.

In a press release, the musical collaboration project makes a case for its program,
citing the similarities between Black poverty in the South Bronx and white labor
struggles in Central Appalachia.158 In equating black and white experiences of
marginalization and repression this justification resonates with Smith’s critique of the
notion that “hillbillies” constitute a racial minority. According to Smith, the “position
that ‘hillbillies’ are, in effect, a racial minority” is “inaccurate and highly misleading.”159
Smith identifies a “class over caste perspective” that fails to acknowledge the
intersections of race and class in Appalachia. Instead, according to Smith, in studies of
regional injustice and repression, class consistently emerges as “super-ordinate.”160
According to Smith, persistent focus on class in studies of Appalachia has perpetuated a

157 Smith, “De-Gradations of Whiteness.”
158 “Mixin It Up: Hip-Hop Meets Traditional Mountain Music,” Holler to the Hood, 2007,
false perception of “racial innocence” in Appalachia: “a powerful myth that emerged...in the late nineteenth century (Silber 1993, 2001), [and] persists to this day.”¹⁶¹ This “racial innocence” presumably stands in contrast to the South, defined by its history of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and extreme racial violence. Such a conceptualization suggests that Appalachian whites reproduce, benefit from, and embody white racism differently than other whites.

The musical collaboration perpetuates a sense of colorblind cohesion, just as the ambiguous construction of the social injustices associated with mass incarceration supports the concept of the region’s racial innocence. Supporting this sense of cohesion, the collaboration project frequently uses the concept of “culture” to replace that of “race.” For example, the program describes its “exciting form of music that accommodates two diverse cultures,” making it possible to “bring two distinct audiences and cultures together.” By replacing racial terminology in favor of “culture,” race is erased as a meaningful distinction within the region. Sustaining their delicate double commitment, this language reinscribes Appalachian culture with Smith’s concept of regional racial innocence, obscuring the white supremacist origins of even the positive stereotypes central to Appalshop’s cultural work. A conceptualization of cultural difference is more acceptable than racial difference, and is more palatable to the popular contemporary notion of multiculturalism, which promotes acceptance and communicates a belief in the value of diverse communities. In addition, the assumed interchangeability of race and culture creates a false sense of equivalency that works to level the playing field, so to speak, regarding how these groups (African Americans and white Appalachians) have experienced repression.

¹⁶¹ Smith, “De-Gradations of Whiteness,” 42.
As an example of inter-racial distinction, the project creates a dichotomy between “urban” and “rural” that, in effect, becomes racially coded as black and white respectively. The hip-hop component of the project (including both the music and producers of this music) is persistently conflated with the term “urban,” and placed in opposition to “traditional” Appalachian music, analogous with the word “rural,” played by whites. Avoiding racial language, in this case, also reveals a seemingly natural difference between whiteness and blackness, exemplified by divergent cultural products (musical styles). Furthermore, in this dichotomy, whiteness becomes “traditional” in Appalachia. For example, a press release for the project claims that “traditional mountain music doesn’t often conjure thoughts of urban hip hop,” revealing how a concept of Appalachian whiteness is perpetuated by positioning (“urban”) non-whites outside the boundaries of what constitutes “authentic” (“rural”) Appalachian culture. The seemingly nonracial terms “urban” and “rural” thusly convey a deeper truth regarding the racial ideologies perpetuated by Appalshop’s diversity programming. As such, Appalshop engages with “other cultures” but does so in a way that maintains an essentialized concept of culture that relies on positive stereotypes. Through their definition of what constitutes Appalachian “tradition,” the music collaboration underscores Appalachia’s self-distinction by engaging with “outsiders.”

Another of Hughey’s intra-racial distinctions is enacted through what he calls “white debt” and “epidermal capital.” This concept is defined by a response to common perceptions of whiteness as “plain” or “boring” whereby whites “work to fill in this perceived white debt by converting relationships with people and objects symbolically coded non-white (especially black and Latin@ [sic]) into a kind of credentialing form of
Such a process is reflected in the token visual inclusion of non-whites on Appalshop’s website. While, predictably, the most concentrated occurrence of images of non-whites appears on pages associated with *Holler to the Hood*, *Thousand Kites*, and *Calls from Home* (despite never bringing up race), a less explicable example is on the Appalachian Media Institute’s webpage, which includes prominent images of whites with non-white youth in two prominently placed photos on AMI’s “About Us” page (see Figure 4 and Figure 3). However, a similar demographic cannot be found anywhere else on the site.

![Figure 4: Images of African American and white students working together are prominently placed with AMI’s “About Us” information. However, the majority of photographs depicting AMI workshops and events throughout the site do not reflect the same level of diversity. Source: “About the Appalachian Media Institute,” Appalshop, http://www.appalshop.org/ami/about.](image)

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162 Hughey, “(Dis)similarities,” 1299.
Appalshop’s desire to appear committed to multiculturalism manifests in the inclusion of African Americans in press photos and little else. The presentation and portrayal of non-whites in this context reveals not only an effort to depict a collaborative relationship between white Appalachians and non-whites (as with the musical collaboration project) but a failure to subsequently acknowledge the implications of such an inclusion in a meaningful way. However, a simultaneous exclusion of racial terminology inadvertently reinstates whiteness as a qualifying component of Appalachian authenticity.

While Appalshop stresses the “value” of diversity, suggesting an apparent antiracist stance and promoting messages of acceptance and inclusion, it is difficult to ignore the meaning with, and produced by, their apprehensive approach to race and racism in the region. Thusly, Appalshop’s delicate double commitment has resulted in a sustained commitment the subtle exclusion of non-whites from the cultural spaces of
Appalachia. As a result, Appalshop’s attempts to accept, acknowledge and include the presence of non-whites in the region do little to change and expand exclusory conceptions of authentic Appalachian culture.
CHAPTER V: IDENTITY, REPRESENTATION, AND THE PROBLEM OF PLACE

Appalshop formed in support of the idea that “Appalachian people should solve their own problems and tell their own stories.” To this end, the organization has endeavored to provide opportunities for Appalachians themselves to speak truth to the negative stereotypes that have become wedded to the region after decades of unflattering "outsider" portrayals. In order to reveal the realities missing from mainstream depictions, Appalshop relies on documentary media made by regional insiders. However, in many instances this work relies on equally simplified and fabricated definitions of place-based identity.

The positive stereotypes that Appalshop promotes rely on concepts of traditional culture that, echoing early philanthropy in the region remain “cloaked in a mantel of romantic revitalization.” As a result, Appalshop’s objective of “challenging stereotypes” by “[telling] the stories the commercial cultural industries don’t tell”\(^{163}\) is inadvertently undermined by a reliance on stereotypes that inadvertently support dominant ideology. Appalshop’s method of refuting negative stereotypes while perpetuating positive stereotypes fails to recognize the constitutive nature of such dualities. Additionally, conceptualizing culture in terms of authenticity supports a problematic notion of innate identity that stigmatizes difference, reinforces cultural boundaries, and reifies status quo social relations.

\(^{163}\) “About Us,” Appalshop.
In this way, although promoting the inclusivity of their work, Appalshop in fact contributes to a process of exclusion. Appalshop’s approach to documentary-making and to regional culture (place-based identity) remains too limited to effectively provoke radical new ways of thinking about the people and place they aim to represent. Their commitment to cultural authenticity results in a narrowly conceived definition of Appalachian culture that obscures the pertinent insights offered by scholars such as Whisnant and Shapiro (regarding the region’s invention) and instead continues to support a false concept of innate cultural inheritance.

However, Appalshop’s success and seemingly positive reception in the region reflects the organization’s strengths and highlights the value of their community-based work that mustn’t be overlooked. Appalshop makes a concerted and commendable effort to broaden definitions of regional culture along lines of gender, sexuality, and evolving conceptions of what it means to be Appalachian, even if the potential gains of these goals have not been fully realized. My intention is not to prove Appalshop’s work wholly ineffective but, instead, to suggest that such work has not yet met its full potential. It is my belief that critiquing such efforts, which are generally accepted as inherently liberatory, may uncover possibilities for improving the impact and outcomes of similar community-based activist work.

As far as my own efforts to conceptualize innovative pedagogies for community-based documentary education in rural spaces, this investigation into Appalshop’s construction of regional identity (where and from whom it draws its definitions) serves as a viable foundation for further exploration; it provides insight into the meanings potentially produced, and reproduced, when using documentary as a tool for cultural representation, expression, and activism. Despite fundamental differences between the
programs and projects discussed in the preceding chapters and my own work in Tutwiler, this research has helped to illuminate issues that I now see as central to future work, specifically, carried out in places that have been similarly defined by and celebrated for concepts of preserved cultural traits and practices (rooted in the past). Specifically, this research has led me to consider the limiting qualities of common definitions of both identity and documentary.

Conceptualizations of place-based identity pose particular problems where the past (“tradition”) is used to define the present. Such an emphasis on heritage and cultural continuity threatens to interrupt, or may altogether forestall, positive changes produced by the passage of time or activist efforts. In this way, historically rooted conceptions of place-based identity have the ability to covertly carry out ideological projects, ensuring that deeply rooted prejudice remains unexamined and obscure.164 According to political scientist Margaret E. Farrar, “Place becomes the basis for a narcissistic patriotism or a reactionary nationalism, one that prohibits critical examination of our values and our histories.”165 And, Farrar notes, when such place memory is neatly packaged for consumption, it emerges as a spectacle “rather than a vehicle for active engagement with and contestation of the meaning of a place.”166 Within the context of places where authentic regional culture and history form the most immediate draw (places, for example, like Southern Appalachia and the Mississippi

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Delta), place-based cultural projects that reiterate and celebrate a supposed window to the past may in fact do more to obscure our view of the present.

A consideration of the possible impact of such place-based cultural productions and representations offers additional insight into the problems posed in the preceding chapters on Appalshop’s work. Specifically, it is helpful to consider other instances in which spaces supposedly uphold a contained rejection of (or isolation from) outside influences, leading to conceptions of authenticity and cultural capital. As one example, scholarship on cultural heritage tourism explores many pertinent issues.

Cultural tourism industries often answer to desires for an easily digestible encounter with a perceived foreign culture (Other). However, such fascinations with difference rarely deviate from preconceived expectations and received mainstream ideals. Studying a cultural landscape of Appalachia other than that discussed in this paper, anthropologist Cristina Taylor Beard-Moose observes the “insider” run tourist industry of Cherokee, North Carolina, where local performers have adopted a practice of “chiefing,” appearing for tourists dressed in a stereotypical (and not historically accurate Cherokee) Indian fashion.167 Beard-Moose writes, “The majority of those [tourists] that came to and through the [Qualla] Boundary were satisfied with a stereotypical representation of the American Indian through the chiefing enterprise, and relatively few stopped to see who the Cherokee actually were.”168 Beard-Moose’s discussion of chiefing in the Appalachian Cherokee community highlights the complex relationship between tourists and the members of communities that become the focus of

tourism industries, where the expectations of tourists center on the traditions they expect to encounter, which, in turn, are what organizations – and people – will aim to provide. A similarly complicated dynamic emerges between filmmaker and audience - and likewise, between filmmaker and subject - in Appalshop’s regionally focused media and cultural education programs. The cursory sense of understanding produced through efforts that cater to tourist expectations, or rely on simply countering the mainstream do little to engender meaningful dialogue.

In another analysis of how cultural "insiders" interact with touristic representations of their own communities, leisure and tourism studies scholars Greg Richards and Derek Hall write, “The realization that the community itself has become an object of tourism consumption has in turn encouraged some communities to reproduce themselves specifically for tourists.”169 “Site sacrilization,” as such, compels communities to “identify themselves with the way in which they are ‘named’ and ‘framed’ as tourist attractions.”170 Beyond simply catering to tourist expectation, Richards and Hall suggest how communities sometimes internalize stereotypical cultural productions. This type of tourism enables the production and reproduction of an embodied cultural authenticity, risking the “narcissistic patriotism” Farrar warns against. Such reactionary concepts of identity support the naturalization of boundaries, built along imagined lines of inherent, and often irreconcilable, differences. To, once again, quote Jane Gaines’ study of Appalshop, “To conceive of folk culture as a core of common experience that goes so far back in history that it can remain beyond the reach

170 Richards and Hall, “Tourism and Sustainable Community Development,” 4.
of human development is to say that there are some things that are the way they are ‘by
nature’; that their meanings are self-evident and not particular versions that benefit one
group’s point of view more than another’s.”171

Gaines identifies such conceptions of folk culture as an inherently problematic
enterprise. Such processes of identity formation, associated with tourism and tourist
expectations, similarly emerge in Appalshop’s work, by programs wherein particular
cultural traditions are celebrated and named as evidence of a shared cultural heritage.
As with many cultural heritage tourism sites, this work supports an idea that certain
groups are natural recipients of specific talents and inclinations. In the case of
Appalshop, where culture and place have been so intensely bound, and where touristic
expressions of place identity become implemented through the production of
documentary media making, such a naturalization of culture poses a real threat.

Many of Appalshop’s activist goals are undermined by a persistent refrain that
identity can be defined by region. While claiming to call into question stereotypical
images of regional culture this work often reinforces static conceptions of culture,
enacting a process of Othering by naming what is and undoubtedly what is not a part of
Appalachian identity. Such definitions of group and individual identities reinforce
hegemonic power structures and strengthen uneven power relations and social
hierarchies.

171 Gaines, “Appalshop Documentaries.”
POSSIBILITIES FOR RETHINKING PLACE-BASED IDENTITIES IN COMMUNITY-BASED DOCUMENTARY EDUCATION

Due to common expectations and representations, constructions of place-based culture are particularly vulnerable to becoming vehicles of dominant ideology. However, this does not mean focus should not be placed on such constructions of identity; it could be equally detrimental to ignore them completely in favor of viewing cultural production as a flat plane, cut off from history. Instead, it is important to actively deconstruct the various forces that work to compose what has come to be viewed as the culture of a place, recognizing the power that circulates therein. In the example of Appalachian culture, such a study proves enlightening, as it sheds light on a number of places in which focus on particular traditions in fact continue a linear construction of place-based identity that, in turn, perpetuates the very kinds of thinking that the work might otherwise hope to counteract. In this way, I hope my own work might continue a study of the foundations of the regional identities that are often expected of various rural communities, and to use this information to seek ways of avoiding the potentially limiting qualities of such conceptions.

Such an endeavor would prove beneficial not only to activism that promotes place-based culture as a means of strengthening particular communities and localities, it would also aid those organizations that harness the means of documentary representation to connect with outside audiences for other purposes. In any case, a sophisticated understanding of the various forces that have come together to form concepts of specific place-based identity would allow for engagements to work more productively with the legacies of regional space. In this, such work would be able to reach its full potential, and a more inclusive perspective.
RETHINKING IDENTITY

My work in Tutwiler differed from Appalshop in many ways, one being that concepts of authentic Delta culture were never of central focus in class discussions or student projects. While my wariness of conceptualizations of cultural authenticity (especially in the context of activist and/or benevolent work) have only been reinforced by my examination of Appalshop’s organizational identity, I don’t believe alternative approaches should instead exclude such constructions. Instead, I have come to believe that efforts to define ourselves and those we encounter (either in reality or imagination) are so intrinsic that the simple rejection of extant concepts of identity and culture, however problematic, may only make way for their persistent reproduction.

In the specific context of community-based documentary work an intentional focus on regional culture and stereotypes - as fashioned by both insiders and by outsiders - may work to move away from dualities of true/false, myth/reality, insider/outsider, and instead begin to loosen the boundaries of cultural belonging implied by static cultural definitions. While community-based documentary initiatives frequently claim to engender venues for counter-narratives and diverse voices, they may also reinforce concepts of static identity and cultural boundaries when failing to work outside of larger structures of control from which such concepts are drawn. In practice, deconstructing static concepts of place, identity, culture, and so on should perhaps replace more common efforts to simply redefine such notions.

Perhaps efforts aimed at defining identity at all become inherently limiting. Instead of approaching such categorical concepts in terms of definition, region and identity may become springboards for more radical thought: providing avenues of deconstructing and rethinking our ways of understanding our environments and our communities. Such an endeavor might be carried out through explorations of the
different and constantly changing ways that individuals experience place and identity or through examining the historical roots and contemporary shifts of particular regional representations, revealing their subjectivity as well. As such, it may in fact become possible that such work might engender radical counter-narratives.

As a possible conceptual framework for such work, poststructuralist feminist scholarship offers particularly relevant discourse on identity. Such scholarship posits that identity is never static and cannot therefore be defined. According to poststructuralist feminism, individuals are made up of myriad “identities that shift and change.”172 Unlike common concepts of identity that “presuppose an essence at the heart of the individual which is unique, fixed and coherent” poststructural feminists suggest “a subjectivity which is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak.173 This rejection of common conceptions of identity also helps to expand upon theories that emphasize the subjective nature of documentary expression by addressing, not only the media produced by such programs but also the unfixed and subjective identities of those that produce it.

RETHINKING DOCUMENTARY

In a region whose inhabitants have been perpetually labeled as both inherently impoverished and backwards, documentary becomes a particularly attractive way to


“speak back.” However, just as identity can be confining so too can documentary expression.

Within the context of the South, and especially the rural South, film, photography, and audio documentation have long been tools in the quest to uncover and catalogue the evidence of “pure” cultural formations and “endangered authenticity.” In the case of Appalshop, such authenticity becomes tantamount to contemporary identity formation. The overriding assumptions about cultural cohesion and tradition asserted in Appalshop’s organizational identity, undoubtedly permeates their documentary strategies and pedagogy. Organizing their work around notions of a cohesive place based culture not only leads to overly simplified constructions of Appalachia, but also of Appalachians themselves.

For example, in her analysis of Appalshop’s early films, Gaines argues that these films conceal their subjectivity within Appalshop producers’ (trained at Appalshop) particular stylistic choices. Critiquing a number of films from Appalshop’s first fifteen years of work, Gaines focuses on the presence of a now-familiar modernization-preservation dichotomy (claiming that Appalshop’s overarching preference is for the latter) as it plays out in these films, specifically, in interactions between subject and filmmaker, as displayed therein.

With particular regard to documentaries focused on “folk” production and products (i.e., basket weaving, chair making, and so on), the Cinéma Vérité style manifested in a “profound ambivalence toward modernization.” Gaines argues that, in such films, the aesthetic realism of the Cinéma Vérité style work to conflate

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“traditional” craftsmanship with the “craft” of documentary filmmaking (simultaneously portrayed as modern by Appalshop). Such an aesthetic approach works to stress the “cultural continuities” between primarily impoverished subjects and the mostly middle-class, college educated documentary filmmakers working at Appalshop as part of a larger project, according to Gaines, of concealing the significance of class distinctions that might undermine the organization’s depictions of regional culture or compromise their insider status.

Gaines reveals how such films exploit a presumed insider status in tandem with common perceptions about documentary’s ability to show the “truth.” This analysis of the documentary work produced by Appalshop, suggests the significance of Appalshop’s “particular assumptions” about region, class, and cultural identity in the subsequent production of films made by students of their programs. Given the longevity of Gaines’ double commitment, as examined in previous chapters, a contemporary analysis of Appalshop’s documentary work (produced in the years since Gaines’ article), with attention to current documentary theory and discourse, is pertinent. In the contemporary field of documentary studies it is generally accepted that objective representations of the “real” world, “as it happens,” so to speak, are undermined by the various processes and interactions and constitute the act of documentation (be it film, photography, audio). The mediation of documentary representation constructs its own meaning. It would be valuable to see if Appalshop’s media educators take such contemporary discourse into account, or if perhaps they have sustained the use of Cinéma Vérité.

Engaging with pertinent theories from the field of contemporary documentary studies in such a way provides avenues for a constructive critique of extant community-based documentary work. Despite the prevalence of documentary-making in media-
oriented activist efforts there seems to be a lack of attention paid to documentary studies. As a result issue-oriented documentary work may fail to successfully function as a representational tool, instead succumbing to common pitfalls regarding truth and subjectivity. In other words, failing to address contemporary documentary theories and modes of representation, activist documentary may be easily written off as detrimentally one-sided. While documentary discourse assumes that form is just as, if not (in some instances) more important and powerful than content, this line of thinking does not seem to have entered into community-based documentary programming.

Perhaps the absence of such a critical approach stems from the assumption that these programs inherently possess the ability to allow their participants to “speak back” to a repressive mainstream. Many support a belief that community-based documentary work is inherently equipped to engender radically address injustice and promote cross-cultural dialogues and understanding by providing a platform for public expression for marginalized groups.

While I myself am drawn to the potentials of documentary media (specifically in rural regions like Southern Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta, that are geographically and/or socioeconomically isolated) to expand historical and cultural narratives and stimulate dialogue through creative self-expression, I firmly believe this is by no means intrinsic to documentary media. On the contrary, in regions that have, for example, been popularly imagined in terms of particular visual qualities, coded by stereotypes, documentary work becomes particularly vulnerable to unintended misrepresentation and increased misunderstanding. Additionally, documentary representations of place-based culture that champion concepts of cultural authenticity also present myriad problems as they circulate into the dominant field of vision where
viewers inevitably construct their own meaning based on preconceived notions and expectations.

Community-based documentary education programs generally emphasize the importance of the process (documentary-making) over the end product (the media itself), a failure to fully address the complexities of documentary representational strategies limits the potential liberatory aspects of the documenting process. While this process is meant to engender positive identity formation through creative exploration, such potentials are diminished by finite definitions of documentary expression. Instead, perhaps such programming would benefit from a more experimental approach to documentary representation. Simplified concepts of documentary, defined simply as non-fiction narrative, become confined to normalizing concepts of communicating and understanding. Instead, perhaps a more organic exploration of the medium, while also attending to the power of media representation, could allow for new and innovative way of documentary representation, and thinking and knowing more broadly. While documentary expression can prove problematic, it may provide a unique ability to call into question what we understand to be natural, true, real, and so forth. In this way, I agree that such work offers possibilities for “speaking back,” however, in my own summation, this potential is contingent upon a process of rethinking static definitions of documentary expression.

Documentary’s most profound use may lie, not in an ability to reveal or uncover essential truths about the world but instead to engender processes of questioning truth in general. In other words, documentary’s capacity to question and complicate our understandings prove more powerful than its capacity to reveal or even to, literally, document. Making such a conceptualization central in community-based documentary work might effectively aid in explorations of the constructed nature of otherwise
accepted truths and, in turn, allow new ways of knowing and thinking that can in fact begin to move beyond dominant ideology.

Supporters of community-based media programs such as Appalshop champion the inherent liberatory potentials of putting cameras into the hands of community members. Many argue that such work has the ability to “give voice” as a form of advocacy by inviting members of under-represented groups to tell their own stories and influence their own representations. Returning again to the work of poststructuralist feminists, pedagogical theorist Mimi Orner argues that such strategies prove ineffective due to their limiting assumptions that “voices, and identities [are] singular, unchanging and unaffected by the context in which the speaking occurs.”175 Likewise, warning against the “simplistic dichotomy between empowerment and oppression,” prevalent in work that engages marginalized and underrepresented groups, Jennifer Gore argues for a conceptual shift “from purely oppositional stances, to a problem of multiplicity and contradiction.”176 Considering such scholarship within the context of community-based documentary work helps to underscore the importance of critiquing assumptions of even the most celebrated and seemingly successful activist efforts.

The ways that we perceive our environments, ourselves and others are governed by experience as well as perceptions that are often embedded within hegemonic social structures that frequently lack meaningful analysis. However, participatory documentary education programs may stimulate curiosity and critical thinking by

175 Orner, “Interrupting the Calls for Student Voice,” 80.

encouraging in-depth explorations of issues affecting people directly as individuals and more broadly in society. Such activist programs have a largely unrealized potential to create open spaces for counter-narratives and productive radical dialogues. In order to realize this potential however, we must look critically at the ways in which this ever-growing field of social action and expression is being implemented.
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