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“THE HARD WORK IS DONE IN THE LOOKING”:
ANALYZING REPRESENTATIONS OF AND RESPONSES TO APPALACHIA IN
POPULAR CULTURE

A thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Southern Studies
The University of Mississippi

by

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April 2015

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ABSTRACT

For many Americans, the concept of Appalachia as a singular place has been created through images in popular culture, often stereotypical. This thesis presents an evolution of Appalachian representations—or, more appropriately, a chronology of images in stasis, as they seem to have remained fairly unchanged over time.

Responses to those images, however, have changed greatly. Most importantly, responses from within Appalachia have transformed, with regional people gaining power over the types of images of the region in popular culture. There is, however, a paradoxical dualism in the responses from within the region, as some Appalachians grow weary of being stereotyped on the screen while others welcome clichés as commercial opportunities. This thesis will shed some light on not only the history of visual representations of Appalachia but also on their future.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandparents, George and Thelma Barnes and James and Gladys Trollinger. They have always inspired me to do my best work by example, and I miss them all greatly.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to my thesis advisor, Andy Harper, who not only patiently put up with my wrist-wringing through the writing process, but also encouraged me to think deeply and broaden my horizons. Advice from my committee members, David Wharton and Jessie Wilkerson, lent my thesis nuance and complexity that made it much stronger, and I am grateful to them for that.

I am also appreciative of those professors who, through their classes, brought theories and methodologies to my attention that improved my work: Charles Reagan Wilson, Ted Ownby, Leigh Ann Duck, and Jay Watson.

Finally, I am ever thankful for my family: my parents, Richard and Patsi, and my sister, Mary. You always support me, whether I'm writing something as big as a thesis or as small as a haiku, and it means the world.

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INTRODUCTION:
“YOU CAN’T UNDERSTAND AMERICA UNTIL YOU UNDERSTAND
APPALACHIA”¹

In the foreword to Harold Warren’s volume *a right good people*, Loyal Jones wrote, “Those who look at Southern Appalachia usually find whatever they are conditioned to find.”² This is likely true of any region within the United States, but of Appalachia in particular—especially when it comes to visual representations of Appalachian people in popular culture. Walter Precourt argues, “Such images result in a communication barrier between local Appalachians and those from other regions”³—but they also likely are created *because* of that barrier. Appalachia as a region has been repeatedly mapped for the nation from the outside in. This cultural cartography of the mountains through popular imagery is useful in attempting to understand the state of Appalachia (or at least the idea of the region as a place “in but not of America”⁴) within the national consciousness.

Studying visual representations in popular culture is crucial to gaining a better understanding of “the state of the American mind.”⁵ As film scholars Leonard Quart and Albert Auster explain, popular images are “one of the most democratic elements in the cultural fabric, [...] the images often becoming a substitute for reality for their audiences.”⁶ Knowing this, in an

¹ Howard Berkes, interview with Jeff Biggers and Rudy Abramson, *All Things Considered*, NPR, May 7, 2006.

² Harold Warren, *a right good people* (Boone: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1974), 2.

³ Walter Precourt, “The Image of Appalachian Poverty,” in *Appalachia and America: Autonomy and Regional Dependence*, ed. by Allen Batteau (Lexington: the University Press of Kentucky, 1983).

⁴ Allen Batteau, ed., *Appalachia and America: Autonomy and Regional Dependence* (Lexington: the University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 4.

⁵ Leonard Quart and Albert Auster, *American Film and Society Since 1945* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

attempt to get a footing on how the nation views the region of Appalachia, “the significance of mass media cannot be overemphasized.”⁷ As Gladys L. Knight observes, “Appalachia and its people occupy a complicated place in the popular media,”⁸ and have for well over a century. For many Americans, the concept of Appalachia as a singular place has been created through images on the screen and the page. This process is not unique to Appalachia, but it has had an immeasurable impact on the construction of this place in the broader imagination. Elizabeth Cowie explains this process of translating representations into reality: “Through the other’s face I become aware of a world experienced by the other, which thus becomes a realm of possibilities and of a virtuality, whether this is ‘a world’ of fiction, or ‘the world’ of contingent actuality.”⁹ In Appalachia, the world of “fiction” and the world of “actuality” overlap so much they are indistinguishable.

Appalachian historian Roberta Herrin says, “The truth about any region can never be fully known because diverse perspectives see different ‘truths,’”¹⁰ but this concept is largely unknown or forgotten by those who create images of Appalachia in popular culture. While other American regions have transformed in popular culture over time, image makers still largely “present mountain culture as the general public wants to see it portrayed”¹¹—that is, as “a monolithic place with the same kind of people from one end to the other [...] like no other part of the country.”¹² Appalachians are often presented as culturally backwards—or at the least,

⁷ Walter Precourt, “The Image of Appalachian Poverty,” in *Appalachia and America*, ed. by Allen Batteau.

⁸ Gladys L. Knight, *Pop Culture Places: An Encyclopedia of Places in American Popular Culture* (Westwood, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Co., 2014), 52.

⁹ Elizabeth Cowie, “Documentary Desire: Seeing for Ourselves and Identifying in Reality,” in *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 87.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Saulsbury, “ETSU Center hopes to clarify Appalachian misconceptions,” *Johnson City (Tenn.) Press*, July 26, 2014.

¹¹ W. K. McNeil, ed., *Appalachian Images in Folk and Popular Culture* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 12.

¹² Loyal Jones, “Foreword,” in *Appalachian Images in Folk and Popular Culture*, ed. by W. K. McNeil (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), xii.

culturally ignorant, decades behind the rest of the nation in every way, from fashion to education. While popular culture has utilized many of these stereotypes for decades, even in modern images of the region, “old stereotypes are constantly being recycled,” Loyal Jones declares, asserting that this has, to some extent, led to a dehumanization of the Appalachian people.¹³ These specific cultural images have served an important purpose in America over time. As Ronald Eller explains, “We *know* Appalachia exists because we need it to exist in order to define what we are not.”¹⁴

Sixteenth-century explorers borrowed the name for the Appalachian Mountains from the Apalachee tribe, native to northern Florida. But the designation of Appalachia as a distinct region in the United States did not happen until the twentieth century. The government first mapped distinct boundaries for the “Appalachian Region” in the Appalachian Regional Development Act of 1965, which created the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) and led to a bevy of legislation aimed at eradicating poverty in the mountains.¹⁵ In the Act, Congress declared, “Appalachia, while abundant in natural resources and rich in potential, lags behind the rest of the Nation in its economic growth [in] that its people have not shared properly in the Nation’s prosperity.”¹⁶ Appalachia, as it was mapped then, was comprised of thirteen states, including all of West Virginia, for a total of 205,000 square miles following “the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi.”¹⁷ Its Western borders include parts of Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi. A large swath of Pennsylvania is included in the region, along with small sections of New York and Maryland. On its Eastern side

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ronald Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2013).

¹⁵ “The Appalachian Region,” *The Appalachian Regional Commission*, accessed March 2015, http://www.arc.gov/appalachian_region/TheAppalachianRegion.asp.

¹⁶ *Appalachian Regional Development Act of 1965*. Public Law 107-8 (2001), § 1965.

¹⁷ Ibid.

are Virginia and North and South Carolina, with several counties in northern Georgia rounding Appalachia out.¹⁸ For the purposes of this thesis, I focus on central Appalachia, which includes West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and parts of Georgia and the Carolinas. These are the areas that most vividly come to mind when the word “Appalachian” is used as a descriptor. In the counties in Central Appalachia, the mountains produce coal, which in turn produces a culture of poverty, which in turn produces ideas about the kinds of people Appalachia produces. It is a vicious cycle—one the region has not yet been able to break. The cultural cartography, or interior mapping, of Appalachia in the American imagination by popular culture continues to create a distinct regional image that immediately provokes clichéd connotations and meanings.

I find that the images created in popular culture have a profound affect on this region in every way: socially and economically, as well as in cementing beliefs about the mountains and the people who live there. My thesis argues that representations of Appalachia in popular culture were one-dimensional for decades, utilizing stereotype often, but the region has begun challenging these clichés in diverse ways in the new millennium. I will analyze the history of Appalachia in popular culture (with an emphasis on visual representations) from the mid- to late 1800s to the present day, with the goal of generating a better understanding of where these images come from based on their historical and cultural context. I will present an evolution of Appalachian representations—or, more appropriately, a chronology of images in stasis, as they seem to have remained fairly unchanged over time. In fact, some of the most popular images of Appalachians that still appear onscreen in the new millennium harken back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some of the most omnipresent of these images are moonshine-making white men (in fact, racial diversity hardly ever emerges in Appalachia in popular culture)

¹⁸ “Map of the Appalachian Region,” *The Appalachian Regional Commission*, accessed November 2014, http://www.arc.gov/appalachian_region/MapofAppalachia.asp.

on the run from the law; unkempt mountain men who live on the outskirts of society; hillbilly fools who are ignorant of the ways of the modern world; and a culture that has remained unchanged over the generations while the rest of America has evolved. Generally, popular culture has presented images of Appalachia in one of two ways: through a romantic lens that praises its resistance to change, or in a negative light that ranges from concerned to horrified at its cultural ignorance.

In conjunction with this chronology and analysis of images of Appalachia in popular culture, I will illustrate responses to those images, as much as contemporary documents from those periods will allow, from the wider viewership and from within the region. These responses can range from critical reviews of films and box office reports to protests and essays digging deeper at the heart of these productions. I contend that, while the images appear to have stayed fairly the same, the responses to them have changed greatly. Over time, images that connote the perceived traditionalism, isolation and cultural “otherness” of Appalachia have sometimes provoked awe and fascination while at other times they have drawn repulsion and pity. Most importantly, responses from *within* Appalachia have transformed, with natives of the mountains gaining power over some of the types of images of the region in popular culture. The paradoxical dualism in the types of responses to representations of Appalachia within the region reveals a stark contrast in what people from the mountains find acceptable. Some Appalachians grow weary of being stereotyped on the screen while others welcome popular clichés as commercial opportunities. One group of modern Appalachians is not willing to let these stereotypes speak for them as a people, and by resisting flat representations, they are beginning to give a three-dimensional voice to the region in the national popular culture. But another segment of Appalachian people is now more willing to not only accept but promote representations—clichéd

or not—if there’s a possibility of pumping capital into the region as a direct result of those images.

The three chapters that are the heart of my thesis examine representations of Appalachia in popular culture chronologically, since this illustrates trends in representations of Appalachia when they first appeared and how they have remained at the fore over the years. The first chapter begins at the close of the Civil War, when the concept of an Appalachia that was different from the rest of the nation began to fully emerge. The second half of the nineteenth century saw “an army of observer-writers”¹⁹ travel to the mountains, where they “discovered” a culture seemingly in stasis, unchanged when compared to the rapidly modernizing outside world. As Ronald Eller explained, “The idea of Appalachia provided a counterpoint to emerging definitions of progress at the turn of the twentieth century.”²⁰ The writers and artists who created an image of an “other” Appalachia for America conjured up notions that became ingrained in the national imagination in the following decades. In this first period of Appalachian image-making, the region was generally portrayed in a romantic light; people were fascinated by a place that was resistant to change, and embraced the notion that there was part of America that was unscathed by the ravages of modernity. For many, the region came to symbolize “what the West once did: the self-sufficient, the inaccessible, the fiercely independent soul of the nation.”²¹ As visual representations became more popular and more widespread into the twentieth century, Appalachia (as it had been created for the world in the nineteenth century) remained a go-to cultural touchstone. Films, television shows and comic strips capitalized on the idea of a different Appalachia—usually in a lighthearted manner that either poked fun at or idealized a

¹⁹ Loyal Jones, “Foreword,” in *Appalachian Images*, ed. by McNeil.

²⁰ Ronald Eller, *Uneven Ground*.

²¹ David Baker, “Elvis Goes to Hollywood: Authenticity, Resistance, Commodification and the Mainstream,” in *Redefining Mainstream Popular Music*, ed. by Sarah Baker, Andy Bennett, Jodie Taylor (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 98.

mountain people uncultured in the ways of the modernized national society. “The southern ‘hillbilly’ [became] a stock character of popular culture”²² during that time, and viewers enjoyed seeing the “idealized versions of fetching boyishness”²³ that the hillbilly often represented. There was a general acceptance that the region experienced widespread poverty as a result of a “self-sufficient economy,”²⁴ and the idea of a region within America that remained outside modernization enthralled viewers. Appalachia, during the first decades of the twentieth century, came to be seen by the American populace as “an internal colony.”²⁵ The cultural aspects of Appalachia that made it different were not only acceptable but also fascinating at this time. Viewers enjoyed seeing a people mired in the past, whether poverty was a direct result of that or not. J. W. Williamson described the American concept of the region leading up to the 1960s succinctly: “It’s noble to suffer economic injustice. But fight back, and you lose.”²⁶ That is, while Appalachia interested viewers, it also evoked fear and frustration through its representations in popular culture.

Chapter II begins as the War on Poverty touches down in Appalachia in 1964—an important moment for the region, as it was a turning point in the way the mountains were portrayed in popular culture. Just as it had been in the late nineteenth century, Appalachia was “discovered” once again by outsiders—but where writers and image-makers had once found beauty, they now found problems. “The rediscovery of Appalachia as a cultural and economic *problem* area was an embarrassment and a challenge to a [post-war] generation confident in its

²² John Solomon Otto, “Hillbilly Culture: The Appalachian Mountain Folk in History and Popular Culture,” *Southern Quarterly* 24 (1986).

²³ J. W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland: What the Movies Did to the Mountains and What the Mountains Did to the Movies* (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

²⁴ Walter Precourt, “The Image of Appalachian Poverty,” in *Appalachia and America*, ed. by Allen Batteau.

²⁵ Allen Batteau, *Appalachia and America*.

²⁶ J. W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland*.

ability to shape a better world,” Eller explains.²⁷ The things America used to find funny or romantic about the region suddenly became cause for concern—or even horror. Appalachia transformed “in the public mind from a place to a condition.”²⁸ Its distinct regional “otherness” was pitiful; “at a time when suburban middle-class families were enjoying new homes with [...] modern conveniences, many Appalachian families survived [...] with few amenities in rural areas or deteriorating company towns.”²⁹ By way of acknowledging the downsides of this poverty, it was no longer acceptable to laugh at Appalachia. For many viewers, Appalachian poverty was a direct result of what was now considered a problematic regional “ideology” stemming from backwards “cultural values and beliefs,”³⁰ or from being abandoned by the nation at large economically. Appalachian cultural elements that had once drawn smiles and awe now drew disapproval and concern. For the ensuing few decades, the majority of images of the region cast a critical eye upon the cultural differences of the mountains, usually with change as the end goal.

The War on Poverty simultaneously, however, introduced a grassroots movement of image making in the region, with Appalachians starting to find ways to create representations of themselves for a larger audience for the first time. A flood of documentaries came out of the region in the 1960s and 1970s, allowing viewers to ““see for [them]selves’ in an identification with the camera as objective and disembodied.”³¹ These films, photographs, and television news programs often presented representations of Appalachia that “combined the lack of progress with the ravages of progress,”³² simultaneously looking down on the region for its cultural and

²⁷ Ronald Eller, *Uneven Ground*. Emphasis mine.

²⁸ Loyal Jones, “Foreword,” in *Appalachian Images*, ed. by McNeil.

²⁹ Ronald Eller, *Uneven Ground*.

³⁰ Walter Precourt, “The Image of Appalachian Poverty,” in *Appalachia and America*, ed. by Allen Batteau.

³¹ Elizabeth Cowie, *Recording Reality*, 91.

³² Allen Batteau, *Appalachia and America*.

economic stasis while also placing some blame on the nation at large for not doing more for the people of the mountains. The decades leading up to the new millennium produced images that took Appalachia's "otherness" very seriously. Appalachia remained a place apart from the rest of the nation in popular culture into the early years of the twenty-first century, since "the transformation begun by the War on Poverty [not only] failed to eliminate the perception of Appalachian otherness," it heightened that perception.³³

Marshall Berman writes, "To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction,"³⁴ and this is certainly true of Appalachia in the 21st century. As Chapter III illustrates, Appalachian representations in the present day certainly are mired in paradox and contradiction. As modern images of the region illustrate, the mountains now evoke "complicated feelings of simultaneous awe and aversion."³⁵ Williamson notes that, currently, "the distance between the hillbilly as comedy and the hillbilly as threat is amazingly short, representing the full [...] maturation of primitive rural America in pop culture."³⁶ Sometimes, strangely, the "hillbilly" can be both comedic and terrifying in the same film or television show nowadays, which was not the case in the past. Appalachia is undergoing another era of "discovery"—and some within the region believe that this is leading to "a more realistic picture of what Appalachia is and was,"³⁷ while others remain frustrated at the continued popularity of recurring stereotypes. For instance, reality television may be a new medium, but the images it generates of Appalachia are not, as some of the oldest and most clichéd representations of the region appear often in these shows. The hillbilly stereotype promoted in such programs, John Solomon Otto argues, "is bitterly resented

³³ Ronald Eller, *Uneven Ground*.

³⁴ Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: the Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 13.

³⁵ J. W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland*.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Howard Berkes interview, *All Things Considered*.

by the contemporary inhabitants of the Southern Appalachian mountains.”³⁸ The accumulation of so many flat regional images over time has sparked a new grassroots movement to change Appalachian images from within, with the hopes that the rest of the nation will take notice. With modern technological platforms like the Internet giving voice to all people on a broad scale, some Appalachians are beginning to affect the construction of the region in the national consciousness from the inside out in new and exciting ways.

Modern existence, however, is a paradox, and Appalachia is no exception. The dualism there lies in the fact that some Appalachians not only have no problem with stereotypes, they welcome them for their commercial marketability. As Berman argues, “The self recognizing itself, even if a self-destructive way, [is] the ultimate source of authority.”³⁹ A segment of the regional population is taking this notion to heart. A new industry of tourism banking on popular images has emerged in the mountains, with groups hoping to capitalize on America’s idea of Appalachia for the benefit of the region. Whatever the result of these dual responses to Appalachian images from within the mountains, one thing is clear: “The naming and redefining of Appalachia appears to have no end,”⁴⁰ and neither does the discussion of what is acceptable in visual representations of the region.

Scholars have been interested in interpreting images of Appalachia in popular culture for some time, and several volumes of previous work have been of vital importance in influencing my argument, research and conclusions. This thesis adds to that body of work in its discussion of responses generated from the region itself, particularly in recent years, which has not yet been analyzed in a large-scale scholarly work. J. W. Williamson’s 1995 book, *Hillbillyland: What the*

³⁸ John Solomon Otto, “Hillbilly Culture,” *Southern Quarterly*.

³⁹ Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, 212.

⁴⁰ David Walls, “On the Naming of Appalachia,” from *An Appalachian Symposium: Essays Written in Honor of Cratis D. Williams*, edited by J. W. Williamson (Boone, NC: Appalachian State University Press, 1977).

Movies Did to the Mountains and What the Mountains Did to the Movies, has become a go-to resource for insight into Appalachian representations in the twenty years since its publication. Williamson explores America's "ambiguous need for hillbillies"⁴¹ by using each chapter to examine a particular type of Appalachian image through the lens of its cultural importance during the era of its highest popularity. Williamson introduces such visual stereotypes as "the hillbilly as fool," "the coonskin cap boys," "the hillbilly as social bandit" and "the mama's boys," among others,⁴² analyzing where they come from and why they remain popular. His work is accessible and encompassing, and it helped greatly in my own analysis. Much has changed in the world of visual representations in the two decades since Williamson's book was published, however, and I particularly hope the second and third chapters of my thesis can meaningfully bring Williamson's methodology into the 21st century.

Another Appalachian scholar whose work was helpful for me is Ronald Eller, whose 2013 book, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945*, is among the most contemporary works I was able to find that was critical to my understanding of the region. As Eller has been at the fore of Appalachian studies for over 30 years, his latest book draws from a large body of work and a profound knowledge of the region. Eller's research encompasses all of Appalachia and its culture, not just visual representations—not even primarily visual representations, as he considers the economic and political influences that have also played a role in shaping the region and its representations. His analysis of the history of America through a regional lens was beneficial to me in my understanding of the evolution of the mountains through the 20th century.

Several edited volumes of articles, both historic and modern, were also crucial to my understanding of the evolution of Appalachian images in popular culture. W. K. McNeil's

⁴¹ J. W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland*.

⁴² *Ibid.*

collection, *Appalachian Images in Folk and Popular Culture* (1989), brought together articles and essays written as far back as the late 1800s, effectively creating a timeline of responses to the region by the outside world. McNeil's work was immeasurably helpful while I created my own chronology of images of the mountains, as I was able to utilize historical moments in that book to pinpoint the birth of certain ideas about Appalachia. Allen Batteau's *Appalachia and America: Autonomy and Regional Dependence* (1983) also brought together a number of essays exploring "the identity of Appalachia [as] a regional culture that was 'in but not of' America."⁴³ Many of these essays specifically discuss the notion of poverty in the region, which makes sense, as a book on Appalachia published in the early 1980s would have been influenced interminably by the War on Poverty. Batteau's collection shed light on the scholarly response to the images generated during that era in a useful way. The 1999 book *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Back Talk from an American Region*—edited by Dwight B. Billings, Gurney Norman and Katherine Ledford—does work similar to Batteau's, also collecting essays about the region up to the end of the 20th century. The book includes an important and unique section of essays called "Speaking More Personally: Responses to Appalachian Stereotypes"⁴⁴ that gives natives of the region a platform for discussing how representations of the mountains have affected their identity, and this was most helpful for me as I looked for Appalachian voices in my research.

Clearly, there is much that has already been said about visual representations of Appalachia in popular culture, and large shoes to fill in terms of making a useful analysis of those images. I hope my work will fill a gap in Appalachian studies, or at least bridge other studies in a coherent way. I do intend to marry some methodologies of previous scholars in my thesis. For instance, McNeil crafted a chronology of written ideas about Appalachia, while

⁴³ Allen Batteau, *Appalachia and America*.

⁴⁴ Dwight B., Billings, ed., *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Back Talk from an American Region* (Lexington: the University Press of Kentucky, 1999).

Williamson wrote a chronology of visual representations; I attempt to bring them together to gain a better understanding of where these images came from, why they were popular, and what they meant (and continue to mean) to people in the region. Also, I will be able to bring these ideas into the present day and use them to understand such phenomenon as reality television and the Internet, both of which trade widely on Appalachian stereotypes.

I am synthesizing several types of sources in this thesis, which is of importance. The difference between images created for journalistic purposes and those created for commercial or artistic use is significant—and yet, I deliberately group them all together in my chronology and analysis. While their producers may have intended different outcomes for these types of images to produce, in the end, I believe they all have a similar affect on the cultural cartography of Appalachia. Context is indeed important, but I would argue that, when viewers recall what they know about the region based on the images they have seen, the lines between what was meant to be presented as truth and what was meant to be fictional likely blur. These representations collide and converge in the construction of Appalachia in the national imaginary, and as such, they also converge in the chronology and analysis of this thesis.

I should also make note of themes and issues that do not take center stage in this thesis—nor, indeed, in Appalachian studies as a whole. There is, historically, a dearth of scholarship about race in Appalachia, even though “the making of Appalachia has been a profoundly racial process,” as Barbara Ellen Smith argues.⁴⁵ In popular culture, the Appalachian is presented overwhelmingly as white, and this will manifest itself in the chronology of images I present in each chapter of this thesis. In recent years, scholars such as Smith and groups like the

⁴⁵ Barbara Ellen Smith, “De-Gradations of Whiteness: Appalachia and the Complexities of Race,” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* Vol. 10, Issue 1/2 (Spring/Fall 2004), 38.

Affrilachian Poets are bringing issues of race to the front of the field, and I hope that, as my research continues, I can explore race in the mountains more closely.

In the end, I hope my thesis will shed some light on not only the history of visual representations of Appalachia but also on their future. What viewers see in the movies, in television and in the comics shapes their perception of the world, and consciously or not, the audience takes cues from what they see that become ingrained in their minds. This process plays a vital role in the construction of place in the national cultural imagination. With such a paradox of what images viewers—from the region or otherwise—find acceptable, it is difficult to determine how Appalachia will be mapped culturally in the future. Eller argues, “There is never going to be a consensus about the real meaning of Appalachia [...] It’s either a cultural place that’s defined pejoratively or geopolitics that governors might not want to be a part of.”⁴⁶ One of the first steps that needs to be taken towards gaining a true understanding of the place is “acknowledging there is more than one Appalachia,” as Graham Shelby wrote in an op-ed in the *Lexington Herald-Leader*,⁴⁷ and calling into question the stereotypes of yore that are still omnipresent. Shelby decries the Appalachia of popular culture as “a myth, which can be anywhere, everywhere, all the time.”⁴⁸ If the myth is indeed so pervasive and oppressive, can modern attempts to dispel it ever succeed? Scholar John C. Inscoe believes they can, if viewers can “recognize [images] as ‘inventions,’ rather than accepting them as reality.”⁴⁹ But will they, especially if those invented images can be turned for a profit? This current dualism of the responses to Appalachian images reveals that the region is much more similar to the rest of the

⁴⁶ Jennifer Medina, “Is Upstate ‘Like Appalachia’? Well, Part of It Is Appalachia,” *New York Times* (New York City), March 22, 2006.

⁴⁷ Graham Shelby, “Once—and always?—of Appalachia,” *Lexington Herald-Leader* (Lexington, Ky.), June 1, 2014.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ John C. Inscoe, *Race, War, and Remembrance in the Appalachian South* (Lexington: the University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 377.

nation than it has been presented as being for so long. Viewers have, over time, bought into the idea that Appalachia is a singular culture, with people who all feel the same about their home place—but this array of responses to popular images of the region demystifies that notion. Appalachia’s struggle to be defined and to define itself is a universal problem, as illustrated in Berman’s theory: “Even in the most highly developed parts of the world, all individuals, groups and communities are under constant relentless pressure to reconstruct themselves; if they stop to rest, to be what they are, they will be swept away.”⁵⁰ If this is true, then, as Eller says, “Appalachia’s problems are not those of Appalachia alone. [...] We are all Appalachians.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, 78.

⁵¹ Ronald Eller, *Uneven Ground*.

CHAPTER I
CREATING APPALACHIA:
EMERGENCE OF REGIONAL IMAGES IN POPULAR CULTURE LEADING TO THE
WAR ON POVERTY

After the Civil War, the United States was fractured and devastated. While the burgeoning technology fueling modernization was widely welcomed, journalists, novelists and other writers still romanticized cultural elements of the past, including traditionalism and old-fashioned ideals. In a search for exemplars of this kind of romantic culture, people found what they were looking for in Appalachia, a region that fit the mold of exceptionalism precisely because of its traditionalism. The mythos of the unique Appalachian and a distinct regional identity have been present in the wider American culture since this era. By the end of the Civil War in 1865, “the process of labeling Appalachians as different on the basis of alleged anti-social traits or deprivation of some form [had begun to] set the stage for the development of the clearly established poverty image that emerged in the twentieth century.”⁵²

In *Poverty in Central Appalachia: Underdevelopment and Exploitation*, Ada F. Haynes argues that an 1873 *Lippincott's Magazine* article by Will Wallace Harney, entitled “A Strange Land and Peculiar People,” first introduced the American middle class to the idea of a distinct Appalachian region. Haynes credits Harney “with the discovery of Appalachia because of his depiction of Appalachia as an ‘otherness’ which placed the region in radical opposition to middle class America. [...] This ‘otherness’ presented a people frozen in time, unaffected by

⁵² Walter Precourt, “The Image of Appalachian Poverty,” in *Appalachia and America: Autonomy and Regional Dependence*, ed. Allen Batteau (Lexington: the University Press of Kentucky, 1983).

modernization, throwbacks to an earlier stage of development.”⁵³ Appalachian afflictions appealed to the Victorian mindset gripping bourgeois America at the turn of the twentieth century. Appalachia was viewed in part as “a social problem to be ameliorated by the missionaries.”⁵⁴ If America was thought to have been a bountiful, wealthy country, Appalachia provided an unwanted “counterpoint to emerging definitions of progress”.⁵⁵

As W. K. McNeil wrote in 1995, “the mountaineers living in the Southern part of Appalachia have for two centuries been perceived as living in isolation,”⁵⁶ and both regional and national writers played a role in creating and disseminating this idea of a culturally ancient Appalachia. William Goodell Frost, the third president of Kentucky’s Berea College, referred to Appalachians in an 1899 *Atlantic Monthly* article as “our contemporary ancestors,” saying, “Appalachian America may be useful as furnishing a fixed point which enables us to measure the progress of the moving world!”⁵⁷ Frost minced no words in his judgment of the region in regards to the rest of the United States, claiming, “Appalachian America is a ward of the nation.”⁵⁸ Noted author John Fox, Jr., echoed Frost’s proclamations in a 1901 article in *Scribner’s*, proclaiming that the Appalachian “is a distinct remnant of Colonial times—a distinct relic of an Anglo-Saxon past.”⁵⁹ For Fox, the cause of this preservation of traditional culture was the mountains themselves: “the Cumberland range keeps the Southern mountaineer to the

⁵³ Ada F. Haynes, *Poverty in Central Appalachia: Underdevelopment and Exploitation* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997).

⁵⁴ Haynes, *Poverty in Central Appalachia*.

⁵⁵ Ronald D. Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945* (Lexington: the University Press of Kentucky, 2008).

⁵⁶ W. K. McNeil, ed., *Appalachian Images in Folk and Popular Culture* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 2.

⁵⁷ William Goodell Frost, “Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains” (1899), in *Appalachian Images in Folk and Popular Culture*, ed. W. K. McNeil (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 98.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 106

⁵⁹ John Fox, Jr., “The Southern Mountaineer” (1901), in *Appalachian Images in Folk and Popular Culture*, ed. W. K. McNeil (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 123.

backwoods civilization of the revolution,” he wrote, emphasizing, “This region was and is an unknown land.”⁶⁰

From the early days of Appalachia’s appearance in popular culture, it has clearly been a place that writers view themselves apart from. For instance, it can be inferred from their comments above that Frost and Fox both saw themselves as separate from slow-paced Appalachia—even though Fox spent his life in the region, dying in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, and Frost headed Berea College, still one of the foremost institutions of higher education in Kentucky. This differentiation between themselves and the distinctly different “Appalachian” they wrote of speaks to the notion that the culturally significant elements of the region were restricted to its rural areas. In fact, many Americans believed—and still do—that the region was rural in its entirety. People who lived deep in the mountains and its “hollers,” away from metropolitan areas, came to represent “real” Appalachians. Over time, the term “hillbilly” became easy shorthand for that particular kind of Appalachian. The word made its first appearance, in the *New York Journal*, in 1900, and while it was first used as a descriptor for country music,⁶¹ the term “hillbilly” quickly became an identifier for all elements of Appalachian culture. The entrance of “hillbilly” into the American lexicon is a crucial moment in the chronology of Appalachian representations because it is one of the first examples of *misrepresentations* of the region. Appalachia is home to such urban centers as Roanoke, Va., Knoxville, Tenn., Charleston W.Va., and others. Yet, from the turn of the 20th century onwards, it has been widely accepted that all Appalachians are “hillbillies” who dwell in the hollers of the mountains.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 122-3.

⁶¹ J. W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland: What the Movies Did to the Mountains and What the Mountains Did to the Movies* (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

Frost's and Fox's comments illustrate how, even in the early days of the creation of Appalachian otherness, there was a paradox of looking down on people from the region with pity while also respecting them as a standard of a romantic past that had been jettisoned elsewhere in favor of cultural progress. This remained evident in a 1910 article by Ellen Churchill Semple titled "Anglo-Saxons of the Kentucky Mountains," in which she wrote, "Though these mountain people are the exponents of a retarded civilization, and show the degenerate symptoms of an arrested development, their stock is as good as any in the country."⁶² This schizophrenic love and disgust for Appalachia made it difficult to nail down what exactly the region *was*, and contributed greatly to its construction as a unique place in the American consciousness. Josiah Stoddard Johnson's 1899 commentary on the "Romance and Tragedy of Kentucky Feuds" bolstered this belief, as he described Appalachia in highly poetic yet destructive terms: "The waves of progress and civilization have washed all around the confines of this unfortunate region, this vast Sargasso, a dead sea surrounded by an ocean of life."⁶³ Johnson followed this proclamation, however, by placing blame for this cultural isolation on the extractive industries that overwhelmed the region, writing, "[Corporations in Appalachia] illustrate the wastefulness of that system of commerce which drains a country of its raw materials without enabling it to receive in exchange the products of its customers."⁶⁴ Semple's and Johnson's descriptions of Appalachia made it clear to their readers that this region was behind the times, although the blame for this could arguably be placed outside the region itself. Nevertheless, Appalachia was without doubt unique to these writers—and through the articles and stories they wrote, it became different to their readers in the wider American populace as well.

⁶² W. K. McNeil, ed., *Appalachian Images in Folk and Popular Culture* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 150.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

One of the early, lone responses to these representations of an “othered” Appalachia during this time period came from author John H. Ashworth, who wrote a piece on “The Virginia Mountaineers” in 1913. Ashworth noted, “There are many classes of mountaineers [...] Where is a section of country of which this is not true? [...] If the popular conception of Virginia mountain life does not correspond to the actual facts, then arises the question: Why these misconceptions?”⁶⁵ Ashworth laid into the journalists and authors who had used “unscholarly methods of study” to describe Appalachia, saying that writers “who profess to teach others the way of life are very active in slandering a country and its people [...] The mountain population have neither crowning virtues nor peculiar vices which strikingly differentiate them from other rural Americans.”⁶⁶ Ashworth, however was in the minority in this era in his belief that Appalachia was not so different from the rest of America, and readers continued to consume clichéd representations of the mountains continued despite his protestations. On the whole, articles written in the late 1800s and early 1900s revealed and generated a fascination with Appalachia, which was presented to readers as extremely different from the rest of the nation—whether the reality matched the myth or not.

Alongside these “non-fiction” pieces about Appalachia grew an interest in creating (and a market for buying) fictional depictions of the region, both romantic and ridiculous. An early example is the titular character of George Washington Harris’ book *Sut Lovingood*, published in 1867, with the subtitle, “Yarns Spun by a ‘Nat’ral Born Durn’d Fool,’ Warped and Wove for Public Wear.”⁶⁷ Although Harris lived in Knoxville—one of Appalachia’s urban centers—for most of his life, he apparently did not sympathize or identify with the region in any way. He was

⁶⁵ John H. Ashworth, “The Virginia Mountaineers” (1913), in *Appalachian Images in Folk and Popular Culture*, ed. W. K. McNeil (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 196-199.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 202-3.

⁶⁷ George Washington Harris, *Sut Lovingood: Yarns Spun by a ‘Nat’ral Born Durn’d Fool,’ Warped and Wove for Public Wear* (New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1867).

“contemptuous of the backwoods folk culture,” but he also laid into the region’s urbanites.⁶⁸ Harris “delight[ed] in ridiculing the impoverished mountain people, particularly when they contribute[d] to their own debasement,” while simultaneously highlighting “the ignorance of city folk who misguidedly fashion[ed] themselves as superior to rural Tennesseans in intellect, manner, and morals.”⁶⁹ Where Harris placed himself in this dichotomy is uncertain, but in his opinion, whether Appalachians hailed from the hills or the city, they were still “durn’d fools”—even if that meant including himself in his own indictment of the regional culture.

In Harris’ collection of stories, Sut Lovingood “relishes struggling against all forms of power—political, parental, social, and religious.” Harris’ mountain man describes himself as “nuffin but sum new-fangil’d sort ove beas’, a sorter cross atween a crazy ole monkey an’ a durn’d wore-out hominy-mill”.⁷⁰ Sut consistently finds himself in ridiculous situations that are often directly related to or caused by his rural background; for instance, the titles of some of the “yarns” include “Parson Bullin’s Lizards,” “Snake-Bit Irishman,” “Sut’s Sermon—Ye Cat Fische Tavern” and “Rare Ripe Garden Seed.”⁷¹ In the illustrations accompanying the stories, Sut is depicted in a way that has become the classic hillbilly look: a skinny man with dark features, including long, unkempt hair and a scraggly beard, wearing ragged overalls with patches and holes, and no shoes. Williamson rationalizes the creation and acceptance of this image of the Appalachian by explaining, “Fools were scapegoats, visually stigmatized by either outright deformity or outlandish dress—visual chaos as a fitting accompaniment to mental chaos.”⁷² If hillbillies looked like the average American but lived differently (or vice versa), it would be

⁶⁸ Milton Rickels, “George Washington Harris, 1814-1869,” in *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ George Washington Harris, *Sut Lovingood*.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² J. W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland*.

harder to accept those images, since there needs to be considerable distance between Appalachia and everywhere else. Because Sut Lovingood ran so counter to the American idea of normalcy at that time, he captured the public's interest, and his appearance in popular culture marks the start of an eternal trend in the portrayal of mountain men. The decades since Harris' book have seen Sut-like figures created over and over—and viewers continue to accept him as an accurate (or at least tolerable) image of Appalachia.

Contrasted with the harebrained tales of Sut Lovingood were the romantic dramas of John Fox, Jr., whose novels ranked among the most popular of any in the United States during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Fox was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1899,⁷³ and his home in Big Stone Gap was designated a Virginia Historical Landmark.⁷⁴ The popularity of Fox's fiction, set in Appalachia, took him across the world, including to the White House on invitation by President Theodore Roosevelt and overseas, where he received a commendation for his contribution to literature from the Emperor of Japan.⁷⁵ Fox brought a particular type of image of the region to the world in his fiction, the most popular of which included *Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come* (1903) and *Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (1908). During the height of its popularity, *Trail of the Lonesome Pine* "was only outsold by the Bible and *Gone With the Wind*."⁷⁶ The June Tolliver Playhouse (named for the female protagonist of *Lonesome Pine*) in Big Stone Gap began hosting outdoor performances of a dramatized version of the book in 1964. The production has run annually to the present, making it the longest continually running outdoor drama in Virginia and garnering it the title of the state's Official

⁷³ C.D. Merriman, "Biography of John Fox, Jr.," *The Literature Network*, last modified 2006, <http://www.online-literature.com/john-fox/>.

⁷⁴ "John Fox, Jr., Museum," *Town of Big Stone Gap*, accessed March 2015, <http://www.bigstonegap.org/atract/johnfox.htm>.

⁷⁵ C.D. Merriman, "Biography of John Fox, Jr.," *The Literature Network*.

⁷⁶ "Questions and Answers," *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, accessed March 2015, <http://www.trailofthelonesomepine.com/faq.htm>.

Outdoor Drama.⁷⁷ *Trail of the Lonesome Pine* tells a tale of feuding families, focusing on a young woman who falls in love with an outsider, an engineer drawn to Appalachia during the coal boom. Fox's story is an early example of what has become an oft-told Appalachian tale—of mountain families fighting through the generations, but also of the “otherness” that is apparent when readers or viewers see the region for the first time, through the narration or observations of non-Appalachians. However, where Americans could laugh at Appalachia's Sut Lovingoods, they could admire the loyalty and romanticism of its June Tollivers. This duality of popular images of Appalachia—at once humorous and quixotic—has not only remained but proliferated in American culture following Fox's works.

As illustrated in *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, Appalachian women were often portrayed slightly differently than their male counterparts in popular imagery. From written representations to film and television, it became clear in the early decades of the twentieth century that “mountain men are not nearly as appreciated [...] as are mountain women.”⁷⁸ Appalachian women were hardly ever as foolish as their menfolk, often presented more respectfully as preservers of the old ways, the very picture of traditionalism. While male hillbillies were portrayed as spending much of their time stilling moonshine, running from revenuers, or generally involved in hijinks of some sort, women were shown keeping everything together. John C. Inscoe observed, “Strong women play key roles in so many [Appalachian] films that students could easily conclude [...] that Appalachia was a matriarchal society.”⁷⁹ Especially in this period, however, this meant that women were rarely the focus of Appalachian images; more often than not, they appeared off to the side, not in the starring roles, since their

⁷⁷ Jettie C. Hess, “Trail of the Lonesome Pine: State Outdoor Drama,” *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, accessed March 2015, <http://www.trailofthelonesomepine.com/home.htm>.

⁷⁸ John C. Inscoe, *Race, War, and Remembrance in the Appalachian South* (Lexington: the University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 373.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 371.

lives did not provide the exciting counterpoint to American normalcy that mountain men did. During this era, Appalachian women—with their strong beliefs, protective natures and traditional values—were often not as interesting to readers and viewers as their outlandish husbands, brothers, sons and cousins, who held center stage in Appalachian representations.

Between the 1890s and the 1930s, the “process of economic change strengthened and eventually crystalized the image of Appalachian poverty”⁸⁰ in popular culture, along with the sense that “these people had been arrested in time and thus were really from a world different from modern America.”⁸¹ The photographs of Doris Ulmann capitalized on and heightened this consensus, as she often purposely “posed people performing outdated tasks in antiquarian clothing.”⁸² Her pictures appeared in *Scribner’s* and *Mentor* magazines, as well as on display at the Library of Congress.⁸³ Alongside art like Ulmann’s, meant to document Appalachia, appeared more overtly caricatured images during this time—but these had just as much of an impact on the cultural cartography of the region as photographs. Appalachia garnered a particular kind of national attention in the funny pages, and in 1934, newspaper readers across the country were introduced to both Snuffy Smith and Li’l Abner. Snuffy Smith was introduced initially as a one-off character in Billy DeBeck’s comic strip *Barney Google*, which had been in syndication since 1919. But Snuffy—whom Barney met on a trip to rural North Carolina—was so popular with readers that the strip eventually became called *Barney Google & Snuffy Smith*, which it is still called today. In fact, over time, Snuffy Smith overcame Barney Google in popularity, and

⁸⁰ Walter Precourt, “The Image of Appalachian Poverty,” in *Appalachia and America*.

⁸¹ W. K. McNeil, *Appalachian Images in Folk and Popular Culture*, 16.

⁸² “Biographical Essay: Doris Ulmann (1882-1934),” *Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Reading Room*, last modified October 22, 2010, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/coll/womphotoj/ulmannessay.html>.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

Google was eventually phased out of his own strip. The comic strip is currently published by 900 newspapers in 21 countries.⁸⁴

Snuffy Smith could be likened to a warped caricature of Sut Lovingood. He is a stumpy little man with a giant nose, large ears, and whiskers covering his face. Like Sut, Snuffy wears a wide-brimmed, crumpled top hat, overalls, a patched shirt, and brown boots. He can often be seen toting a rifle, which is several inches taller than he is. The popularity of Snuffy Smith increased so rapidly after his introduction into the comics that he began to transcend the bounds of newspaper. For instance, King Features Syndication, the strip's parent company, created a franchise of restaurants called "Snuffy's Shantys," whose menus included such items as "Hillbilly Chili," hot dogs and chips, with nothing costing more than 40 cents.⁸⁵ Why were readers so enamored with this stumpy, silly mountain man? Perhaps because, like Sut Lovingood before him and many other hillbillies to come, he offered an alternative to normalized American life that allowed readers to momentarily escape the expectations and rules of their own worlds. Williamson writes, "The larger populace has historically used Appalachia for that liminal ground on which to criticize its own values, to challenge the 'acceptable' way of life with other attitudes."⁸⁶ Snuffy and his family and friends were more than satisfied with their lives, even though they were presented as impoverished, uneducated, and existing on the outskirts of society. Readers enjoyed living vicariously momentarily through these Appalachian characters.

Li'l Abner, the titular character of Al Capp's comic strip that also debuted in 1934, was a different type of Appalachian fool than Snuffy Smith—though fool, he was. Abner Yokum, native of Dogpatch, Ky., was a "naïve, bottomlessly good-hearted 19-year-old hillbilly" who was

⁸⁴ "Barney Google," *I Love Comix Archive*, accessed February 2015, <http://www.ilovecomixarchive.com/barney-google>.

⁸⁵ Don Maley, "Super Roads to Riches are Paved with Comics," *Editor and Publisher Magazine*, November 1968.

⁸⁶ J. W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland*.

hardly “li’l” at all, depicted as standing over six feet tall—a “bumpkin, hunk, and Dogpatch’s most eligible bachelor”.⁸⁷ In physical appearance, Li’l Abner deviated somewhat from Sut and Snuffy, but his clothes were still ragged, his home was still sparse, and readers could still laugh at the shenanigans he found himself mixed up with. Many women fawned over Li’l Abner—most notably Daisy Mae and Marryin’ Sam—which led to numerous humorous situations for the comic. Readers liked Li’l Abner’s earnest nature and ability to resist temptation, and the strip was instantly popular, reaching syndication in 1,000 newspapers to over 60 million readers by the 1950s.⁸⁸ By the time the comic strip ended syndication in 1977, it had become a national cultural touchstone, with Li’l Abner and Daisy Mae gracing the cover of *Life* magazine and leading to the advent of Sadie Hawkins Day dances.⁸⁹

Appalachians have been popular on the screen since the advent of the moving picture and its emergence as a popular form of entertainment. Both Snuffy Smith and Li’l Abner made the transition from the funny pages to film. A live-action film called *Private Snuffy Smith* appeared in 1942, following the titular character (played by Bud Duncan) as he enlists in the Army.⁹⁰ Seeing Snuffy attempt to navigate the modern world of warfare allowed viewers to laugh at a time when they sorely needed an escape from reality. Handsome Li’l Abner found himself onscreen a bit more often than Snuffy, with an RKO production in 1940 (featuring Buster Keaton playing the character Lonesome Polecat)⁹¹ and a Paramount picture in 1959.⁹² These characters were two of many Appalachian figures to appear in film and on TV in the early days of the mediums. In 1904, the Biograph moving picture company released a thirteen-minute narrative

⁸⁷ Dennis Drabelle, “Dogpatch Confidential,” *Salon*, September 30, 2002, <http://www.salon.com/2002/09/30/capp/>.

⁸⁸ Stefan Kanfer, “Exile in Dogpatch,” *City Journal*, Spring 2010.

⁸⁹ Al Capp, “Why I Let Li’l Abner Marry,” *Life Magazine*, March 31, 1952.

⁹⁰ *Private Snuffy Smith*, directed by Edward F. Cline (1942; Hollywood: Monogram Pictures, Internet Archive, 2009), online.

⁹¹ *Li’l Abner*, directed by Albert S. Rogell (1940; Los Angeles: Vogue Productions, Internet Archive, 2011), online.

⁹² *Li’l Abner*, directed by Melvin Frank (1959; Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, Internet Archive, 2010), online.

film called *The Moonshiner* that followed a mountain family from the “blue grass” area. The plot narrates the family’s everlasting attempts to evade a group of “revenueurs” while stilling and selling their illegal corn whiskey.⁹³ In the end, a scuffle results in a revenueur shooting the moonshiner—only to be shot in the back himself by the moonshiner’s wife. Thus, the ‘shine trade lives to see another day in the hills. The film “was a big hit in the early nickelodeon trade.”⁹⁴ John Solomon Otto explains that the immediate popularity of such representations came from their ability to “transport [viewers] back to the time of Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett and Abe Lincoln’s boyhood. The ‘lost frontiersman’ stereotype”—with Sut Lovingood as its primary ancestor—captured the American imagination, providing an escape from the perils of modern life.⁹⁵

The romance of the mountains was also instantly a big draw for movie viewers. Fox’s *Trail of the Lonesome Pine* was wildly popular, with a handful of adaptations making their way to the big screen in the early film era, including a 1916 adaptation directed by Cecil B. DeMille,⁹⁶ and a 1923 production that that has since been lost.⁹⁷ A version released in 1936, starring Henry Fonda, was the first Technicolor production at Paramount.⁹⁸ This film opened with a title card that explained to viewers the nature of the feud between these “shut-in valley people of the mountains of America.”⁹⁹ This notion of Appalachians being “shut-in” by the mountains had been well-established in popular culture at this point—after all, Sut, Snuffy, June and their

⁹³ *The Moonshiner*, directed by Wallace McCutcheon (1904; Scarsdale, N.Y.: Biograph Pictures; Internet Archive, 2010), online.

⁹⁴ Tim Dirks, “Great Film Milestones: 1900s,” *AMC Filmsite*, accessed February 2015, <http://www.filmsite.org/1904-filmhistory.html>.

⁹⁵ John Solomon Otto, “Hillbilly Culture: The Appalachian Mountain Folk in History and Popular Culture,” *Southern Quarterly* 24 (1986).

⁹⁶ Robert S. Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille’s Hollywood* (Lexington: the University Press of Kentucky, 2009).

⁹⁷ Alan Goble, *The Complete Index to Literary Sources in Film* (West Sussex: Bowker-Saur, 1999), 989.

⁹⁸ “Cinema: The New Pictures,” *Time Magazine*, March 2, 1936.

⁹⁹ Leonard Maltin, “The Trail of the Lonesome Pine (1936),” in *Leonard Maltin’s Classic Movie Guide* (New York City: Plume, 2005).

counterparts lived in clearly rural worlds, and these images strengthened the concept of Appalachia as a place cut off from America in every way. The acceptance of this idea as fact was bolstered by a 1931 silent documentary called *The Forgotten Frontier*. In the film, director (Mary) Marvin Breckinridge followed the Frontier Nursing Service as it provided aid to people in Appalachian Kentucky, who were too hewn in by the mountains to gain access to local medical attention.¹⁰⁰ A similar type of “docu-drama,” released by Frontier Films in 1937, called *People of the Cumberland*, presented a corner of central Appalachia as “depressed, isolated [and] half-forgotten.”¹⁰¹ The movie advocates for unions among mill workers, using both documentary footage as well as staged scenes depicting past true events.¹⁰² *People of the Cumberlands* is an early example of documentary work that hoped to bring direct aid to Appalachia through its representation of the region as impoverished and culturally stagnant. These two pseudo-documentaries—much like their counterparts in later decades—struck a chord with viewers because, critic John Elderfield explains, “we are drawn to what our *feelings* tell us is authentic,” no matter how close it is to the truth.¹⁰³ Viewers wanted to see the mountains as protectors of an ancient culture untouched by modernity, so they bought into that image when it was presented. Also notable in these early films was a sense that it was important to provide some aid to Appalachia while allowing it to maintain its regional differences. In the years leading to the War on Poverty, this impulse to provide for Appalachia in some way—medically, economically, or otherwise—would grow even stronger.

¹⁰⁰ Melanie Beals Goan, *Mary Breckinridge: The Frontier Nursing Service & Rural Health in Appalachia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

¹⁰¹ *People of the Cumberland*, directed by Sidney Meyers and Jay Leyda (1938; Frontier Films, Internet Archive, 2012), online.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ John Elderfield, ed., *American Art of the 1960s* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991).

The 1940s through the early 1960s showed a proliferation of images depicting Appalachians on the big screen, ranging from heroic and heart-warming to horrifying and hateful. These images were popular during World War II and in the following Cold War period because, even if Appalachians made their fellow Americans apprehensive, they still embodied admirable values and ideals. After all, as Mary French Caldwell wrote, if “they are sometimes illiterate, narrow-minded, provincial and a trifle ‘hide-bound,’ at least they are not Communist or atheists.”¹⁰⁴ This sentiment spoke to the popularity of Howard Hawks’ 1941 action flick *Sergeant York*, which saw Gary Cooper portraying real-life war hero Alvin York, who was awarded the Medal of Honor for courage under fire in World War I.¹⁰⁵ The public was enamored with York, a young man “from a cabin back in the mountains of Tennessee [...] untutored in the ways of the world” who, after being denied conscientious objector status, went on to capture over 120 German troops single-handedly in France in October of 1918.¹⁰⁶ York was the perfect type of hero: a reluctant one—against war but doing his duty when his country required it, and upon returning home, remaining totally humble, “believing it was wrong to profit from an act of war.”¹⁰⁷ After he did his country a service, he returned to Appalachia, and American viewers appreciated that. Sergeant York was present when he was needed, but retreated from the wider American awareness when he was not. He was able to retain his regional identity while momentarily leaving the confines of the mountains, and viewers admired his loyalty to his home place.

American cinemagoers gobbled up this idea of Appalachian people, like Alvin York,

¹⁰⁴ Mary French Caldwell, “Change Comes to the Appalachian Mountaineer,” in *Appalachian Images in Folk and Popular Culture*, ed. by W. K. McNeil (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 214.

¹⁰⁵ “Alvin Cullian York,” *Military Times Hall of Valor*, accessed February 2015, <http://projects.militarytimes.com/citations-medals-awards/recipient.php?recipientid=134>.

¹⁰⁶ Sam K. Cowan, *Sergeant York and His People* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1922).

¹⁰⁷ “Sgt. Alvin C. York State Park,” Tennessee State Parks, last modified 2015, <http://tnstateparks.com/parks/about/sgt-alvin-c-york>.

whose lives were “rich in the romance of adventure. They were of strong hate and gentle love [and] lived in the simplicity of the pioneer.”¹⁰⁸ As such, other true stories from the mountains appealed to viewers during this time period as well. Another mountain hero appeared on the big screen in *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier*, a 1955 feature by Walt Disney. Fess Parker played the folk hero, reprising a role he had already played in a miniseries on ABC the previous year. The film’s theme, “The Ballad of Davy Crockett,” identified Crockett (who served in Congress and fought at the Alamo) as distinctly Appalachian: “Born on a mountaintop in Tennessee/ [...] Raised in the woods so’s he knew ev’ry tree/ Kilt him a b’ar when he was only three/ Davy, Davy Crockett/ King of the wild frontier.”¹⁰⁹ The film “fed an urban audience the picture of Davy Crockett as a country bounce-back trickster, a scapegoat fool who was made to survive so he could go on suffering humiliation,” argues J. W. Williamson in *Hillbillyland*.¹¹⁰ Crockett fit the mold of the “lost frontiersman” that had morphed somewhat but remained ever-present since the days of Sut Lovingood. Davy Crockett was self-sufficient, happy in his mountain home, and of a world entirely different than that of his modern American viewers. Ironically, even though its titular character was no titan of commerce, the popularity of *Davy Crockett* set off what the *New York Times* dubbed “Crockett frenzy [...] “one of America’s greatest merchandizing fads.”¹¹¹ The film’s theme song sold millions of copies, its popularity only outmatched by replicas of the coonskin cap Parker wore onscreen. An avalanche of branded items accompanied the film, and by the end of 1955, “American children had their choice of more than 3,000 different Davy Crockett toys, lunch boxes, thermoses and coloring books.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Sam K. Cowan, *Sergeant York and His People*.

¹⁰⁹ Richard Severo, “Fess Parker, Who as Davy Crockett Set Off Coonskin Cap Craze, Dies at 85,” *New York Times*, March 19, 2010.

¹¹⁰ J. W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland*.

¹¹¹ Richard Severo, “Fess Parker Dies at 85,” *New York Times*.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

As Davy Crockett, Parker embodied all that was good about the mountain man: he may have lived in an “other” world, but he was “king” of that world, experiencing a sovereignty that viewers adored and came to associate with Appalachia as a whole.

Other historic images of Appalachia also continued to appear in American popular culture in the post-war years. The “feudin’ family” staple made another splash in the 1949 RKO production *Roseanna McCoy*, embellishing on the lore of the Hatfield and McCoy blood feud in Eastern Kentucky and West Virginia by adding an element of forbidden love (à la *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*) between the titular character and a young man from the Hatfield clan. A review of the movie in the *New York Times* pointed out, however, that the saturation of legends and stories from Appalachian region likely already colored viewers’ reaction to this particular love story: “The famous mountain families have been satirized and distorted in jokes and comic strips for so many years now that it is difficult to take them seriously.”¹¹³ Snuffy and Li’l Abner had made it so easy to laugh at the mountains that, for some, it became difficult to take Appalachia and its unique culture seriously when a film required that of its viewers. MGM brought another true story of forbidden love to the screen in 1961 with *A Bridge to the Sun*, based on the autobiography of Gwen Terasaki, an Appalachian native who married a Japanese national in the 1930s. Leading actress Carroll Baker was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actress, but the film, which premiered in Terasaki’s hometown of Johnson City, Tenn., did not perform well at the box office. If asking viewers to take a story of Appalachian romance seriously was difficult, asking viewers to consider a mountain woman and a non-American together was too much. Viewers were not prepared to see an Appalachian person transcending the bounds of the region into America, much less a foreign country—and especially an Appalachian woman, who had traditionally been the keeper of tradition in the mountains. As such, the established images

¹¹³ Thomas M. Pryor, “*Roseanna McCoy* at The Capital,” *New York Times*, October 13, 1949.

of Appalachian people ensconced in their own culture remained the preferred type of representation.

This anxiety about Appalachian contact with other regions manifested itself again in *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), another film based on actual events that set a precedent of terror in the mountains that continues to attract audiences in the present day. The film, based on a book of the same name, draws on the true story of a serial killer-cum-preacher¹¹⁴ traveling through West Virginia who preys on a young widow and her children. Now part of the Criterion Collection and often considered among the best movies of all time, *The Night of the Hunter* has been called “cinema’s most eccentric rendering of the battle between good and evil.”¹¹⁵ This film represents a popular theme from the 1940s through the early 1960s of Appalachians coming into contact with Americans from outside the region, usually with results that were either extremely comedic or extremely dangerous, but rarely anything in between. Viewers grew anxious when Appalachians began to roam and push their boundaries, preferring them to stay safely in their world without muddying the wider American identity.

Both terrific and comedic representations of Appalachia were based on a regional misunderstanding of the ways of the world, due to physical and cultural isolation. The 1950s saw a handful of humorous films about the clash of modernity with mountain culture. Abbott and Costello cashed in on the comedic side of this with the feature *Comin’ Round the Mountain* in 1951, as did Andy Griffith as a silly Appalachian in the Air Force in *No Time for Sergeants* in 1958. Several “hillbilly” music—known by this point as country music—stars came together to try to reach a wider audience in another 1958 film, *Country Music Holiday*, starring Ferlin Husky, June Carter, and other singers. The most popular films in this era that relied on the

¹¹⁴ Wilbur M. Swiger, “Harry Powers: Bluebeard of a Quiet Dell,” *Clarksburg Telegram*, March 19, 1932.

¹¹⁵ “The Night of the Hunter,” *The Criterion Collection*, last modified 2015, <http://www.criterion.com/films/27525-the-night-of-the-hunter>.

comedy of Appalachian ignorance were the Ma and Pa Kettle series, which were created as a spin-off from *The Egg and I* in 1947. The Kettles made their first appearance as secondary characters but, like Snuffy Smith before them, gained stardom in their own right. The characters were popular with both audiences and critics: Marjorie Main was nominated for an Academy Award for her role as Ma Kettle in *The Egg and I*.¹¹⁶ Audiences loved seeing the mountain Kettles navigating life beyond the hills so much that the characters headlined nine feature films, including *Ma and Pa Kettle Go to Paris* (1953) and *Ma and Pa Kettle at Waikiki* (1955).¹¹⁷ The Kettles did not understand the ways of the world, following in the confused footsteps of many Appalachians before them, and audiences enjoyed watching them learn about their regional differences through experience.

Alternatively, however, this era produced images of Appalachians leaving the mountains that were meant to strike fear into the hearts of viewers outside the region. Andy Griffith took a startlingly dark turn in *A Face in the Crowd*, directed by Elia Kazan in 1957. Griffith's character starts off as a hillbilly rube fresh out of jail, but as he becomes a famous singer under the name "Lonesome Rhodes," he plays up his regional accent and identity for financial gain. Kazan and screenwriter Budd Schulberg intended *A Face in the Crowd* to stand as "a warning [against] the inner workings of the mass media and the calculated methods in which they influenced the opinions of urban and rural viewers."¹¹⁸ After Rhodes' true nature has been revealed, he cackles, "This whole country's just like my flock of sheep! Hillbillies, hausfraus, everybody that's got to jump when someone else blows a whistle! They're mine!"¹¹⁹ A character who utilizes his

¹¹⁶ Michelle Vogel, *Marjorie Main: The Life and Films of Hollywood's 'Ma Kettle'* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2011).

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Scott McGee, "Why A Face in the Crowd is Essential," *Turner Classic Movies Film Articles*, last modified 2010, <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/74421/A-Face-in-the-Crowd/articles.html>.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

Appalachian identity for financial gain, or as a front for something more sinister, was scary for audiences, who had historically found comfort in the Ma and Pa Kettles, the Snuffy Smiths and the Davy Crocketts of the region in popular culture. More importantly, a self-aware Appalachian was a dangerous Appalachian. What made the Kettles and their counterparts funny was that they had no idea how different the mountains were until they left them. Lonesome Rhodes, on the other hand, was entirely aware of his regional distinctness, and instead of using it for good, he hypnotized America with it for personal gain. This monetization of regional identity and evil intelligence struck fear in the hearts of viewers who had, up until then, seen Appalachians constructed as ignorant in every way.

While this anxiety towards Appalachia was formidable, the late 1950s and early 1960s also saw a cultural trend towards pity for the mountains, generating an urge in viewers to help their fellow Americans stuck in the past. Elia Kazan once again turned his cameras towards the region in 1960 in the film *Wild River*, a period piece illustrating the tension between Appalachians wanting to maintain their traditional ways of life and agents from the Tennessee Valley Authority attempting to dam rivers in the 1930s. Nature in Appalachia at that time had the power to evoke “complicated feelings of simultaneous ‘awe and aversion,’”¹²⁰ and the TVA (embodied here by Montgomery Clift’s character, Agent Chuck Glover) played the role of the benevolent outsider who will save these people from their own surroundings. The opening cartography of the film—showing the Tennessee River from the air, and its surrounding mountains—charted Appalachia as a removed, problematic, wild place in need of reform. This wildness was emphasized through the townspeople, who attacked Glover in an angry mob. Still, in the end, the TVA wins out, and resistance is futile as the new dam floods old homesteads, literally wiping everything the old-fashioned off the map in favor of new technology.

¹²⁰ J. W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland*.

The natural, unavoidable danger of the mountains in *Wild River* and other films that sprang from Appalachia's perceived isolation also played a role in Robert Mitchum's *Thunder Road* (1958), but with a twist: the danger portrayed in this film presented a kind of law-breaking that was exciting specifically because it was so unimaginable for many viewers. Called "the best film you'll ever see about Tennessee moonshiners and their midnight runners," *Thunder Road* was a pet project for Mitchum, who starred in, directed, and wrote and recorded several of the film's musical tracks.¹²¹ Promotional material for the film called it "more savage than the tommy gun massacre of the roaring '20s," alluding to another type of criminal element audiences loved to see on the screen.¹²² The film is directly reminiscent of the 1904 short feature *The Moonshiner*, with both featuring mountain people hiding their stills from revenuers, constantly on the lam from the law, living on the edge of society in a way viewers might wish they could. *Thunder Road* amped up the drama even more with the availability of cars, a technology that made moonshining easier and simultaneously more dangerous. Appalachian living was treacherous in *Thunder Road*—but in an exciting and acceptable way that audiences ate up. The law-breaking protagonist of *Thunder Road*, like so many Appalachians onscreen in this era, appealed because he was free from the confines of society—a dangerous notion at that time. As Williamson writes of this type of Appalachian figure, "We want to be him and we want to flee him."¹²³ Viewers had, over time, grown to love this liminal mountain man, a warped Davy Crockett, who was now cemented in the American consciousness as the ideal outsider.

Over a roughly 100-year period between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the War on Poverty, certain images of the Appalachian became cemented through American

¹²¹ Jeff Stafford, "Thunder Road," *Turner Classic Movies Film Articles*, last modified 2015, <http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/12700%7C0/Thunder-Road.html>.

¹²² "Thunder Road (Arthur Ripley, 1958) Trailer," *YouTube*, last modified November 13, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqUyxJkHilY>.

¹²³ J. W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland*.

popular culture by appearing repeatedly on the screen and the page. Many of the images boiled down to a perceived simplicity of the region and its people—a simplicity of the culture, of daily life, and, frankly, of intellect, even if that portrayal was not realistic. These images often projected the idea of a mountain people who would protect their region, their families, and their old ways of life at all costs. These concepts cemented the idea of mountain people who were wary of outsiders, and simultaneously, of Americans who were equally unsure of what to make of their Appalachian neighbors. One of the earliest images of Appalachia in popular culture was that of the Appalachian fool, usually an unkempt mountain man who lived outside the traditional laws and expectations of civilization. His ignorance grew from his isolation, and that isolation was alternately celebrated and feared. Often, the Appalachian fool traded in illegal moonshine and found himself on the run from government revenueurs. Appalachian women (usually portrayed in a more benign, respected way than their male counterparts) assisted in this moonshine trade, and were also considered the keepers of traditions passed down through generations. Even with almost a century between George Washington Harris' Sut Lovingood and the mob of townspeople in *Wild River*, the two images mirror each other closely. Ironically, however, Kazan saw his work as progressive, later commenting on his 1961 film, "It's affectionate and very human. I guess that's why I like it. It turns around a lot of accepted stereotypes."¹²⁴

A theme that became exceptionally prominent during the 1960s was that of the overwhelming poverty in Appalachia. The idea of fellow Americans living in scarcity had an impact on viewers in the Cold War era, "a time when suburban middle-class families were enjoying new homes with washing machines, televisions, showers, telephones, and other modern

¹²⁴ Jeff Young, ed., *Kazan on Film: The Master Director Discusses His Films: Interviews With Elia Kazan* (New York City: Newmarket Press, 2001).

conveniences [while] many Appalachian families survived in aging houses with few amenities in rural areas or deteriorating company towns.”¹²⁵ While the cultural isolation and paucity of resources perceived to be common in Appalachia had been causes for laughter or horror over previous decades, the 1960s saw a change in the reception of these images by the American public. Now, there was an overwhelming urge to improve conditions in the mountains, from both outside groups and people as well as people within the region. By 1964, the War on Poverty had arrived in Appalachia in full force, and with it came changes both to the region and to representations of it in popular culture.

¹²⁵ Ronald Eller, *Uneven Ground*.

CHAPTER II
“‘AND THE WORLD WITH PLENTY AND US WITH NOTHING”¹²⁶.
APPALACHIA IN A NEW ERA OF REPRESENTATIONS, C. 1960-2005

Harry W. Ernst and Charles H. Drake wrote a magazine article in the late 1950s that stated, “There is nothing wrong with hillbillies [...] that a strong dose of equal opportunity couldn’t cure.”¹²⁷ By the turn of the 1950s into the 1960s, the nation was beginning to accept this notion on a broad scale, and Appalachia began its transition “from a culture on the periphery and therefore vaguely threatening to urban America, into a ‘social problem’ just begging to be solved (and in fact solvable, given enough federal cash).”¹²⁸ Fuel for the fire propelling the image of Appalachian poverty appeared in 1962, when Michael Harrington wrote *The Other America*. Although the book addressed various impoverished groups and regions across the nation, Harrington specifically “recommended massive federal aid to cure the poverty of Appalachia.”¹²⁹ The same year also saw former Kentucky legislator Harry Caudill publish the book *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area*. Caudill’s book caught the eye of President John F. Kennedy, who was already invested in bringing aid to the region, and made such an impression on him that he recommended it to his entire staff.¹³⁰ His successor, Lyndon

¹²⁶ *Christmas in Appalachia*, directed by Joe Gorsuch (1964; New York City: CBS, Internet Archive, 2014).

¹²⁷ Ronald Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2013).

¹²⁸ J. W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland: What the Movies Did to the Mountains and What the Mountains Did to the Movies* (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 225.

¹²⁹ John Solomon Otto, “Hillbilly Culture: The Appalachian Mountain Folk in History and Popular Culture,” *Southern Quarterly* 24 (1986).

¹³⁰ John Cheves and Bill Estep, “Meet the man who focused the world on Eastern Kentucky’s woes,” *Herald-Leader* (Lexington, Kentucky), December 16, 2012.

B. Johnson, visited the region in 1964—and while standing on a porch in rural Inez, Ky., Johnson declared, “I have called for a national war on poverty. Our objective: total victory.”¹³¹

As a result of President Johnson’s declaration of a “War on Poverty,” Congress passed the Economic Opportunity Act and created the Office of Economic Advancement, each intended to use federal funds on local levels to combat impoverishment.¹³² The Economic Opportunity Act also led to the formation of numerous other federal programs, including Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), to alleviate problems—including those in the Appalachian region—stemming from the high poverty levels. Congress also passed the Appalachian Development Act in 1965, “authorizing expenditures of 810 million dollars for highway development but only 250 million dollars for human and environmental development.”¹³³ Thus, some legislation enacted during the era of the War on Poverty was arguably aimed at bringing “poverty warriors” into the region or helping Appalachians leave to find work elsewhere—not on putting money into the hands of Appalachian leaders to help their constituents from the inside.

The American media and popular culture also fought the War on Poverty in less official capacities. Batteau argues that “the Appalachia of the poverty warriors in the 1960s combined the romantic appeal of bucolic self-sufficiency with the indignity of welfare dependence,” and this was certainly the dominant image of the region during that era.¹³⁴ America’s television programs, magazines, and other outlets devoured images of devastating poverty in Appalachia, and people flocked to the region with the sole purpose of capturing and generating these types of pictures. *Life Magazine* published a photo essay on Eastern Kentucky in 1964 that described

¹³¹ Diana Nelson Jones, “Appalachia’s War: The Poorest of the Poor Struggle Back,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 30, 2000.

¹³² “Economic Opportunity Act of 1964” (PL 88-452, 20 August 1964).

¹³³ John Solomon Otto, “Hillbilly Culture,” *Southern Quarterly*.

¹³⁴ Allen Batteau, ed., *Appalachia and America: Autonomy and Regional Dependence* (Lexington: the University Press of Kentucky, 1983).

Appalachians as “an impoverished people whose plight has long been ignored by affluent America. Their homes are shacks without plumbing or sanitation. [...] The people, themselves—often disease-ridden and unschooled—are without jobs and even without hope.”¹³⁵ These images were shocking to Americans outside the region and had a staying power. For many readers and viewers, “War on Poverty photographs, whether intentional or not, became a visual definition of Appalachia.”¹³⁶

These types of images entered American homes and minds as “a regular feature of television news throughout the 1960s.”¹³⁷ An apt example of the types of TV reports and stories that appeared in the wake of the War on Poverty was *Christmas in Appalachia*, a CBS News Special Report anchored by Charles Kuralt that aired four days before Christmas in 1964. The television documentary utilized the lens of the holiday season to illustrate the seriousness of the poverty in Letcher County, Ky. It is worth noting that the documentary was produced in partnership with the Office of Economic Advancement, one of the organizations created as part of the War on Poverty. As such, within *Christmas in Appalachia*, American popular interest in the poverty in the mountains collided with the federal government’s political interest in improving the region.

If monetary donations and sympathetic feelings (both for Appalachia and for the politicians lending it a helping hand) were the intended results of *Christmas in Appalachia*, CBS hit both the literal and figurative jackpot. Bernard Birnbaum, the film’s producer, spoke at Kuralt’s funeral in 1997 about the tangible outcome of the documentary. “After that 1964 broadcast [...] the CBS switchboard lit up. Seventy thousand dollars of unsolicited money poured into CBS News,” Birnbaum stated. “A viewer chartered a plane to carry food and

¹³⁵ Michael Murphy, “The Valley of Poverty,” *Life Magazine*, January 31, 1964, 54-65.

¹³⁶ Roger May, “Overview,” *Looking at Appalachia*, last modified 2015, <http://lookingatappalachia.org/overview>.

¹³⁷ John Elderfield, ed., *American Art of the 1960s* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991).

Christmas presents to Letcher County, Ky., all because of Kuralt's words and that grave voice-over, those stark black-and-white pictures describing poor children and their coal-miner families at Christmastime, dying of hunger in the richest country, in America.”¹³⁸ It is worth noting that Birnbaum’s eulogy is the only apparent reference still in existence to these viewer donations, and it is unclear how many families in eastern Kentucky benefited tangibly from the gifts of CBS’ audience.

Certain stark images of Appalachia were presented to America on a recurring basis during this period: images of the region’s children with stained faces and weather-worn clothes; of coal miners and the ramshackle homes they lived in; of an impoverished people generally not quite sure how to help themselves. Apparently, these critical representations of Appalachia in the 1960s evoked a charitable response parallel to that of *Christmas in Appalachia*, but viewers were sometimes unable to give aid to the region in useful ways. Harry Caudill described the atmosphere of giving in the mid-1960s:

Americans cleaned out their closets and shipped tons of old clothes to Eastern Kentucky; threadbare suits cut for 1940s fashions dominated the mountains for years. A charitable wholesaler sent 12,000 pairs of children’s shoes. Other donations were less thoughtful. The town of Harlan was blessed with an entire carload of cabbages for several days on a side track while the cargo rotted, and the Louisville and Nashville—which touts itself as the ‘Old Reliable’—promptly discarded it on a riverbank [...] The ten tons of decaying vegetables sent an odoriferous pall to plague the county seats and raise serious doubts about the whole idea of Christian charity.¹³⁹

There was indeed a visceral need for aid in Appalachia at the time, as poverty did exist there—but it was a need for aid that could actually be useful. In the early 1960s, the annual per capita income in Appalachia was, on average, \$1,400—more than a third lower than the national average. In some Appalachian counties, the average income fell even lower than this; in parts of

¹³⁸ Bernie Birnbaum, “A Tribute to Charles Kuralt,” *RememberingCharlesKuralt.com*, last modified 2005, <http://www.rememberingcharleskuralt.com/tribute/birnbaum.html>.

¹³⁹ John Cheves and Bill Estep, “The man who focused the world on Eastern Kentucky,” *Herald-Leader*.

Eastern Kentucky, for instance, the average per capita income was barely over \$840.¹⁴⁰ This was troubling to Americans outside the region, who had seen their own lives improve economically in the Cold War era, and they felt compelled to help Appalachia in some way. As Eller explained, “for the post-WWII generation, confident in its ability to sustain growth and build a better life for everyone, Appalachia remained an American enigma.”¹⁴¹ This enigmatic quality was present in every representation of Appalachia up until this moment (even if it manifested itself in varying ways), but the responses to those qualities changed greatly as seen through the lens of the 1960s.

The War on Poverty and the images of the region that appeared alongside it “unmasked profound social divisions in America and Appalachia—a society of disparate values and competing conceptions of the American dream.”¹⁴² Several television shows of the era attempted to bridge those differences through comedy. Namely, viewers found humor in watching American and Appalachian cultures colliding in such shows as *The Real McCoys* and *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and later the variety show *Hee Haw* (1969–1971). *The Real McCoys* ran on ABC from 1957 to 1962 (and on CBS in a final season, ending in 1963). The show featured a West Virginia family who moved to a farm in California where they could continue the work they had done in Appalachia but with the benefits of modern living the West Coast offered—“livin' like good folks should live, as happy as kids with toys,” as the show’s theme song proclaimed.¹⁴³ Viewers were comfortable with Appalachians leaving the mountains if they retained their customs, and it made Americans feel good to see at least a few Appalachians

¹⁴⁰ Ronald Eller, *Uneven Ground*.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ Vincent Terrace, *Television Introductions: Narrated TV Program Openings Since 1949* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2013).

enjoying the economic standards of the rest of the nation. The show drew in large audiences, ranking in the top fifteen shows on the Nielsen ratings for its series run.¹⁴⁴

But *The Beverly Hillbillies*, which ran from 1962 to 1971, surpassed even *The Real McCoys* in popularity. Despite being “rebuked by critics for its mindlessness, within five weeks of its premiere the CBS series was the top-rated television show and was riding the crest of media fascination.”¹⁴⁵ Viewers ate up the antics of the Clampett family, who struck oil and moved to the posh Los Angeles suburb with their new money. With a premise strikingly similar to *The Real McCoys*, *The Beverly Hillbillies* allowed a group of mountain folk to retain their regional identity while living in luxury with the comfort of modern American amenities. At its most popular, the show drew in 60 million viewers a week, and several episodes from its second season still hold records for being among the most-watched hours on television of all time.¹⁴⁶ The show’s creator, Paul Henning, believed that, with such an astonishing number of viewers, the main actors needed to appear as authentically Appalachian as possible—both on and off the screen. Allison Graham writes that Henning “insisted upon a news blackout on the private lives of his actors, [saying] ‘For the present I would prefer that they *cease to exist as themselves*.’”¹⁴⁷ The success of *The Beverly Hillbillies* relied on the viewer’s inability to tell fact from fiction, and this blurring of lines even away from the camera helped solidify the image of the culturally impoverished Appalachian as truth in the American imagination.

The humor of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, as was often the case in *The Real McCoys*, arose from misunderstandings between the rural Clampetts and their new urbanite neighbors—but

¹⁴⁴ “TNN to begin airing ‘Alice,’ ‘Real McCoys,’” *Lubbock (Texas) Avalanche-Journal*, June 26, 1999.

¹⁴⁵ Allison Graham, *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle* (Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 114.

¹⁴⁶ Todd Leopold, “Donna Douglas, Elly May on ‘Beverly Hillbillies,’ Dead at 81,” *CNN*, last modified January 3, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/02/showbiz/tv/feat-donna-douglas-beverly-hillbillies-elly-may-dead/>.

¹⁴⁷ Allison Graham, *Framing the South*, 114. Emphasis hers.

there was never a question that the Clampetts were in the Hills to stay. After all, “progress [...] as exemplified by [...] these programs demands that America’s individualistic agrarian roots be left behind to ensure equal access to prosperity.”¹⁴⁸ Mountain people like the McCoys and the Clampetts had a freedom, as former rural Appalachians, that their California neighbors could not access: they had no qualms about transcending social bounds or sometimes ignoring the cultural rules of the suburbs. Although their address now said Beverly Hills, they still occupied a liminal cultural space that was an unavoidable aspect of their Appalachian identity. Viewers admired them for this, since the domesticity of “Fordist suburbs [...] took on both a utopic and dystopic set of meanings”¹⁴⁹ in the Cold War era: while they were a sign that the country was on economically stable ground, they were uniform and did not allow for deviation from the norm. Viewers could live vicariously through the socially deviant Clampetts and McCoys and their fellow Appalachians on the screen.

The Beverly Hillbillies came to an end, however, when CBS began its ‘rural purge,’ canceling 15 shows between 1970-1971.”¹⁵⁰ With the beginning of this new decade, America was, once again, unable to laugh at Appalachia, a trend that would last into the 1990s. The 1970s and 1980s saw a dearth of comedic representations of the region, as Appalachian issues now strictly evoked concern. The horror of the region’s cultural backwardness most notably manifested itself in a film that, for many viewers, came to symbolize everything that was wrong with Appalachia: *Deliverance*. Based on the novel by James Dickey, the film followed four Atlanta businessmen as they traveled to the hills for a canoeing vacation gone awry at the hands of a gang of perverted hillbillies. Several aspects of the film have become instantly recognizable

¹⁴⁸ Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann, *Ecology and Popular Film: Cinema on the Edge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

¹⁴⁹ Leerom Medovoi, *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

¹⁵⁰ Ryan Broderick, “The Dark Side of America’s Redneck Reality TV Obsession,” *Buzzfeed Ideas*, last modified October 27, 2014, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/ryanhatesthis/how-hillbilly-reality-tv-got-way-too-real>.

cultural touchstones in the years since its 1972 release, including the nine-note introduction to the “Dueling Banjos” track. Some viewers argue that the line “I’m gonna make you squeal like a pig”¹⁵¹ made actor Ned Beatty “the unofficial spokesmodel of Appalachian tourism.”¹⁵² The film’s stark images of Appalachia as a place of total despair misplaced all of the comforting images that preceded it, and the region became synonymous with complete backwardness.

However, despite the horror it portrayed, *Deliverance* was well-received by both critics and audiences alike, garnering three Academy Award nominations and grossing over \$46 million, considerably bypassing its \$2-million budget.¹⁵³ Although *Deliverance* was released over 40 years ago, it remains influential in the national perception of Appalachia—that is, as a place whose isolation has given way to a level of cultural and moral depravity. Interestingly, Rabun County, Ga., where the film was located and shot, has experienced a dichotomy of responses to *Deliverance* over time, from outsiders as well as locals. Even though the most horrifying images of the film take place on the banks of the Chattooga River, tourism is now the top source of revenue in the county, with rafting alone bringing in \$20 million a year.¹⁵⁴ The Chattooga River Festival also grew out of positive responses to the film—but not everyone in Rabun County agrees with profiting from negative stereotypes. Sarah Gillespie, the event’s organizer, recalled a commissioners meeting where a towns person “said that the movie had ruined her life.”¹⁵⁵ This paradox of acceptable responses to Appalachian images is a problem that continues to plague the region, with one group admonishing negative representations altogether while the other group welcomes the capital that popular culture draws to the area.

¹⁵¹ Leonard Maltin, “*Deliverance* (1972),” in *Leonard Maltin’s Classic Movie Guide* (New York City: Plume, 2005).

¹⁵² Michael Washburn, “Appalachia Used to be Simply Scary. Now its Hipness is Frightening,” *New Republic*, last modified November 5, 2013, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/115474/moonshiners-tv-review-appalachia-has-never-been-hipper>.

¹⁵³ “Box Office/Business for *Deliverance*,” *Internet Movie Database (IMDB)*, last modified 2015, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0068473/business?ref=tt_dt_bus.

¹⁵⁴ Cory Welles, interview with Sarah Gillespie, *Marketplace*, August 22, 2012.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

The horror of *Deliverance* goes hand-in-hand with the concern and pity viewers began to feel towards the mountains in this era. This concern for Appalachia also generated a different type of representation of the region: true stories about folk heroes emerging in spite of the region's struggles and drawbacks, as seen in the documentaries of the 1970s and the biopics of the 1980s. Documentary projects about Appalachia converged with grassroots movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s that started from within the region—movements of standing up to coal conglomerates who lay waste to Appalachia's mountains; movements in support of creating, filming, and publishing art made by Appalachian people themselves. The “crusade against poverty launched a renaissance of Appalachian identity”¹⁵⁶ that manifested itself in an interest for “authentic” popular culture images that had been created by people from the mountains. Appalshop, for instance, was founded in 1969¹⁵⁷ as a place where people could be trained in the creation of different types of “media art.”¹⁵⁸ Located in Whitesburg, Ky., Appalshop drew filmmakers, playwrights, actors, and other types of artists to the mountains to create images of the region—but also encouraged communities in the region to “garner the resources, including new technologies, to tell their own stories,” which attracted local artists to it as well.¹⁵⁹ Appalshop offered educational opportunities for Appalachians that were “intended to help them solve their own problems in a just and equitable way.”¹⁶⁰ The films and stories that were produced through Appalshop were not intended to be high-grossing economically, per se; the art created there was valued not because of the money that could be made off of it, but because it was culturally significant.

¹⁵⁶ Ronald Eller, *Uneven Ground*.

¹⁵⁷ John D. H. Downing, *Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media* (New York: Sage Publications, 2011), 60.

¹⁵⁸ Piama Habibullah, “Audiences & Technology Series: Appalshop harnesses the power of storytelling,” *ArtsFwd*, last modified December 6, 2011, http://artsfwd.org/appalshop_harnesses_the_power_of_storytelling/.

¹⁵⁹ “About us,” *Appalshop*, accessed December 2014, <http://appalshop.org/about/>.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Documentaries about Appalachia captured the nation's interest in the 1970s because they gave voice to a region that viewers believed had survived outside the parameters of modern society for over a century. Elizabeth Cowie explains that images of Appalachian poverty as presented through the documentary lens struck a chord with viewers precisely because of the types of mountain representations produced in previous decades. She writes, "The people in the documentary must appear properly deserving [...] insofar as their poverty or starvation is not caused by themselves, and their need must be justified for empathy to arise."¹⁶¹ Appalachia, as portrayed in documentaries of the 1970s, had been treated unjustly by national corporations, ruined by coal companies, and exploited by government agencies. A pair of critically acclaimed documentaries latched onto the notion of the noble Appalachian community fighting against exploitation: *Before the Mountain Was Moved* (1970) and *Harlan County, USA* (1976). In *Before the Mountain Was Moved*, director Robert K. Sharpe followed a community in West Virginia as they worked to support legislation that would control strip mining, which effectively destroys mountains forever. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the documentary was funded in part by the Office of Economic Opportunity, which had a vested interest in garnering support for government legislation. Despite the bias that government sponsorship might have given the film, *Before the Mountain was Moved* was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature the year it was released.¹⁶²

Harlan County, USA was also exceedingly popular and was met with overwhelming critical acclaim upon its release in 1976. The film, which follows miners on strike against the Duke Power Company, won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature and, in 2007,

¹⁶¹ Elizabeth Cowie, "Documentary Desire: Seeing for Ourselves and Identifying in Reality," in *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 99.

¹⁶² *Before the Mountain Was Moved*, directed by Robert K. Sharpe (1970; Robert K. Sharpe Productions for the Office of Economic Opportunity, Internet Archive, 2012).

was named one of the top five documentaries of all time by the International Documentary Association.¹⁶³ The film was called “a landmark in the history of American documentary filmmaking” despite being self-aware of its “unabashedly partisan” message.¹⁶⁴ Director Barbara Kopple was dedicated to capturing a particular level of authenticity in her work, so she lived with the striking miners during filming, even standing on the picket lines with them as they attempted to block strikebreakers from reporting to the mines.¹⁶⁵ These documentaries portrayed Appalachians as a fiercely loyal and hardworking people, whose economic disparities sprang from broad injustice rather than their own lack of motivation.

Popular interest in the bleak realities of the lives of coal miners also played a part in bolstering support for two narrative features of the 1980s based on true stories: the biopic *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980) and the historical narrative *Matewan* (1987). *Coal Miner's Daughter* was an adaptation of Loretta Lynn's autobiography of the same name, following the country singer's rise to fame from the hills of Eastern Kentucky. The film was both a critical and commercial hit, with Sissy Spacek winning an Oscar for her role as Lynn, and the film also grossing over \$67 million, making it one of the top ten highest-earning films that year.¹⁶⁶ The soundtrack also struck gold, literally: it has sold over 500,000 copies, earning a gold certification.¹⁶⁷ *Coal Miner's Daughter* is one of the few examples of an Appalachian woman as the star of a film—but then again, despite the connotations the title might wish to evoke, Loretta Lynn is no average Appalachian woman. Her life is as full with adventure as the Sergeant Yorks of the past, who also transcended regional borders but held onto their mountain identities.

¹⁶³ Ian Aitkin, “Barbara Kopple,” *The Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film* (London: Routledge, 2013), 504.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Stephen L. Betts, “Flashback: Why Sissy Spacek Almost Snubbed ‘Coal Miner’s Daughter,’” *Rolling Stone*, last modified March 9, 2015, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/videos/flashback-why-sissy-spacek-almost-snubbed-coal-miners-daughter-20150309>.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

Matewan, on the other hand, picked up where *Harlan County, USA* left off, bringing to the screen a fictionalized version of an actual 1930s standoff between West Virginian miners attempting to unionize and the coal companies they fought against. The film, shot entirely in West Virginia, was clear about whose side the viewer should be on: “the characters are either good or evil,” wrote a reviewer in *The New York Times*, who was somewhat disgruntled that the Appalachians portrayed therein were “the idealized figures portrayed in the Government-sponsored murals that, during the Depression, were painted in post offices and other public buildings from one end of the country to the other.”¹⁶⁸ The pity for the region that bloomed with the start of the War on Poverty had created an aura around Appalachia. Non-fiction representations of Appalachia in popular culture in the 1970s made mountain people out to be rugged workers fighting for dignity, for economic equality and even for national stardom.

Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, there was a gradual change once again in terms of what was acceptable in representations of Appalachia in popular culture. While there was still an element of the despair of poverty that appeared in the films of these years, there were also new kinds of images, too—or rather, a certain type of image returned after being crowded out for several decades. Some of the action heroism from the days of *Sergeant York* reappeared in the 1980s and 1990s. Several of the biggest action stars of the day made turns either as Appalachians standing up to the ravages of the outside world, or as outsiders come to town to save the mountain people from themselves. In 1984’s *The River*, Mel Gibson portrayed a farmer trying to hold on to his land, which was about to be flooded in the wake of a new dam—harkening straight back to Kazan’s *Wild River* over 20 years before. The notion of the mountain man trying to live an old-fashioned life while modernity encroaches on his territory is one with roots deep in the past, and viewers showed some signs of weariness towards these vintage tropes. The moral

¹⁶⁸ Vincent Canby, “John Sayles’s ‘Matewan,’” *New York Times*, August 28, 1987.

overtones and one-dimensional renderings of the region were not lost on reviewer Roger Ebert, who was distracted by the “fairly heavy touch” of Appalachian pity in the screenplay: “The crucial flaw in the movie's plot is that Glenn’s [the villain’s] ideas, which are supposed to make him the bad guy, sound like simple common sense. [...] You know a movie's got problems when you find yourself wishing the heroes would agree with the villain.”¹⁶⁹ This heavy-handedness was apparent again in *Next of Kin* (1989), which saw Patrick Swayze take the lead as an Appalachian out-migrant who has made a life for himself in Chicago as a police officer; when his brother is murdered, however, the hillbilly in him comes out, and he calls his country kin to town on a mission for revenge. As the trailer intoned, “When these boys head for the city, someone better head for the hills.”¹⁷⁰ Like *The River*, *Next of Kin* drew on an old mountain stereotype: the Appalachian family locked in a blood feud. The 1997 Steven Seagal film *Fire Down Below* seemed to offer something slightly newer by taking an opposite approach, with Seagal as an agent from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) who travels to Jackson, Ky., to investigate the death of a fellow agent in an abandoned mine. When he finds evidence of toxins being dumped in the mines, Seagal’s character takes on the role of savior for the region, fending off outsiders who don’t have Appalachia’s best interests at heart as he does. Seagal also sang two songs on the soundtrack, which featured a variety of country music stars also appearing in the film in cameos, including Marty Stuart and Randy Travis. Reviews of the film and Seagal’s music were fair to middling, calling both “good, if predictable [...] To be blunt, he’s as subtle a singer as he is an actor”.¹⁷¹ The concept of the outside American savior bringing justice

¹⁶⁹ Roger Ebert, “The River,” *RogerEbert.com*, originally published January 11, 1985, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-river-1985>.

¹⁷⁰ “Next of Kin,” *YouTube*, last modified December 6, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6f56L6mo-g>.

¹⁷¹ Steven Thompson Erlewine, “Review,” *AllMusic*, accessed March 2015, <http://www.allmusic.com/album/fire-down-below-mw0000026676>.

to the hills could also be called predictable, as it harkened directly back to the “army of observers” who first crafted Appalachia for the American public at the turn of the 20th century.

Around the turn of the new millennium, cultural trends changed once again, and Appalachian “otherness” changed along with them, as ever. Finding horror in the hillbilly was revived in full, but interestingly, so was the documentary film, and the historical narrative remained as unflaggingly popular as it had proven itself to be over the twentieth century. A trio of biopics—*October Sky* (1999), *Songcatcher* (2000) and *We Are Marshall* (2006)—offered images of Appalachia that varied slightly from what had been seen on the screen in the past. *October Sky*, an adaptation of West Virginia native Homer Hickam’s autobiography, showed viewers how high school students facing a future as coal miners forged a new path by learning to build rockets. Hickam, as a consultant on the film, worked very hard to “keep West Virginia stereotypes minimal in this gutsy depiction of his town and family.”¹⁷² It is unusual for representations of Appalachia to include anyone with educational aspirations—much less young people who were also able to maintain their regional identities at the same time. *We Are Marshall* also brought education in Appalachia to the screen, telling the true story of the aftermath of a 1970 plane crash that killed 75 members of the Marshall University athletic department, including a large part of the university’s football team. The film’s writers and producers were drawn to the story because of the strength of the university and regional community, saying, “Rarely does a story move us to be better people, stronger people. What the town of Huntington [W. Va.] did following the 1970 plane crash is one of these inspirational stories.”¹⁷³ For once, *We Are Marshall* portrayed Appalachians helping other Appalachians—not in the context of fighting outside economic forces, but helping each other overcome adversity.

¹⁷² “October Sky,” *Homer Hickam*, last modified 2006, <http://www.homerhickam.com/movies/>.

¹⁷³ “We Are Marshall: The Movie,” *Marshall University*, accessed February 2015, <http://www.marshall.edu/movie/frequently-asked-questions/>.

Several historical films from the early years of the new millennium cast the history and culture of Appalachia in a highly romantic light. *Songcatcher* (2000) told the story of a female musicologist who traveled to the region in the early 1900s to capture the traditional music of the mountains on recording. The story follows the trope of the “stranger comes to town” tale that has been common in images of the mountains on the screen, with an outsider discovering “a previously unknown musical culture”¹⁷⁴—even if that culture has been “discovered” repeatedly by outsiders over the years. *Songcatcher* also plays into the notion that the music (and, thus, the people who make it) of Appalachia is in some way different from that of the rest of the nation. Another film, *Cold Mountain* (2003), based on the book by Charles Frazier, found romance in a historic Appalachian tale. The film follows star-crossed lovers torn apart by the Civil War, focusing on their struggle to reunite after war’s end. Ebert praised the film’s evocation of “a backwater of the Civil War with rare beauty,” but wondered “who in God's name thought this was a promising scenario for a movie.”¹⁷⁵ The film fit the mold of what is now well-worn idea, following in the footsteps of a handful of previous pictures that also cashed in on the notion that a love borne in the mountains is a different, somehow special kind of love. Nevertheless, the film was nominated for seven Academy Awards and gained a cult following with viewers who reveled in the star-crossed romance between the two main characters.¹⁷⁶ Viewers, it seems, cannot stay away from an Appalachian romance and the element of danger that often accompanies it.

Alternately, a cavalcade of Appalachian horror films appeared in the first decade of the 21st century. One urban legend provided inspiration for *The Mothman Prophecies*, a 2002

¹⁷⁴ Stephen Holden, “A tender lady explores mountains and their music,” *New York Times*, June 15, 2001.

¹⁷⁵ Roger Ebert, “Cold Mountain,” *RogerEbert.com*, originally published December 24, 2003, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/cold-mountain-2003>.

¹⁷⁶ Melvyn Stokes, *American History Through Hollywood Film* (London: A&C Black, 2013), 106.

psychological thriller based on unexplained real events starting in 1966 in which numerous people in the town of Point Pleasant reported seeing a “gray creature about two meters tall with bright red eyes and wings like a bird.”¹⁷⁷ The Mothman is horrifying to the viewer because he is an unknown entity who lives a life of seclusion in the shadows of civilization—much like the Appalachian himself, at least as he has been portrayed in popular culture. This psychological thriller made way for a handful of other types of horror films, including an entire franchise of scary mountain movies, the *Wrong Turn* series, which follows a “cannibalistic clan of inbred mutants [who] hunt a group of hikers through the backwoods.”¹⁷⁸ These West Virginia villains have such names as Three Finger, Saw Tooth, and One Eye, and the franchise has proven popular among viewers, with *Wrong Turn 6: Last Resort* appearing in 2014.¹⁷⁹ Other films in this era also fit into the “horrifying hillbilly” genre, including 2004’s *Dark Harvest* and 2006’s *Header*, both featuring some type of mountain man with perverse impulses that take the backwardness seen in *Deliverance* a step further. The modern-day horror in Appalachia stems from the same idea that made Sut Lovingood humorous or Davy Crockett admirable: these people, it seems, live on the outskirts of society, and as such, are different from the rest of America in fundamental ways.

The American public also had an appetite for documentary in the first decade of the new millennium that included images of Appalachia as a place apart from the rest of the country. For

¹⁷⁷ Geoff Pevere, “Mothman still a frighteningly big draw for tourists,” *Toronto Star*, January 19, 2008.

¹⁷⁸ Jason Buchanan, “Wrong Turn 3: Left For Dead,” *Rotten Tomatoes*, accessed February 2015, http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/wrong_turn_3/.

¹⁷⁹ The sixth film in the franchise disappeared from stores and media platforms, however, after being recalled because the filmmakers were sued: “During one of the early scenes in the movie, [...] a missing persons board is spotted several times [...] Apparently, one of the posters used on the board is the real life missing persons poster of Stacia Purcell. Stacie was officially declared missing on October 30, 2013, although her body was found several days later. [...] When her family heard that Purcell’s picture was being used in a horror movie without their consent, they launched action to prevent her image from being used anymore. [...] It’s unclear whether Last Resort will resurface on DVD and VOD again. [...] However, in the meantime, Wrong Turn 6 copies are being sold for upwards of \$45 on eBay.” [“Wrong Turn 6 Recalled,” *Horror Society*, <http://www.horrorsociety.com/2014/11/26/copies-wrong-turn-6-recalled-not-reason-may-think/>]

the most part, the documentaries produced in this time period romanticized the people of the region, focusing on certain cultural elements that were gradually becoming more popular and marketable in the American mainstream. In the PBS special *The Appalachians* (2005), producers attempted to “fill the void in information about the region, offering a rich portrait of its history and its legacy in music, literature, and film.”¹⁸⁰ As this thesis hopefully illustrates, there has hardly ever been “a void” of images of Appalachia, despite what the PBS documentary argued. No matter how many films, television shows and other types of images popular culture creates, the mythos of an Appalachia that is unknown and unknowable persists. Viewers have been “discovering” the region on a consistent basis since the nineteenth century, and yet, whenever the mountains become popular again, they are presented to the public as a place that is yet to be charted.

The 2003 documentary *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* followed a trajectory comparable to other films with mountain men at their center, its filmmakers focusing on singer Jim White as an example of Appalachia’s unique and strange regional culture. In the film, White “reflects upon exactly what it is about this baffling place that inspires musicians and writers, whilst at the same time working through his own preoccupations with his muse—or, as he puts it, ‘trying to find the gold tooth in God’s crooked smile.’”¹⁸¹ In a similar fashion, the 2008 documentary *This is the Last Dam Run of Likker I’ll Ever Make* focused on romanticizing, once again, an aspect of Appalachian culture that has intrigued viewers for decades: moonshine. Popcorn Sutton, a moonshiner who had gained a cult following for his irreverence and willful ignorance of the law, had become an underground hero for what he resisted, which other hillbillies had done in numerous representations before. As Williamson explains, “What the

¹⁸⁰ *The Appalachians*, produced by Mari-Lynn C. Evans (2005; PBS, 2014, online).

¹⁸¹ *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, directed by Andrew Douglas (2003; BBC Productions, iTunes, 2015).

American hillbilly fool often stands in opposition to is capitalism,”¹⁸² and Sutton definitely fit that mold, as do all moonshiners living outside the legal economic confines of the United States. *This is the Last Dam Run of Likker I’ll Ever Make* documents Sutton stilling his final batch of moonshine, knowing full well it would be his last: with a federal prison sentence looming, he actively decided to commit suicide in 2009 rather than go to jail.¹⁸³ Viewers loved Sutton’s fierce independence and unwillingness to conform to the nation’s expectations—a stereotype of Appalachians whose genealogy goes back to Sut Lovingood, who lived in a similarly liminal mountain world.

The representations of Appalachia that appeared between the beginning of the War on Poverty and the end of the 20th century featured a variety of images that had already been around for nearly a century. Although the War on Poverty was established to eradicate the desperation that seemed omnipresent in the mountains, it “failed to eliminate the perception of Appalachian otherness”.¹⁸⁴ Arguably, the War on Poverty made that “perception of Appalachian otherness” even stronger by providing America with images of Appalachian poverty that have remained ever-present in the American mind. The period between the start of the War on Poverty and the end of the twentieth century was strangely paradoxical for the mountains in popular culture, as television shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies* laughed at the very aspects of Appalachian identity that films like *Next of Kin* asked audiences to take seriously. When considered altogether, these films and shows raised “the same question [...] are we supposed to laugh at these people, pity them, or relate to them?”¹⁸⁵ The answer to that question seemed to change with each image, as the artists behind those films and shows asked viewers to feel a certain way towards the

¹⁸² J. W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland*.

¹⁸³ “Daughter says independence likely led to moonshiner’s suicide,” *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, March 17, 2009.

¹⁸⁴ Ronald Eller, *Uneven Ground*.

¹⁸⁵ Ryan Broderick, “America’s Redneck Reality TV Obsession.”

mountains based on the lens they placed on Appalachia. Despite these different lenses, one clear message these images sent was that Appalachia “always opposed images of America’s self-definition”¹⁸⁶—and that opposition created mixed feelings. In the shows and films that focused on the seriousness of Appalachian poverty, the moral of the story was that good jobs [and] government help [...] are what these poor hillbillies need.”¹⁸⁷ On the other hand, viewers found themselves laughing incredulously at the cultural ignorance and social freedom living in Appalachia afforded—sometimes wishing that they, too, could break free from the rules of American society in favor of an unmediated existence in the hills.

There was also an element of horror at the hillbilly that garnered a rabid popularity in this era, which brought about connotations that cultural isolation led to moral depravity. Where the hillbilly fool had once been humorous, he now acted as “a warning, a keep-away sign enjoining us to avoid the rocky rural edges outside the grasp of urban economy.”¹⁸⁸ A subliminal message in these horror films, then, was that Appalachians “needed to be redeemed from neglect and isolation to return to the cultural mainstream.”¹⁸⁹ The 1970s and 1980s did not leave much space for viewers to find humor in Appalachia’s problems, for in the productions created in those decades—oftentimes either documentaries or narrative features of real historical figures—“the sight of the poor, struggling mountain people [was] supposed to trigger liberal guilt.”¹⁹⁰ In the new millennium, however, Appalachia would appear in a new way in popular culture: for the first time, artists would begin to produce documentaries that found humor in the “real” lives of Appalachian people. In the past, viewers had been allowed to laugh at Appalachians only if they were fictional, and many of the “famous pop culture hillbillies of the 20th century were actors

¹⁸⁶ Allen Batteau, ed., *Appalachia and America*.

¹⁸⁷ J. W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland*.

¹⁸⁸ J. W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland*.

¹⁸⁹ Ronald Eller, *Uneven Ground*.

¹⁹⁰ J. W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland*.

reading from scripts. Their versions of poverty and ignorance ended when the episode was over. It was safe.”¹⁹¹ But the era of reality television bridged the gap between fictional representations and the supposed everyday life of average Appalachians. This transition has been tenuous for viewers and Appalachians, who have had a variety of responses to the portrayal of the region in modern documentaries and television shows. Through the proliferation of technology and modernization, people from the region would, for the first time, find a platform for having their own voices heard by the rest of the nation.

¹⁹¹ Ryan Broderick, “America’s Redneck Reality TV Obsession.”

CHAPTER III
THE SMUDGE SPEAKS:
REPRESENTATIONS OF AND RESPONSES TO APPALACHIA IN THE PRESENT

In recent years, even American urban centers like New York City have embraced “pop-yokelism.”¹⁹² This trend has brought attention to Appalachia once again—with results that vary from positive to tragic. In a tangible example from 2014, entrepreneur Montana Masback opened a restaurant in Brooklyn called Montana’s Trail House, offering cuisine he describes as “Appalachian East coast country food.”¹⁹³ A far cry from “Snuffy’s Shanties” of the twentieth century, Montana’s Trail House is meant to be a hybrid of high-class comfort food. Masback was so dedicated to presenting an “authentic” image of the mountains to his customers that he bought and transported a barn from Eastern Kentucky to New York City, where he reconstructed it as the restaurant’s exterior. The popularization of Appalachian culture, however, strikes some people as almost criminal, with a reviewer in the *Observer* writing of the Trail House:

“One need not be from Appalachia to object to the fetishization of that impoverished region for the blithe consumption of faux Brooklyn frontiersmen and women. [...] Appalachia is not a rural Shambhala or evocative coffee table book source material. It’s not just a place to buy old barns. The misery is human and ongoing. [...] You can’t be an innocent patron at this blank parody.”¹⁹⁴

In today’s hyper-politically-correct society, these stereotypical images of Appalachia rub some people—both within and without of the region, clearly—in the wrong way, so much so that they

¹⁹² Michael Washburn, “Appalachia Used to be Simply Scary. Now its Hipness is Frightening,” *New Republic*, last modified November 5, 2013, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/115474/moonshiners-tv-review-appalachia-has-never-been-hipper>.

¹⁹³ Joshua David Stein, “Montana’s Trail House Brings Morally Hazardous Appalachian Cuisine to Brooklyn,” *The Observer*, last modified July 29, 2014, <http://observer.com/2014/07/montanas-trail-house-brings-morally-hazardous-appalachian-cuisine-to-brooklyn/>.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

will not take them sitting down anymore. A bevy of online projects, blogs and other types of Internet responses to certain images of Appalachia are reaching people across the world. Appalachians could not access these types of platforms before modernization, but now, their voices are being broadcast to the world, and they are making tangible changes. However, the new millennium has also, ironically, produced some of the flattest representations of Appalachia ever seen on the screen, drawing directly from images that are now well over 100 years old. For some, these images are something not only to embrace, but to capitalize on for the benefit of the region—a way of taking a cultural past and putting it to use in an attempt to become active players in America’s growing tourism and service industries. This juxtaposition of protestation at the stereotyping of Appalachia and an acceptance of cultural clichés as a marketable commodity have created dialogues about the region that have been decades in the making.

For everything that has changed—not just in Appalachia, but around the world—since the start of the 21st century, the region is still often presented visually to the country in a very particular way. In 2009, ABC aired a documentary series, *A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains*. For two years, Diane Sawyer—a Kentucky native herself—and an ABC news crew followed four Appalachian children, documenting their struggle to live normal lives in the hills of Kentucky. The premise and tone of the show are strikingly similar to the 1964 CBS Special Report *Christmas in Appalachia*; an introductory article on Sawyer’s work begins by stating, “In the hills of Central Appalachia, up winding, mountain roads, is a place where children and families face unthinkable conditions, living without what most Americans take for granted.”¹⁹⁵

Compare this to Kuralt’s opening statement in his 1964 production:

“This is the road—if you can call it that—that leads to the Pert Creek School in Letcher County, Kentucky. There are tens of thousands of roads like this, winding

¹⁹⁵ “A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains,” *ABCNews.com*, last modified February 10, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=6845770&page=1&singlePage=true>.

back along the creeks and hollows [*sic*] of eleven states. And beside these roads, the shacks of tar paper and pine which are the homes of a million permanently poor.”¹⁹⁶

Sawyer’s approach to the people of Appalachia directly mirrors Kuralt’s: she presents them in their homes and schools, and emphasizes how much the children of the region have to do without. Although half a century had passed between the creation of these two documentary projects, the message remained the same: within the borders of one of the world’s wealthiest countries is an area of extreme poverty, and the people who live there need their fellow Americans to help.

The fact that images of such extreme poverty in Appalachia are not only still produced but are still popular begs the question: did the War on Poverty—and the bevy of representations tugging on America’s hearts and purse-strings that came along with it—make a marked difference on the region? Since 1964, 92 federal programs have been instituted to help lower-income Americans, including 17 food-aid programs and 20 housing programs.¹⁹⁷ But as of the 1990s, two-thirds of Appalachian counties still lived in worse economic conditions than the rest of the United States.¹⁹⁸ As of 2012, the federal government had spent \$799 billion on programs meant to solve these problems¹⁹⁹—and yet, disproportionate poverty still seems to be a permanent aspect of Appalachia.

So if the government has not been able to completely eradicate the problems in Appalachian economies and markets, were the “poverty warriors” and image-makers who gravitated to the mountains in the 1960s and 1970s able to make any clear difference in the ways

¹⁹⁶ *Christmas in Appalachia*, directed by Joe Gorsuch (1965; New York City: Carousel Films and CBS News, Internet Archive, 2014).

¹⁹⁷ Ada F. Haynes, *Poverty in Central Appalachia: Underdevelopment and Exploitation*. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997).

¹⁹⁸ Ada F. Haynes, *Poverty in Central Appalachia*.

¹⁹⁹ Ada F. Haynes, *Poverty in Central Appalachia*.

Appalachians were portrayed in the national media? One distinctly powerful and positive force for the region has been Appalshop, which has been continuously producing or helping others produce Appalachian art since 1969. Appalshop has transitioned well into the digital age, with a strong online presence that allows people around the world to access Appalachian art. On an economic level, Appalshop has also made an impact, employing 32 people in its Whitesburg, Ky., headquarters as of 2011 and bringing in \$1.7 million in revenue, “making it a significant economic force in Letcher County.”²⁰⁰ But not every initiative that sprang from the War on Poverty was as lasting; many writers, artists and groups who flocked to the mountains to enact justice did not stay in the region once the War on Poverty petered out in the 1970s. As such, it is harder to measure the kind of impact they made, either positive or negative.

What is easier to gauge now is how Appalachian people feel about certain images of the region that appear in popular culture. The 2002 documentary *The True Meaning of Pictures* specifically addresses Appalachian responses to the photography of Shelby Lee Adams, whose work is polarizing due to the stilted way he presents the region. Director Jennifer Baichwal gives screen time to Adams as well as viewers of his work, some of whom praise his approach while others find it damaging. The film explores how Adams came to create the images in his most well-known book, *Appalachian Portraits*—which scholar Dwight Billings says “demonstrates that some Appalachian artists are not hesitant to serve up what mainstream culture expects from the region.”²⁰¹ The people Adams portrays fit the now-established hillbilly image: families of “holler-dwellers,” to use his own phrase,²⁰² who slaughter hogs in the front yards of their dilapidated log cabins. Adams is protective not only of his photographs but of his relationship to

²⁰⁰ John Cheves and Bill Estep, “A nation notices, and help arrives,” *Lexington Herald-Leader*, December 19, 2012.

²⁰¹ Dwight Billings, “Introduction,” *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes*, 6.

²⁰² *The True Meaning of Pictures*, directed by Jennifer Baichwal (2002; Toronto: Mercury Films, 2003), DVD.

the people in them, who he calls “my friends, who I love and care about.”²⁰³ But the film also presents Louise Hall, an Eastern Kentucky native whose sister is photographed in the book, who argues that the picture “disgraced our family.”²⁰⁴ *The True Meaning of Picture* illustrates the dichotomy of feelings in Appalachia towards the use of stereotype in popular culture: some people who identify as Appalachian embrace images that have become worn over time, while others are indignant at their perpetuation.

Responses to Appalachian representations are also more accessible in the present day thanks to international platforms—like the Internet—that give people a place to speak out en masse about the reality of life in the mountains. To take it a step further, the Internet is now acting as a place where people can actively challenge what they see on the screen, and the Appalachian presence online has been powerful enough to eradicate several unsavory images in recent years. For instance, when DirecTV began airing a commercial in 2013 that depicted what its narrator called “crazy hillbillies”—with terrible dental hygiene, wearing soiled overalls and no shoes, sharing the dilapidated shack they call a home with farm animals—the backlash was overwhelming. Harlan, Ky., Tourism Commission Director Brandon Pennington said of the advertisement, “It was in bad taste [as] it was very offensive to all of Appalachia or all mountain places.”²⁰⁵ Neil Middleton, general manager of Eastern Kentucky news network WYMT, was concerned that the continuation of such stereotypes could have negative economic consequences on the region, saying,

“Think about the damage this ad did ... yet again ... to our reputation. A friend of mine put it this way. ‘We’re working to diversify our economy. If any decision maker for a large corporation looking to relocate saw that ad, do you think there’s

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Laura Beranek, “DirecTV apologies after ‘crazy hillbillies’ commercial,” *WYMT*, last modified October 24, 2013, <http://www.wkyc.com/wymt/home/headlines/229163771.html>.

any possible chance they would even take our call?’ I don’t know about you, but I’m not laughing.”²⁰⁶

The viewing public was so vocal in their disapproval of the depictions in the commercial that DirecTV was forced to pull it from circulation and issue a statement, saying, “It was certainly not our intent to offend anyone”.²⁰⁷ DirecTV may have been telling the truth in that regard; after all, if this ad had appeared several decades earlier, it may not have struck viewers as being so offensive, as it was not incredibly different from characters they saw on certain television shows and in film. But with the numerous platforms that allow viewers to respond to images in the modern era, DirecTV could not ignore the opinions of actual Appalachians in regard to their portrayal on the national scale.

The importance of the Internet as a platform to fight regional stereotypes was never more clear than in the backlash to “What’s the Matter with Eastern Kentucky?”, an article that appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2014. Journalist Annie Lowrey, who referred to Appalachia in the article as “the smudge of the country between New Orleans and Pittsburgh,” wrote the piece in response to a recently released study that placed several mountain counties among the worst places to live in the United States.²⁰⁸ Lowrey praised “the federal safety-net programs [that] have drastically improved” the poverty in the region, but wondered, “Even with additional government subsidies, would businesses really want to move there?”²⁰⁹ By the article’s end, Lowrey came to the conclusion that “it would be better to help the people than the

²⁰⁶ Neil Middleton, “‘Crazy Hillbillies’ commercial: A DirecTV insult to region,” *WYMT*, last modified October 28, 2013, http://www.wkyt.com/blogs/neilsnotebook/Crazy_Hillbillies_commercial_A_DirecTV_insult_to_region_22938313_1.html.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Annie Lowrey, “What’s the Matter With Eastern Kentucky? Bluegrass-State Blues,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 29, 2014.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

place—in some cases, helping people leave the place.”²¹⁰ She advocated Appalachians leaving the region rather than staying there and suffering (from her point of view). Where other writers have considered the mountains a haven, a place where the “dream of modernization without urbanization”²¹¹ might be realized, Lowrey saw a region without a future.

The response to the article from within the region was intense—but it is noteworthy that these responses were heard on a large scale. Author Silas House countered the article with one of his own titled, “The matter is you don’t know what you’re talking about,” arguing that “media portrayals of my people have led to life being worse for us. If you tell people they are worthless long enough, some part of them starts to believe it. Calling a place ‘a smudge’ certainly doesn’t help.”²¹² The Daily Yonder, a blog featuring articles on rural lifestyles, provided a stage for numerous Appalachians to respond in its Speak Your Piece opinion series, and the articles posted there revealed the vitriol people felt towards the *New York Times* piece. In her response, Betsy Taylor wrote, “In trying to shine a spotlight on us, [Lowrey] tripped and turned the spotlight onto herself and her own biases. She erases the values of place, community and the countryside, while uncritically exalting mobility, individualism, wealth, creativity, cities, coasts, and success.”²¹³ Tim Marema decried Lowrey’s assumption that moving out of the mountains was the answer, saying, “It is as if East Kentuckians were not living, breathing beings capable of acting on their own behalf.”²¹⁴ Marema concluded his article by saying, “Remember, while we’re having this

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: the Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 244.

²¹² Silas House, “The matter is you don’t know what you’re talking about,” *A Country Boy Can Surmise*, last modified July 10, 2014, <http://www.silashouseblog.blogspot.com/2014/07/the-matter-is-you-dont-know-what-youre.html>.

²¹³ Betsy Taylor, “Speak Your Piece: A Journalistic Selfie,” *The Daily Yonder*, last modified July 8, 2014, <http://www.dailyyonder.com/speak-your-piece-journalistic-selfie/2014/07/08/7462>.

²¹⁴ Tim Marema, “Speak Your Piece: Here’s what’s the matter,” *The Daily Yonder*, last modified June 27, 2014, <http://www.dailyyonder.com/speak-your-piece-heres-whats-matter/2014/06/27/7454>.

discussion, rural folks are standing right here. You know we can hear you, right?”²¹⁵ Lowrey may not have meant to offend Appalachia, but the online responses made it hard for anyone to ignore how the region felt. This new platform gave Appalachia a voice—and an influence over popular culture.

Another new situation that the media and the mountains have had to contend with in the modern era is the strange reality of reality television, which has proven to have quite an affinity for Appalachia. Unfortunately, filming reality television series in Appalachia comes with unique challenges, as was most evident in the case of MTV’s *Buckwild*, a reality series marketed as “a redneck *Jersey Shore*”²¹⁶ that aired for a single season in 2013. MTV has played a starring role in perpetuating regional stereotypes across the nation through reality television, with *Jersey Shore* as its most notable blockbuster hit. But the success of *Buckwild* was short-lived, as tragedy brought it to an abrupt end. In its singular season, the series attracted an average of 3 million viewers per episode as it followed a group of rambunctious West Virginia teenagers participating in a long list of hijinks, usually with the goal of simply having fun.²¹⁷ Some Appalachians balked at the show, including former West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin, who decried MTV, arguing that the network “preyed on young people, coaxed them into displaying shameful behavior.”²¹⁸ Some argued that MTV was bringing revenue to the region, especially to the teenagers in the cast—but in truth, each series regular earned just \$1,000 per episode, a tiny fraction of the millions generated in ad revenue.²¹⁹

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ryan Broderick, “The Dark Side of America’s Redneck Reality TV Obsession,” *Buzzfeed Ideas*, last modified October 27, 2014, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/ryanhatesthis/how-hillbilly-reality-tv-got-way-too-real>.

²¹⁷ Karen L. Cox, “The Death of Shain Gandee and MTV’s Cancellation of ‘Buckwild,’” *Pop South*, last modified April 10, 2013, <http://southinpopculture.com/2013/04/10/the-death-of-shain-gandee-and-mtvs-cancellation-of-buckwild/>.

²¹⁸ “Senator: MTV Series ‘Buckwild’ is a Travesty,” *Today Show*, December 10, 2010.

²¹⁹ Karen L. Cox, “The Death of Shain Gandee.”

The fate of *Buckwild* was sealed in a fatal accident involving Shain Gandee, one of the stars of the show, who was found dead of carbon monoxide poisoning with his uncle and a friend in a mudding excursion gone wrong.²²⁰ MTV could not reconcile the happy-go-lucky atmosphere the show projected with the grim reality of Gandee's accidental death, and the series was quickly cancelled. Gandee's death was sobering for viewers: while the wild antics of mountain people living on society's periphery had been an impetus for laughter for decades, Appalachia became dangerous once again in the wake of *Buckwild*. Harkening back to *The Beverly Hillbillies* and creator Paul Henning's desire to keep the private lives of his stars out of sight, *Buckwild* hit a cultural nerve because it was suddenly too real. As commentator Ryan Broderick wrote, "The problems arise when these authentic hillbillies [...] start acting in a way offscreen that doesn't comport with the relatively safe, contained version we see of them onscreen."²²¹

The problems MTV faced, however, have not deterred other networks from cashing in on America's interest in seeing rural Appalachia on reality television. The eternal fascination with corn whiskey has manifested itself in this medium through the popular Discovery Channel show *Moonshiners*, which has been on the air since 2011 and has even generated a spin-off show about a particularly beloved 'shiner, *Tickle*. Even though legal moonshine has become popular in its own right, *Moonshiners'* promotional material announces, "The black market for white lightning is thriving. Moonshiners will go to unprecedented extremes in their efforts to hide their still sites and cloak their distribution networks. With new styles of shine being tested and sold there is a king's ransom waiting for those bold enough to grab it."²²² Brush-ups with the law are still common on the show, as "the police are wise to shiner deceptions and more determined than

²²⁰ Bill Carter, "After Star's Death, MTV Cancels 'Buckwild,'" *New York Times*, April 11, 2013.

²²¹ Kate Aurthur, "Is there a future for MTV's troubled 'Buckwild'?", *Buzzfeed Entertainment*, last modified April 1, 2013, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/kateaurthur/is-there-a-future-for-mtvs-buckwild#.xj4rDOoz3>.

²²² "This is how we make the moonshine!", *Discovery*, accessed February 2015, <http://www.discovery.com/tv-shows/moonshiners/about-this-show/moonshiners-about-show/>.

ever to catch them red handed. The day of reckoning may be just around the corner.”²²³ Of course, this is all highly ironic and paradoxical: the local police cannot *not* know that the cast of a television show called *Moonshiners* are making corn whiskey in the hills; if they needed to provide evidence to make an arrest, they could just tune in to the Discovery Channel. The show plays into that old but clearly still beloved (or at least marketable) tale of the mountain man living outside the law, running from the revenuer as he shares his ’shine with the world.

The National Geographic Channel, on the other hand, shows what it’s like to be on the lawman’s side in Appalachia in its brand-new series *Southern Justice*. The show follows police officers in Ashe County, North Carolina, and Sullivan County, Tenn., in the style of *Cops*, but makes sure viewers understand that things are different here. For instance, the episodes often have mountain-themed titles, including “Blue Ridge Bloodshed,” “Mountain Manhunt,” “Hillbilly Heroin” and “Appalachian Lockup.”²²⁴ These titles harken back to the titles of Sut Lovingood’s “yarns” in the way they situate the viewer in a specific region and culture before the story has even begun. Promotional pieces for the series placed its cast in a particular light as well. An online *National Geographic* story directly compared the officers to characters on *The Andy Griffith Show*, writing that “deputies in the Blue Grass area need to have ‘a little bit of Andy in them’—a ‘tough love’ approach to law enforcement, requiring compassion and respect for even the toughest criminals.”²²⁵ This qualifier of cops as protagonists was necessary, as the group has been vilified in moonshining stories—viewers needed to know that, even though they were taking on the role of the “revenuers” of old, these deputies were still Appalachian at heart.

If online comments can be indicative of how the general viewership feels, then people have mixed feelings about the scenes that play out on *Southern Justice*. Comments on an online

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ *Southern Justice* (2014; Sullivan Co., Tenn.: NatGeo).

²²⁵ Roger May, interview by Becky Harlan, *Proof, National Geographic.com*, February 6, 2015.

National Geographic promotional article revealed the differences of opinion viewers feel. Commenter Jack Cunningham wrote, “A horribly produced, inaccurate pile of garbage that has no place on television. Expanding inaccurate stereotypes and showing some of the worst of the worst [...] National Graphic, you should be ashamed of yourself.”²²⁶ But another commenter, going by the name justin doran, replied, “I feel honorable that National Geographic has shed some light on my home town [...] before people speak please realize this is a very good thing for our area [...] Please continue to make more episodes and continue the awesome work!!!”²²⁷ The future of *Southern Justice* is yet to be decided, but whether or not it is renewed for a second season may prove how well it has been received in the region it represents.

A highly popular dramatization of the “southern justice” trope is *Justified*, which recently completed its final season after six years on FX. The series follows Deputy U.S. Marshal Raylan Givens as he returns to his hometown of Harlan, Ky., to fight the crime that is so rampant in the region.²²⁸ The show has only filmed a handful of scenes in Harlan itself, opting instead to use the hills of Pennsylvania as stand-ins for Harlan County.²²⁹ The series certainly trades in old tropes, playing up a certain level of “Kentucky flavor” and “Appalachian pride” that appears as Givens faces off with renegade mountain men. But Givens—like the officers in *Southern Justice*—is Appalachian, too, as his boss in the Lexington police headquarters makes clear in the pilot episode when he jokes, “I guess some places haven’t been entered in the system, like North Korea and Raylan’s hometown.”²³⁰ The mountains are “othered” instantly in *Justified*, and Raylan—as a native of the region—is the only person qualified to navigate that foreign world.

²²⁶ “Get ready for Southern Justice,” *NatGeo*, last modified September 17, 2014, <http://tvblogs.nationalgeographic.com/2014/09/17/get-ready-for-southern-justice/>.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ *Justified*, created by Graham Yost (2010; FX Productions).

²²⁹ Roger Sabin, et al, *Cop Shows: A Critical History of Police Dramas on Television* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2014), 165.

²³⁰ “Pilot,” *Justified*, created by Graham Yost (2010; FX Productions).

Justified relies heavily on the stereotypes of old: its main character wears a white cowboy hat and cowboy boots in every scene, it focuses on a family feud from the first episode onward, and people live in hollers at the end of dirt roads. A review in the *New Yorker* responded to one character's comment, "That'd be a neat trick, escaping the past" by writing, "This axiom applies to television, too."²³¹ However, despite its sometimes clichéd storylines, *Justified* is apparently well liked in Appalachia—even if it is not considered representative of real life in the mountains. The Harlan tourism website states, "*Justified's* Harlan is an embellishment, but generally well-accepted among Harlan Countians as an entertaining work of fiction."²³² This is a notable statement, as it reveals that Appalachians are able to enjoy images of the region they live in on the screen, even if those representations are not necessarily realistic. That this endorsement of *Justified* comes from a tourism department also shows that Appalachia is willing to capitalize on cultural representations even if they are not entirely politically correct.

This notion of capitalizing on cultural images certainly rang true in the response to the History Channel's 2012 miniseries *Hatfields & McCoys*, chronicling the historic blood feud for the public once more. As the *Christian Science Monitor* noted, the production was "chock full of some of Hollywood's top frontier-lovin' hombres," including Kevin Costner, Powers Booth and Bill Paxton, who did not shy away from romanticizing the legendary tale.²³³ Eastern Kentucky and West Virginia tourism agencies created marketing strategies in tandem with the rise of the popularity of the miniseries—evidence that images of regional distinctiveness are sometimes guarded if they can be profitable. This Hatfield and McCoy tourism industry drew the attention of the national media in the wake of the History Channel miniseries, with the *Wall Street*

²³¹ Emily Nussbaum, "Trigger Happy," *The New Yorker*, January 21, 2013.

²³² "FX's *Justified*: Fact and Fiction," *Harlan County, Kentucky*.

²³³ Gloria Goodale, "'Hatfields & McCoys': Is History Channel miniseries fact or fiction?," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 29, 2012.

Journal, the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *New York Times* all weighing in on the cultural import of a region welcoming popular stereotype in exchange for economic benefit. The *New York Times* filtered the response to the miniseries through the region's "grappling with the decline of coal," writing,

There is an urgency to capitalize on the show [...] and to promote the feud as a draw to the region. In Pike County, Ky., thousands of state dollars have been funneled to the local tourism department to that end. Tony Tackett, the county's executive director of tourism, said his office had spent close to \$40,000 in state money on billboards and a national advertising campaign since April 2012. The campaign included advertisements in *O, The Oprah Magazine*, and several other publications.²³⁴

And apparently the campaign worked, with the county reporting "a surge in out-of-town foot traffic, tourists by the thousands drawn to the region in search of history."²³⁵

America's most famous blood feud seems particularly ripe for economic leverage, however, with certain Appalachian forums utilizing the Hatfield and McCoy drama for economic leverage even before the History Channel drew new attention to the area. For instance, the tourist haven Pigeon Forge in Sevier County, Tenn., features a Hatfields & McCoys dinner theater that promises audiences comedy as the two families "try to settle their differences mountain-style."²³⁶ This dinner theater is one example of numerous Appalachian stereotypes that draws thousands of tourists to Sevier County annually, including Ole Smoky Moonshine Distillery in Gatlinburg—Tennessee's first federally licensed distillery²³⁷—Dollywood, Davy Crockett Mini Golf, Shoot Em Up Cinemas, Appalachian GhostWalks, and more. These attractions—along with the chance to vacation in the mountains (but not stay forever)—are unapologetic in their capitalization of the

²³⁴ Chase Purdy, "Seeking to Lure Tourists To a Rugged Outpost Famed for a Deadly Feud," *New York Times*, May 5, 2013, A17.

²³⁵ Chase Purdy, "Seeking to Lure Tourists," *New York Times*.

²³⁶ "Feudin'! Family Fun!," *Hatfield & McCoy Dinner Show*, accessed February 2015, <http://www.hatfieldmccoydinnerfeud.com>.

²³⁷ Jaime Joyce, *Moonshine: A Cultural History of America's Infamous Liquor* (London: MBI Publishing, 2014), 128.

construction of Appalachia in popular culture for payment. Then again, many of the people they attract are unapologetic in their enjoyment of these productions. Enjoying Appalachian stereotypes runs counterintuitive to the critical response to Appalachia's problems in the War on Poverty era. This paradox—of a region that simultaneously fights for more realistic, layered portrayals while also utilizing clichés unabashedly—is something Appalachians grapple with to an unprecedented degree in the 21st century.

At the same time, some older images of the mountains are reappearing in popular culture in new ways. The concept of the “mountain man” who lives in the liminal space of the mountains continues to thrive in the 2010s, with such characters taking center stage in such films as *Lawless* (2012) and *The World Made Straight* (2015). These two films made slight changes to the legendary Appalachian image—particularly *The World Made Straight*, an adaptation of a Ron Rash novel following a young Appalachian man caught between societal expectations of Appalachia and his own life goals. To set a coming-of-age story in the mountains is something that has rarely been done before, especially when that narrative includes a young person figuring out his identity in relation to this particular region. But both films do still rely heavily on substance abuse in the mountains as a crucial definer of the regional culture, with *Lawless* drawing on the age-old interest in whiskey and *The World Made Straight* trading in liquor for marijuana. Drug usage has remained synonymous with Appalachia from the start, and like all other aspects of the regional culture, it is both romanticized and decried on the screen. For image producers and, in turn, viewers, perhaps there is sense in rationalizing Appalachia's perceived cultural lag—whether that is a positive or negative thing—as an effect of widespread drug usage.

Comedy has also made a comeback in images of Appalachia, but also in new ways—namely, finding humor by directly highlighting stereotypes and how they play a part in

misconstruing the region. Williamson said that “the hillbilly provokes a range of responses, from an odd kind of comfort to a real kind of terror,”²³⁸ and for the first time, that comfort and terror could coexist in the same space. The cult film *Tucker & Dale vs. Evil* (2010) satirized the burgeoning hillbilly horror (or rather, horrifying hillbilly) genre by revealing its two main characters to be much more harmless than the vacationing college students who assume the hillbillies are out for blood. By playing on the audience’s expectation that the mountain man is meant to be scary while the non-Appalachian is the protagonist, *Tucker & Dale* is one of the first films to bridge the paradox of humor and horror in representations of the region. Audiences could now see, through Tucker and Dale, an Appalachia that was sane and unexceptional, despite the nation’s—embodied in the paranoid college students they run into—preconceived notions about the region. Viewers latched on to the satire of the film, voting it the audience favorite at the 2010 SXSW Festival,²³⁹ and there is sequel rumored to be in production.²⁴⁰

Another stereotypical image of Appalachia was called into question through comedy when the *Colbert Report* ran an incredibly popular segment about the small town of Vicco, Ky. Stephen Colbert used his trademark satire in a report called “People Who Are Destroying America” that featured Johnny Cummings, Vicco’s mayor (and barber), who is openly gay. Cummings and Vicco received international attention in 2013 after the town council passed a fairness ordinance stating that no one can be discriminated there based on sexual orientation. At the time of its passage, Vicco was the smallest town in the United States to enact a fairness ordinance. The *New York Times* wrote of the ordinance’s passage, “Admit it: The Commission’s anti-discrimination vote seems at odds with knee-jerk assumptions about a map dot in the

²³⁸ J. W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland*.

²³⁹ Jay A. Fernandez, “Magnet Releasing Snags ‘Tucker & Dale vs. Evil,’” *The Hollywood Reporter*, last modified June 8, 2011, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/risky-business/magnet-releasing-snags-tucker-dale-196244>.

²⁴⁰ Alan Tudyk, interview with Kristy Jett, *Bigger Show Podcast*, March 24, 2014.

Appalachian coal fields.”²⁴¹ Colbert played up these assumptions in his satirical frustration over Cummings’ legislation. After showing a variety of Vicco citizens voicing their approval of the ordinance, Colbert cried in a voiceover, “What is wrong with you people?” A man onscreen sighs, “People think that this is just a small town, they think it’s just a bunch of close-minded hillbillies,” and Colbert cries, “Yes, we count on that!”²⁴² The *Colbert Report* segment drew praise across numerous news outlets and online platforms, for its humor and its compassion, and for highlighting progressivism in Appalachia. By shedding light on how the region has changed while also shedding light on its stereotypes, much like *Tucker & Dale*, the segment on Vicco married dualistic Appalachian images in a modern way.

Another trend in 21st-century representations of the mountains is a push for more realistic images, whatever realism may mean to people from across Appalachia. Some of the most profound and popular movements for realism in portrayals of the region are grassroots, springing from Appalachians without backing or sponsorship on a national level. One of the beauties of living in the 21st century is that images don’t have to be mass-produced to reach the masses anymore. A prime example of this is the “crowd-sourced” online project Looking at Appalachia, which allows Appalachians to play a direct role in creating the images they want the world to see of their region.²⁴³ Created by Appalachian photographer Roger May, the Looking at Appalachia website welcomes photographic submissions from Appalachians of all kinds in the hopes that the region can begin to be “defined by its people as opposed to political legislation.”²⁴⁴ May hopes that pictures taken by Appalachian people themselves will add a depth to the “established narrative” of Appalachia in popular culture, but he is aware of the paradox of accepted responses

²⁴¹ Dan Barry, “Sewers, Curfews and a Ban on Gay Bias,” *New York Times*, January 28, 2013.

²⁴² “People who are destroying America: Johnny Cummings,” *The Colbert Report* (August 14, 2013; Comedy Central).

²⁴³ Roger May, “Overview,” *Looking at Appalachia*, last modified 2015, <http://lookingatappalachia.org/overview>.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

to images of the region in popular culture. He has said that, “quite often the ‘othering’ that happens there is, I think, somewhat self-induced. That’s really OK, but I think it’s important to pursue and embrace change, whatever that might look like. [...] let’s be truthful in our representations.”²⁴⁵ The work being done through Looking at Appalachia is an attempt to bridge the gap between cultural representations of the region and its reality, as well as the gap between those who resist stereotype and those who accept it.

While the mountains have been both romanticized and reviled for their differences, May hopes this project will prove that Appalachia is in many ways similar to the rest of America. “Pictures of ‘normalcy’ may require a bit more work,” he says, “and we may or may not be surprised at what we find, but the hard work is done in the looking.”²⁴⁶ The project has had an overwhelmingly positive response, with submissions from over 100 people from states across the region, including rural and urban areas.²⁴⁷ May hopes that the project is just the start of a larger transformation in the role Appalachians play in controlling the images the rest of the world sees of the region:

“[I]t’s important to realize that this project can’t or won’t single-handedly dispel decades worth of stacked myths or stereotypes. We all know how powerful images can be. [...] I see these photographs as added voices to a conversation that started well before the War on Poverty was declared and ones that’ll be around for a long while to come. [...] If we’re collectively willing to sit a while, listen, and try to understand on an individual level, we might surprise ourselves with what we find.”²⁴⁸

²⁴⁵ Karen L. Cox, “Looking at Appalachia: Fifty Years after the War on Poverty,” *Pop South*, last modified September 29, 2014, <http://southinpopculture.com/2014/09/29/looking-at-appalachia-fifty-years-after-the-war-on-poverty/>.

²⁴⁶ Roger May, interview by Becky Harlan, *Proof, National Geographic*.

²⁴⁷ “2014 Contributors,” *Looking at Appalachia*, accessed January 2015, <http://lookingatappalachia.org/contributors>.

²⁴⁸ Karen L. Cox, “Looking at Appalachia: Fifty Years after the War on Poverty,” *Pop South*.

Over time, American society has become more and more resistant to the idea of stereotyping of any kind—and yet, when it comes to Appalachia, the old images are still very much alive and welcome in the mainstream popular culture. Roger May says that Appalachia is “the last bastion of America that’s sort of generalized, lumped together, and made fun of.”²⁴⁹ The modern paradox of Appalachia is that some of those now cliché images of mountain people continue to emerge from the mountains themselves—or, at least, are protected by Appalachians who hope to profit from them in some way. May himself has defended stereotypes, saying that, “in all fairness those stereotypes aren’t 100 percent inaccurate. To say that would be a huge disservice to the truth.”²⁵⁰ This paradox—of both continuing antiquated images (and even profiting from them) while also fighting for more nuanced Appalachians on the screen—is representative of an age-old struggle within the mountains. Those who choose to take stereotypes like the moonshiner and the Appalachian as the “contemporary ancestor” of America and embrace or profit from them are just trying to make the best of a historical trend. After all, what else should be expected of the people who live in this “poor, poor, and damned poor” region except attempts to escape poverty? Who can blame them for capitalizing on an age-old stereotype for their own benefit? Precourt understood that some Appalachians, “facing economic difficulties on the one hand and having their way of life stereotyped and denigrated on the other,” would understandably prioritize the economic problems over the cultural ones.²⁵¹ But the downside of this acceptance is the perpetuation of one-dimensional images of Appalachians, which could also be an economic hindrance in its own way. If the government and national

²⁴⁹ Roger May, interview by Becky Harlan, *Proof, National Geographic*.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ Walter Precourt, “The Image of Appalachian Poverty,” in *Appalachia and America: Autonomy and Regional Dependence*, ed. by Allen Batteau (Lexington: the University Press of Kentucky, 1983).

corporations believe the concept of Appalachia as a place removed from modern culture and technologies, their resistance to exploring options in the mountains is somewhat understandable.

What are now appearing alongside those cliché representations, however, are homegrown responses to them, outright attempts to show the world a more nuanced idea of Appalachia that might be closer to reality than what has been seen in popular culture before. The fact that some of the loudest responses to images of Appalachia currently come from inside the region is new—but to be fair, before technology and globalization brought the Internet to Appalachia, there was not an easy mode of dispensing those responses to the rest of the world. Appalachian natives want everyone to see “what Appalachia *can* be,”²⁵² not just what it has been in popular culture for the past 150 years. Just as it is easy to understand the perspective of those promoting Appalachian stereotypes for commercial profit, it is similarly easy to understand those attempting to bring depth to Appalachian representations in popular culture. Mountain people want to see realistic reflections of themselves in film and on television—a “contemporary Appalachia,” not just “Appalachia from 400 years ago.”²⁵³ Interestingly, projects like *Looking at Appalachia*—and the people behind them—are more concerned with capturing a *true* Appalachia, whether those images confirm stereotypes or not.

The irony of the dualism of responses to images of Appalachia in popular culture is that, in both cases, people are trying to make the region better. One group wants to improve the mountains economically through tangible results, even if that means sacrificing multidimensionality in film and television. The other group fights for images of Appalachia that they can be proud of, even if that means sacrificing economic opportunities that grow out of the

²⁵² Adam Booth, interview by Diana Clarke, *The Billfold*, May 19, 2014. Emphasis mine.

²⁵³ Ibid.

popularity of regional stereotypes. Perhaps in the coming years, these two sides can come to understand that they aren't necessarily as diametrically opposed as they might seem.

CONCLUSION
MOVING THE MOUNTAINS FORWARD:
CONCLUDING ONE APPALACHIAN ERA AND ENTERING THE NEXT

Film theorists Leonard Quart and Albert Auster posit that “films are never merely the product of an individual artist, but a collaborative expression of mass feelings.”²⁵⁴ If this is the case, then America’s feelings towards Appalachia—as reflected through images of it in popular culture—have been schizophrenic since the mid-1800s. At times, Appalachia has been viewed as an object of fascination, humor and romanticism for the nation, a place that was markedly different due to its rurality, its isolation, and its culture. At other times, Appalachia has provoked pity, anger, and even revulsion in viewers, who were terrified that a place in the United States could be so extremely different.

Ironically, while the spectrum of lenses the nation views Appalachia with has varied wildly over the years, the images themselves have not. For instance, since the nineteenth century, the mountain man has held a prominent place in popular culture, appearing regularly on the screen and in pictures. His appearance and the reactions he provokes have transformed based on extenuating cultural circumstances, but at heart, he himself has varied little. The mountain man lives on the edge of society, evoking a variety of responses: from humorous Sut Lovingood and Snuffy Smith to heroic Sergeant Alvin York and Davy Crockett to even the horrifying hillbillies in *Deliverance* and the *Wrong Turn* series, he always occupies a liminal space. As a direct result of the repetition of this trait in popular culture, America came to see Appalachia itself as

²⁵⁴ Leonard Quart and Albert Auster, *American Film and Society Since 1945* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 7.

removed from modern life, a place apart from the rest of the nation. The acceptance of this stereotype of the mountains as a unique place is a consequence of constant exposure to that idea as truth—and when considered that way, the acceptance of Appalachian stereotypes in popular culture makes sense. After all, if you see something over and over and over again, it becomes ingrained in your mind, either as *the* truth or as *a* truth, something you can rely on because it has always been there, omnipresent.

Although Appalachia has been “othered” in popular culture over time, American viewers continue to consume images of the region en masse. The mountains have acted as a kind of security blanket for the rest of the nation over the years, serving as a place for viewers to escape from their real lives. In the post-Civil War and Victorian eras, when reform was the order of the day, viewers lived vicariously through the independent Appalachian who forged his own path. In the modernizing early decades of the twentieth century, viewers took solace in the idea that, in Appalachia, the old American ways lived on, untouched by technology or evolution. When viewers were faced with the seriousness of wartime in the 1940s and 50s, they turned to the mountains for comedic relief. As the nation experienced a shift in values and an era of revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, viewers became concerned with fixing these differences, and Appalachia became a cause to take up, rather than a living place. In the decades leading to the new millennium, it became possible to smile at Appalachia again, and regional folk heroes were held up as examples of the right way to live. Now, several years into the 21st century, America has a more intense desire to *know* the region than ever before, and has turned to reality television, documentaries, and new hybridizations of comedy and horror in an attempt to get a handle on just what Appalachia is.

So what will the next era of Appalachian representations entail? If the trends of the last few years are any indication, this time, *America* is in for a change, *not* the mountains. Having come to an understanding that “Appalachian ‘otherness’ [is] less a matter of peculiarity and more related to the control (or lack thereof) of America’s collective representations,”²⁵⁵ Appalachians see the importance in taking charge of representations of their homeland in popular culture. Responses to images of the region from within the region are making their way into the public spotlight, and at least one group of Appalachians want the rest of the world to know that they will no longer be reduced to stereotypes. For instance, in an article in the *New Republic*, Michael Washburn did not mince words, writing, “Popular culture has always traded in the currency of reckless caricature, but when it comes to Appalachia the image has always been less exaggeration than outright fantasy. Appalachia is not an island of lost teeth.”²⁵⁶ He is one of many fighting to forge a new image of Appalachia as a place where a variety of people have a variety of experiences—a more realistic image than the one fostered in popular culture over the years.

But there are also some Appalachians who are not offended by the region’s stereotyping over time. In fact, they welcome these clichés and the economic opportunities that sometimes come along with them. For instance, Rabun County, Ga., county official Tammy Whitmire recalled discussions on the acceptance of *Deliverance*-fueled tourism to her hometown: “A lot of people tried to talk me into supporting this and so they justified it and said, ‘Tammy, but it’s making money, it’s tourism, it’s bringing people to the county, why does it matter how they get

²⁵⁵ Allen Batteau, ed., *Appalachia and America: Autonomy and Regional Dependence* (Lexington: the University Press of Kentucky, 1983).

²⁵⁶ Michael Washburn, “Appalachia Used to be Simply Scary. Now its Hipness is Frightening,” *New Republic*, last modified November 5, 2013, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/115474/moonshiners-tv-review-appalachia-has-never-been-hipper>.

here?”²⁵⁷ When I began my research for this thesis, I had a knee-jerk reaction to this train of thought. It was so cut-and-dry, so obvious to me: Appalachia has occupied one tired place in the American mind for over 150 years, and the stereotypes that have emerged from that stasis have been extremely harmful to the region. But as I have read, watched, listened to and looked at more and more representations, Appalachia’s place in American popular culture has revealed itself to be anything but simple. For a people who have been portrayed as downtrodden, dirt-poor and hopeless, Appalachians looking to utilize clichés as commercial opportunities sure are enterprising. And why not? Is it really so wrong to accept the lesser evil of cultural clichés in favor of addressing tangible economic problems? I am no longer as offended by this concept as I once was. But it appears to me that the most beneficial act of all would be for these two opposing fragments of Appalachian population to unite in favor of improvement on all levels. If the region could find a way to monetize modern, more accurate representations of the mountains, perhaps even greater change could be possible for Appalachia.

All this is to ask: what does the future *really* hold for Appalachia, as presented to the world through popular culture? Radical change, or more of the same? A possible indicator of what’s to come could be seen on the January 24, 2015, episode of *Saturday Night Live*, hosted by country music star Blake Shelton. During his opening monologue, Shelton called up an image of Appalachia for the audience, saying, “I do feel like a fish out of water up here in New York City. When I was growing up, the only comedy show I watched was *Hee-Haw*, and *Hee-Haw* was a variety show that was kind of like *Laugh-In* meets *Deliverance*.”²⁵⁸ Suddenly, the entire *SNL* cast appeared onstage with Shelton dressed in caricaturized hillbilly garb, with the men wearing flannel shirts and faded jean overalls and the women in flouncy prairie dresses and pigtailed

²⁵⁷ Cory Welles, interview with Sarah Gillespie and Tammy Whitmire, *Marketplace*, August 22, 2012.

²⁵⁸ Blake Shelton, *Saturday Night Live* (2015; NBC).

wigs. Shelton proceeded to strum his guitar and exchange *Hee-Haw*-esque jokes with the cast, with only cast member Leslie Jones protesting:

Bobby Moynihan: Had to take my sister out the other night!

Shelton: What for?

Moynihan: Our anniversary!

Jones: I do not like this.

Shelton: Too bad! Hey, Cecily, Grandpa got his test results back.

Cecily Strong: Was he okay?

Shelton: He's great! He finally passed second grade!

Jones: This is wrong.²⁵⁹

Perhaps in the years to come, it will continue to be okay to utilize old stereotypes of the region—but only if they also call attention to the fact that they are, indeed, stereotypes. The eradication of Appalachian clichés from popular culture is likely an impossible request. Maybe inserting a reactive commentary directly into the images as they are created could be a potential means of wearing down those stereotypes in the future.

This attempt to meet in the middle is embodied wonderfully in Kentucky author Silas House, whose response to the *New York Times* article “What’s the Matter with Eastern Kentucky?” walked a line of negotiation between popular culture’s representations of Appalachia and his own personal knowledge of the region. House described Appalachia as “a wound and a joy and a poem, a knot of complication that scholars and reporters have the audacity to assume they know with a little bit of research. But you cannot know a place without loving it and hating it and feeling everything in between. You cannot understand a complex people by only looking at data—something inside you has to crack to let in the light.”²⁶⁰ House acknowledges that, while he refers to Appalachia as singular, it is home to many, an array of people who “keep going, we keep fighting back, we keep trying our best. Not all of us, of course.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Silas House, “The matter is you don’t know what you’re talking about,” *A Country Boy Can Surmise*, last modified July 10, 2014, <http://www.silashouseblog.blogspot.com/2014/07/the-matter-is-you-dont-know-what-youre.html>.

That would be a generalization as bad as saying we are all lazy. But I can honestly say that most of the Appalachians I know try their best.”²⁶¹ Those Appalachians can only continue to do their best to navigate representations of the region in popular culture in the future, as national interest in the mountains shows no sign of fading away.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

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