

# Hillbilly Talkback: Co-Creation and Counter-Narrative in Appalachia

by

Elon B. Justice

B.A. Broadcasting  
Western Kentucky University, 2017

SUBMITTED TO THE PROGRAM IN COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES/WRITING IN  
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES  
AT THE  
MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

JUNE 2021

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Signature of author: \_\_\_\_\_

Elon Justice  
Department of Comparative Media Studies/Writing  
May 14, 2021

Certified by: \_\_\_\_\_

Vivek Bald  
Associate Professor, Comparative Media Studies/Writing  
Director of Graduate Studies  
Thesis Supervisor

Certified by: \_\_\_\_\_

Katerina Cizek  
Artistic Director, Research Scientist and Co-Founder of Co-Creation Studio at MIT Open  
Documentary Lab  
Thesis Advisor

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## ABSTRACT

The Appalachian region has been systematically stereotyped in popular media representations for over a century, contributing to many of the structural, economic, and psychological challenges faced by those who live there. In order to solve this issue, it is necessary to produce compelling counter-representations which undermine the dominant regime of representation around Appalachia.

In this thesis, I explore some of the most common image types used to represent Appalachia in popular media and assess the potential of co-creative documentary practices to create representations which challenge these harmful images. I begin with an explanation of the importance of representation, drawing from the work of Stuart Hall in cultural studies, and an introduction to co-creative methodologies in media production. Next, I recount the history of four tropes commonly used to represent Appalachia in popular media. Finally, I examine two co-creative documentaries set in the Appalachian region – Elaine McMillion Sheldon’s *Hollow* and my own *The Appalachian Retelling Project* – to assess these projects’ approaches to co-creation and the counter-narratives that emerge from them. Ultimately, I argue that co-creation is an effective methodology for producing compelling counter-representations of Appalachia and for other groups like it who have been systematically misrepresented.

**Thesis Supervisor:** Vivek Bald

**Title:** Assistant Professor, Comparative Media Studies/Writing  
Director of Graduate Studies

**Thesis Reader:** Katerina Cizek

**Title:** Artistic Director, Research Scientist and Co-Founder of Co-Creation Studio at MIT Open Documentary Lab

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## Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of many, many people who have lent me their time, advice, and encouragement during my time at MIT. These two years have simultaneously been the most challenging and rewarding time of my life, and I wouldn't be here without the help of all those named below (and many more who aren't). One page isn't enough to convey the depth of my gratitude to all of you, but I'll give it my best shot.

To my parents: Thank you for your unconditional love and support in everything I do, including this program. Thank you for moving me halfway across the country twice, once during a pandemic, and for driving over 24 hours straight to bring me home as the world began to shut down. Most importantly, thank you for always making me feel like I'm capable of anything I set my mind to, and for always asking what you can do to help. I never would have gotten here without you both as my foundation.

To my partner, Ken: Thank you for supporting me from the moment my acceptance letter came in the mail, even when we knew that meant spending the better part of two years apart. Thank you for always encouraging me to grow, for being a listening ear when things get stressful, and for your endless belief in me. Thank you especially for reminding me of the importance of fun and rest, for making me laugh harder than anyone else can, and for sending me bags of my favorite coffee in the mail. I think of you every time I drink it, which is at least twice per day.

To my thesis committee, Vivek and Kat: Thank you for uplifting me, guiding me, and challenging me to think more deeply about my work. Thank you for your thoughtful and insightful feedback on what has turned out to be a monster of a project, and for your words of wisdom and encouragement at every step of the process. Getting to learn from both of you has undoubtedly been my most rewarding experience at MIT, and I am so grateful to have had you in my corner.

To my friends in my cohort, Kentucky, and beyond: Thank you for being a shoulder to lean on during what has been a mentally, physically, and emotionally taxing two years. Whether it was bonding over not really "getting" Foucault, watching my thesis presentation (in some cases more than once), having weekly group video chats, or just checking in with a text, your friendships have been such an important source of love, joy, and encouragement. I hope you're all ready for endless memes now that I have some free time.

To all those who participated in *The Appalachian Retelling Project*: Thank you for sharing your stories with me, both in video and written responses. The unconditional support I have received from both people I know and people I've never met is a reminder of one of my favorite things about being Appalachian: the deep sense of community we share. Working on this project has been such an uplifting and rewarding experience, and I couldn't have done it without all those who trusted me with their thoughts and memories. I'm looking forward to seeing what we can create together in the future.

And finally, thank you to my blue light-filtering glasses and Spencer's Coffee, without which I literally could not have written this thesis.

## Introduction

You say, I'm not going to live in the past.

And all the time the past is living in you.

– Jim Wayne Miller, *Brier Sermon*–“*You Must Be Born Again*”

When *Hillbilly Elegy*, the film adaptation of J.D. Vance's memoir of the same name, premiered on Netflix Thanksgiving week in 2020, half a dozen of my friends reached out to see if I'd watched it. It was a well-meaning-enough gesture: As someone who has spent the majority of her adult life studying and working outside the Appalachian region, but who loves to talk about her childhood and family there, I'm sort of the go-to person for all things Appalachia among my friends. And with a movie (and book) about Appalachia making such a splash in the mainstream, of course they would ask if I had seen it. But I'll be honest: I have no intention of seeing that movie in my lifetime. I'll be even more honest: I had never even read the book until I decided to write this thesis.

When *Hillbilly Elegy* the book came out in 2016, I was a senior at Western Kentucky University, and I was taking a lot of English classes to finish up my minor in Creative Writing. As my classes' resident Appalachian, professors were baffled that I hadn't snatched up the book at the first opportunity. *Why haven't you read it yet?* they would ask. My answer had something to do with being too busy, what with classes and a job hunt to work on, but my real answer was more like this: *Because I already know what it's going to say, and I don't want to hear it again.*

Though the book's defenders argue that *Elegy* is just one man's perspective on his own story, I saw it as something else: the latest entry in a long record of accounts demonizing the place and people who had made me. Vance sees his success, something “quite ordinary” for the average American, as a rare feat for someone of an Appalachian background. Throughout the book, Vance paints Appalachia as “a hub of misery” and claims that lack of success is engrained within Appalachian culture, as “some of the very traits that our culture inculcates make it

difficult to succeed in a changing world.”<sup>1</sup> While a memoir of a troubled Appalachian family from the perspective of someone who loves them would actually be a refreshing take, Vance positions his own (admittedly difficult) story as something directly correlated to the failings of Appalachia itself. As Dwight B. Billings, Emeritus Professor of Sociology and Appalachian Studies at the University of Kentucky, writes in a response to the book, “It is one thing to write a personal memoir...but quite something else—something extraordinarily audacious—to presume to write the ‘memoir’ of a culture.”<sup>2</sup> And yet, audiences were more than willing to accept Vance’s “memoir” of Appalachia as unequivocal truth, as the book quickly reached *New York Times* bestseller status, became a staple in college courses, and, of course, allowed Vance to strike a lucrative movie deal with Ron Howard (whose strongest connection to the region would be his portrayal of Opie Taylor in *The Andy Griffith Show*). Many people seemed to feel that it was empowering to give a self-proclaimed “hillbilly” like Vance such a platform, to discuss what he saw as Appalachia’s issues and to offer what he felt were the proper solutions. But every time a friend mentioned the book or a professor suggested I watch yet another interview Vance had given, I just grew more angry. Five years later, that anger – at least in part – propelled me to write this thesis.

Growing up in Central Appalachia, you tend to be born with a chip on your shoulder. You’re hyper-aware of the divide between the place you call home and the place you go the second you step out of those mountains. You realize that other people think you talk funny and that they probably think you’re uneducated. You see the next town over and people who look

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<sup>1</sup> J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elogy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: Harper, 2016), Apple Books, 8; 11; 12.

<sup>2</sup> Dwight B. Billings, “Once Upon a Time in ‘Trumpalachia’: *Hillbilly Elogy*, Personal Choice, and the Blame Game” in *Appalachian Reckoning: A Region Responds to Hillbilly Elogy*, eds. Anthony Harkins and Meredith McCarroll (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2019), 39.

like they could be your neighbors featured in the news in sensational stories about poverty, opioid abuse, poor healthcare and failing education. And you wonder why everyone else wants to point their finger and either pity or laugh at you when all you want is to improve the place you love.

I realized fairly young that the answer to that question, somehow, had something to do with media. Why did all the shows featuring characters who had “good” lives take place in California or New York, and never a place like Kentucky or West Virginia? Why did the term *hillbilly* get thrown around as an insult or a joke? And why could I never find a representation of my home that was positive? I had discovered a pattern: Appalachia was a place that was always portrayed as broken, in need of saving from itself. And people were believing what they saw.

As I got older, I began to understand more about the ways that Appalachia was being presented to the world. The images were conflicting, confusing, and never fully representative of the place and people I knew. Somehow, Appalachians were both comically stupid *and* horrifyingly violent, even murderous. We were deadbeats with pill addictions *and* we were helpless victims of exploitation and neglect. I understood that the vast majority of these images had been produced by people who had never spent more than a few weeks in the region, who didn't grasp what it meant to be of this place but were quick to turn an entire population's lived experience into a talking point or political bargaining chip. What I didn't understand was why.

When I decided to write this thesis, I realized that as much as the *what* was being said about Appalachia was important, the *why* mattered more. Why was an entire region with a multitude of people, lifestyles, and beliefs so consistently portrayed through the same narrow set of negative images? And why did it matter?

## The Problem of Appalachian Representation

Appalachian media representation is not simply a matter of bruised egos and hurt feelings; it is a systematic process which occurs for a purpose and has tangible effects on the region and those who live there. One of the most oft-cited of these effects is the marking of Appalachia and Appalachians as a geographic and cultural *other*, positioning them as outside of the norm while “stabilizing the non-Appalachian as natural and correct.”<sup>3</sup> One potential cause for this othering, argues Meredith McCarroll, author of *Unwhite: Appalachia, Race, and Film*, is that Appalachian culture historically placed less emphasis on middle-class gender roles than the rest of the United States; women frequently performed physically demanding tasks such as farming, owned and could operate guns, and functioned as the matriarchs of their extended family structures. Similarly, historian and popular culture scholar Anthony Harkins argues that denigrating portrayals of Appalachia have historically been deployed to “both uphold and challenge the dominant trends of twentieth-century American life—urbanization, the growing centrality of technology, and the resulting routinization of American life,” trends that were generally either rejected by or received slowly into the Appalachian region.<sup>4</sup> These transgressive acts were a threat to the maintenance of power and were subsequently inscribed as deviant. McCarroll explains: “[M]ountaineers that act outside of prescribed roles invite various forms of prohibition. One of the most effective means of controlling a people is controlling their image. Turning strength of character into caricature and making established traditions a punch line serves not only to entertain audiences but to weaken and control those represented.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Meredith McCarroll, *Unwhite: Appalachia, Race, and Film* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>5</sup> McCarroll, 47.

The marking of Appalachia as a “strange and peculiar” place whose people exist outside American norms is a practice that continues into the present, situating mountain folk as a group subordinate to “normal” (a term which often equates to “white”) America.<sup>6</sup> Though a taxonomy of representations which contribute to this phenomenon will be presented later in this thesis, here I wish to examine the material effects of over a century of being “othered” – namely, the willful ignorance of and lack of aid toward issues of importance in the Appalachian region. By placing Appalachia outside of the American norm, cultural traits which differentiated it from “typical” white America could be construed as negative, and its problems could be read as symptoms of a larger cultural dysfunction. As Harkins writes:

The pioneer spirit could also reflect social and economic backwardness; strong kin connections might mean inbreeding, domestic violence, and bloody feuds; rugged individualism could also be interpreted as stubbornness and an inability to adapt to changing conditions; closeness to nature could stand for primitiveness, savagery, and sexual promiscuity; and purity and common sense might actually indicate ignorance and a reliance on unscientific and dangerous childrearing, medical, dietary, and religious practices.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, when it comes to urgent issues faced throughout the Appalachian region – from a higher-than-average poverty rate to an opioid epidemic to inadequate broadband access and infrastructure – believing in stories that promote Appalachia as inherently and incurably dysfunctional “give[s] the government permission to look away and step back” rather than provide resources and support to the massively underfunded and over-stretched organizations and initiatives already working to solve the region’s problems.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the propagation of these narratives, especially in regard to poverty and lack of opportunity in the region, helps

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<sup>6</sup> McCarroll, 81; 13.

<sup>7</sup> Harkins, 7.

<sup>8</sup> McCarroll, 4.

“alleviate public concerns about economic and social inequality by both minimizing the plight of the people of the southern mountains and portraying their poverty as simply another aspect of their folk culture.”<sup>9</sup>

Systemic neglect of challenges in the Appalachian region by state and national governments, as well as the public at large, has certainly had its consequences. For example, the Interstate Highway System, whose construction was authorized by the federal government in 1956, was specifically designed to avoid mountains wherever possible, effectively isolating much of Appalachia from the outside world and hindering the flow of resources and job opportunities both within and from outside the region.<sup>10</sup> Thus, rather than furthering the development of a diversified economy in the region, the federal government ensured that Appalachia’s would remain a regional, single-sector economy almost entirely reliant on the production of coal. This had catastrophic results for mining families after the coal industry’s near-total collapse, without a safety net for out-of-work coal miners, under President Barack Obama.<sup>11</sup> As the United States entered a recession in 2007 and 2008, Appalachia encountered something more like a depression: A disproportionate number of Appalachian households experienced a loss in income and an increase in poverty compared with the rest of the country during this period, and the Appalachian economy recovered much more slowly than in the United States overall.<sup>12</sup> As recently as 2017, the Appalachian Regional Commission has found

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<sup>9</sup> Harkins, 10.

<sup>10</sup> “History of the Interstate Highway System,” *U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration*, last modified June 27, 2017, <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/interstate/history.cfm>; EBP US, Inc., *Access in Appalachia: Concept and Methodologies – Final Report*, Washington, D.C.: Appalachian Regional Commission, 2020, i, <https://www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/ARC-Access-Final-Report-20201110.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Matt Egan, “Coal companies have been scorched under Obama,” *CNN Business*, CNN, August 3, 2015, <https://money.cnn.com/2015/08/03/investing/coal-obama-climate-change/index.html>; Paul H. Tice, “Obama’s Appalachian Tragedy,” *Wall Street Journal*, Wall Street Journal, November 30, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/obamas-appalachian-tragedy-1448928062>.

<sup>12</sup> Linda A. Jacobsen, Marlene Lee, and Kevin Pollard, *Household Wealth and Financial Security in Appalachia*, Washington, D.C.: Appalachian Regional Commission, 2013, 5-8, <https://www.arc.gov/wp->

that Appalachia continues to have more working-age residents than available jobs and that this ratio is disproportionately skewed compared to other areas of the country.<sup>13</sup> The effects of Appalachia’s lack of opportunity and increased rate of poverty have been multifaceted: On the one hand, rural Appalachia has rapidly lost a large portion of its overall population since 2010, many of whom are young working-age people with college degrees, in a so-called “brain drain.”<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, those who remain in the area are far more likely to struggle with and die from “diseases of despair” – including alcohol abuse, prescription or illegal drug overdose, and suicide – than those who live elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the systematic disregard for the issues facing the Appalachian region is a systematic equation between Appalachianness and whiteness. Pop cultural and mass media representations of the region nearly always portray Appalachians as white, effectively erasing the existence of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color who reside and make their lives in the Appalachian mountains. At the same time, McCarroll argues that popular media represents Appalachians through the same tropes used to represent nonwhite groups, marking Appalachians as “phenotypically white [yet] hierarchically nonwhite,” a categorization she terms “unwhite.”<sup>16</sup> However, by this term I do not mean to imply that white Appalachians experience the same legal and systemic oppression faced by people of color throughout the United States and the world and

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content/uploads/2020/06/HouseholdWealthandFinancialSecurityinAppalachia.pdf; Logan Thomas, *Industrial Make-Up of the Appalachian Region*, Washington, D.C.: Appalachian Regional Commission, 2019, 11, <https://www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/IndustrialMakeUpoftheAppalachianRegion2002-2017.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas, 13-15.

<sup>14</sup> Kevin Pollard and Linda A. Jacobsen, *The Appalachian Region: A Data Overview from the 2014-2018 American Community Survey*, Washington, D.C.: Appalachian Regional Commission, 2020, 13, 21, <https://www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/DataOverviewfrom2014to2018ACS.pdf>; Daniel T. Lichter et al., *Emerging Patterns of Population Redistribution and Migration in Appalachia*, Columbus: Ohio State University, 2005, 27-28, <https://www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2005/04/EmergingPatternsPopulationRedistributionandMigrationinAppalachia1.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Meit et al., *Appalachian Diseases of Despair*, Chicago: The Walsh Center for Rural Health Analysis, 2017, 2; 4-10, <https://www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/AppalachianDiseasesofDespairAugust2017.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> McCarroll, 2.

acknowledge the white privilege held by white Appalachians such as myself. Like McCarroll, I take up Barbara Ellen Smith's call to resist the "inaccurate and highly misleading position that 'hillbillies' are, in effect, a racial minority."<sup>17</sup> Rather, I mean to call attention to the ways that the subordination of a "phenotypically white" Appalachia to the rest of America both upholds and privileges a "true" whiteness while simultaneously erasing the existence and contributions of people of color to the region's history and culture.

Furthermore, by making this claim I do not intend to contribute to the issue of "whitewashing" Appalachia myself. It is of vital importance to recognize the Appalachian scholars, activists, and artists of color who have and continue to do essential work in the region. As historian and Appalachian scholar Phillip J. Obermiller writes:

Charges of a "whitewashed" Appalachia ignore the works of Fayette Allen, Edward J. Cabbell, Omope Carter Daboiku, Wilma Dunaway, Wilburn Hayden, Jr., bell hooks, Cicero M. Fain III, John C. Insoe, Ronald L. Lewis, Joe William Trotter, William H. Turner, Thomas E. Wagner, Althea Webb, and this reviewer; the poetry of Effie Waller Smith, Frank X Walker, and Crystal Wilkinson; and the memoirs of Robert Armstead, Kojo (William T.) Jones, Jr., and Memphis Tennessee Garrison. Dissertations, book chapters, blog posts, and documentaries, along with newspaper, journal, and magazine articles add to this canon, rendering the trope of Black Appalachian invisibility to a form of vincible ignorance.<sup>18</sup>

While I certainly do not wish to perpetuate myths of Black Appalachian invisibility, the work of many of the above scholars and artists has largely gone unrecognized on a national scale.

Similarly, while the existence and work of Appalachians of color are recognized and celebrated by organizations, institutions, and individuals throughout the region, the unfortunate fact remains

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<sup>17</sup> Barbara Ellen Smith, "De-Gradations of Whiteness: Appalachia and the Complexities of Race," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 10, no. 1 (2004): 39.

<sup>18</sup> Phillip J. Obermiller, "Review: *Gone Home: Race and Roots through Appalachia* by Karida L. Brown," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 25, no. 2 (2019): 254-255.

that popular representations of Appalachia – those which are most likely to be seen by an “outside” audience – tend to be overwhelmingly white.

Finally, Appalachia’s history of disparaging media portrayals has had both measurable and immeasurable impacts on the identity and self-worth of many who claim Appalachia as their home. A study conducted by Brandeis University PhD candidates Rachel Steele and Misti Jeffers found that the “long-term, external, pejorative narratives of Appalachia,” most recently exemplified in news coverage of the region surrounding the 2016 presidential election and success of *Hillbilly Elegy*, has contributed to the formation of “legitimizing” or “resistance” identities for many individuals throughout the area.<sup>19</sup> These sorts of identities, respectively, agree with or totally reject common stereotypes associated with a group to which an individual belongs; both run the risk of inadvertently reinforcing stereotypes (and increasing polarization) through the upholding of an “us/them” mentality and prevent the formation of a “project” identity which allows for structural-level thinking which unites within and between identity groups.<sup>20</sup>

Other effects on Appalachian identity may not have been as rigorously studied but can be understood through the anecdotal evidence of Appalachian stories. Many Appalachian people experience feelings of inadequacy and unbelonging in institutions of power; many more do not attempt to reach their full potential due to a fear of being judged or a lack of belief in their abilities. This topic is discussed at length in the seventh episode of the Radiolab podcast *Dolly Parton’s America*, during which host Jad Abumrad interviews a group of undergraduate students at the University of Tennessee about their experience as Appalachians in and out of the region.

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<sup>19</sup> Rachel Steele and Misti Jeffers, “The Future of Appalachian Identity in an Age of Polarization,” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 26, no. 1 (2020): 59; 65-70.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 70-74.

Each student mentions feelings of shame surrounding their Appalachian identity; one recounts an experience from her childhood in which her mother began teaching her to repress her accent:

“She was like, ‘You need to talk lower and slower, because you’re going to have to work twice as hard for people to take you half as seriously.’” Another student, who was born in Appalachia but moved frequently due to his father’s career in the military, felt a divide between himself and those he met outside the region: “I got to hear a bunch of different accents, and I thought, ‘Wow, I’m different. I want to sound like them.’”<sup>21</sup> In my own life, I have seen these feelings manifest in the lives of classmates who turned to drug use instead of college and in my own sense of “imposter syndrome” as a student at MIT.

Although the effects of this phenomenon can be seen in nearly every facet of Appalachian experience, how can one be sure that media is a culprit? I turn now to the work of Stuart Hall in cultural studies to unpack the importance of media representation.

### **Theorizing Representation: Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies**

Stuart Hall’s work in cultural studies provides critical insight on the role of mass media in society, shedding light in particular upon the effects of media representations on the way that people think about others, themselves, and the world. Building upon the work of Marx, Althusser, Gramsci, and Foucault, Hall rejects the notion, popular in media studies, that events have a single fixed, “true” meaning and that the goal of representation is to simply reflect that true meaning. Rather, Hall posits that things and events *have* no meaning until they have been represented; representation is thus constitutive of meaning.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, representation is

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<sup>21</sup> *Dolly Parton’s America*, episode 7, “Dolly Parton’s America,” hosted by Jad Abumrad, produced by Shima Oliatee, aired December 3, 2019, on WNYC Studios, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/dolly-partons-america/episodes/dolly-partons-america-episode>.

<sup>22</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation & the Media* (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 1997), 6-8.

crucial to the way we see and understand the world and, perhaps more importantly, the ways that others see us: “The fact is that, if we are concerned about the proliferation of images in our culture, it is because they constantly construct us... And that is what is, in a sense, bothering us. We’re not bothered because we are barraged by something which means nothing to us. We are bothered precisely by the fact that we are caught.”<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, because representation is constitutive of meaning, representation is deeply intertwined with questions of power. Hall asks, “*Who* has the power, in *what* channels, to circulate *which* meanings to *whom*?” as a way to call attention to the interconnected nature of representation and power.<sup>24</sup>

A second point central to Hall’s work is the fluidity and slippage of meaning. Because meaning arises from representation, the same event can be encoded with several different meanings depending on a variety of factors: “[E]vents and relations in the ‘real’ world do not have a single natural, necessary and unambiguous meaning which is simply projected, through signs, into language. The same set of social relations can be differently organized to *have a meaning* within different linguistic and cultural systems.”<sup>25</sup> However, not all possible meanings are given the same weight; certain meanings become privileged and others subordinated through systems of ideology, which Hall defines as “the frameworks of thinking and calculation about the world – the ‘ideas’ with which people figure out how the social world works, what their place is in it, and what they *ought* to do.”<sup>26</sup> Hall argues that ideology, like meaning, is inherent within the process of representation, as it attempts to “fix” or privilege a preferred meaning above all

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<sup>23</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Stuart Hall, “Culture, the Media and the ‘Ideological Effect,’” in *Mass Communication and Society*, eds. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woollacott (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 328-329.

<sup>26</sup> Stuart Hall, “Ideology and Ideological Struggle,” in *Cultural Studies 1983*, eds. Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 131.

others, and that as such it is a practice “structured in dominance.”<sup>27</sup> And although ideology exists in the realm of ideas, it manifests in the material world through rituals of social practice and the very structures of society itself.<sup>28</sup>

The function of ideology is to incorporate non-dominant groups into “the discipline, the logic, the culture, and compulsions” of the dominant system, that is, to achieve hegemony.<sup>29</sup> Borrowing from Gramsci, Hall defines hegemony as the coordination and coercion of subordinate classes into the interests of the ruling bloc (which, importantly, is not necessarily reducible to any particular economic class), thus exerting a “‘total social authority’ over those classes and the social formation as a whole.”<sup>30</sup> Gramsci refers to the importance of the State as a “new kind of structuring force which often interposes itself between the direct play of economic or class forces and the relationships of culture” which, in Hall’s assessment, makes “the ‘definitions of reality,’ favourable to the dominant class fractions, and institutionalized in the spheres of civil life and the state, come to constitute the primary ‘lived reality’ as such for the subordinate classes.”<sup>31</sup> In fact, the hegemonic State’s ideological presence is so ubiquitous that it permeates the “everyday consciousness of the masses” itself in the form of “common sense.”<sup>32</sup> Though common sense “represents itself as the ‘traditional wisdom or truth of the ages,’” the “‘taken-for-granted’ ground on which more coherent ideologies and philosophies must contend for mastery,” it is precisely this naturalization of ideas which conceals its basis in serving

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<sup>27</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 19; Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: New Left Books, 1965), quoted in Hall, “Culture,” 327.

<sup>28</sup> Hall, “Culture,” 326.

<sup>29</sup> Hall, “Ideology,” 129.

<sup>30</sup> Stuart Hall, “Domination and Hegemony,” in *Cultural Studies 1983*, eds. Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 162; Hall, “Culture,” 332.

<sup>31</sup> Hall, “Domination,” 163; Hall, “Culture,” 332-333.

<sup>32</sup> Hall, “Domination,” 165.

dominant interests.<sup>33</sup> After all, “you cannot learn, through common sense, *how things are*: you can only discover *where they fit* into the existing scheme of things.”<sup>34</sup>

However, the State is not something to be thought of in purely governmental terms. Rather, the State encompasses all institutions of civil society – “newspapers, the mass media, educational institutions, and the church.”<sup>35</sup> All of these institutions, which aid in the maintenance of a hegemonic order, are both granted legitimacy through and continue to reproduce the dominant ideology of the age.<sup>36</sup> Media, however, is an especially important component of State rule, as it is “the principal means...for the production and distribution of culture” in modern Western society.<sup>37</sup> Even more, media constructs and distributes an image of reality itself which operates within dominant codes, performing the ideological work of “helping us not simply to *know more about* ‘the world’ but to *make sense of it*.”<sup>38</sup>

This function of media becomes especially important when considering “*other* groups and classes” with which one has no personal experience, as media helps individuals outside those groups “construct an ‘image’ of [their] lives, meanings, practices and values” so that the fragmented world may be “coherently grasped as a *‘whole’*.”<sup>39</sup> Hall explores the compulsion to use “difference” as a signifier and a theme in “The Spectacle of the ‘Other,’” arguing that images of difference are subconsciously read in terms of broader ideological questions of cultural belonging and difference: “In representation, one sort of difference seems to attract others – adding up to a ‘spectacle’ of otherness.”<sup>40</sup> Hall distinguishes the practice of “typing” – a general

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<sup>33</sup> Hall, “Domination,” 165.

<sup>34</sup> Hall, “Culture,” 325.

<sup>35</sup> Hall, “Domination,” 163.

<sup>36</sup> Hall, “Culture,” 334-335.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 340.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 341.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 340.

<sup>40</sup> Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other,’” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, eds. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1997), 230; 231-232.

classification of people, objects, and events so as to make sense of them – from that of “stereotyping,” which reduces a person to a few recognizable and easily understood characteristics, exaggerates those traits, and fixes them without any possibility of change.<sup>41</sup> Stereotyping as a signifying practice has numerous consequences: It “naturalizes” difference, claiming that differences in a subordinate group are “beyond history, permanent and fixed”; it also excludes, setting up a “symbolic frontier between the ‘normal’ and the ‘deviant’ ...the ‘acceptable’ and the ‘unacceptable’, what ‘belongs’ and what does not or is ‘Other’, between insiders and outsiders, Us and Them.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, stereotyping is an extension of the “maintenance of social and symbolic order” that is hegemony, occurring where there are “*gross inequalities of power*” and always against subordinate groups.<sup>43</sup>

While hegemony constitutes a consolidation of power, Hall argues that it is not equivalent to the total domination of subordinate groups. Hegemony is the effort to “actively contain, educate, and reshape oppositional forces, to maintain them in their subordinate places” rather than to violently suppress and eliminate opposition altogether.<sup>44</sup> Hegemony thus “allows for the space in which subordinate and excluded peoples develop political practices and social spaces of their own,” and, in cases of sufficient oppositional power, can even allow for the formation of counterhegemonies which attempt to resist a dominant ideology.<sup>45</sup> The site of this ideological struggle, Hall writes, must be within the “practices of articulation which produce them”: representation.<sup>46</sup> Hall thus refers to the “politics of the image” as the ongoing struggle for meaning in representation.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Hall, “Spectacle,” 257-258.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 245; 258.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 258.

<sup>44</sup> Hall, “Domination,” 169.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 170; Hall, “Culture,” 187-190.

<sup>46</sup> Hall, “Culture,” 206.

<sup>47</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 20.

But how does one challenge and change a dominant regime of representation? Hall describes three common strategies. The first is to “reverse” the stereotype, replacing the expected trope with its opposite: in the case of Appalachia, that might mean replacing images of impoverished Appalachians with wealthy ones. However, Hall argues that this move is ultimately ineffective, as it does not allow the subject in question to escape the binary structure of the stereotype; in fact, it reinforces that structure.<sup>48</sup> Another mode of challenging representations takes the form of countering “negative” meanings and images with “positive” ones; in Appalachia, this might look like Appalachian people expressing pride in their heritage and culture. Though more effective than reversing stereotypes, Hall writes that this strategy “increases the diversity of the ways in which [the subject] is represented, but does not *necessarily* displace the negative. [...] This strategy challenges the binaries – but it does not undermine them.”<sup>49</sup> Finally, Hall advocates for a representational strategy which he describes as going “inside the image”: this mode of counter-representation “locates itself *within* the complexities and ambivalences of representation itself, and tries to *contest it from within*.”<sup>50</sup> This strategy focuses on disrupting and displacing the very stereotypes that are deployed to harm; it attempts to undermine and challenge their construction of meaning – to “make [the stereotype] strange” and, in doing so, to uncover what is hidden and obscured by the stereotype. Beyond explicitly contesting stereotypes, this strategy attempts to transcend the binary nature of representation altogether by opening up space for a multiplicity of complex representations that defy the simple binary of “positive” and “negative.”<sup>51</sup> In the case of Appalachia, this could mean overtly focusing on issues of poverty, drug abuse, and education, but with an aim to humanize

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<sup>48</sup> Hall, “Spectacle,” 270-272.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 272-274; 274.

<sup>50</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 21; Hall, “Spectacle,” 274.

<sup>51</sup> Hall, “Spectacle,” 274.

and “de-familiarize” these issues in ways typically not attempted in media, as well as portraying the more “everyday” experiences of many different Appalachian people that do not fit neatly into a positive/negative structure.<sup>52</sup> By allowing for a multiplicity of ways in which a group can be seen in media, a new space is also created for them in the public imagination – one in which members of a group are not limited to being either “bad” examples of a stereotype or “good” people who prove its opposite, but may be conceived as whole and complex beings. Only then, Hall says, can the dominant regime of representation be undermined, albeit with the understanding that “since meaning can never finally be fixed, there can never be any final victories.”<sup>53</sup>

Though Hall argues that representations matter, and that it is in fact crucial to challenge dominant modes of representation, what approaches are available to perform this work? And how can one assess their effectiveness? I propose the methodology of co-creation, specifically in the realm of documentary filmmaking, as a key methodological intervention in the struggle for meaning in Appalachian representation.

### **Co-Creation: A Possible Solution**

Documentary as a creative practice can be traced back to at least the late 1800s, although the term was not employed until its invocation by pioneering documentarian John Grierson in 1926.<sup>54</sup> Documentaries “stake a claim on a certain kind of truth”: they are “based on the representation of reality, however that reality might have been manipulated, and a notional ‘agreement’ between filmmaker and audience that what is on screen is fundamentally conveying

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<sup>52</sup> Hall, “Spectacle,” 274.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> William Uricchio, “Things to Come: The Possible Futures of Documentary...From a Historical Perspective,” in *i-docs: The Evolving Practices of Interactive Documentary*, eds. Judith Aston, Sandra Gaudenzi and Mandy Rose (New York: Wallflower Press, 2017), 192-193.

accurate information not liable seriously to mislead.”<sup>55</sup> Though contemporary documentary encompasses a myriad of forms – from linear film to interactive web experiences to emerging technologies like virtual and augmented reality – and topics, I wish to focus here on the methodology known as co-creation.

Co-creation is a practice whose application is not limited to documentary; in fact, prehistoric rock carvings, created by a succession of artists across millennia, could be considered co-creative artworks. However, co-creation in documentary might best be understood as an approach which offers alternatives to the single-authorship model most common in media production. Co-creation not only allows for but encourages a range of perspectives on a given project or issue, and requires deep listening by all parties involved in every step of the process. In fact, many co-creative endeavors are not clearly defined at the outset; rather, the dialogue generated between a group of diverse participants allows “projects to emerge from process rather than the other way around.” Most importantly, though, co-creation is a method solidly rooted in social justice, “stimulat[ing] projects that don’t simply document or passively observe the world, but insist on change.” This approach “reframes the ethics of who creates, how, and why,” challenging the inequalities exacerbated by media production and representation.<sup>56</sup> Katerina Cizek and William Uricchio, founders of the MIT Open Documentary Lab’s Co-Creation Studio, write of co-creation:

Co-creative processes challenge and bring transparency to the power dynamic of relationships entrenched in the legacy models of professional production — between

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<sup>55</sup> Dave Saunders, “The ‘D’ Word: Definitions, ‘obligations,’ and functions,” in *Documentary* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 12.

<sup>56</sup> Katerina Cizek et al., “Part 1: ‘We Are Here’: Starting Points in Co-Creation,” in *Collective Wisdom: Co-Creating Media within Communities, across Disciplines and with Algorithms*, eds. Katerina Cizek and William Uricchio (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press WiP, 2019), <https://wip.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/collective-wisdom-part-1/release/3>, accessed February 16, 2021; Katerina Cizek et al., “Part 2: How to Co-Create: Practical Lessons from the Field,” in *Collective Wisdom: Co-Creating Media within Communities, across Disciplines and with Algorithms*, eds. Katerina Cizek and William Uricchio (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press WiP, 2019), <https://wip.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/collective-wisdom-part-2/release/3>, accessed February 16, 2021.

people formerly known as the makers, the subjects, and the audiences. A new space emerges for equitable, inclusive, and democratic practices. For people with access to institutions, on a personal level, it means leveraging that power.<sup>57</sup>

In documentary, co-creation brings filmmakers together with subjects, communities, audiences, and other parties with a vested interest in an issue, who together invest time, resources, and dialogue to move the needle on the problems facing our world.

In addition to the benefits inherent to the practice of co-creation itself, the methodology may also produce narratives that defy traditional structures. Rather than following conventional linear formats, co-creative narratives may develop into “non-linear, open-ended, ongoing, multi-vocal, and circular, spiral forms” that could result in a larger “expansion of the language of non-fiction.”<sup>58</sup> These projects may benefit from the affordances of new technologies such as the web and XR, where content does not have to fit within the confines of a linear, three-act structure; these platforms may also more successfully demonstrate the polyvocality of the co-creative narrative:

“Rather than deductive argument or grand narratives, these projects employ mosaic structures of multiple perspectives,” wrote Patricia Zimmermann and Helen de Michiel in *Open Space New Media Documentary: A Toolkit for Theory and Practice* (2018), “Open space new media documentaries explore the terrain where technologies meet places and people in new and unpredictable ways, carving out spaces for dialogue, history, and action.”<sup>59</sup>

Co-creation can take a wide range of forms and be enacted with a variety of people (and in some cases, non-human actors). Cizek and Uricchio explore four major categories of media

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<sup>57</sup> Cizek et al., “We Are Here.”

<sup>58</sup> Cizek et al., “How to Co-Create.”

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

co-creation: within communities, with online communities and new technologies, across disciplines, and with non-human systems such as AI.<sup>60</sup> Though each form of co-creation can be implemented in the documentary space, here I will concentrate on the two forms which will be most relevant to my study: co-creation across disciplines and within communities.

Cross-disciplinary co-creation brings together players from different (and often seemingly unrelated) fields to “embark on parallel paths of discovery rather than privileging one discipline’s priorities over the other.” These players could include media makers, technologists, scientists, artists, designers, and beyond. Through “openness, flexibility, intention, iteration, abandonment of ego, deep teamwork, and, most significantly, time,” co-creation across disciplines allows for the opportunity to “tackle the complex problems of the 21st century while enabling inclusivity and diversity, and honoring expertise from people of all walks of life.” Together, teams can arrive at outcomes that benefit multiple disciplines and areas of knowledge.<sup>61</sup>

Co-creation within communities honors a different sort of expertise: the lived experiences of individuals, groups, and communities facing an issue. These sorts of projects “put people with first-hand experience at the center of a practice rather than that of the artistic vision, or agenda, of an often professional media-maker.”<sup>62</sup> Although co-creative projects within communities can occur across a spectrum of directorial control, from more curatorial and participatory approaches

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<sup>60</sup> Katerina Cizek and William Uricchio, *Collective Wisdom: Co-Creating Media within Communities, across Disciplines and with Algorithms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press WiP, 2019), <https://wip.mitpress.mit.edu/collectivewisdom>, accessed February 16, 2021.

<sup>61</sup> Katerina Cizek, William Uricchio, and Sara Rafsky, “Part 5: Estuaries: Media Co-Creation Across Disciplines,” in *Collective Wisdom: Co-Creating Media within Communities, across Disciplines and with Algorithms*, eds. Katerina Cizek and William Uricchio (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press WiP, 2019), <https://wip.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/collective-wisdom-part-5/release/1>, accessed February 16, 2021.

<sup>62</sup> Katerina Cizek, Detroit Narrative Agency, and William Uricchio, “Part 3: Media Co-Creation Within Community: ‘Nothing About Us Without Us,’” in *Collective Wisdom: Co-Creating Media within Communities, across Disciplines and with Algorithms*, eds. Katerina Cizek and William Uricchio (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press WiP, 2019), <https://wip.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/collective-wisdom-part-3/release/1>, accessed February 16, 2021.

to those that more fully incorporate the community into every step of the media-making process, what unifies these projects is a deep concern about the ethics of creating media about a particular group, following the spirit of the expression “nothing about us without us.”<sup>63</sup> Perhaps most importantly, co-creation within communities allows for a plurality of voices to be heard and rejects the notion that any place or group can be defined in one way; as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says in a 2009 TED Talk, “When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.”<sup>64</sup> Allowing communities to tell their own stories with their own voices, and not remaining at the whims of a director or media institution, allows them to take a step closer to their own paradise.

Because co-creation emphasizes relinquishing the single-author vision; allows individuals and groups, who are often at a power disadvantage and whose needs are disregarded in the media production process, to be involved in the way they are portrayed; and can successfully lead to the creation of complex and polyvocal narratives, I argue that co-creation is an effective methodology for creating compelling, multi-dimensional, and deeply human counter-narratives of misrepresented groups of people, transcending the limiting and binary structure of the stereotype to create space for many different representations of a group of people. More specifically, I contend that co-creative documentary has the potential to be even more effective in this endeavor, as unlike fictional media, documentary stakes its claim on a “certain kind of truth.” By giving communities, such as those in Appalachia, the agency to show the world their real stories from their own perspectives, co-creative documentary can be an effective tool in dismantling regimes of representation that have caused these communities such harm.

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<sup>63</sup> Cizek et al., “Media Co-Creation Within Community.”

<sup>64</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The danger of a single story,” July 2009, TEDGlobal 2009 conference, online video, 18:33, [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript).

## **Conclusion: Co-Creation and Counter-Narrative in Appalachia**

In this introduction, I have argued that the historic misrepresentation and malignment of Appalachia in mainstream media, which has occurred for over a century, has had devastating effects on the region and its people. Next, I made a case for the importance of media representation and the possibility of creating counter-representations which attempt to dismantle dominant regimes of media representation. Finally, I briefly explored the methodology of co-creation in media, highlighting two major forms – co-creation across disciplines and within communities – that are most relevant to my study, and argued for the potential effectiveness of co-creative documentary in creating new counter-representations of Appalachia.

In this thesis, I explore current mainstream narratives of the Appalachian region and assess the effectiveness of documentaries which use co-creative methodologies in combatting these dominant narratives. In Chapter 1, I lay out four archetypes commonly used in representations of Appalachia, taking a look at the history of these image types and providing modern-day and popular examples of their use. In Chapters 2 and 3, I provide case studies of two documentaries which use co-creative approaches – the 2013 interactive documentary *Hollow* and my own participatory web documentary *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, respectively – assessing the ways that these projects approach co-creation, the narratives that arise from these projects, and their effectiveness as counter-representations of the Appalachian region. Finally, I conclude with an analysis of co-creation as a model for creating counter-narratives, discussing the implications of my findings for media-makers who wish to implement this methodology as well as in my own work. By exploring co-creation as a viable alternative to the single-authored media which has so consistently damaged the livelihoods, dreams, and self-worth of a place and

people I hold dear, my hope is that future media-makers can begin to make destructive images of Appalachia – images from which novels like *Hillbilly Elegy* so easily profit – a relic of the past.

### Appalachian Types in Media: A History

“Appalachia” is a region historically ill-defined, a place whose boundaries shift and blur according to who describes it – and to what end. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission, Appalachia consists of 420 counties spread across 13 states in the U.S., beginning in New York and running south through much of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi.<sup>65</sup> But ask a New Yorker or a Pennsylvanian whether they consider themselves Appalachian – an identity long characterized in the American consciousness by images of poverty, violence, drug abuse, and countless other unsavory traits – and expect quite a different response.

If difficult to demarcate in the corporeal world, Appalachia (and by extension, those who live there) becomes something even more nebulous in the realm of mediation. The place and people of Appalachia have been invoked in media through a constellation of competing and overlapping images throughout history, sometimes rooted in fact but more often rooted in an imagination run wild. Appalachia may be a pitiful place of inescapable destitution in one film and a space of frightening violence and animality in the next. As Meredith McCarroll notes in her book’s introduction, ambiguity has itself become a definitive marker of Appalachia, often the result of its portrayal at the hands of those with little understanding of the region’s complexities.<sup>66</sup> Adding to the confusion over content is a confusion over place: Images of Appalachia are rarely tied to concrete geographic locations but instead culminate into what Anthony Harkins describes as a “mythic South” in which often “mountains border on bayous, where caves and caverns stretch for miles, and where a two-day's walk beginning in the

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<sup>65</sup> Appalachian Regional Commission, “About the Appalachian Region,” *Appalachian Regional Commission*, accessed December 7, 2020, <https://www.arc.gov/about-the-appalachian-region/>.

<sup>66</sup> McCarroll, 7-8.

Appalachian hills brings one to the southwestern desert.”<sup>67</sup> While the ambivalence of Appalachian representation makes defining the real-world space tricky, this ambiguity makes cataloguing its mediated counterpart nothing short of a herculean task. After all, how can a researcher decide what constitutes an portrayal of Appalachia when even media-makers seem unsure of what they are portraying?

This is a question not easily answered, and previous scholars in this arena have taken different approaches to determining what renders a media image Appalachian. However, McCarroll offers a solution to the tricky question of Appalachia: Rely not on rigid geographic or cultural boundaries and look instead to more open-ended “perceptive” ones. This is the approach she takes in her own work of cataloguing films about Appalachia, which she explains:

If a film was marketed as a “Southern Mountain” film, is clearly set in Appalachia, is based on a book in Appalachia, or is overwhelmingly perceived as Appalachian, I’m counting it as Appalachian. After months of thinking through how to define the region for this book, I realized that the reason I was writing the book all along is that others are already defining it. For once I’ll let them.<sup>68</sup>

I intend to operate in much the same vein. If an image “reads” as Appalachian – that is, if it includes any of the key tropes which have historically connoted Appalachianness – I have included it in this study, regardless of the actual defined (or undefined) location.

Of course, this methodology raises another important question: What *are* the ways in which Appalachianness is and has been connoted in media? As established above, neither geographic location nor specific cultural traits or practices can reliably indicate whether an image is supposed to represent Appalachia. However, certain traditions of portraying the region

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<sup>67</sup> Harkins, 127.

<sup>68</sup> McCarroll, 8.

can be traced through time, all of which follow a common theme: Appalachia is something “other,” a space and people “in, but not of” America.<sup>69</sup>

Though techniques for the othering of Appalachia abound, I have identified four key tropes through which Appalachia has most often historically been portrayed – and which still exist in media today. Each trope in its own way serves to other the region and its people, rendering it a space worthy of fright, discomfort, or pity, but rarely of aid or understanding. These tropes, which I will examine in turn, are: Degraded Appalachia, Violent Appalachia, Displaced Appalachia, and White Appalachia. I will now turn to the explanation of each of these categories and the tracing of each image’s lineage through history.

### **Degraded Appalachia: Backwardness, Helplessness, and Degeneracy**

Perhaps the most pervasive, and certainly the longest-running, theme in Appalachian representation is that of degradation: poor, barefoot mountaineers in run-down cabins (or trailers in the modern era); an ignorance of urban life and modern values in favor of an outmoded way of living; and a sometimes comic, sometimes tragic, often absurd sense of degeneracy and depravity. The earliest accounts of Appalachia described it in terms of backwardness, slovenliness, and scarcity, a tradition that has continued nearly unbroken since its inception. But images of Degraded Appalachia do not fit neatly into one container; the trope has shifted across time and genre, morphing to serve new narratives and audiences. To best understand the ways mountain people and places have been represented as degraded, this archetype might be further broken down into three sub-genres: primitiveness, destitution, and comic degeneracy.

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<sup>69</sup> Harkins, 5.

One of the earliest depictions of the Southern mountain region that later came to be known as Appalachia is that of British expeditioner and colonial surveyor William Byrd II. A member of the Virginia Governor's Council, Byrd was charged with mapping the disputed boundary line between colonies Virginia and North Carolina, a matter he detailed in his account *The History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina, Run in the Year of Our Lord 1728*. In addition to scientific discussions of the landscape, flora, and fauna of the region, Byrd includes descriptions of those living in the mountains of North Carolina, a people whose laziness he finds utterly disturbing:

Surely there is no place in the World where the Inhabitants live with less Labour than in N Carolina. [...] The Men, for their Parts, just like the Indians, impose all the Work upon the poor Women. They make their Wives rise out of their Beds early in the Morning, at the same time that they lye and Snore, till the Sun has run one third of his course, and disperst all the unwholesome Damps. [...] Thus they loiter away their Lives, like Solomon's Sluggard.<sup>70</sup>

As Harkins notes, Byrd's disgust with the mountain people stems not from their poverty, but rather from their rejection of what he perceives to be the "natural" order: the need for structured labor, the physical and economic dependence of women upon men, and a distinction between white colonialists and Native Americans.<sup>71</sup> Byrd sees a cultural backwardness in the mountains of North Carolina, a conclusion that many writers, journalists, and media makers would echo in their work on Appalachia for centuries to come.

Many early portrayals of Appalachia were similar to Byrd's not only in their negativity but in their posturing of themselves as objective, even scientific, fact. The 1930s saw a slew of scientific and medical reports which described Appalachia as not only culturally backward but as

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<sup>70</sup> William Byrd II, *The History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina, Run in the Year of Our Lord 1728* (Petersburg: Printed by Edmund and Julian C. Ruffin, 1841), 27-28, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/byrd/byrd.html>.

<sup>71</sup> Harkins, 15.

evolutionarily less advanced than other Americans. One such study, titled *Hollow Folk* (1933), details the lives of five communities in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia as it traces “the human race on its long journey from primitive ways of living to a modern social order.”<sup>72</sup>

Another medical article, this one published in 1936 and again focused on a mountain clan in Virginia, argues that generations of incest had produced a community of unintelligent and grotesque people. One description of a family’s living conditions exemplifies the author’s stance: “In the room were three grown boys, all imbeciles, all illegitimate, one stretched out on a filthy bed in a drunken stupor. There was not a normal human being in the room.” But author Jack Manne does not stop at disgust and derision; so strong is his revulsion that he proposes a permanent end to this biologically-mandated depravity. “In view of the present inadequacy of medical science in curing these mental ills,” he writes, “the only alternative seems to be the prevention of further propagation by sterilization.”<sup>73</sup>

Conceptions of Appalachia as degraded began to migrate from niche scientific communities into the greater national consciousness throughout the latter half of the 1930s by way of a trio of popular comic strips – which, perhaps not coincidentally, all began to cash in on the Appalachian “hillbilly” image in the year 1934. Paul Webb’s *Esquire* episodic *The Mountain Boys*, Al Capp’s *Li’l Abner*, and Billy DeBeck’s *Barney Google* all feature Southern mountain characters who, among other traits, are secluded, ignorant, and often almost animalistic in their primitiveness. *The Mountain Boys* centers on tales of three mountain brothers’ depravity and slovenliness; as Harkins notes, the characters have an inordinate number of children, often sleep in the barnyard while the animals sleep inside and, when presented with a bar of soap, attempt to

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<sup>72</sup> Mandel Sherman and Thomas R. Henry, *Hollow Folk* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1933), 5, [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b297150&view=1up&seq=7](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b297150&view=1up&seq=7).

<sup>73</sup> Jack Manne, “Mental Deficiency in a Closely Inbred Mountain Clan” (1936), 270, 279, quoted in Harkins, 111.

eat it due to an unfamiliarity with the concept.<sup>74</sup> *Li'l Abner's* fictional locale of Dogpatch, originally located in Kentucky and later inexplicably moved to the Ozarks, provides the setting for a cavalcade of secondary characters who “are physically grotesque and little better than wild animals. They walk around barefoot and in rags, think only of sex and food, and are utterly ignorant of and confused by the modern world.”<sup>75</sup> And while *Barney Google* originated 15 years prior to either *The Mountain Boys* or *Li'l Abner*, DeBeck's 1934 episode in which the eponymous character discovers he is the heir to an estate in the North Carolina mountains signaled a massive shift in the comic's tone and plot, as Google discovers that his “mansion” is nothing more than a run-down shack and his character eventually becomes nearly replaced by that of the lazy and immoral hillbilly Snuffy Smith.<sup>76</sup>

While these comics were clearly intended in jest, their impact was real: Harkins argues that the lack of public outcry over the animality of the characters in *The Mountain Boys* signaled that *Esquire* readers “viewed such images as exaggerated, but at heart, truthful portrayals of southern poor whites”; meanwhile Capp, despite only a brief excursion to the Appalachian region before the launch of his comic, was considered “an authority on the southern mountains” whose “portrayal in *Li'l Abner* was, in its totality, if not in its details, an accurate one.”<sup>77</sup>

The image of the outrageously depraved hillbilly was replaced in the late 1950s and 1960s by its tamer, more lighthearted cousin: the ignorant and unmodern (but well-meaning) mountaineer. This archetype is best exemplified by TV shows such as *The Real McCoys* (1957-1963) and *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-1968), both of which feature characters who are

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<sup>74</sup> Paul Webb, *The Mountain Boys* (New York: Esquire, 1934-1958); Harkins, 106-07.

<sup>75</sup> Al Capp, *Li'l Abner* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1934-1977); Harkins, 127, 133.

<sup>76</sup> Billy DeBeck, *Barney Google and Snuffy Smith*, originally *Take Barney Google, F'rinstance* (Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 1919-1942); Harkins, 113-14.

<sup>77</sup> *The Real McCoys*, created by Irving Pincus (1957-1962; New York: ABC and 1962-1963; New York: CBS); Harkins, 112, 127.

confused by and uncomfortable around new technologies and modern ways of living. Grampa McCoy of *The Real McCoys* is one such example: Transplanted from his West Virginia farm to California's San Fernando Valley alongside his family in search of a "better life," Grampa remains staunchly opposed to "all things modern from 'pipe water' and daily baths to buying a newer car and opening a bank account" and is later revealed to be illiterate. The show also contains strong themes of "doing without" and near-constant economic hardship that, Harkins argues, suggests "poverty or near-poverty were simply part of the McCoys' 'mountain culture.'"78

*The Andy Griffith Show* features a range of similarly unmodern but unthreatening characters who, though stubborn and uneducated, are nearly always revealed to be well-intentioned. Residents of *Griffith's* fictional town of Mayberry (based on actor Griffith's real-life hometown of Mount Airy, North Carolina) often showcase their hard-headedness and distrust of modern science and technology, with one episode featuring a farmer who refuses to get a tetanus shot until Andy's playing of the song he will perform at his funeral convinces him otherwise; another episode centers around a feud between two farming families who have forbidden their children to marry, despite no longer being able to recall what ignited the feud in the first place. Both men even make a claim of wanting to kill the other, though neither is willing to endanger his life to do so.<sup>79</sup> Harkins argues that this plotline pits an outmoded, erroneous mountain culture against the "correct" culture of 1960s America, writing: "Here the older generation of mountaineers are presented as incompetently violent rubes, but their far-less-stereotyped children

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<sup>78</sup> Harkins, 179.

<sup>79</sup> *The Andy Griffith Show*, created by Sheldon Leonard, Aaron Ruben, and Danny Thomas (New York: CBS, 1960-1968); Harkins, 181-82.

represent the capacity of such people to bridge the gap between an archaic and wrong-headed ‘mountain culture’ and an idealized contemporary America.”<sup>80</sup>

More recent portrayals of the primitive and backward mountaineer have appeared as the punchline of a joke. In the NBC sitcom *30 Rock* (2006-2013), for example, NBC page Kenneth Parcell’s hometown and culture of Stone Mountain, Georgia is a running gag throughout the series. Kenneth is uneducated and absurdly religious; he says that science is his favorite subject, “especially the Old Testament,” and only submits write-in votes for God during elections because “choosing is a sin” – though as Jack Donaghy retorts, these votes are counted as Republican.<sup>81</sup> He also frequently references the backwardness of his family and community in Georgia: He states that he and his family have “eaten [their] share of rock soup and squirrel tail” but have known “lean times” as well; reveals that his parents were “technically brothers”; and comforts Jack, whose spouse is kidnapped in season five, by saying, “Back in Stone Mountain people lose their spouses all the time. Mumps, hill people attacks, cave collapses – both business and residential....”<sup>82</sup>

The Netflix animated comedy-drama *Bojack Horseman* also makes use of the backward Appalachian trope in its 2018 episode “The Amelia Earhart Story.” The episode reveals that Princess Carolyn, now a major manager of celebrities in Hollywood (the *Bojack* version of

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<sup>80</sup> Harkins, 182.

<sup>81</sup> *30 Rock*, season 3, episode 22, “Kidney Now!”, directed by Don Scardino, written by Jack Burditt, featuring Tina Fey, Tracy Morgan, Jane Krakowski, Jack McBrayer, and Alec Baldwin, aired May 14, 2009, on NBC, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/2c6a8014-ba14-433c-acb3-49610c7f7dd9>; *30 Rock*, season 2, episode 12, “Subway Hero,” directed by Don Scardino, written Jack Burditt, featuring Tina Fey, Tracy Morgan, Jane Krakowski, and Jack McBrayer, aired April 17, 2008, on NBC, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/6bc1b878-1c46-4211-9694-a329564737d3>.

<sup>82</sup> *30 Rock*, season 3, episode 4, “Gavin Volure,” directed by Gail Mancuso, written by John Riggi, featuring Tina Fey, Tracy Morgan, and Jack McBrayer, aired November 20, 2008, on NBC, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/822d4be0-fba1-4e10-ad22-e3e0aada4c63>; *30 Rock*, season 6, episode 13, “Grandmentor,” directed by Beth McCarthy-Miller, written by Sam Means, featuring Tina Fey, Tracy Morgan, Jane Krakowski, and Jack McBrayer, aired March 22, 2012, on NBC, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/43f1fe6c-efc3-48fa-a9a4-9e5621986eea>; *30 Rock*, season 5, episode 23, “Respawn,” directed by Don Scardino, written by Hannibal Buress, featuring Tina Fey, Tracy Morgan, Jane Krakowski, and Jack McBrayer, aired May 5, 2011, on NBC, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/35fe697f-65fe-4b54-977d-dfb1bc985bd2>.

Hollywood), grew up in a small mountain town in North Carolina, often cared for her ten siblings and alcoholic mother, and accidentally became pregnant at the age of 18 (although it is later revealed in the episode that she suffered a miscarriage). Decades later, Princess Carolyn returns to her home in an attempt to adopt a baby from another accidentally-pregnant teen, Sadie, whose boyfriend has left her. Though the plot of the episode itself draws upon centuries-old notions of Appalachian backwardness, it is a stream of sight gags and one-liners which turn the otherwise serious story comedic. As Princess Carolyn accompanies Sadie to a flea market, for example, she passes a booth with a banner which reads “Stuff I stole to make money to buy heroin”; later, the pair attend a church potluck with Sadie’s family. As Sadie points out her various family members, she mentions her mother, who has “been banged more times than a screen door during hurricane season” and her cousins, joking, “I slept with all of them. Just kidding. I’m from North Carolina, not Tennessee.”<sup>83</sup> The episode combines both serious and comedic elements of Appalachian backwardness, but never fully allows Sadie to escape the role of comic relief; both she and her hometown are ultimately punchlines.

While images of backward hillbillies have been played for laughs since the 1930s, the portrayal of Appalachia as destitute, inescapable, and helpless has rarely been regarded as funny. Rather, Appalachia’s poverty has frequently been framed as a deadly serious matter, with such representations often in service of political or personal gain. Some of the earliest documentary films were set in the Appalachian mountains and set the stage for generations of films portraying the region as in need of a “savior”: The 1910 nonfiction silent film *Sensational Logging*, for example, portrays a lush mountain whose beauty is stripped away by the logging industry,

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<sup>83</sup> *Bojack Horseman*, season 5, episode 5, “The Amelia Earhart Story,” directed by Adam Parton, written by Joe Lawson, featuring Will Arnett, Amy Sedaris, and Allison Brie, released September 14, 2018, on Netflix <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80200246>.

establishing Appalachia as a region who must suffer in order to make a profit.<sup>84</sup> Likewise, Marvin Breckenridge Patterson's 1931 documentary *The Forgotten Frontier* praises the Frontier Nursing Service for bringing proper medical care to the backroads of the Kentucky mountains, establishing it as a place dependent on outside assistance for health.<sup>85</sup> Themes of outside aid become even stronger in the 1944 film *Valley of the Tennessee*, a government documentary created by the Office of War Information and intended for an overseas audience. This film extols the virtues of the Tennessee Valley Authority's agriculture and dam-building projects in the Appalachian region, in doing so creating a conflict between the "self-destructive" and "immoral" farmers who were initially unwilling to participate in the project against the government programs which would "rejuvenate" them if only they would cooperate. Harkins further elaborates on the film's portrayal of the mountain farmers:

*Valley of the Tennessee* presents the backwardness and destructive individualism of upland farmers, rather than capital interests or monopolistic private power companies, as the enemies of social and environmental progress. Unshaven, slouch-hatted, and shuffling slowly through the dust, these men are, according to the narration, almost incapable of conceiving any alternative future other than "poverty, ignorance [and] drudgery" after "years of isolation...and bigotry."<sup>86</sup>

According to the film, those living in the Appalachian region are both the cause of their own anguish and the barrier to their problems being solved; it is their own ignorance and rejection of "saving" federal programs, not structural injustice, which keep mountain folk impoverished.

It was not until the 1960s, however, that Appalachia became a "problem area" whose destitution appeared on the national radar. Three major scholarly and nonfiction works on the

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<sup>84</sup> *Sensational Logging*, director unknown (1910; Chicago: The Essanay Film Manufacturing Company); McCarroll, 81-82.

<sup>85</sup> *The Forgotten Frontier*, directed by Marvin Breckenridge, pseudonym for Mary Breckenridge (1931; Hyden, KY: Frontier Nursing Service); McCarroll, 82.

<sup>86</sup> *Valley of the Tennessee*, directed by Alexander Hammid (1944; Washington, D.C.: Office of War Information, 2014), online; Harkins, 159.

plight of Appalachia appeared in quick succession in the early 1960s: *The Southern Appalachian Region –A Survey* (1962), a collection of scholarly essays which chronicled a “troubled” region; Harry M. Caudill’s *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* (1963), which presented Appalachia as a “ravaged land with a battered people”; and, most influentially, Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* (1962), which called for decisive action to end Appalachia’s “needless suffering in the most advanced society in the world.”<sup>87</sup> A CBS documentary on the region, titled *Christmas in Appalachia*, also premiered during this time, “movingly contrast[ing] the ideal of Yuletide plenty with the ‘wretched’ poverty of the remote Appalachian hollers.”<sup>88</sup>

Given the barrage of media on Appalachian poverty in this period, it is unsurprising that Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty was infamously launched from a cabin porch in eastern Kentucky in April of 1964. Johnson’s trip to shake hands with Kentucky locals was highly publicized, with “nearly every major general-circulation magazine and newspaper featur[ing] articles on ‘the plight of the hill people,’ punctuated by the faces of dirty, ill-clothed, and malnourished men, women, and children living in tarpaper shacks.”<sup>89</sup> One capturer of such images was *Life* magazine photographer John Dominis, who followed Johnson’s path through Appalachia to put a face to the War on Poverty. As McCarroll writes, his images “convey a sense of despair, destitute poverty, and fragility,” including only the most impoverished areas encountered on the trip and “ignoring middle-class neighborhoods, urban areas, and any other images that challenged the monolithic scene of utter destitution.”<sup>90</sup> Though there was certainly no denying Appalachian poverty, images of this era made it seem as if Appalachia was nothing

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<sup>87</sup> Thomas R. Ford, *The Southern Appalachian Region, A Survey* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1962); Harry M. Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1963); Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 191, <https://archive.org/details/otheramerica00mich>; Harkins, 185.

<sup>88</sup> Harkins, 185.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 185-86.

<sup>90</sup> John Dominis, photographer for *Life* magazine; McCarroll, 83-84.

but poverty, selectively presenting to the country only those images which proved the necessity of Johnson's initiative and lacking even a modicum of nuance.

Although images of Appalachian destitution mostly faded from national view following the War on Poverty era, they conspicuously reemerged in the late 2000s, first accompanying the 2008 economic recession and subsequent regulations on the coal industry imposed under President Barack Obama, and later becoming a major national talking point in the 2010s as Donald Trump rose to power in the Republican Party and won the U.S. presidency in 2016. One particularly noteworthy example from this time is the 2009 ABC News special report *A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains*. Produced by Diane Sawyer, this 48-minute news special centers on the stories of four of what she terms Appalachia's "forgotten children." Each child faces nearly insurmountable obstacles – some combination of drug abuse, alcoholism, and poverty features in every case – and yet all still dream of a better, "different life." Sawyer points to Appalachia as the culprit for these forgotten children's struggles, a ruined area with "three times the national poverty rate, an epidemic of prescription drug abuse, the shortest life span in the nation, toothlessness, cancer and chronic depression" which seems to be inescapable. The only "heroes" of the story are those who have been fortunate enough to attain an education – often from outside the region – and become the "teachers, social workers, doctors and dentists reaching out to a population isolated by the steep hills and lack of transportation" who clearly lack either the understanding or ability to drag themselves out of poverty.<sup>91</sup> *Children of the Mountains* presents Appalachia as a place whose poverty and degradation is ingrained in its culture, a place from which few can escape though all want to – or, at least, all *should* want to.

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<sup>91</sup> *A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains*, directed by Diane Sawyer (2009; New York: ABC News); "A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains," *ABC News*, February 10, 2009, <https://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=6845770&page=1>.

The connection between Appalachia and the present social, economic, and political moment becomes even more evident in J.D. Vance's 2016 novel *Hillbilly Elogy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. A *New York Times* bestseller in both 2016 and 2017, and adapted into a feature film directed by Ron Howard in 2020, *Hillbilly Elogy* recounts the story of Vance's difficult childhood in southern Ohio, including his mother's drug addiction and inability to care for him, leading to the need for his aging (yet fiery and unpredictable) grandparents to become his primary caretakers. But this personal narrative serves as a microcosm of what Vance believes is a larger issue: the responsibility of "hillbilly culture" for Appalachia's widespread poverty, backwardness, and inability to succeed.<sup>92</sup> Vance provides ample anecdotal evidence for this claim, frequently citing the poor work ethic and gaming of the welfare system that he witnessed from those around him as he grew up. Vance asserts that Appalachian poverty is nothing more than the result of a culture of laziness and blame-shifting, writing:

The problems that I saw...run far deeper than macroeconomic trends and policy. Too many young men immune to hard work. Good jobs impossible to fill for any length of time. And a young man with every reason to work—a wife-to-be to support and a baby on the way—carelessly tossing aside a good job with excellent health insurance. More troublingly, when it was all over, he thought something had been done to *him*. There is a lack of agency here—a feeling that you have little control over your life and a willingness to blame everyone but yourself. This is distinct from the larger economic landscape of modern America.<sup>93</sup>

Vance places this so-called hillbilly culture directly within the context of the modern-day political landscape, arguing that a growing desire to place Appalachians' own failings elsewhere has led to a "cultural movement in the white working class to blame problems on society or the government, and that movement gains adherents by the day." Such a movement, Vance continues, has only been encouraged by the modern Republican party, causing much of the

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<sup>92</sup> Vance, 56.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

Appalachian region to flip from Democratic to Republican in less than a generation: “What separates the successful from the unsuccessful are the expectations that they had for their own lives. Yet the message of the right is increasingly: It’s not your fault that you’re a loser; it’s the government’s fault.”<sup>94</sup> Assertions such as these became connected even more directly to the political moment following Donald Trump’s 2016 election victory, as *Elegy* was used as a way to “explain” Trump’s win among elite audiences – with the *New York Times* dubbing the book a “civilized reference guide for an uncivilized election” and Vance becoming commonly known as the “Trump whisperer.”<sup>95</sup> Despite all its acclaim, its construction of Appalachia is undeniably harmful: Vance reduces Appalachia’s incredibly complex social and political landscape to something contingent entirely on laziness and unwillingness to change and repeatedly denies any possibility that Appalachian poverty and substance abuse could be rooted in systemic inequality. In *Hillbilly Elegy*, it is the people of Appalachia, and themselves alone, who cause their harm, and they are simply unwilling to fix it.

The final lens through which Degraded Appalachia is often portrayed is that of comic degeneracy. Although images of primitive and backward Appalachia are often intended to be humorous, these representations differ in that they are not packaged as a joke – it is Appalachian behavior *itself* which is funny. One of the earliest of such portrayals is the 1923 silent film *Our Hospitality*, a comedic spoof of the Hatfield-McCoy feud which occurred in Appalachia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the film, Willy McKay (played by Buster Keaton) discovers that he is heir to his father’s estate in the Blue Ridge Mountains and suddenly finds himself at the center of a

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<sup>94</sup> Vance, 254.

<sup>95</sup> New York Times, “6 Books to Help Understand Trump’s Win,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/books/6-books-to-help-understand-trumps-win.html>; Karen Heller, “‘Hillbilly Elegy’ made J.D. Vance the voice of the Rust Belt. But does he want that job?,” *The Washington Post*, February 6, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/hillbilly-elegy-made-jd-vance-the-voice-of-the-rust-belt-but-does-he-want-that-job/2017/02/06/fa6cd63c-e882-11e6-80c2-30e57e57e05d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/hillbilly-elegy-made-jd-vance-the-voice-of-the-rust-belt-but-does-he-want-that-job/2017/02/06/fa6cd63c-e882-11e6-80c2-30e57e57e05d_story.html).

decades-long feud between the McKays and the neighboring Canfield family. Aside from discovering that his father's "estate" is no more than a run-down cabin, many of the film's gags feature McKay trying to escape the Canfield's "hospitality" as they humorously try – and fail – to murder him.<sup>96</sup> *Our Hospitality* portrays Appalachian culture as violent, yet ultimately not as a legitimate threat – rather, its petty culture of feuding and violence is laughable.

The next major film to capitalize on Appalachia's comic degeneracy was the 1938 *Kentucky Moonshine*, a tale of three down-on-their-luck New York performers who travel to Kentucky and pose as hillbillies in order to be discovered. The film fully exploits the stereotypical hillbilly image, as the performers costume themselves in long beards, tote guns, and drink moonshine; the group also encounters a reporter who asks the girlfriend of one of the performers what it feels like to wear shoes and if she has ever been a child bride. Most notably, the film's script refers to a "'typical lazy hillbilly scene' as if the meaning were so well known that it hardly needed explication."<sup>97</sup> Although the trio is ultimately discovered by a New York radio host, their broadcast from the Kentucky mountains is not heard due to technical difficulties.<sup>98</sup> *Kentucky Moonshine* is aware of Appalachian stereotypes and uses them to its advantage – asking the audience to laugh not only at the movie, but at the people and culture which the characters impersonate.

Comedic hillbilly schemes came repackaged for a new era in the hit CBS action-comedy *The Dukes of Hazzard*, which ran for seven seasons between 1979-1985. Set in the fictional Hazzard County, Georgia, but drawn from the name of the real-life mining town of Hazard, Kentucky, *The Dukes of Hazzard* follows the hijinks of the rambunctious "Duke boys" and their

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<sup>96</sup> *Our Hospitality*, directed by John G. Blystone (1923; Joseph M. Schenck Productions, 2014), online.

<sup>97</sup> Harkins, 154.

<sup>98</sup> *Kentucky Moonshine*, directed by David Butler (1938; Los Angeles: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox).

cousin Daisy.<sup>99</sup> The show mixes Appalachian and Deep South tropes, deliberately keeping vague the exact location of Hazzard County, but featuring such hillbilly imagery as moonshining (the Duke boys are on probation for the illegal transport of moonshine in service of their grizzled-but-loveable Uncle Jesse), scantily-clad women (with the popularization of “Daisy Duke” cutoff shorts following the show’s success), and absurd violence (the Duke boys recklessly race around in their iconic Dodge Charger and frequently shoot bows-and-arrows, sometimes with dynamite on the tips).<sup>100</sup> *Dukes’* legacy upon Appalachian representation might best be summarized as transforming the hillbilly into its contemporary counterpart: the reckless and idiotic, yet undeniably hilarious, redneck – a trope that has only gathered strength in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The comedic redneck image is further solidified and legitimized in the 2009 documentary *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*. Directed by Julien Nitzberg and produced by Johnny Knoxville (of *Jackass* fame), the film tracks the notorious White family in Boone County, West Virginia, chronicling “one tumultuous year” as the family engages in “shoot-outs, robberies, gas-huffing, drug dealing, pill popping, murders and tap dancing.”<sup>101</sup> Featuring descendants of the famous mountain dancer “D. Ray” White, *Wild and Wonderful Whites* places the White family under the spotlight in their own right as they encounter child custody battles, a stabbing, and countless other outlandish events. Though the film’s critical reception was lukewarm at best, the documentary has a fervent cult following, with a 90-second clip of Sue Ann “Sue Bob” White in the Taco Bell drive-thru becoming a widely-shared meme:

SUE BOB WHITE: Yeah, give me a quesadilla. The steak and cheese fajita only, with cheese and steak only.

TACO BELL EMPLOYEE: We don’t have fajitas.

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<sup>99</sup> Harkins, 213.

<sup>100</sup> *The Dukes of Hazzard*, created by Gy Waldron (1979-1985; New York: CBS).

<sup>101</sup> “The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia,” Amazon Prime, accessed December 7, 2020, <https://www.amazon.com/Wild-Wonderful-Whites-West-Virginia/dp/B003VWC4BW>.

SUE BOB WHITE: You don't have fiestas?  
TACO BELL EMPLOYEE: I'm sorry, could you repeat that?  
SUE BOB WHITE: Why is it on your sign if you don't have it?  
TACO BELL EMPLOYEE: Are you talking about Gorditas?  
SUE BOB WHITE: Y'all have mozzarella cheese sticks?

After ordering, White notices two friends seated inside the restaurant and, gesturing to her niece in the passenger's seat, shouts through the glass, "They took her baby. She had her baby. CPS took it. She's crying," as White's friends wave excitedly to the camera.<sup>102</sup> Though *Wild and Wonderful Whites* does not attempt to position the Whites as representative of Appalachia as a whole, it certainly does not shy away from Appalachian tropes of degeneracy as central to the family's dysfunction.

While Nitzberg's documentary may not have been symbolically intentioned, it certainly inspired copycats, such as the MTV reality series *Buckwild* that aired in 2013. Again located in West Virginia, this time in Charleston and nearby Sissonville, *Buckwild* follows the lives of nine young adults who "love to dodge responsibilities and always live life with the carefree motto, 'whatever happens, happens.'"<sup>103</sup> Nicknamed the "'Jersey Shore' of Appalachia," the series features wild parties, dangerous stunts like "muddin'" and rope swinging, and a slew of romantic fiascos and get-rich-quick schemes.<sup>104</sup> Following the premiere of the show's first season, four cast members were separately arrested on various charges including possession of a controlled substance, driving under the influence, and failure to report an accident.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, one cast

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<sup>102</sup> *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*, directed by Julien Nitzberg (2009; n.p.: Dickhouse Productions)

<sup>103</sup> "Buckwild," *MTV*, accessed December 7, 2020, <https://www.mtv.com/shows/6pmm6h/buckwild>.

<sup>104</sup> "MTV's 'Buckwild': The 'Jersey Shore' of Appalachia," YouTube video, 2:00, from *Good Morning America*, posted by ABC News, December 5, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBntzmWkn2Q>; "Buckwild," *MTV*.

<sup>105</sup> "Salwa Amin, Buckwild Cast Member, Arrested in Drug Raid: See Her Mugshot," *Us Weekly*, February 12, 2013, <https://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/salwa-amin-buckwild-cast-member-arrested-in-drug-raid-see-her-mugshot-2013122/>; Margaret Eby, "MTV 'Buckwild' reality star Michael Burford arrested for DUI in West Virginia," *New York Daily News*, February 16, 2013, <https://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/gossip/buckwild-star-michael-burford-dui-bust-article-1.1266058>; Ashley B. Craig, "Another 'Buckwild' cast member facing charges," *Charleston Gazette-Mail*, August 6, 2013, <https://www.wvgazette.com/news/legalaffairs/another->

member, Shain Gandee, passed away just over a month after the first season's release in an off-roading accident, leading to the series' eventual cancellation.<sup>106</sup> *Buckwild* could perhaps be viewed as the tragic culmination of nearly a century's worth of dangerous depictions of Appalachia – a place full of backward, ignorant, carefree rednecks – which could not possibly be replicated in reality.

### **Violent Appalachia: Violence, Murder, and Sexual Barbarity**

Closely related to, yet patently distinct from, portrayals of Appalachia as backward and degenerate are those which depict it as horrifically violent and often murderous. McCarroll elaborates on this theme, which she dubs “one of the most damning caricatures of Appalachia – the ‘monstrous mountaineer.’” She explains, “The isolation of the hills leads to a depravity – often sexual in nature. Without the presence of a civilizing force, monstrous mountaineers are given reign to hone their self-serving cruelty.”<sup>107</sup> However, it is important to note that images of Violent Appalachia, like many ambivalent representations of the region, tend to gravitate toward one of two poles: They are either terrifyingly realistic, or they are comically exaggerated. Regardless of tone, though, the message remains the same: Appalachia breeds a culture of violence and barbarity.

Most often portrayed through film and other visual media, images of Violent Appalachia have existed nearly as long as the film medium itself; in fact, the first silent film set in the mountains casts Appalachians as deadly. *The Moonshiner*, a 13-minute short released in 1904

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buckwild-cast-member-facing-charges/article\_bcce7df5-6894-59eb-bf7d-848a8882b2e9.html; Rachel McRady, “Buckwild’s Anna Davis Arrested For Aggravated DUI,” *Us Weekly*, November 17, 2013, <https://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/buckwilds-anna-davis-arrested-for-aggravated-dui-20131711/>.

<sup>106</sup> Bill Carter, “MTV Cancels the Reality Series ‘Buckwild,’” *New York Times*, April 10, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/11/business/media/mtv-cancels-the-reality-series-buckwild.html>.

<sup>107</sup> McCarroll, 22.

and directed by Wallace McCutcheon, tells of an illegal whiskey trade in the mountains and a violent conflict between a family of moonshiners and the revenuers searching for the still. After being discovered, the moonshining family engages in a deadly shootout with the revenuers; the film ends with the moonshiner's wife shooting the lone surviving revenuer in the back, cradling her husband in her arms as he dies.<sup>108</sup> Produced by Biograph, *The Moonshiner* was a massive success, so much so that the company was still advertising it four years later as “the most widely known and most popular film ever made.”<sup>109</sup>

Due to such interest in moonshining plots, many subsequent silent films of this era focused on violent altercations in Appalachia, “making evident the danger of roaming into the mountains.”<sup>110</sup> In addition to battles between moonshiners and revenuers, popular plotlines included feuds and love triangles which pitted mountaineers against city-dwellers, nearly always involving at least one death. Violence and death are so common in films set in the mountains during this era that Harkins is able to quantify it: “[T]he amount of violence in the nearly 500 mountain films released through 1929 is staggering—over 200 murders, 500 assaults with guns, axes, or hand-to-hand combat, and 100 attacks on women.”<sup>111</sup>

Two major films which featured just these sorts of plots are 1915's *Billie – The Hill Billy* and the enormously successful *Tol'able David* released in 1921. *Billie* marks not only the first use of “hillbilly” in a film title but also a massive departure from previous notions of what a “hillbilly” was.<sup>112</sup> Rather than depicting a backward and ignorant but ultimately nonthreatening mountaineer, *Billie*'s hillbilly is tyrannical, unstable, and prone to violence – having beaten his

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<sup>108</sup> *The Moonshiner*, directed by Wallace McCutcheon (1904; New York: Biograph, 2019), online.

<sup>109</sup> Bebe Bergsten, ed., *Biograph Bulletins 1896-1908* (Los Angeles: Locare Research Group, 1971), 229, quoted in Harkins, 58.

<sup>110</sup> McCarroll, 110.

<sup>111</sup> Harkins, 58.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-65.

son so badly that he ran away and constantly threatening to punish his daughter for her “sinful” desire to draw illustrations. Ultimately, the daughter is saved by marrying a visiting researcher from the city, allowing her to move out of her oppressive mountain town.<sup>113</sup>

*Tol’able David* takes mountain violence even further, as David, the film’s protagonist, protects his West Virginia home and sweetheart from a trio of mountain brutes on the run from the law. After killing David’s dog, gravely injuring his older brother, and indirectly causing his father to suffer a fatal stroke, David faces off with the trio in a horrific battle from which he emerges victorious, though injured, after killing all three foes.<sup>114</sup> According to Harkins, *David* remains to this day “one of the most lucrative and influential films about mountaineers ever produced,” garnering nationwide rave reviews (one Illinois exhibitor touted it as “beyond a shadow of a doubt, the greatest picture of mountain life ever made”), winning best picture in a 1922 issue of *Photoplay Magazine*, and making a star out of its lead actor, Richard Barthelmess.<sup>115</sup> *Tol’able David* made famous the image of the mountaineer who was not simply violent, but truly, in McCarroll’s sense, *monstrous*.

It is worth noting that while these films were clearly fictional, they were often taken by critics and audiences – and intended by writers and directors – to represent the real circumstances of life in the Appalachian mountains. This is well exemplified in the reception of the 1927 film *Stark Love* directed by Karl Brown. The film itself is a coming-of-age story of a young man named Rob who wants to escape his mountain life but must first defeat “the living symbol of degraded backwardness and savagery” itself – his own father.<sup>116</sup> When Rob’s mother

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<sup>113</sup> *Billie – The Hill Billy*, directed by Archer MacMackin (1915; Santa Barbara, CA: American Film Manufacturing Company).

<sup>114</sup> *Tol’able David*, directed by Henry King (1921; New York: Biograph).

<sup>115</sup> Harkins, 143; Comments of Steve Farrar, Orpheum Theater (Harrisburg, IL), *MPW*, December 23, 1922, 768, quoted in Harkins, 143.

<sup>116</sup> Harkins, 149.

dies, his father marries Rob's childhood sweetheart, Barbara, essentially acquiring her like property with her father's permission. Rob attacks his father when he discovers him attempting to have sex with Barbara against her will, but is thrown out the door and into the river. Barbara then threatens her captor with an axe, saves Rob from the river, and the two float to safety, "free at last from their mountain shackles."<sup>117</sup>

While the theme of escape from the mountains was not uncommon in this time period, director Brown insisted that his film moved beyond clichéd storylines, telling one writer, "I want to show these people as they are. As they *really* are. As human beings, not caricatures."<sup>118</sup>

Although the film was unsuccessful in its original run, it was nevertheless accepted as an accurate portrayal of mountain life by critics and reporters, with one reviewer labeling the film "a picturization of the actual life and customs of the most primitive people of America" and another comparing it to three highly influential documentaries of the time – *Nanook of the North* (1922), *Grass* (1925), and *Moana* (1926) – pronouncing the film "as important sociologically and scientifically as the illustrious trinity which preceded it."<sup>119</sup>

The monstrous mountaineer trope gets a new heroic twist in the 1958 cult classic *Thunder Road*. The film, which Harkins cites as the first to look at moonshining from inside the culture since 1904's *The Moonshiner*, tells of Luke Doolin, a moonshine-runner in the mountains of Kentucky and Tennessee willing to do whatever it takes to protect his family's craft but concerned that his younger brother will follow in his footsteps.<sup>120</sup> Although Doolin is the story's protagonist, he is still brutally violent, assaulting a member of a rival gang from the north,

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<sup>117</sup> *Stark Love*, directed by Karl Brown (1927; Los Angeles: Paramount Famous Lasky Corporation, 2015), online; Harkins, 149.

<sup>118</sup> Kevin Brownlow, "Hollywood in the Hills: The Making of *Stark Love*," *Appalachian Journal* 18, no. 2 (1991), 189, quoted in Harkins, 150.

<sup>119</sup> Brownlow, "Hollywood in the Hills," 171, quoted in Harkins, 150-51.

<sup>120</sup> Harkins, 211; *Thunder Road*, directed by Arthur Ripley (1958; n.p.: D.R.M. Productions).

becoming involved in the death of another moonshiner and federal agent by car bomb, and engaging in high-speed chases in his souped-up hot rod. The film ends as Doolin dies a hero's death on the highway, running through the police roadblocks intended to capture him and spinning out of control. Though the audience certainly roots for Doolin and his "way of life that is clearly destined to disappear," themes of Appalachian violence and lawlessness still reign supreme.<sup>121</sup>

Perhaps the most insidious – and certainly instantly recognizable – portrayal of mountain violence occurs in the 1972 thriller *Deliverance*, directed by John Boorman. A cautionary tale for urbanites looking to travel south, *Deliverance* features a terrifying cast of "retarded and crippled misfits and savage sodomizers of the North Georgia wilderness who terrorize a foursome of Atlanta canoeists."<sup>122</sup> From the moment the urban protagonists meet their soon-to-be captors in the woods, a threat hangs in the air, one derived distinctly from the villains' mountain isolation and backwardness:

The pair of men who emerge from the woods in *Deliverance*, guns in hand, are the daguerreotype: physically repulsive, more animal than human, with overgrown hair and long utilitarian fingernails caked with dirt and oil. [...] The monstrous mountaineer type, at least in *Deliverance*...exists apart from the white southerners, who are shocked to come across him, and because he has no access to the civilized white world that surrounds him at the foot of his hills.<sup>123</sup>

Themes of Appalachian backwardness, brutality, and sexual deviance come to a head in the film's most infamous scene, in which Bobby, one of the urban canoeists, is sodomized at gunpoint by his captors. The horrific scene, in which one mountaineer orders Bobby to "squeal like a pig" as he rapes him, has "forever after [been] synonymous with the movie...

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<sup>121</sup> Harkins, 211.

<sup>122</sup> Harkins, 207; *Deliverance*, directed by John Boorman (1972; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros.).

<sup>123</sup> McCarroll, 22.

accentuat[ing] the idea of the mountaineers' utter degeneracy.”<sup>124</sup> Interestingly, these allusions to bestiality were not present in the far more ambiguous novel (written by James Dickey) on which the movie was based. Dickey's son, Christopher, worked on the film and was disturbed by what he experienced there; in a phone call to his father, he (correctly) predicted that the brutal rape scene would overshadow anything meaningful that the film had to say.<sup>125</sup>

Despite its horrific portrayal of mountain culture, *Deliverance* was an instant hit, nominated for awards in several categories at both the Academy Awards and Golden Globes in 1973 and parodied on nightly talk shows, in cartoons, and on *Saturday Night Live* for years after its release.<sup>126</sup> Harkins explains further:

The film's infamous scenes of sodomy at gunpoint and of a retarded albino boy lustily playing his banjo became such instantly recognizable shorthand for demeaning references to rural poor whites that comedians needed to say only “squeal like a pig”...or hum the opening notes of the film's guitar-banjo duet to gain an immediate visceral reaction from a studio audience.<sup>127</sup>

Nearly 50 years later, the film has retained staying power, with a Metascore of 80, a Rotten Tomatoes rating of 89% (with many recent favorable reviews on each website), and a perhaps permanent slot in the American cultural lexicon.<sup>128</sup>

Like many popular films, *Deliverance* inspired a slew of subsequent movies in the same vein, appearing as many as 35 years after *Deliverance*'s release. These films – including the 1982 *Baker County, U.S.A.* (originally titled *Trapped*), 2003 *Wrong Turn*, and 2007 *Timber Falls* – all fit into the mold created by *Deliverance*: They are horror films (McCarroll calls them

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<sup>124</sup> Harkins, 208.

<sup>125</sup> James Dickey, *Deliverance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1970); Harkins, 208-209. See also Henry Hart, *James Dickey: The World as a Lie* (New York: Picador, 2000).

<sup>126</sup> “Deliverance Awards,” *IMDb*, accessed December 7, 2020, [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0068473/awards?ref\\_=tt\\_ql\\_op\\_1](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0068473/awards?ref_=tt_ql_op_1); Harkins, 206.

<sup>127</sup> Harkins, 206.

<sup>128</sup> “Deliverance Reviews,” *Metacritic*, accessed December 7, 2020, <https://www.metacritic.com/movie/deliverance>; “Deliverance (1972),” *Rotten Tomatoes*, accessed December 7, 2020, <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/deliverance>.

“hipploitation” films) set in the mountains of West Virginia and Tennessee in which isolated mountaineers turn to the “(sexual) violence and grotesque torture of outsiders or intruders.”<sup>129</sup> In these films, and others like them, “geographic isolation, inbreeding and the resultant genetic deficiencies, and cultural hatred of outsiders combine” to create a barbaric, imbecilic, and altogether terrifying caricature of Appalachia.<sup>130</sup>

Another twist on the monstrous mountaineer archetype is that of the female heroine who must navigate her dangerous mountain culture in order to survive – sometimes becoming complicit in the process. Two such films are Michael Apted’s 1994 drama *Nell*, starring Jodie Foster, and the 2010 *Winter’s Bone*, directed by Debra Granik and starring Jennifer Lawrence. *Nell*’s eponymous character is an isolated, almost feral young woman who speaks a nearly indecipherable form of English, distrusts outsiders, especially men, and is frightened of modern technology; the town doctor finds her hiding in the rafters of a cabin after her mother dies, discovering she was conceived through rape and has been isolated with her mother ever since. As McCarroll surmises, “Nell is both monstrous in her savagery and beautiful in her navigation of that savagery.”<sup>131</sup>

*Winter’s Bone* takes the notion of monstrous women even further, as Ree (played by Jennifer Lawrence) must contend with her “dysfunctional, isolated mountain community” as she searches for her father, who is due in court for the manufacture of meth, so her family can keep their home.<sup>132</sup> Ree eventually tries to get information from a local crime boss and is severely beaten by the women of his family; after Ree learns that her father was killed because he was

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<sup>129</sup> *Baker County, U.S.A.*, directed by William Fruet (1982; n.p.: Verdict Productions); *Wrong Turn*, directed by Rob Schmidt (2003; Santa Monica, CA: Summit Entertainment); *Timber Falls*, directed by Tony Giglio (2007; Santa Monica, CA: Ascendant Pictures); McCarroll, 23.

<sup>130</sup> McCarroll, 24.

<sup>131</sup> *Nell*, directed by Michael Apted (1994; Los Angeles: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox); McCarroll, 23.

<sup>132</sup> McCarroll, 23.

planning to inform on other meth cookers, the women return to take her to “[her] daddy’s bones.”<sup>133</sup> Rowing to her father’s submerged body in the middle of the pond, the women instruct Ree to grasp his hands so they can cut them off with a chainsaw. Ree then takes the hands to the authorities to prove her father’s death so the house will not be taken away, lying that someone had thrown them on her front porch. Ree neither confronts those who have hurt her family nor makes an attempt to leave such a dangerous place; rather, she hides their violence and stays put. In both films, it is the brutality of the isolated mountain culture which is to blame for the heroines’ troubles; in *Winter’s Bone*, this culture of violence is so pervasive that the protagonist does not even attempt to fight it.

A more recent example of mountain violence comes not from the world of film but of gaming. *Red Dead Redemption 2*, released in 2018, contains both overt and implicit Appalachian imagery, portraying the region and its people as dangerous and even excited at the thought of bloodshed. *Red Dead*’s Roanoke Ridge region is a fantastical merging of both Appalachia and the Ozarks but contains many references specific to Appalachia, such as coal mining, thick forests along tall mountains, and flora and fauna which are native to the region. While both the animals and the terrain of Roanoke Ridge pose a threat to the player, it is the area’s inhabitants, called the Murfree Brood, who are the true menaces. As the player (controlling a character named Arthur) canoes through the area toward the town of Butcher’s Creek, Charles, a companion on the journey, warns about the “Murfree gang that hides out in these caves. They’re animals. Everyone is terrified of them.”<sup>134</sup> The first night of camping in this area confirms Charles’s description, as Arthur encounters two members of the Murfree Brood:

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<sup>133</sup> *Winter’s Bone*, directed by Debra Granik (2010; Los Angeles: Anonymous Content).

<sup>134</sup> *Red Dead Redemption 2*, created by Rockstar Games (2018; New York, Rockstar Games); Christopher Ryan McCloud, “Virtual Appalachia: Video Game Representations of the Region,” *Appalachian Journal* 47, no. 1 (2019),

The first man, wearing overalls and no shirt, warns, “Y’all know these is Murfree hills. You should be careful where you’re camping.” [...] The other Murfree, with a facial deformity, responds...that “everything [is] bought and paid for. And we going to protect what’s ours.” After warning Arthur to stay away, they leave the campsite with a final threat: “We’ll kill you next time.”<sup>135</sup>

Arthur spots other “locals” during his trip through Butcher’s Creek, noting that “they don’t look too friendly.”<sup>136</sup> Many of the characters in this area are physically disfigured and emit an altogether threatening aura, as if any one of them could be persuaded to shoot Arthur dead at a moment’s notice. As McCloud summarizes, the characters in Roanoke Ridge, especially Butcher’s Creek, are “illiterate, fatalistic, uncivilized, violent, and prone to animalistic instincts,” bringing age-old ideas of the monstrous mountaineer into the relatively new arena of video gaming.<sup>137</sup>

On the opposite end of the spectrum concerning representations of Violent Appalachia are those which are intended to be comedic. Although these images make light of violent situations, typically including buffoonish characters which build upon previously discussed tropes of backwardness and primitiveness, they are intended to be reflective of a real culture of violence in the region – often based upon real-life feuds and violent altercations which occurred in the region and were highly publicized by the national press. One early example of such representations is the 1934 film *Kentucky Kernels*, starring Bert Wheeler and Robert Woolsey. Combining Deep Southern, Western, and hillbilly imagery, the film follows a pair of out-of-work magicians who discover the young boy they are helping guard has inherited a Kentucky estate – by now a familiar plot device for stories concerning the region. Upon arriving, however, the men

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111-12, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edo&AN=142305873&site=eds-live&scope=site;> *Red Dead Redemption 2*, quoted in McCloud, 113.

<sup>135</sup> McCloud, 113.

<sup>136</sup> *Red Dead Redemption 2*, quoted in McCloud, 113.

<sup>137</sup> McCloud, 114.

find themselves at the center of a bitter feud between the Southern plantation Wakefield family and the clannish and mountaineering Milford family. The ensuing battle, described by one reviewer as “something like civil war,” occurs against a backdrop of comedic gaffes such as a scene in which the aristocratic Wakefields begin firing their rifles at the dinner table when they mistake a popped champagne cork for a gunshot.<sup>138</sup> Although the violence is comedic rather than frightening in nature, the film nonetheless portrays southern mountain people as constantly feuding, excitable, and prone to violence.

Though *Kentucky Kernels* was a live-action film, many comedically violent hillbilly caricatures to follow were animated, perhaps due to the medium’s ability to over-exaggerate and cartoonify movement and action. Many of these animated films included hillbilly sight gags and above all, “the central plot motif of the family feud, in which the animators pitted one group of hill folks against their identical-looking rivals and both against naively pacifist outsiders.”<sup>139</sup> Perhaps the most glaring illustration of these caricatures is the Warner Bros. 1938 *A Feud There Was*, directed by Tex Avery. The film begins with a shot of a family of absurdly lazy and stereotypically-appearing hillbillies, the Weavers, who are in a deep sleep. The only thing that can awaken the Weavers from their slumber (aside from a song and dance number at the beginning of the film) is the opportunity to fight with the neighboring McCoy family, a name clearly taken directly from the infamous Hatfield-McCoy feud of the preceding century. Harkins brilliantly summarizes the ridiculous plot which follows:

When the inevitable feud begins, the combatants blast away at each other with all manner of absurd weaponry (including a rifle with multiple triggers and a howitzer that turns a pig and chicken into ham steak and fried eggs). Their mutual hostility is exceeded only by their sheer contempt for Egghead, a predecessor of Elmer Fudd, who tries to persuade

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<sup>138</sup> *Kentucky Kernels*, directed by George Stevens (1934; Los Angeles: RKO Radio Pictures); *London Chronicle*, March 9, 1935, quoted in Harkins, 153.

<sup>139</sup> Harkins, 163.

both sides to put “an end to this meaningless massacre.” His reward for his troubles is a huge fistfight with both clans. But even after Egghead emerges victorious and walks off screen, he is shot by a silhouetted mountaineer in the “theater audience,” thus presenting hillbillies as irredeemably violent.<sup>140</sup>

Though humorous and clearly not intended to be a believable representation of the actual Appalachian region, its evoking of real historical figures and events, use of clearly-established mountaineer tropes, and portrayal of incessant fighting all point toward the film’s attempt to depict an exaggerated and comedic version of a real place and culture – one which is irrepressibly violent.

A similar story of comedic hillbilly violence appears in the 1946 Walt Disney musical anthology *Make Mine Music*, a compilation of ten animated musical numbers. One such number is “The Martins and the Coys” – again a clear riff on the McCoy family name – which features a by-now standard presentation of two feuding hillbilly families. Despite the cartoon’s lighthearted tone and animation style, the sketch’s lyrics tell a rather dark story of violence and bloodshed:

Oh, the Martins and the Coys  
They was reckless mountain boys  
And they took up family feudin' when they'd meet  
They could shoot each other quicker  
Than it took your eye to flicker  
[...]  
After that they started out to fight in earnest  
And they scarred the mountains up with shot and shell  
There was uncles, brothers, cousins  
Why, they bumped them off by dozens  
Just how many bit the dust is hard to tell<sup>141</sup>

The song continues, revealing that the feud is so brutal that every member of both clans is killed in battle except two teenagers. The two marry (an act reminiscent of the famously forbidden romance between two young members of the Hatfield and McCoy families), and after a brief

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<sup>140</sup> *A Feud There Was*, directed by Tex Avery (1938; Los Angeles: Warner Bros., 2015), online; Harkins, 163-64.

<sup>141</sup> “The Martins and the Coys,” from *Make Mine Music* (1946; Los Angeles: Walt Disney Company).

moment of celebration, the two newlyweds pull out their guns and begin to “carry on the feud just like before,” to the delight of their deceased relatives who smile down at them from the clouds.<sup>142</sup>

Although the tropes in *Kentucky Kernels* and *Make Mine Music* are quite similar, it is interesting to note that unlike *Kernels*, “The Martins and the Coys” drew heated criticism from audiences and critics after the film’s release, who labeled the sketch “infinitely insulting” and “tasteless.”<sup>143</sup> This is likely due in large part to changing attitudes about mountain people following the Appalachian diaspora into midwestern cities and enlistment in World War II. (These changing attitudes did not mean that Appalachian stereotypes disappeared altogether during this time; rather, they shifted into new forms which will be discussed in the following section.) Nor did comedically violent hillbillies vanish from the big screen after the war; films such as *Murder, He Says* (1945), *Comin’ Round the Mountain* (1951), *Feudin’ Fools* (1952), and the film adaptation of the Broadway musical *Li’l Abner* (1959) all featured similar characters and plot devices, though these archetypes became increasingly unpopular with audiences.<sup>144</sup>

Images of comedically violent Appalachians have fallen largely out of fashion in the modern era, and media which has made use of this trope since the 1960s has been generally poorly received. The 1987 comic horror film *Redneck Zombies* (dir. Pericles Lewnes), for example, illustrates a combination of old comedic hillbilly tropes with the newly-formed image of the mountain redneck. Promoted with the tagline “They’re Tobacco Chewin’, Gut Chompin’, Cannibal Kinfolk from Hell!,” the film is set in an unspecified backwoods location in which a

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<sup>142</sup> “The Martins and the Coys.”

<sup>143</sup> James Agee, “Films,” *Scribner’s Magazine*, June 1931, 611-17 and “Fun without Mickey,” *Commonweal*, May 3, 1946, 72-73, quoted in Harkins, 164-65.

<sup>144</sup> *Murder, He Says*, directed by George Marshall (1945; Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures); *Comin’ Round the Mountain*, directed by Charles Lamont (1951; Universal City, CA: Universal International Pictures); *Feudin’ Fools*, directed by William Beaudine (1952; New York: Monogram Pictures); *Li’l Abner*, directed by Melvin Frank (1959; Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures); Harkins, 166.

group of “demented rednecks” discover a barrel of radioactive waste and use it in their moonshine still, turning them all into flesh-hungry zombies.<sup>145</sup> Though the violence of this film is different from that of previous violent hillbilly characterizations, and the film itself received largely poor reviews, the choice to identify these characters specifically as backwoods and redneck cannot be seen as arbitrary; it builds upon decades of previous tropes and an underlying perception of mountain people as reckless, imbecilic, and violent, a perception that, even when unpopular as a storyline, remains a clear presence in the cultural backdrop of popular media.

### **Displaced Appalachia: Diaspora, Escape, and Inability to Assimilate**

As mentioned in the preceding section, attitudes toward mountain people began to shift in the mid- to late 1940s, primarily as a result of Appalachian enlistment in World War II and mass migration from the region into cities following the war. The intermingling of Appalachian people with those of other regions made increasingly unsustainable the “popular conception of a region wholly removed from social and economic reality” which had facilitated previous ideations of mountain people as isolated and comically violent.<sup>146</sup> However, this shift in attitude was not necessarily from a negative perception of Appalachians to a positive one; rather, it was the specific ways in which Appalachian folk were denigrated which changed. As a growing number of Appalachian people moved from the mountains into cities such as Cincinnati, Detroit, and Chicago with the boom in industrial work and subsequent decline in coal production, urban dwellers began to feel threatened in both their job security and cultural norms.<sup>147</sup> The primary way in which Appalachians were portrayed in the 1940s and 1950s, then, was that they were “out

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<sup>145</sup> *Redneck Zombies*, directed by Pericles Lewnes (1989; Los Angeles: Full Moon Pictures); “Redneck Zombies,” *IMDb*, accessed December 7, 2020, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093833/>.

<sup>146</sup> Harkins, 164.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*, 175.

of place” and a disturbance in the city, and that they needed to go back to their mountain homes where they “belonged.” Distaste for Appalachians was so strong, in fact, that “job listings that announced ‘No Southerners need apply’ and restaurant owners who refused to serve ‘hillbillies’ were not uncommon,” and a 1951 survey of Detroit residents asking which groups were “not good to have in the city” determined that “poor southern whites” and “hillbillies” were high on the list of undesirables, second only to “criminals” and “gangsters” and well ahead of “negroes” and “foreigners.”<sup>148</sup>

The “problem” of Appalachian migrants reached the national stage in the late 1950s through a barrage of articles in nationally circulated magazines. One such article, titled “Down from the Hills and into the Slums,” not only stresses that the mountain migrants are “badly out of sync with urban ways” but also accuses them of being a dangerously backward and criminal group guilty of “shootings, child neglect, rape...[and] incest.”<sup>149</sup> A similar article, titled “The Hillbillies Invade Chicago” and featured in a 1958 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*, describes the city’s Appalachian migrants as “proud, poor, primitive, and fast with a knife” as well as “clannish...disorderly, [and] untamed to urban ways.” They have “fecund wives and numerous children” and, even more egregiously, “their habits – with respect to such matters as incest and statutory rape – are clearly at variance with urban legal requirements.” The author further cites a *Chicago Sunday Tribune* editorial which compares the “Southern hillbilly migrants” to a “plague of locusts” and describes them as having “the lowest standard of living and moral code (if any), the biggest capacity for liquor, and the most savage tactics when drunk, which is most of the

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<sup>148</sup> Harkins, 175; Dale Nouse, “Detroiters Like City Just Fine, Survey Reveals,” *Detroit Free Press*, 1952, quoted in Harkins, 176.

<sup>149</sup> Harkins, 176; James Maxwell, “Down From the Hills Into the Slums,” *The Reporter*, December 13, 1956, 28, quoted in Harkins, 176.

time.”<sup>150</sup> Through these articles, it became clear that Appalachian “hillbillies” were an unwelcome, even repulsive, presence in the cities and that many urbanites found them incapable of assimilating into city culture.

Aware of the tension between urban-dwellers and Appalachian migrants occurring across the country, popular media made attempts to profit from this “fear and fascination” surrounding southern mountain people.<sup>151</sup> By far the most successful of these attempts was the CBS sitcom *The Beverly Hillbillies*, which ran for eight years, was the highest-rated show of both 1962 and 1963, boasts the highest-rated half-hour single episode of television in history, and gained a rabid following both in the U.S. and abroad.<sup>152</sup> Produced by Paul Henning, the series tells the story of the mountaineering Clampett family, who suddenly become millionaires after discovering oil on their land and move into a Beverly Hills mansion.<sup>153</sup> The series’ intrinsic humor stems from the Clampetts’ displacement: Although they are now wealthy, they remain largely ignorant, unmodern, and unable to decipher or integrate into their new California culture. Harkins provides examples of the Clampetts’ confusion surrounding modern living in the show’s early run: “In one early episode, Jed asks why the ‘electric meat grinder’—a kitchen disposal—does not work properly and believes he can use a telephone simply by shouting into it while it lies on its cradle.”<sup>154</sup>

But beyond these jokes about modernity, similar to those of *The Real McCoys* in the decade prior, lies a deeper conflict between urban Californian and rural “hillbilly” values. This occurs in many forms: through Jed, who symbolizes a “pure” mountain culture and unwavering

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<sup>150</sup> Albert N. Votaw, “The Hillbillies Invade Chicago,” *Harper’s Magazine*, February 1958, 64-66, quoted in Harkins, 176-77.

<sup>151</sup> Harkins, 186.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 189-90.

<sup>153</sup> *The Beverly Hillbillies*, created by Paul Henning (1962-1971; New York: CBS).

<sup>154</sup> Harkins, 194.

traditional value system; through Jethro, who willingly attempts to embrace California culture to eternally disastrous results; and through Granny, who is most explicitly uncomfortable in her new surroundings and often disparages the consumerist California lifestyle. In fact, Granny is most often intended to provide a more general critique of 1960s consumerism, “expos[ing] the vapidness and uselessness of the lifestyles of Beverly Hills, and by extension, of much of comfortably affluent American society.”<sup>155</sup> And yet, despite all their admonition of Beverly Hills culture, “the Clampetts never leave this den of hedonism and greed for longer than a few weeks nor do they reshape their social environment in any meaningful way. Instead, they remain strangers in a strange land with little sense of purpose, no longer working the land yet unwilling to become part of or to transform the commercial society around them.”<sup>156</sup> Thus, despite any cultural critique meant to be implied by the *Hillbillies*, its ultimate message is one of incompatibility between the mountains and the outside world.

However, depictions of Appalachian migrants have often contained an inherent contradiction – asserting that while Appalachians can never truly belong in the city, they also cannot stay put in their mountain homes, which are too hopeless and degraded for survival. Such is the case in both the 1981 made-for-television film *The Pride of Jesse Hallam*, starring Johnny Cash, and the 1984 film adaptation of Harriette Arnow’s novel *The Dollmaker*, starring Jane Fonda. Both films portray Appalachian migrants who are forced to leave their homes for the city – in *The Dollmaker* due to financial hardship and in *Jesse Hallam* due to the need for medical care – but are either unwilling or unable to assimilate into their new culture.

Cash’s Jesse longs to leave Cincinnati and return to his Kentucky home, as his children face discrimination at school and he must confront his own illiteracy, but is reminded by his boss

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<sup>155</sup> Harkins, 194.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, 196-97.

that if his family returns to Kentucky that his children will be “nothing,” just like he is. Thus, Jesse must – as the movie’s title suggests – overcome his pride and learn to accept what the film deems the correct choice to stay in the city. As McCarroll summarizes, Jesse learns to find the good in his new city life and eventually “comes to associate ‘home’ with ignorance, poverty, and dead ends. [...] Validating the judgments of others, Jesse learns to swallow his pride and embrace the values, structures, and lessons of the city that he is learning to call home.”<sup>157</sup> Although Jesse and his family will never truly be part of the city, they must learn to put their old, “improper” ways behind them and do their best to adapt to the opportunity and “progress” which the city represents.

Similarly, Fonda’s Gertie in *The Dollmaker* is immediately cast as an outsider as she and her family arrive in Detroit – while other women hustle by dressed in suits, Gertie carries a handmade basket and wears a large hat – and spends the rest of the film uncomfortable and out of place in her new home. The need for assimilation is constantly stressed throughout the film, as her five children, too, face discrimination and hardship. In one scene, Gertie meets with the teacher of her oldest son, Reuben, who she fears is unhappy at school. The teacher responds, “You hillb – you Southern people who come up here...Don’t you realize that it will be a great change for your children?” and later adds, “Reuben is in Detroit now. He will have to adjust to his surroundings. That’s the most important thing in life.”<sup>158</sup> However, the children (and Gertie) still struggle to assimilate, and the sudden and tragic death of Gertie’s youngest daughter is the breaking point in which she decides that the family must earn enough money to return home. Gertie uses her homespun talents to carve dolls out of wood, “working her way closer to

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<sup>157</sup> *The Pride of Jesse Hallam*, directed by Gary Nelson (1981; Los Angeles: The Königsberg Company, 2020), online; McCarroll, 73.

<sup>158</sup> *The Dollmaker*, directed by Daniel Petrie (1984; n.p.: Finnegan Productions, 2019), online.

Kentucky with every blow” into the cherry, and finally sells enough to return to the mountains.<sup>159</sup> Thus, *The Dollmaker* takes the contradictory position that mountaineers cannot survive in the city, despite the city being their only hope to return to the mountains.

The fascination surrounding displaced Appalachians has not disappeared in recent times, though the framing has shifted a bit. Attempting to rekindle the excitement garnered by *The Beverly Hillbillies* in the 1960s, CBS proposed a new reality show titled *The Real Beverly Hillbillies* in 2002 which would transplant a real-life Appalachian family into a Beverly Hills mansion. To cast the show, CBS launched what critics dubbed a “hick hunt” in the rural South, even circulating fliers offering a \$1000 reward for tips leading to a suitable family throughout many of Kentucky’s poorest counties.<sup>160</sup> These fliers specified the type of family executives had in mind – “Parents in their 40s with children ages 17–25. Grandparents and other kin invited” – and offered up to \$500,000 to the family willing to relocate to California.<sup>161</sup> Many in the region found the search and the show itself to be offensive, a plot detailed by the Center for Rural Strategies in Whitesburg, Kentucky: “The concept of the show was simple: Take a poor family from rural America and set them up in California with all the trappings of affluence. Then let the cameras roll as the family copes with rich neighbors, electronic gadgets, and cultural clashes. *‘Imagine the episode where they have to interview maids,’* said one CBS executive.”<sup>162</sup>

Ultimately, production on the show was cancelled, thanks in large part to the Center for Rural Strategies’ campaign against the show which received national and international attention,

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<sup>159</sup> McCarroll, 72.

<sup>160</sup> Angela Cooke-Jackson and Elizabeth K. Hansen, “Appalachian Culture and Reality TV: The Ethical Dilemma of Stereotyping Others,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 23 (2008): 183, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08900520802221946>.

<sup>161</sup> Meg James, “‘Beverly Hillbillies’? CBS has struck crude, Appalachia says,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 11, 2003, quoted in Cooke-Jackson and Hansen, 183.

<sup>162</sup> “Campaign to Stop ‘The Real Beverly Hillbillies,’” *Center for Rural Strategies*, accessed December 7, 2020, <https://www.ruralstrategies.org/the-real-beverly-hillbillies>.

including press coverage in the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Guardian*.<sup>163</sup> Interest in a reality show about displaced hillbillies, however, was not cancelled, as a new show on mountain migrants appeared on a different network in 2014. Reelz's *Hollywood Hillbillies* escaped the pre-production backlash which had foiled CBS a decade earlier by selecting a young, rural YouTube star for the role. Michael Kittrell, known on YouTube as "CopperCab," went viral in 2010 after posting a three-minute rant titled "GINGERS DO HAVE SOULS!!"<sup>164</sup> *Hollywood Hillbillies* is the "story of what happens next" after he and his family move from Georgia to Los Angeles to expand his brand.<sup>165</sup> The show clearly intends to tell a "fish out of water" story, capitalizing on the Kittrell family's unfamiliarity with the world of Hollywood and characterizing them as a family of outrageous country bumpkins:

*Hollywood Hillbillies* chronicles the hilarious antics of internet superstars Michael "The Angry Ginger" and his "Mema" as they trade in their simple country living in Georgia for the bright lights of Hollywood. With the fame and fortune from more than 150 million YouTube views, Michael, his grandma Mema, aunt Dee Dee, uncle "Big" John, and the rest of the clan are ready to take Hollywood by storm. The question is not whether they are ready for LA, but rather is LA ready for these outrageous Hollywood Hillbillies?<sup>166</sup>

*Hollywood Hillbillies* aired for 23 episodes and quietly ended production due to poor ratings.<sup>167</sup>

Despite their apparently poor reception, series such as *The Real Beverly Hillbillies* and *Hollywood Hillbillies* are predicated on an underlying belief that Appalachian "hillbillies" do not

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<sup>163</sup> Rudy Abramson, "Up From CBS Comes Bubbling Crudity," *Los Angeles Times*, December 1, 2002, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2002-dec-01-oe-abramson1-story.html>; Duncan Campbell, "Southerners rebel over hillbilly reality TV show," *The Guardian*, February 12, 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2003/feb/12/realitytv.broadcasting>.

<sup>164</sup> "GINGERS DO HAVE SOULS!!", YouTube video, 2:59, self-recorded, posted by CopperCab, January 14, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EY39fkmqKBM>.

<sup>165</sup> Mary McNamara, "Review: 'Hollywood Hillbillies' – how did it take so long?", *Los Angeles Times*, January 20, 2014, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/showtracker/la-et-st-hollywood-hillbillies-reelz-20140120-story.html>.

<sup>166</sup> "About Hollywood Hillbillies," *Reelz*, accessed December 7, 2020, <https://www.reelz.com/hillbillies/>.

<sup>167</sup> "'Hollywood Hillbillies' Alum Michael Kittrell Is Allegedly Dating His Half-Sister," *Distractify*, last modified September 2020, <https://www.distractify.com/p/what-happened-to-hollywood-hillbillies>.

belong in the outside world – even when, as in *The Pride of Jesse Hallam* and *The Dollmaker*, there is a concurrent belief that the outside world is all that will save them.

### **White Appalachia: Christian Male Dominance and POC Erasure**

Although Appalachia has been historically characterized in conflicting and overlapping ways – both placeless *and* place-bound, deserving of pity *and* worthy of fright – one theme has remained largely unchanged: Appalachia is overwhelmingly presented as a place of white, (often extremist) Christian men. Although nearly 20% of the Appalachian region is nonwhite (including Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, and other races) and has become increasingly diverse since 2010, Appalachia is all but synonymous with whiteness.<sup>168</sup> McCarroll describes Appalachian representation as “phenotypically white” – in other words, whiteness is a precondition of Appalachianness when represented in media.<sup>169</sup> Because of this, most media about Appalachia does not call attention to whiteness; it simply features heavily (or exclusively) individuals who are white and excludes those who are not. This correlation between Appalachianness and whiteness in media is so strong, in fact, that Appalachian author Elizabeth Catte noted in a 2018 op-ed for *The Guardian* that her most recent Google search of “Appalachian photography” pulled up “three times more images of white people in coffins than living people of color.”<sup>170</sup>

While Appalachian whiteness remains mostly seen and not heard, some media about Appalachia *does* get explicit about race – and about Appalachian whiteness as something distinct from general whiteness. This distinction can be traced to a time before Appalachia was

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<sup>168</sup> Kevin Pollard and Linda A. Jacobsen, *The Appalachian Region: A Data Overview from the 2014-2018 American Community Survey*, Washington, D.C.: Appalachian Regional Commission, 2020, 22-29, <https://www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/DataOverviewfrom2014to2018ACS.pdf>.

<sup>169</sup> McCarroll, 13.

<sup>170</sup> Elizabeth Catte, “Passive, poor and white? What people keep getting wrong about Appalachia,” *The Guardian*, February 6, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/feb/06/what-youre-getting-wrong-about-appalachia>.

recognized as a cultural or geographic region. An 1847 article on the South Carolina backwoods titled “The Carolina Sand-Hillers,” for example, describes the rural folk as “peculiar in dress and looks...as distinct a race as the Indian.”<sup>171</sup> Later writers distinguished Appalachians as neither “white” nor “nonwhite” but as a distinct “‘Cracker’ race” in all ways so debased that they had no capacity for social advancement.”<sup>172</sup> A correspondent from Boston’s *Daily Advertiser* confirmed this attitude in 1866, predicting that “time and effort will lead the negro up to intelligent manhood...but I almost doubt if it will be possible to ever lift this ‘white trash’ into respectability.”<sup>173</sup>

Following the establishment of Appalachia as a region, popular media too began to make explicit the whiteness of Appalachians. The opening title of Brown’s 1927 *Stark Love* introduces its Appalachian characters as “an isolated and primitive people, descendants of the British pioneers.”<sup>174</sup> The popular comic strips *Snuffy Smith* and *Li’l Abner* of the 1930s also focus on their characters’ whiteness, albeit in different ways. DeBeck’s *Snuffy Smith* emphasizes the in-between social hierarchical space that his Appalachian characters occupy by demonstrating their position below “normal” white characters but above African American characters. Harkins explains this positioning further:

Whereas numerous characters in positions of status and authority (businessmen, bankers, judges, lawyers) commonly refer to Snuffy and his kin as “hill-billies,” “yokey(s),” and, even on one occasion, “back-woods trash,” black characters almost never call him anything other than “suh” or “boss.” [...] In panels such as this, DeBeck asserts unequivocally Snuffy's whiteness through his domination over African-American figures, a quality that is meant to mitigate the degrading aspects of his character and to reinforce his role as mythic hero.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> “The Carolina Sand-Hillers,” (*Boston*) *Odd Fellow*, September 15, 1847, 193, quoted in Harkins, 16.

<sup>172</sup> Harkins, 17.

<sup>173</sup> Boston *Daily Advertiser* correspondent quoted in *The Congressional Globe*, 39<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session (Washington, D.C.: F & J Rives, 1866), 552, quoted in Harkins, 17.

<sup>174</sup> Brown, *Stark Love*, quoted in Harkins, 147.

<sup>175</sup> Harkins, 118.

Capp's *Li'l Abner*, on the other hand, emphasizes Appalachian whiteness by excluding Black characters from the comic completely. This omission can be attributed in part to a mandate of all newspaper syndicates of the era to avoid potentially controversial topics and a deep-seated (but incorrect) belief that the Southern mountains were a place untouched by slavery and racial tensions. But Capp's exclusion of Black characters also says something about what his Appalachian characters are meant to signify: "[T]he mountaineers in this strip took the place of their black counterparts in other comic strips and throughout Depression-era popular culture; they are the clownish buffoons, the country innocents in the big city, the servants of socially superior white employers, or, in the case of the murderous Scraggs, the violent savages who threaten social order."<sup>176</sup> Ultimately, these images reveal a deeper assumption: Although whiteness is essential to Appalachianness, they are a different, "other" white.

News accounts of the Appalachian diaspora in the 1950s similarly emphasized the mountain migrants' whiteness. As Harkins explains, in addition to a focus on Appalachians' backwardness and potential criminality, these reports described a people who "despite their 'superior' racial heritage threatened the comity of the industrial heartland."<sup>177</sup> James Maxwell's 1956 article "Down from the Hills and into the Slums" describes Appalachian migrants in overtly racial terms: "After opening with a quote from an Indianapolis resident fearful of an uncivilized and dangerously independent population, Maxwell then informs his presumably shocked readers that this group was not Puerto Ricans or Mexicans but 'white Anglo-Saxon Protestants,' a group 'usually considered to be the most favored in American society.'"<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Harkins, 128.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid, 174.

<sup>178</sup> Harkins, 176; Maxwell, "Down from the Hills," quoted in Harkins, 176.

The 1958 *Harper's* article "The Hillbillies Invade Chicago" contains similarly racialized language, opening with the claim that "The cities' toughest integration problem has nothing to do with Negroes" but rather "involves a small army of white Protestant, Early American migrants from the South."<sup>179</sup> This reference to integration, especially, indicates an underlying distinction between Appalachian whites and a more general whiteness.

Although much pre-Civil Rights movement media on Appalachia emphasized Appalachians' place in the social hierarchy – subordinate to "normal" whites but indisputably above African Americans – perhaps no media reinforced Appalachians' white superiority quite as much as *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971). Like many sitcoms of the era, *The Beverly Hillbillies* only sparingly featured African American characters, but unlike others, the Clampetts were brazen and unashamed supporters of the Confederate South. Harkins explains the family's allegiance:

*The Beverly Hillbillies* portrayed not only humble but proud southerners but also self-avowed neo-Confederates, who saluted the rebel flag and cheered Jefferson Davis as the greatest president who ever lived. Although Granny is the most adamant in her allegiance to the Old South, even in one episode proudly donning a Confederate uniform, all the Clampetts at least implicitly embraced their Confederate heritage.<sup>180</sup>

Harkins argues that the show's association of neo-Confederacy with the Clampetts' other positive traditional values sent a not-inconsequential message to a Civil Rights-era audience, especially as "the evening news almost daily featured civil rights activists being taunted and harassed by southern whites bearing rebel flags and promoting Confederate heroes."<sup>181</sup> He concludes with the analysis that the *Hillbillies'* rampant popularity with a broad swath of Americans during this period "cannot be divorced from its promotion and defense, however

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<sup>179</sup> Votaw, "The Hillbillies Invade Chicago," quoted in Harkins, 176.

<sup>180</sup> Harkins, 197.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid*, 198.

unspoken, of historical segregationists at a time of widespread racial struggle.”<sup>182</sup> Thus, *The Beverly Hillbillies*’ Clampetts demarcate themselves as indisputably white – though it is a whiteness of racism and inequality, one of a pre-Civil War South rather than a progressive 1960s America.

Appalachian whiteness was used to further other political and social agendas, as well. The whiteness of Appalachian people was often a central focus of War on Poverty media, always containing the implicit argument that Appalachian poverty was an urgent matter because white people should not be poor. Michael Harrington’s influential novel *The Other America* put the whiteness of both Appalachian residents and migrants front and center, presenting the region as “the locus of white poverty in America, equivalent to the Black poor of the nation’s inner cities.”<sup>183</sup> Much War on Poverty-era media similarly focused on white poverty, “offering proof that poverty was a problem facing the entire nation and not just inner-city minorities” and thus should be swiftly eradicated.<sup>184</sup> In this way, the distinction of Appalachian people as white meant that their disadvantaged position needed to be corrected, though their poverty nonetheless marked them as something inherently different from middle-class white Americans.

In addition to the “phenotypical” whiteness of Appalachian representation, these images are generally highly male-centric, featuring men in positions of power and women as subordinate figures. McCarroll separates depictions of Appalachian women into four categories, two of which focus on characters’ temperament and two of which focus on their age. Here I will concentrate on the archetypes of personality: the downtrodden “drudge,” most often portrayed “quietly toiling, silently obeying, and drawing empathy without being fully developed into a

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<sup>182</sup> Harkins, 199.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid, 185.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

character,” and the wily “feist,” who is “outspoken, direct, [and] a bit wild” and “may find success or dignity in the realms in which they exist, but they are stripped of full access to female hero status in their portrayal.”<sup>185</sup> In both cases, these characters are secondary (usually to the men who ultimately control their lives) and never fully the agents of their own destinies; instead, these women “inhabit the space of the other, even when they are the primary figures of a text.”<sup>186</sup>

The mountain drudge has historically been the most common way in which Appalachian women are portrayed in media, as it has long contained associations with poverty and primitiveness. These connections can be seen in the earliest descriptions of mountain folk, including William Byrd II’s *History of the Dividing Line* written in 1728. As noted in the quote from this account in the section focused on images of Degraded Appalachia, Byrd not only calls the mountaineers lazy but specifically claims that all the work is performed by “the poor Women,” who “rise out of their Beds early in the Morning, at the same time that [the men] lye and Snore...”<sup>187</sup> Byrd’s disgust with the region stems not only from what he perceives as the men’s slothfulness but on the perpetual toil of the women who serve them.

Later scientific and ethnographic work of the region also portrayed mountain women as unceasing laborers at the mercy of men. Sherman and Henry’s 1933 study *Hollow Folk*, for example, describes a scene in which a group of mountain women listen with rapt attention to a story of Goldilocks and the three bears, a rare opportunity for entertainment: “But these are not wide-eyed three-year-olds. They are the mothers of large families. They have tramped in, barefoot, from their isolated cabins over mountain pathways and the dried courses of brooks to hear once more about Goldilocks...”<sup>188</sup> McCarroll argues that women were often portrayed as

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<sup>185</sup> McCarroll, 45-46.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>187</sup> Byrd, *History of the Dividing Line*, 27.

<sup>188</sup> Sherman and Henry, *Hollow Folk*, 111.

silent and doleful in these nonfiction works because they contribute to an overall pitiable representation of the region as a whole; after all, “a back-talking woman does not deserve pity.”<sup>189</sup>

However, some depictions of oppressed mountain women went beyond a general bid for pity and toward a representation of mountain women’s lives that was downright frightening. Perhaps the best example of this genre is the 1937 Warner Bros. film *Mountain Justice* – unofficially based on the case of Edith Maxwell, a young Virginia girl who was found guilty by an all-male jury of murdering her father although he had drunkenly attacked her with a knife. In press accounts of the case, though, and similarly in the movie, the real source of injustice was not the perpetrator of the crime or the jury which found her guilty, but “a backward-looking and generalized ‘mountain culture’ that enforced absolute male authority.” Thus, *Mountain Justice* centers on themes of patriarchal rule and an almost medieval “Hill Billy Justice” (the film’s original title) that is “little more than mob rule.”<sup>190</sup>

Early in the film, the cruel father lashes his daughter Ruth with a bullwhip for disobeying his order to marry a seedy mountain man; as the altercation turns violent, Ruth accidentally kills her father in self-defense and is later found guilty for his murder. Toward the film’s end, an angry mob of mountaineers, outraged by Ruth’s “lenient” punishment (25 years in prison), don Ku Klux Klan-like sacks over their heads and attempt to lynch her.<sup>191</sup> *Mountain Justice* portrays Appalachian women as not only at the total mercy of men but Appalachian culture itself as toxic – even deadly – for women.

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<sup>189</sup> McCarroll, 47.

<sup>190</sup> Harkins, 156.

<sup>191</sup> *Mountain Justice*, directed by Michael Curtiz (1937; Los Angeles: Warner Bros.).

Even in representations less horrific, mountain drudges are commonly presented in total misery and often only in relation to male characters. The 1941 film *Sergeant York* typifies this portrayal, as Ma York, widowed mother to the young Tennessee soldier Alvin York, exists only to work the barren land and serve her three children. The only activities Ma is seen performing throughout the film are “worshipping, cooking, and working. She rarely speaks, never smiles, [and] has the look of a woman who has lived a long and grueling life.”<sup>192</sup> She walks a long distance to the store in town, sends her son off with food while she goes without, and performs no action that does not relate to her role as a mother, farmer, or housekeeper. Ma York is “utterly humorless...bereft of any semblance of joy” – a joy that has been stolen by her unceasing labor and duty to serve her children.<sup>193</sup>

Despite a backlash to depictions of Appalachian women as “hardworking, silent [women] who...produce so many children” that became typical of the 1930s and 1940s, this narrative was perpetuated into the War on Poverty era, even by those who were from and presumed to speak for the region.<sup>194</sup> Henry Caudill’s 1962 *Night Comes to the Cumberland*s, an influential novel of the time that has since been called the “master narrative” of Appalachia, merely extended a vision of Appalachia as downtrodden and inescapably miserable, including prior notions of women as drudges. Although Caudill does not focus specifically on the experiences of women, he describes Appalachia as a whole as “silently toiling, wildly impoverished, [and] distinctly uncultured” and mountaineers as “embittered rejects and outcasts from the shores of Europe – as cynical, hardened and bitter a lot as can be imagined outside prison walls.”<sup>195</sup> Though Caudill

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<sup>192</sup> McCarroll, 117.

<sup>193</sup> *Sergeant York*, directed by Howard Hawks (1941; Los Angeles: Warner Bros.); McCarroll, 118.

<sup>194</sup> McCarroll, 114.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid*; Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberland*s, quoted in McCarroll, 114.

does not paint a picture specifically of the mountain drudge serving at the mercy of men, his image of Appalachia certainly builds upon and perpetuates these notions.

Opposite the misery of the drudge is the headstrong and rambunctious feist, who despite her willfulness cannot escape her subordinate position. This archetype first appeared in the early 1900s due to an interest in the tension between Victorian-era notions of the role of women and the supposed backwardness and unfemininity of women in the mountains. At least half a dozen films explored this tension in the first four years of the medium's existence, representing mountain women as fiercely independent and able to hold their own. In films such as *Bonnie of the Hills* (1911) and *A Mountain Tragedy* (1912), women are portrayed as capable of wielding guns to defend their homes when men are not present. However, when the man returns (or wakes up), the gun is placed in his hands and the woman's subordinate position is revealed.<sup>196</sup>

More modern portrayals of the feist present the woman as a complicated and capable figure but ultimately subject to the control of another (or of her mountain culture more broadly). Such is the case in the 2010 *Winter's Bone*, as Ree successfully navigates her cruel mountain town (enduring unthinkable hardship to do so) in order to save her family's home. However, despite her bravery and cunning, by the film's end she finds herself still at the mercy of the criminal family who killed her father, and of the troubles that are sure to come in her dysfunctional mountain society. Ree may have succeeded in her quest, but she is no hero.<sup>197</sup>

Other representations of Appalachian women do not quite fit within the drudge/feist binary, though they certainly draw upon these themes and do not stray from women's role as secondary characters. One example that draws from both categories is the character of Ruby

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<sup>196</sup> *Bonnie of the Hills*, directed by Mark Dintenfass (1911; Coytesville, NJ: Champion Film Company); *A Mountain Tragedy*, directed by Pat Hartigan (1912; New York: Kalem Company); McCarroll, 119.

<sup>197</sup> Debra Granik, *Winter's Bone*.

Thewes (played by Renée Zellweger) in the 2003 film *Cold Mountain*. Set in Civil War-era North Carolina, the film is a love story between young Southern belle and South Carolina transplant Ada Monroe (played by Nicole Kidman) and Confederate deserter W.P. Inman (played by Jude Law). Zellweger's Ruby, meanwhile, is undeniably secondary, a role that is established within the first few minutes of the film:

[S]he will provide comic relief, she will juxtapose the southern belle, and she will serve as secondary helpmate to protagonist Ada Monroe. Her practical abilities, presented in a forthcoming manner with little regard for etiquette, disarm and ultimately save a distraught and helpless Ada. Her delivery of this support presents a full and complex human being as a caricature of a mountain woman.<sup>198</sup>

Ruby, a rough and often unbecoming mountain woman, draws from elements of both the drudge and the feist, as she unflinchingly and relentlessly performs what Ada considers to be “man’s work” yet is also assertive and bold toward those who underestimate her. Despite her strength, though, Ruby is irrefutably subordinate to nearly every other character in the film and especially to the delicate and proper Ada.<sup>199</sup> McCarroll describes Ruby’s role in the film as related to a “mammy” figure typically seen in representations of African American women. “Through her knowledge of land, her pragmatism, and her nongendered survival skills,” McCarroll writes, Ruby’s purpose is to “[save] the weak but beautiful woman while maintaining a secondary position.”<sup>200</sup> And while Ruby is primarily secondary to another woman and not to a man, it is her status as a woman of the mountains which puts her there.

The final way in which Appalachian diversity is oversimplified is through its portrayal as entirely Christian in religion, a Christianity that is often extremist in nature. Perhaps a more recent addition to Appalachian representation, and generally coinciding with major social and

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<sup>198</sup> McCarroll, 49.

<sup>199</sup> *Cold Mountain*, directed by Anthony Minghella (2003; New York: Miramax).

<sup>200</sup> McCarroll, 50-51.

political events such as the Civil Rights movement and Trump presidency, these images often depict Appalachian people as religious fanatics and adherents to an unusual and even deviant brand of Christianity. The 1967 documentary *Holy Ghost People*, directed by Peter Adair, centers on a Pentecostal snake-handling church in West Virginia whose members, in addition to handling poisonous snakes, speak in tongues and convulse violently on the floor. The beginning of the film contains several shots of run-down homes while the narrator introduces the concept of Holy Ghost churches, of which “thousands are scattered among the hills” in Appalachia. The particular church featured in the film handles “copperheads and rattlesnakes, caught in the hills and kept in the homes of the members” and the narrator notes that “snake-handlers are frequently bitten and rarely accept medical aid” and many have died. Footage of a church service is interspersed with interviews of congregants, one of whom convulses on camera and goes in and out of speaking in tongues. The film’s final scene shows the end of the service, during which a member handles a snake while collecting other members’ church offerings and is suddenly bitten, ending on a shot of the man’s swollen hand.<sup>201</sup> While the film is mostly neutral in tone, it presents a controversial religious practice as one that is largely unique to and representative of the Appalachian region.

This topic is tackled again in the two-part documentary *My Life Inside: The Snake Church*, released in 2018 by London-based media company Truly (formerly known as Barcroft TV). Intended primarily for an online audience, this documentary takes a highly sensationalist approach to the story of Cody Coots, the leader of a Kentucky snake-handling church who is bitten by a rattlesnake on camera during a service. The opening shots of the film exemplify its overall tone, beginning with ominous music and dramatic special effects which make the film

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<sup>201</sup> *Holy Ghost People*, directed by Peter Adair (1967; Thistle Films, 2016), online.

seem more like a horror movie than a documentary. The caption below the first part of the film (available on YouTube) describes the “shocking footage” which shows “Cody Coots - his shirt splattered in blood - collapsing and being helped from his altar as the snake’s potentially lethal poison begins to take hold.” The description further explains that *My Life Inside* provides viewers with “unprecedented access to people who’ve chosen to live outside the norms of modern mainstream society.”<sup>202</sup> Comments beneath the video refer to the church as a “cult” and “church from hell” and its members as “extremest” (sic).<sup>203</sup> Other comments refer, directly and indirectly, to the mountain culture in which the church exists, saying that “this is why you don’t marry your cousins,” that these are “the same people who voted for [M]itch [McConnell],” and asking, “What in the trailer park hell is going on?”<sup>204</sup> Like *Holy Ghost People*, *My Life Inside* stresses snake handling as a product of Appalachian culture, but unlike *Holy Ghost People*, it is here a topic intended for spectacle and derision.

Religious fanaticism and deviance in Appalachia is also a theme of the 2020 psychological thriller *The Devil All the Time*, starring Tom Holland, Bill Skarsgård, and Robert Pattinson. Set in southeastern Ohio and with strong ties to West Virginia, the film features two fanatical evangelical preachers (played by Robert Pattinson and Harry Melling), one of whom pours venomous spiders over his head and later believes he has the power to resurrect the dead; the other rapes and impregnates a young girl, who hangs herself. The film is full of evangelical imagery but often with a horrific or satanic twist, such as a scene in which a man sacrifices his

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<sup>202</sup> *My Life Inside: The Snake Church*, directed by Dan Howlett (2018; London: Barcroft TV, 2018), online; “Snake-Handling Pastor Bitten By Deadly Rattlesnake | MY LIFE INSIDE: THE SNAKE CHURCH,” YouTube video, 12:15, from *My Life Inside: The Snake Church*, posted by truly, August 16, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7OcoUyXiuU0>.

<sup>203</sup> Jay Jay, 2018, comment on “Snake Handling-Pastor”; Brynn Hill, 2018, comment on “Snake-Handling Pastor”; James Rozine, August 2020, comment on “Snake-Handling Pastor.”

<sup>204</sup> sanleunam, 2018, comment on “Snake-Handling Pastor”; Cifer, December 6, 2020, comment on “Snake-Handling Pastor”; gtgrnhuh1, 2018, comment on “Snake-Handling Pastor.”

dog in front of a rough cross he constructed in his backyard in an attempt to rid his wife of cancer.<sup>205</sup> Although clearly a horror film, the choices to base the film in Appalachia and to include fanatical elements (such as the venomous spiders) are significant, implying a belief that Appalachia is uniquely suited for such a disturbing religiously-centered story.

Of course, these three examples are quite extreme, but they are the exceptions which prove the rule. Very little media which showcases the diversity of religious belief in Appalachia (including other Christian denominations but also non-Christian religions such as Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism) exists, despite these belief systems being significant in the region and altogether more common than snake-handling and other divergent religious practices. Rather, when Appalachian religious belief is portrayed (though an admittedly rare phenomenon), it is fanatical, deviant, and often deadly.

### **Conclusion: Appalachian Types in Media**

Appalachia has historically been portrayed through a constellation of competing, overlapping, and conflicting imagery. Although a plethora of Appalachian representation types exist (a full taxonomy is beyond the scope of this thesis), I have divided a selection of its most common forms into four broad categories: Degraded, Violent, Displaced, and White. These images have often been deployed in service of a political or social agenda, such as the launching of the War on Poverty, the eradication of Appalachian people from midwestern cities, or as backlash to or explanation for historical events such as the Civil Rights movement and Trump presidency. Regardless of intention, though, images of Appalachia in media have coalesced to form one overarching message: Appalachia is something “other,” a place and people set apart

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<sup>205</sup> *The Devil All the Time*, directed by Antonio Campos (2020; New York: Nine Stories Productions, 2020), Netflix.

from the rest of the country and the world. Over a century of being “othered” has had devastating effects on the region, as discussed in the Introduction, and thus requires action to correct.

However, with such a long iconographic and cultural legacy haunting the region and its efforts to advance at every turn, Appalachia needs more than a simple end to its current mainstream depictions; it needs counter-representations which reinhabit, diffuse, and deconstruct these age-old destructive images. In the following chapters, I will examine two documentaries which attempt to do just this – Elaine McMillion Sheldon’s *Hollow* and my own *Appalachian Retelling Project* – using co-creative media practices.

### ***Hollow's* Multi-Layered Approach to Co-Creation**

What is the meaning of *home*? Why is a home worth preserving? How do you sustain your home's existence when the rest of the world – and maybe even some of your neighbors – have written it off as a lost cause? Residents of a rural West Virginian county wrestle with these questions and more in Elaine McMillion Sheldon's 2013 documentary *Hollow*. Inspired by the phenomenon of “rural brain drain” – McMillion Sheldon herself is a West Virginian who left the state in search of career opportunities – *Hollow* explores the “hollowing out” of the Appalachian hollers (hollows, for the uninitiated) and contemplates the future of life for those who remain.<sup>206</sup> Centered on the residents of McDowell County, West Virginia, an area with a population of 22,000 at the time of the film's release (compared to its peak of 100,000 in the 1950s), *Hollow* attempts to complicate notions of what it means to be a “dying town” – juxtaposing statistics usually used to describe the area, such as high rates of poverty, drug use, and teenage pregnancy, with glimpses into the personal lives of those who live there.<sup>207</sup> Though the subject matter of *Hollow* is broad, split into six thematic chapters covering issues such as healthcare, infrastructure, community initiatives, and the impact and future of the coal industry, the film's sprawling content can all be tied back to an overarching question: What is the future of McDowell County?

An early leader in the genre, *Hollow* is an interactive web documentary comprised of over 30 short-form video portraits (shot by McMillion Sheldon), community video, photographs,

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<sup>206</sup> Elaine McMillion Sheldon, “Hollow: Our Lessons Learned (Part 1),” Tribeca Film Institute, January 21, 2014, YouTube video, 30:23, <https://youtu.be/el8x3MSmC9k>; DCRC, “Elaine McMillion-Sheldon case study: Hollow,” i-Docs, March 21, 2014, Vimeo video, 44:52, <https://vimeo.com/102113234>.

<sup>207</sup> “Hollow: Our Lessons Learned (Part 1);” Magnum Foundation, “HOLLOW – Case Study Presentation,” Magnum Foundation, 2015, Vimeo video, 18:34, <https://vimeo.com/112433263>.

soundscapes, data visualizations, and community- and user-generated content. Created in HTML5, users navigate the experience primarily by scrolling vertically through each section, as well as by clicking on video portraits and other “unlockable” content including community photographs, footage, and music.<sup>208</sup> Though *Hollow* contains over four hours of content in all, users have the ability to experience the story as quickly or as slowly as they would like, scrolling through sections of lesser appeal and spending more time on the people and issues they find most interesting.<sup>209</sup>

While *Hollow*'s approach to interactivity was certainly considered groundbreaking following its premiere in 2013, the film's approach to co-creation is perhaps even more impactful. As Cizek and Uricchio write, co-creation marks an alternative to single-authorship, allows projects to emerge from within the community, may span across disciplines, and reframes the ethics of media creation through a lens of equity and justice.<sup>210</sup> By working closely with and listening attentively to the communities portrayed in the film, allowing participants to create (and receive credit for) their own material, working with the goal of changing attitudes about and within McDowell County in mind, and fostering close collaborations between members of the *Hollow* team throughout the production, editing, and design process, *Hollow* embraces co-creation on many levels.

### **Within Communities, Across Disciplines: *Hollow*'s Approach to Co-Creation**

*Hollow*'s approach to documentary co-creation is certainly multifaceted. Embracing elements of participatory storytelling, deep listening, collaboration with (and within)

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<sup>208</sup> *Hollow*, directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon (2013; self-published), online, <http://hollowdocumentary.com>; MIT Open Documentary Lab, “Hollow,” Docubase, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://docubase.mit.edu/project/hollow/>.

<sup>209</sup> “Elaine McMillion-Sheldon case study: Hollow.”

<sup>210</sup> Cizek et al., “We Are Here.”

communities, and a cross-disciplinary design and editing process, *Hollow* exemplifies what it means to take part in an “equal, shared discovery process” rather than acting entirely in the interest of one media-maker.<sup>211</sup> Though interviews with members of the team reveal that the process of making the film was at times messier than an organized taxonomy would adequately express, it is nonetheless possible to arrange *Hollow*’s approach to co-creation into three distinct categories: co-creation with a community; co-creation as a member of a community; and cross-disciplinary co-creation.

#### *Co-Creative Methodology #1: Co-Creation with a Community*

The involvement of the residents of McDowell County, and of West Virginians more broadly, in the making of *Hollow* is perhaps the most integral element of the film’s production. Director Elaine McMillion Sheldon decided to create a participatory film early in the project’s development, largely because of a desire to build trust with community members who would likely be skeptical of her intentions – primarily due to the prevalence of “parachute journalists” from national media organizations who often made quick trips to the county to report a (usually negative) story.<sup>212</sup> McMillion Sheldon describes her reasoning in an interview:

The participatory elements felt really important because I’m not from McDowell. [...] Just because you’re from West Virginia doesn’t mean you’re from a particular part of West Virginia, and different parts feel more open and closed to different other parts. [...] I knew that was for good reason...They [McDowell Countians] feel very left behind in many ways, and have been exploited to no end by everybody dropping in to tell their story. And so I just didn’t want to be another person dropping in to tell their story. It was very clear that when I showed up, I wasn’t the first person they had met with a camera. And so I was interested in not just repeating the same; if I was going to be trying to

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<sup>211</sup> Cizek et al., “We Are Here.”

<sup>212</sup> “Hollow: Our Lessons Learned (Part 1)”; Woodstock Digital Media Festival, “Elaine McMillion Sheldon at the 2014 Woodstock Digital Media Festival,” Woodstock Digital Media Festival, March 2, 2015, YouTube video, 36:38, <https://youtu.be/VEADPtGspk8>.

subvert the images and the ideas of this place, then it couldn't just be done through my perspective.<sup>213</sup>

This community participation and trust-building process occurred in a multitude of forms, many of which took place for nearly a year before McMillion Sheldon began filming.<sup>214</sup> One such mode of participation was the formation of a Community Advisory Board, an entity McMillion Sheldon described as an important pathway to the formation of trust within and outreach to the community. Including older individuals considered “pillars of the community,” community historians, high school students, and those with a diversity of perspectives and geographic locations around McDowell County, the Community Advisory Board was instrumental in suggesting who McMillion Sheldon would interview for her video portraits (especially suggesting individuals who “hadn't had [their] voice amplified” in the community); they also participated in community workshops and provided feedback on early cuts of the project. Most importantly, though, the Board was a source of accountability for McMillion Sheldon as she navigated representing the community: “When you're trying to do something within a community that you're not from, you need people to have your back. And you need people to hold you accountable. And you need people to ask the hard questions,” she said in an interview.<sup>215</sup> The involvement of a Community Advisory Board early in *Hollow*'s development enabled McDowell Countians to have a voice in their own representation from nearly the very start.

Though the Community Advisory Board undoubtedly played an important role in the co-creative spirit of *Hollow*, it is worth noting the power dynamics of this relationship. The Board's primary role in the pre-production and production process was to make *suggestions* as to who

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<sup>213</sup> Elaine McMillion Sheldon, interview by author, February 5, 2021.

<sup>214</sup> “Hollow: Our Lessons Learned (Part 1).”

<sup>215</sup> Elaine McMillion Sheldon, interview by author.

McMillion Sheldon should meet in the community. McMillion Sheldon gave great weight to these suggestions, noting in an interview that the vast majority of those she interviewed were at the suggestion of the Board; however, the power to choose and include participants ultimately laid with McMillion Sheldon.<sup>216</sup> Similarly, the Board provided feedback on early cuts of *Hollow*, but McMillion Sheldon could implement these suggestions at her own discretion. McMillion Sheldon demonstrated great respect for the opinions of the Board and of the residents of McDowell County in general, but the power to capture and curate material for the final film rested with her, not the Board. While this dynamic can certainly fit within the framework of co-creation, it is nonetheless worth noting the final authority of the director in this project.

A second mode of community participation was the use of participatory video and holding of regular community workshops on site in McDowell County. Because McMillion Sheldon wanted community video to be an integral aspect of the documentary, she held a series of workshops throughout the summer of 2012 in which she taught interested community members how to use camera equipment she had purchased with money from the film's Kickstarter campaign; she also used workshops as an opportunity to screen early cuts of the footage she was shooting herself and occasionally gave participants feedback on their own work. However, McMillion Sheldon said in a presentation at the 2014 i-Docs Symposium that her initial workshop format felt too stiff and formal, causing her to adjust her approach. Eventually, she shifted toward one-on-one meetings with participants throughout the production period and focused more on content than skill, deciding that it was of less importance that community footage was technically precise and more important that the stories behind the footage shone through.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Elaine McMillion Sheldon, interview by author.

<sup>217</sup> "Elaine McMillion-Sheldon case study: *Hollow*."

Furthermore, participants retained a considerable amount of agency in deciding the subject matter of their participatory videos, as they were free to capture footage around any subject they felt was important to document. Before giving a participant a camera, McMillion Sheldon would provide a quick tutorial on how to operate the equipment and the two would discuss potential topics to explore: “We just talked about the topic, so asking questions that really got to the answer of what matters most to them. What did they want to show that I personally can’t show? That was really important to talk about.”<sup>218</sup> However, these conversations were not binding; in fact, in many cases participants would return with content unrelated to their initial conversations with McMillion Sheldon, a challenge she took in stride. For instance, one participant used the camera to shoot still photographs instead of video; these photos became unlockable content which could be viewed after the participant’s video portrait.<sup>219</sup> In other cases, participants returned with footage that at first glance seemed surprisingly negative but which later added depth to their stories. One such example is Shawn Penwarden, a transplant to McDowell County from North Carolina who borrowed the *Hollow* camera with the intent of capturing the abandoned houses and sewage-filled creek in his community. In his video’s “Behind the Scenes” caption on the *Hollow* website, McMillion Sheldon explains what happened next:

I was a little taken aback with his negative shot list, but I let him proceed and figured I would check in with him in a few days and help guide his stories. When I received the camera back, I started going through the media and tried to get an understanding of the stories he shot. After 10 to 15 shots of abandoned houses, trash, dirty creek beds, dead rats and failing infrastructure, Shawn took his camera home with him. He was sitting at the dinner table getting ready to eat when he turned the camera on and pointed it at his 9-month-old baby, Jessica. Baby Jessica is sitting in her highchair making funny faces and trying to talk. She is anxiously awaiting her dinner and smiling as her dad talks to behind

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<sup>218</sup> Elaine McMillion Sheldon, interview by author.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

the camera. What Shawn's camera log revealed to me was that his desire to capture all the negative allowed him to reflect on why he was shooting the previous footage and why it bothered him; the reason was his child and wanting a better life for her.<sup>220</sup>

Although McMillion Sheldon was initially somewhat concerned with Penwarden's direction, the video of his daughter provided critical context and nuance to these negative images: He was unhappy with the state of McDowell County because he wanted it to be a place where his daughter could have a good life. McMillion Sheldon reflects further on the power of this instance of participatory video in an interview, noting that it was a story she would not have captured herself:

I would have never even told him to do that [film baby Jessica]. I wouldn't even think to do that. But he had the camera there. And he looked up and his little baby is smiling and waiting to eat. And he had this moment of like, this is a moment to capture. And those are the moments that you don't see when people just drop in for 24 hours and show the trailer parks and the despair. You don't see the moment before this baby is about to eat or her dad is thinking about the future... And those are moments I can't create because that's a very good personal relationship that he has.<sup>221</sup>

In giving participants the opportunity to collect their own footage, *Hollow* subverts familiar stories about McDowell County by allowing residents to reflect on all their experiences – even the negative ones – on their own terms. Furthermore, these stories would not have been told if McMillion Sheldon had not given participants the space to tell their stories and experiment with the camera, even when she had initial concerns with their direction.

Like the relationship with the Community Advisory Board, it is again important to note the relations of power at play in *Hollow*'s participatory videos. While McMillion Sheldon gave participants the opportunity to capture any material they wanted, the decision to include or exclude the material they shot was hers alone. In many cases, McMillion Sheldon attempted to

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<sup>220</sup> *Hollow*, "A Future for Half Pint," directed by Shawn Penwarden.

<sup>221</sup> Elaine McMillion Sheldon, interview by author.

include material she had not expected to receive (such as still photographs instead of video and Penwarden's recordings of sewage and abandoned houses), but all the material that made it into the final film did so at her discretion, not the participants'. McMillion Sheldon noted in an interview that while she had few regrets in the making of *Hollow*, she did wish she could have edited the participatory videos alongside participants to involve them in the decision-making process. However, she said that time became a major constraint that prevented her from doing so, as she had to make the most of her three-month production period in McDowell County and felt that acquiring material in the field was more important than editing it there.<sup>222</sup>

Participants were also given a great degree of agency in their video portrait portrayals, though McMillion Sheldon acknowledges that this process was overall more curatorial than in the creation of participatory content. Many participants were selected for the project at the suggestion of *Hollow*'s Community Advisory Board, who would offer potential angles on which McMillion Sheldon could focus in the portrait, such as involvement in a particular community initiative or skill as an artist or musician. McMillion Sheldon then interviewed participants about a wide range of topics, many of which – such as thoughts on representation, stereotypes, and the future of McDowell County – remained the same for each participant. However, she would subsequently narrow in on subjects unique to each individual, especially topics for which she could capture relevant footage, a process she referred to as “curating while in the field.”<sup>223</sup>

McMillion Sheldon noted that while most participants were happy to talk about their issues of interest, many also expressed concerns that the final documentary would be a negative or stereotypical representation of their community, prompting McMillion Sheldon to incorporate these concerns into the interview process and the construction of the film itself:

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<sup>222</sup> Elaine McMillion Sheldon, interview by author.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

[I]t was always a conversation around, what is stereotypical? What is truth? What actually is this community? What's not being told about this community? How can we tell it? Who's the best person to tell that story that's not being told? [...] So it's probably the most transparent process I've ever had making a film. Because when you make a traditional documentary, you kind of keep some information to yourself about the making of it, because you don't want the participant in the film to be so aware of the film that they're thinking about the construction of the film. But what was different about this is I wanted them to think about the construction...I wanted them to actively think about how to make this.<sup>224</sup>

Furthermore, McMillion Sheldon allowed each participant to view their edited portrait before the documentary aired, giving them time to provide feedback or suggest changes. However, no participant requested changes to their portrait, speaking to the sense of trust between McMillion Sheldon and her participants and the power of deep listening on the part of the director.<sup>225</sup>

A fourth mode of community participation during the creation of *Hollow* was the implementation of various community projects throughout McDowell County. The film includes footage and photographs of two major community projects that occurred during the production period: a community balloon mapping project and a youth engagement exercise in which members of a youth group imagined and sketched ideas for a new community center in McDowell County. Jeff Soyk, *Hollow*'s art director and UX designer, discussed the experimental nature of these projects in an interview, noting that the team felt the value of these projects laid less in their contribution to the final film and more in the experience of engaging with the community. Soyk reflected in particular on the impact of *Hollow*'s balloon mapping project, in which participants tied a camera to a large balloon and took pictures of their communities from 1000 feet in the air:

I really think that the more rewarding outcome of that was the on the ground experience... And then just capturing these photos, it was interesting to see. Like, the

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<sup>224</sup> Elaine McMillion Sheldon, interview by author.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

Google satellite view of the county is just like, it's wintertime, it's all gray and drab. And they're shooting and it's beautiful – like green, lush, summertime images of their home. So it's just really cool to see that, of them taking ownership of how their home is portrayed visually.<sup>226</sup>

McMillion Sheldon also spoke about these projects in a presentation, revealing that the primary purpose of these initiatives was to enable community members to think about the future of their communities in new ways.<sup>227</sup> Ultimately, co-creative projects such as these were less about benefitting *Hollow* as a film and more about inspiring and aiding the communities *Hollow* documents.

Finally, *Hollow* attempted to engage with the residents of McDowell County even after the film's completion through the construction of a Community News Tool. Created at the request of the community, who felt they did not have adequate means to gather and share ideas online, the tool was initially built as a WordPress platform in which participants could write and post updates about their lives and the issues discussed in the film.<sup>228</sup> However, the *Hollow* team quickly discovered challenges with this approach, as community members found WordPress difficult and time-consuming to use and the project quickly lost momentum. Around a year after the tool's initial release, McMillion Sheldon and Soyk took down the WordPress site and instead linked to a Facebook group, called "McDowell County Community Initiatives," in which community members were already regularly posting updates.<sup>229</sup> Soyk reflected on the challenges of the Community News Tool and the lessons learned from its failure:

I think it was definitely a little, just too optimistic or too hopeful in thinking that people would, on their own time, jump in and become WordPress admins. [...] [We learned to] identify what already exists, you know; don't try and make something new expecting people to use these new tools. The first thing you should definitely do is be like, what are

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<sup>226</sup> Jeff Soyk, interview by author, February 8, 2021.

<sup>227</sup> "Elaine McMillion-Sheldon case study: Hollow."

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Elaine McMillion Sheldon, interview by author.

they already doing? What are they already saying, what are they comfortable already using? And maybe just try and springboard off of that.<sup>230</sup>

Although the Community News Tool was ultimately unsuccessful, its implementation was the result of a desire to give community members a service they wanted and to remind audiences of the ongoing nature of the issues and stories touched upon in *Hollow*.

### *Co-Creative Methodology #2: Co-Creation as a Member of a Community*

Traditional documentary is often associated with anthropology and the idea that a “neutral” outsider can most accurately assess a given event or community; even well-intended and socially-engaged films struggle with the “gaze” of the director and the power imbalance between maker and subject. However, this does not mean that the telling of a story by an outsider is *inherently* wrong. In Part 3 of Cizek and Uricchio’s *Collective Wisdom*, Tabitha Jackson, director of the Documentary Film Program at Sundance Institute, warns against an essentialist view of insiders vs. outsiders in storytelling:

We're all outsiders in some way. It's a very blunt instrument in this kind of conversation and I think for me, it's less about who is telling the stories than who isn't telling the stories. Being an English, mixed-race person, shouldn't necessarily preclude me or expect me to only tell the stories of English mixed-race people. For me it's about ethics. The underlying worry of what has been the power dynamic and so therefore what have been the narratives that have shaped our culture.<sup>231</sup>

Co-creation, then, is a valuable tool in incorporating those who have historically been unable to tell their own stories and in transforming the directorial “gaze” into a conversation between director and participant; neither outcome relies on the director’s status as an “insider” in that particular community. However, while co-creation is certainly possible regardless of one’s status as a member of a community, it is important to acknowledge the differing dynamics,

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<sup>230</sup> Jeff Soyk, interview by author.

<sup>231</sup> Cizek et al., “Media Co-Creation Within Community.”

affordances, and challenges that can come from being an “insider” rather than an “outsider” in a given group.

For *Hollow*, McMillion Sheldon’s status as a West Virginian was a major influence on both the conception and overall creative process of the film. McMillion Sheldon has spoken at length about the role her upbringing in West Virginia had in her desire to document the state in a way that challenged existing stereotypes; perhaps more importantly, though, her ability to claim West Virginia as home played an important role in her ability to gain the trust of McDowell County residents.<sup>232</sup> In an interview, McMillion Sheldon spoke further about the impact of her West Virginia upbringing on the creative process of *Hollow*:

No doubt that being from West Virginia influenced every single image I took... I was constantly thinking about, how's an outsider going to see this? [...] So I tried to find more color and more vibrancy and more beauty and just more humanity within hard situations. So, I mean, it doesn't mean you have to be from West Virginia to make images like that. But I think that your heart's in it in a different way than someone who's coming from elsewhere, who doesn't really feel the responsibility and weight of the community. They're not thinking about, like, what's Renee going to think of this image? Or what's Linda going to think of this portrait of herself, because they don't really care, right? They're coming there to document it for the *Wall Street Journal*, or whoever, and they're leaving and never going to see Linda and Renee ever again. Whereas I knew that my images would have longer trails, they would reverberate into this community... [T]he real opinion I cared about was within the community.<sup>233</sup>

Although having grown up in West Virginia certainly influenced McMillion Sheldon’s approach to documenting the communities depicted in *Hollow*, she noted that gaining the trust of the community was still a slow and at times challenging process, as she inhabited a sort of double space as an “insider” to Appalachia yet “outsider” to the communities she was documenting. Though born in West Virginia, McMillion Sheldon is not from McDowell County

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<sup>232</sup> “HOLLOW – Case Study Presentation”; “Hollow: Our Lessons Learned (Part 1)”; “Elaine McMillion Sheldon at the 2014 Woodstock Digital Media Festival”; Elaine McMillion Sheldon, interview by author.

<sup>233</sup> Elaine McMillion Sheldon, interview by author.

and lived in Boston, Massachusetts at the time of the film's production – both crucial distinctions in Appalachia, where residents tend to be skeptical of outsiders of any kind, especially those who have moved to more elite and urban areas or who are involved in media (an understandable reaction given the region's history of misrepresentation, partially detailed in Chapter 1). However, McMillion Sheldon's upbringing within Appalachia, if not McDowell County specifically, allowed her to enter the production process with an understanding of the pushback she might receive and the factors that would influence her reception in the area. This knowledge drove McMillion Sheldon's decision to have a long pre-production period before filming – and even before launching the Kickstarter campaign to fund the film – in which she could get to know members of the community and gain support for the project. During this time, McMillion Sheldon visited McDowell County on trips home to West Virginia for holidays, messaged back and forth with community members about their lives and recent news coverage of the region, and took suggestions for material she should read or research in preparation for the project; in turn, she provided examples of interactive documentaries that community members might want to watch themselves. When time for production began, McMillion Sheldon continued to engage with the community outside of the filmmaking process as well as within it, even having meals with participants after a day of shooting.<sup>234</sup> As McMillion Sheldon got to know members of the community, they were able to bond further over their shared knowledge of Appalachian culture and issues facing the region:

I think this project would have been really hard to make if I wasn't from West Virginia, at least the way I made it. [...] [T]here was just already an unspoken language that I had with people, that I knew, like, they didn't have to explain coal mining to me. My family's been in coal mining my whole life. They didn't have to explain consolidation of schools, because I grew up in consolidated schools. They didn't have to explain water quality, because I couldn't drink my water. And they didn't have to explain what a food desert is

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<sup>234</sup> Elaine McMillion Sheldon, interview by author.

because [my hometown] was a food desert. So there's just so much shared knowledge that I had from growing up there that I just kind of slipped in, and was able to relate one-on-one without having to be so ignorant... [F]or this form of documentary, it really helped that we had shared knowledge.<sup>235</sup>

Eventually, as McMillion Sheldon was able to prove her commitment to the area and its people, she developed close relationships with many community members – a new phenomenon for her, as she came from a journalism background, a field in which forming friendships with subjects is often considered a threat to objectivity. She described her experience becoming close with participants during production:

[T]hey all kind of adopted me. I became really close to all the people in the film, and they became like family [...] And so this broke the mold in my brain of how to think about participants, not just subjects, right. And so sharing a meal with them was trust building. And then they just opened up over time and learned to trust me more. And you get to know all sides of someone, it's really interesting. [...] I was so interested in the people there that I just spent as much time as possible trying to learn about them. And when you show that amount of enthusiasm for someone's life, they will open the door over and over, and they'll show you things that haven't showed other people. And that was really special.<sup>236</sup>

These relationships became so meaningful, in fact, that McMillion Sheldon still keeps in touch with participants and makes visits to McDowell County eight years later.<sup>237</sup>

In addition to an influence on her approach to working with the community, McMillion Sheldon's upbringing in Appalachia also impacted her approach to sensitive and often controversial issues which affect the region – especially those related to coal mining. The fifth section of the documentary, titled “When Coal Was King,” most heavily explores these difficult subjects, which include black lung disease (a common health issue associated with coal mining), efforts against mountaintop removal, and environmental and alternative energy initiatives in the

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<sup>235</sup> Elaine McMillion Sheldon, interview by author.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

region.<sup>238</sup> Because of coal mining's cultural legacy in the region, McMillion Sheldon understood that many community members would be uncomfortable with these pieces and strived to approach these issues with more nuance than is typical in traditional environmental documentaries. Still, she experienced inner conflict when broaching these topics in the film, as she has her own personal connection to coal mining:

[People in Appalachia] are so uncomfortable talking about any negative impact of coal, because coal has fed their families. And I get it – my dad was a coal miner, and my brother still works in a coal mine. [...] So I tried to have these conversations in a very character-driven way. [...] *Hollow* wasn't a project for me; it was a project for them. And so I worried about them feeling alienated or isolated from any part of it. So it was difficult to cover those things. But it's irresponsible to the history of documentary tradition within Appalachia to not cover those things. It's not truth telling. So there's a balance there.<sup>239</sup>

McMillion Sheldon's understanding of the complexities of coal mining and environmentalism in the region impacted not only the way she approached the content of these pieces, but the order in which they appear in the film as well. Just before the pieces exploring negative aspects of coal, *Hollow* includes a portrait titled "A Dark Day's Work" which follows a group of coal miners through their shift, putting faces to the work of coal mining that bring a complexity to the topic when issues such as mountaintop removal are discussed in subsequent portraits. McMillion Sheldon revealed in a presentation that this ordering was chosen on purpose: Because coal mining, mountaintop removal, and environmentalism are such polarizing topics – especially in the film world, where opposition to coal mining is strong – she placed them together to present both sides of an enormously complicated issue.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> *Hollow*, "When Coal Was King."

<sup>239</sup> Elaine McMillion Sheldon, interview by author.

<sup>240</sup> "Elaine McMillion-Sheldon case study: *Hollow*."

Finally, McMillion Sheldon's upbringing in Appalachia allowed her to broach other difficult topics in the documentary, such as poor water quality, low literacy rates, and declining health, with a deep sensitivity toward members of the community. Because of the prevalence of negative media coverage already surrounding these topics, she felt pressure not to contribute to the phenomenon; however, she felt it was irresponsible to ignore them altogether. Thus, she aimed to reframe the issues facing McDowell County in a more productive way:

I struggle with the idea that negative things we face should somehow be ignored or overlooked, because they're covered in a way that makes us look bad. I really struggle with that, because I think, problems, issues, negative things need to be documented. [...] So there is ultimately a conflict from the get go of, we want a positive portrait of this community. But there are problems. [...] And so those were the conversations I was having really early on with people, like, we can't ignore the fact that the sewage is going into the creek, right? Like this is a problem; it needs to be fixed. And we all agree the problem needs to be fixed. And if we don't draw attention to it, it's going to continue. And so I think there's a way of humanizing these negatives so that they feel more emotionally driven than finger-pointing or blaming or victimizing or pitying. I think that oftentimes when there's negative coverage of Appalachia, the people of Appalachia are either blamed for the issues or they're pitied for their situation. And so when tackling harder subjects like the stuff Shawn did, or the mountaintop removal or the sewage in the creeks, or the low literacy rates...it's about making them about human quality of life and connection more than about the failure of the people, like this blaming the people for the things that they're up against.<sup>241</sup>

McMillion Sheldon's status as a member of the Appalachian community ultimately played a vastly important role in the creation of *Hollow*, providing her with a deep understanding of the best practices in building trust with those in McDowell County and insight into the complexities of issues that are often portrayed one-dimensionally in media. While she aimed to combat stereotypes of West Virginia in her film, she also did not ignore real problems in the region for the sake of positivity; rather, she leveraged her insider knowledge to tackle these topics with nuance and sensitivity.

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<sup>241</sup> Elaine McMillion Sheldon, interview by author.

### *Co-Creative Methodology #3: Co-Creation Across Disciplines*

Though much of what makes *Hollow* such a powerful project is its profound commitment to its subjects during the production period, its co-creative approach did not end when the cameras stopped rolling. Rather, the editing and design process of the final interactive documentary was also based upon a process of collective discovery, this time among artists and technicians working across a variety of disciplines. From this process, the team together created a film in which no one element – video, sound, web design, or interactivity – takes obvious precedence over the others; instead, all of *Hollow*'s elements play an important role in the user's overall experience.

Before choosing a final form or design for *Hollow*, McMillion Sheldon, Soyk, and other members of the team worked together to define *Hollow*'s goals, such as offering a “multi-dimensional portrayal of the diverse people in McDowell County,” communicating “the historical, cultural, social and economic significance of Southern West Virginia through user-generated content, interactive data and interviews with longtime residents,” and building “an interactive world online for people globally to understand the issue of population loss in rural America.”<sup>242</sup> These stated goals were meant to anchor the team as they decided which stories to tell and how to tell them. After experimenting with documentary forms, the team decided to create an interactive documentary due to the story's evolving nature, a desire for user participation, the ability to develop online tools, and a goal to inspire change through interaction. The team then began to organize and plan the content, starting with McMillion Sheldon simply debriefing the team on all those she had filmed in McDowell County; they then began to organize subjects thematically and draw connections between individuals she had filmed. After

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<sup>242</sup> “HOLLOW – Case Study Presentation.”

the team understood the content McMillion Sheldon had captured, they worked through several iterations of story maps and user journeys, including having portraits organized according to each participant's attitude toward the future, building a tiered system of content that was interrupted by unexpected events, and creating an experience in which each user began as a baby and made choices throughout the film that influenced the outcome of the documentary. The team eventually chose *Hollow*'s final structure out of a desire to create a complete narrative arc, avoid isolating content into "buckets," and design an experience that felt "exploratory, but not fragmented."<sup>243</sup>

After working together to settle on the film's structure, the *Hollow* team continued to collaborate as they edited content and designed elements of the experience, combining each team member's strengths to create content that may not have been possible otherwise. For example, sound designer Billy Wirasnik took music, audio, and ambient sound McMillion Sheldon had captured in the field to create soundscapes that shift according to the content on screen as the user scrolls through the experience. In a panel discussion about the film, Wirasnik commented on how vital McMillion Sheldon's contribution was to his ability to create these soundscapes, saying, "You're usually, in most projects, trying to salvage audio. We were finding new ways of using it because we had so much."<sup>244</sup> Wirasnik also elaborated on his role in the film's production, noting that audio was always planned into the design up front and not added in as an afterthought:

Me, Jeff, and Elaine would sit down and kind of hash out each section of the site at a time. A lot of good ideas came out that way for all of us. But it gave me the idea of what ambiances I needed to create, using either sounds she recorded mixed with sounds I recorded, or just manipulating those sounds in a certain way. And then once that

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<sup>243</sup> "Elaine McMillion-Sheldon case study: Hollow."

<sup>244</sup> Elaine McMillion Sheldon, "Hollow: Our Lessons Learned (Part 2)," Tribeca Film Institute, January 21, 2014, YouTube video, 32:33, <https://youtu.be/c-O8A7KwA1g>.

discussion was over, I started working on those sounds [and] Jeff would start working on the layout of [the website].<sup>245</sup>

While collaborations such as these occurred quite fruitfully throughout the post-production period of *Hollow*, designer Soyk noted that creating across disciplines was not always easy. The team often struggled to use a common language and to clearly assign duties to each member, challenges that Soyk said came largely from their relative inexperience working in interactive media:

[You] talk about how a film is typically structured, like the team dynamics and the workflows. With an interactive piece that goes out the window... With a film, it's like a conductor in the orchestra kind of thing, that everyone's in their own kind of compartments of the orchestra... And then with a web project, it's like, gone. And it's a very unfamiliar space. [...] So I think it was those kind of workflows colliding a little bit, like, kind of Elaine knowing the film workflow, and then me knowing the web workflow. And we definitely took some time. It's a huge learning curve, trying to share that space.<sup>246</sup>

Soyk said that it ultimately took the team several months to get on the same page and collaborate as efficiently as he would have liked.

*Hollow's* co-creative ethos spanned the entirety of its production – from working with members of the Community Advisory Board to gain the community's support in pre-production to working across disciplines to collectively plan the final experience in post-production. This ethos, especially when working with the residents of McDowell County, allowed *Hollow* to provide a new lens through which the world could view West Virginia, one that humanized and problematized many of the issues often depicted quite one-dimensionally in popular media. And out of this process, McMillion Sheldon, McDowell Countians, and the *Hollow* team created a host of powerful counter-narratives.

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<sup>245</sup> "Hollow: Our Lessons Learned (Part 2)."

<sup>246</sup> Jeff Soyk, interview with author.

## **“There’s a lot more that’s here”: Appalachian Counter-Narratives in *Hollow***

*Hollow* broaches many subjects – such as drug abuse, unemployment, and the coal industry – that have come to be closely associated with Appalachia; yet, it tackles these topics in ways that complicate and undermine many popular portrayals of these issues in the region. While the themes explored in *Hollow* are quite broad, I have separated the counter-narratives this film produces into three loose categories, which I will examine in turn.

### *Counter-Narrative #1: Rooted*

Counter to a history of representations that portray Appalachia as a place to escape and Appalachians as a displaced people, *Hollow* emphasizes residents’ connection to the place and people of McDowell County, creating a sense of rootedness within and commitment to the area in which they live. *Hollow*’s opening portrait exemplifies this theme: Titled “I know I’m home when I’m in these mountains,” the portrait centers on Alan Johnston, a photographer and musician who has lived in Welch, West Virginia his whole life. Johnston’s love of music came from his father, also a musician in the area, and he has been documenting the region in song for years, as he says, “I feel compelled to write about this area. It’s easy to write about something you love, you know?”<sup>247</sup> Johnston acknowledges that McDowell County will likely never return to its former glory, but expresses a commitment to remaining in the region: “It’s my home, and I love these mountains. I would never be satisfied anywhere else. [...] I could be in Florida, or I could be in Columbus, Ohio. But home is where my heart is, and my heart is right here in McDowell County.”<sup>248</sup> Similarly, Elaine Lacaria, a small business owner in Welch, emphasizes that those who still live in McDowell County are not trapped there or looking to escape: “The

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<sup>247</sup> *Hollow*, “I know I’m home when I’m in these mountains,” directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon.

<sup>248</sup> “I know I’m home...”

ones of us that are still here are here because we choose to be. Not because we have to be, but because this is home.”<sup>249</sup>

Themes of strong connection to both family and the community at large in McDowell County echo throughout *Hollow*. In the film’s final chapter, a portrait centers on Markella Gianato, owner of WV Grocery and Ya’Sou Restaurant in Kimball, West Virginia. Gianato’s family has lived in McDowell County since 1945, and her father and grandfather opened a grocery store shortly after moving to the area. Gianato took over the business in 1980 as her father’s health began to fail; though she had her own dream of opening a restaurant, the business remained a grocery store to honor her father’s legacy. However, McDowell County experienced a series of devastating floods in 2001 which ruined the storefront, an event Gianato saw as a sign to make a change – prompting her to open Ya’Sou Greek Restaurant in 2003. Although the space has changed, Gianato continues to honor her father through the business: “[M]y dad’s story of poverty and hunger is one of the reasons I’m here. And if anybody stops by here and I think they need something to eat, they’re going to get it.” Gianato also points to her relationship with the community as her anchor, saying, “That’s one of the things that keeps me here. And you don’t get that just anywhere. The love you feel from these people is so special. And you can go, you can move, and you can make friends. I can make friends fairly quickly. But I can’t make old friends.”<sup>250</sup>

Residents’ connection to the area shines through even in footage detailing negative events. In a community video titled “Rocket Boys Festival Leaves Coalwood,” 12-year-old Tyler Christian of Coalwood, West Virginia captures footage of the site that was once home to The October Sky Festival, a yearly festival celebrating the accomplishments of Coalwood-born

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<sup>249</sup> *Hollow*, “To attract businesses we have to fix what we have,” directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon.

<sup>250</sup> *Hollow*, “I wanted Ya’Sou to be a place where people feel at home,” directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon.

NASA engineer Homer Hickam. Christian and his friends lament the changing of their home into a “ghost town” and note the closure of many of Coalwood’s stores and community spots. Even still, when Christian is asked what living in Coalwood is like, he replies simply, “It’s a miracle.” When Christian’s friend asks if he thinks the stores will ever return to Coalwood, he says, “It’s going to take a lot of money. If I ever hit the lottery I’d probably fix this place up.”<sup>251</sup> Even as Coalwood seems to be falling down around him, Christian wants only to keep living in the place he loves.

Several other portraits center on residents who wish to remain in McDowell County but are unsure if doing so is possible for them. Darren Blankenship, for example, is a struggling tattoo artist located in Welch. Blankenship’s love of art began at a young age, and he found that becoming a tattoo artist was his best opportunity to make money as an artist in McDowell County. Even so, business is often slow for Blankenship, and he worries that he might have to close his shop and drive a coal truck, as he notes that “the only jobs that make any money around here [are] coal mining.” Although he could likely earn a better living as a tattoo artist somewhere else, he does not want to live far from his son, who lives with his mother. “Which, don’t get me wrong,” Blankenship says, “I would love to just spend the rest of my life right here in this tattoo shop, right here in McDowell County. [...] I love it here. I am happy with spring behind my house, firewood in my stove, food on my table, a garden in the backyard.”<sup>252</sup> At the end of the portrait, McMillion Sheldon reveals that Blankenship was forced to close his shop a year later and began driving a coal truck; ultimately, he sacrificed his career to remain close to his family and in the area that meant so much to him.

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<sup>251</sup> *Hollow*, “Rocket Boys festival leaves Coalwood,” directed by Tyler Christian.

<sup>252</sup> *Hollow*, “I don’t want to waste my talent and go to work in the mines,” directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon.

Josh Clevenger, a high school senior from Iaeger, West Virginia, grapples with a similar problem in his portrait. Clevenger dreams of becoming an actor, a path with few opportunities in his hometown: “I’m destined, I guess, if I want to follow that dream, to leave McDowell County,” he says. Clevenger has seen many from his school leave the area without intention of returning, a pattern he realizes he may have to follow. “Logic dictates that most people aren’t going to come back,” he says. “That’s what we encourage in the school. [...] [W]e want them to go off and be successful, do what they want to do, chase their dream. That’s what they want us to do, and that’s what they’re going to go and do.” Even so, Clevenger feels strong ties to McDowell County and struggles with feelings of guilt over planning to leave: “I do intend on coming back and helping to build at one point in my life. That’s my biggest fear, honestly, is that I would feel bad that I’m not back home.”<sup>253</sup>

Marsha Timpson, co-executive director of Big Creek People in Action in War, West Virginia, speaks more directly to the connection between Appalachia and those who have left for good. Timpson believes that McDowell County has seen a great decline since its heyday and senses that many young people feel “confined” in the region and want to explore the world. Timpson herself left McDowell County when she was young and remained out of the region for many years, but eventually felt a call to return home: “I couldn’t wait to get out of here. I hated this place. Got married when I was 17 and hit the road. [...] [People] always dream of greener pastures. And when you come back, you see all those things you took for granted. These roots...get embedded in our souls. And we are very connected, very connected, to these mountains.” Timpson believes that no matter where they go, those born in Appalachia have a

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<sup>253</sup> *Hollow*, “Logic dictates that most people aren’t going to come back,” directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon.

bond with the place that cannot be broken. “[I]t doesn’t matter if they never come back,” she says. “This will always be home, and they will always, always have those roots in them.”<sup>254</sup>

Unlike many popular representations of Appalachia, which portray it as a place to be escaped, *Hollow* demonstrates that many consciously choose to live there. Participants in *Hollow* do not deny the challenges of a life in McDowell County, but they choose to make their lives there because of deep ties to the community and the place itself. Even those who feel they must leave struggle with their decision, and in many cases, their connection to the area may one day draw them back.

#### *Counter-Narrative #2: More Than a Statistic*

Although *Hollow* first and foremost grapples with questions around the meaning of home, a second motif throughout the film is that of McDowell County’s reputation as the “worst” of what Appalachia has to offer. Several portraits cite statistics and news reports of McDowell’s drug epidemic and high rates of poverty, obesity, and teenage pregnancy; the film also includes data visualizations of prescription overdose deaths, declining construction of homes, and sewage flowing directly into the county’s streams. But, as McMillion Sheldon explained in a presentation on the film, she did not want to use data to reinforce pre-existing stereotypes of McDowell County; instead, she intended to reveal to audiences the real people behind these statistics.<sup>255</sup> In pairing data with personal and powerful stories, *Hollow* illuminates the humanity of people that statistics and stereotypes often obscure.

Again, *Hollow*’s opening portrait of Alan Johnston epitomizes this stance. Johnston, a large man with a white beard and a long ponytail trailing down his back, clad in overalls and a

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<sup>254</sup> *Hollow*, “It was a rare thing to know people who didn’t work, or at least try,” directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon.

<sup>255</sup> “Elaine McMillion-Sheldon case study: Hollow”; “HOLLOW – Case Study Presentation.”

stained baseball cap, might at first glance fit right into the stereotypical “hillbilly” image. And yet, a few seconds into the portrait, he pulls out a DSLR camera and begins photographing the halls of an old schoolhouse, as he says in his opening voiceover, “There’s a yearning inside of me to create. Create something out of wood, or create a song, or create a beautiful photograph.”<sup>256</sup> Johnston is quickly revealed to be a sensitive and thoughtful figure – he even gets excited at the opportunity to photograph a butterfly – as he movingly explains what McDowell County means to him. Johnston, a mountain man through and through, may well accept the label of “hillbilly,” but he is far from a stereotype.

Other portraits provide similarly new perspectives on images closely associated with Appalachia. “A Dark Day’s Work,” which follows a group of coal miners through a shift underground, contains no interviews but simply documents a day at work in the mines. While the typical persona of the coal miner may be thought of as an unskilled laborer or a gaunt figure who unceasingly toils underground, “A Dark Day’s Work” brings to light both the personalities and the skill of those who work in the mines. Before beginning their shift, the group gathers to discuss an accident that had occurred in a nearby mine and to pray for their own safety that day; as they begin their work underground, the men joke and banter with one another, enjoying both their work and each other’s company. The portrait also showcases the labor of modern-day coal mining itself, a far cry from the pickaxes of yore: The men operate complex machinery with skill and precision, working in highly organized teams to accomplish their work.<sup>257</sup> Ultimately, this portrait illuminates both the people and the labor that are often forgotten in discussions around coal mining, bringing a degree of nuance to the issue that is rarely seen in media.

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<sup>256</sup> “I know I’m home...”

<sup>257</sup> *Hollow*, “A dark day’s work in the heart of the mountains,” directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon.

This complexity remains even in portraits that initially seem in line with more contemporary portrayals of coal mining. One such portrait centers on Rob Goodwin, an anti-mountaintop removal activist from New York. Goodwin works with West Virginians, like McDowell County resident Alexander Wright, to bring attention to mountaintop removal's negative effects such as extensive blast damage to Wright's home. Though Goodwin is outspokenly against mountaintop removal, he understands that the issue is much more complicated than most are willing to admit: "It's impossible to do any work here without considering that impacts from coal mining are certainly not, like, the number one issue that's plaguing this region. I would like to see the region not be so divisive and the conversation be more than something about coal jobs...or no coal. Because there's a lot more, there's a lot more that's here."<sup>258</sup>

Many of *Hollow*'s portraits deal more directly with the data that often contributes to stereotypes of McDowell County, bringing context to this data in story. In *Hollow*'s fourth chapter, titled "For the Land," a portrait on fisherman Tony Wheeler is preceded by a data visualization revealing that 67% of McDowell County's waste flows directly into the streams due to a lack of infrastructure. Wheeler, who is from about two hours outside the county, travels to McDowell County often to take advantage of some of the best trout fishing in the state of West Virginia, "despite all of the abuses" of the water there. Several shots show trash that has been discarded in and around the creeks as Wheeler catches an array of brown and rainbow trout. "McDowell County doesn't get a lot of respect for a lot of, I guess, valid reasons," Wheeler says. "But you know, there's also a lot of good reasons to come here, too... You've just got to take the

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<sup>258</sup> *Hollow*, "Citizens just shouldn't have to deal with impacts from coal mining," directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon.

good with the bad.”<sup>259</sup> Following this portrait, *Hollow* provides further context to McDowell County’s water quality issue by informing the viewer that the lowest cost for a new town sewer line would be \$7 million – a hefty price for such a small and underfunded county.

The chapter “When Coal Was King” similarly provides context on poverty and unemployment in McDowell County. Ellis Ray Williams, who has lived in Gary, West Virginia since 1927, remembers when McDowell County was the “backbone” of the country when it came to producing electricity, especially as it powered the country’s war effort during World War II. Williams saw the coal industry change before his very eyes as mining jobs became increasingly mechanized and required fewer people to produce the same amount of coal. Williams believes that McDowell County needs to create new jobs to draw young people back to the region; still, he feels that McDowell County was wronged by not receiving government support in exchange for the county’s contributions: “When the government makes big money off of a place, like they once did off of McDowell County and West Virginia, they should put more into it. We deserve that in McDowell County. We’ve paid our dues here.”<sup>260</sup>

In the second chapter, titled “These Roots,” Nessie Hunt speaks directly to stereotypes of McDowell County as a place filled with poverty and drug abuse. Hunt, who is originally from Marion, Virginia, moved to McDowell County because she saw not poverty but a simpler way of life. “Most people that live simple live happy,” she says, “and that’s what I like about McDowell County. [...] Not everybody in McDowell County has a lot of money, but...we live happy.” Hunt also takes issue with stereotypes of drug abuse in the area, as she sees it as a widespread problem for which McDowell County is the scapegoat: “I hate that we get fingers pointed at us for the drugs. It’s not all about that. And that happens everywhere, so why point at McDowell

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<sup>259</sup> *Hollow*, “The trout here are beautiful despite the poor water quality,” directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon.

<sup>260</sup> *Hollow*, “We should have been diversifying our economy,” directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon.

County?”<sup>261</sup> Hunt does not deny that some truth exists behind McDowell County’s stereotypes, but to her, McDowell County is not defined by its data.

Some residents, like Sarah and Robert Diaz, were drawn to McDowell County precisely because of its statistics. The Diazes, both missionaries from Ohio, moved to McDowell County because they wanted to make a positive impact in the area and quickly learned that the area was much more than the negative statistics they had seen. “We moved into our house and within days the neighbors were out into our front gate and wanting to meet us,” Sarah says. Though the couple agrees that McDowell County struggles with poverty, education, and drug abuse, their time living there has allowed them to see the place in a new light. “What happens, I think, is that people from the outside focus on those things, and they’re not seeing all the wonderful things,” Sarah says. “There’s some really wonderful people.” Robert continues: “Just because it’s called one of the poorest counties in the U.S., heart-wise, it’s not. And it’s not just that it’s poor, like, county-wise or poor poverty-wise, or teen pregnancies or any of that stuff, like, it doesn’t even matter...these people are good people.”<sup>262</sup>

*Hollow* does not shy away from data or stereotypes that are often used to portray McDowell County. Instead, it illuminates the people behind this data, providing context to the issues that those in the area face and proving that McDowell County is not defined by its statistics.

### *Counter-Narrative #3: Hope and Help in Appalachia*

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<sup>261</sup> *Hollow*, “People that live simple live happy,” directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon.

<sup>262</sup> *Hollow*, “This is where we want to be and we don’t want to be anywhere else,” directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon.

Finally, *Hollow* combats narratives of Appalachia as a hopeless place incapable of solving its own problems by highlighting the work those in McDowell County are already doing to improve their community and their hope for a brighter future in the area.

At first glance, *Hollow*'s second portrait – focused on Shawn and Stephanie Penwarden, who moved to Northfork, West Virginia from North Carolina – takes a tone quite similar to dominant portrayals of the region. Shawn likens moving to McDowell County to “moving to another world,” one in which many able-bodied people are content to live on government assistance; Stephanie believes that the first thought on anyone’s mind when driving through Northfork is, “‘Ew, that’s dirty.’” Still, the couple has made strides to improve their town: They purchased and began renovating a building downtown, which they have turned into a service station and restaurant (named Half Pint’s Café, a nod to their young daughter’s nickname) in the hope of rebuilding pride in the area. “When people see paint and new buildings go up, to me, that’s pride,” Shawn says. “You want to drive down the street and say, ‘This is my hometown. I helped build it.’” Although neither Shawn nor Stephanie is satisfied with the current state of McDowell County, they do not believe it is doomed to fail; they just think people need to work together to fix it. “The county could be, like, a poster child for the nation,” Shawn says, later adding: “There’s hope. You know, there is hope for the area.”<sup>263</sup>

Like the Penwardens, Linda McKinney does not deny that serious issues exist within McDowell County. McKinney, who runs Five Loaves & Two Fishes food bank in Kimball, West Virginia, serves multiple homes in which children are being raised by their grandparents – and in some cases, their great-grandparents – seemingly due to an inability or unwillingness of the parents to raise their children. However, McKinney believes that McDowell County has “such

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<sup>263</sup> *Hollow*, “There is hope for the area,” directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon.

good people” who “just want to be part of something,” and with the help of many volunteers she has expanded her food bank to six locations throughout McDowell County and is planning to create a community garden. McKinney also recognizes McDowell County’s reputation as a helpless area, calling it the “county of white vans” as vans full of mission workers flood the area in the summers.<sup>264</sup> Because of this, she prides herself on her organization’s self-sufficiency, as it does not receive government assistance and operates primarily on the donations of faith-based organizations in the region. McKinney’s success with the food bank serves as proof that McDowell County is capable of solving its own problems.

*Hollow*’s third chapter, titled “For Each Other,” illustrates many of the other initiatives taking place in McDowell County. Examples include Mary Lewis, a Zumba instructor with a passion for improving health in the region and who dreams of opening a community fitness center; Nikki Cavalier Rabel, who hosts a four-week summer literacy camp for children in McDowell County; and Big Creek People in Action, a community organization staffed by residents of McDowell County that coordinates projects in housing, technology access, and health, among other initiatives.

Other chapters, too, showcase work being done to improve the county from within: Chapter four, titled “For the Land,” tells of Ron Serino and Penni Padgett, both of whom feel called to serve the people of McDowell County. Serino is a volunteer firefighter, originally from New York, who has lived in McDowell County for 15 years. Serino says that he chooses to live in the area because, between the prevalence of prescription overdose deaths and accidents on ATV trails around McDowell County, his skills are desperately needed: “[M]y family says, ‘Well, you don’t have to live there.’ Yeah, I do have to live here. [...] The need is great here.”

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<sup>264</sup> *Hollow*, “We felt the food bank was a way to reach out to the community,” directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon.

However, Serino sees hope for future generations in McDowell County who may wish to break the cycle of drug abuse, and finds great meaning in helping his community: “[Firefighting] is a positive experience. Somebody gets in trouble, you go help them out and make things better in the place you live.”<sup>265</sup> Padgett, on the other hand, was born in McDowell County and left for many years, returning once she was offered a job “I’d almost do for free”: building new homes in the county, which had not seen new construction for seven years prior. Padgett aims to create homes that are both environmentally and economically sustainable, noting that much of McDowell County’s housing is inordinately expensive due to a lack of infrastructure.<sup>266</sup> All of these portraits demonstrate the efforts being coordinated by and for McDowell Countians to make their home a better place to live.

Several of *Hollow*’s portraits feature residents who are looking toward the future, especially where energy is concerned. As McDowell County has seen a large decline in the number of residents employed by the coal industry and an increase in energy costs, some people, like Janise Stanley Domingue and Simon Kay, are experimenting with alternate energy sources. Stanley Domingue and Kay discuss the potential of microhydro, a small-scale hydroelectric power source which utilizes the natural flow of water, in the creeks of McDowell County. “This isn’t a way to necessarily kick out coal miners or anything like that,” says Stanley Domingue. “It’s just an alternative.” Stanley Domingue and Kay believe that microhydro could find success within the culture of McDowell County, as many people there are independent and want to be self-sufficient. Kay also sees microhydro as an opportunity for outside investors to pour money into the area and for McDowell County to again become a leader in energy: “[T]he beautiful irony would be that the place that provided the coal would be the place that provided the

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<sup>265</sup> *Hollow*, “I do have to live here. The need is great,” directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon.

<sup>266</sup> *Hollow*, “In order to build new homes, we need proper infrastructure,” directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon.

alternative to coal when the coal dries up. That we will be ahead of the game, that again McDowell will be providing the power for America.”<sup>267</sup>

Other community members are generating hope for the future by celebrating McDowell County’s past. Renee Bolden, for example, resurrected the formerly defunct McDowell County Historical Society to preserve the county’s history. In addition to this work, Bolden has undertaken a personal project in which she photographs empty churches in McDowell County and attempts to uncover the history of these spaces. Others, like Jean Battlo, are saving abandoned buildings from demolition: Battlo is renovating the Houston Company Store in Kimball, West Virginia, built in 1923, and turning it into a museum. Daniel Clark and Elisse Goldstein-Clark, too, have restored one of McDowell County’s historic buildings – the Empire Coal & Coke Co. Miner’s Clubhouse, built in 1922 – and transformed it into the Elkhorn Inn and Theatre. Daniel and Elisse hope that their lodge will encourage tourism in the area, having entertained guests from around the world who are interested in the history of coal mining. Bolden, Battlo, and Clark and Goldstein-Clark all aim to leverage McDowell County’s history to foster pride in the area and to create new opportunities for those who live there.

*Hollow*’s final portrait closes the documentary on a hopeful note. Titled “It’s Time to Come Back,” the portrait centers on Tom Acosta, an artist from Iaeger, West Virginia. After leaving McDowell County for nearly 30 years, Acosta decided to return and works to uplift those in the county through his art. One such artwork is a mural in downtown Welch – which became the largest mural in West Virginia – making it look as if the small town is part of a large city. Acosta hopes that his art will make both those in and out of the region think about McDowell County differently: “This area is so stereotyped, and it unfortunately does have a lot of facts to

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<sup>267</sup> *Hollow*, “Microhydro in McDowell,” directed by Janise Stanley Domingue and Simon Kay.

back a lot of that up, but you don't need to stay on the bottom. And hopefully it'll inspire people, and give people on the outside a different image of what this place is, was, and can be." Acosta acknowledges that McDowell County has a lot of work to do, but ultimately believes it is a place worth saving: "We've got to start small and believe in ourself. [...] [W]e went downhill, and now it's time to come back."<sup>268</sup>

Again, while residents of McDowell County certainly do not deny the major challenges that come with living in the area, they share a sense of hope that their community will prevail. Furthermore, many in the community are actively working to help one another and improve the place they live – tearing down stereotypes that Appalachia is helpless and incapable in the process.

### **Conclusion: Co-Creation and Counter-Narrative in *Hollow***

*Hollow's* approach to co-creation is multifaceted, involving community engagement, deep knowledge of the area as an Appalachian, and a multidisciplinary post-production process. Cizek and Uricchio write that co-creation is at its core a relational process, connoting "a collective sense of ownership, a joint journey of discovery and an abandonment of ego" that *Hollow* embraces at many levels.<sup>269</sup> By involving residents of McDowell County in the creation process even before turning on a camera, and by requesting participants' input until their portraits were complete, *Hollow* is a profoundly collective and collaborative documentary. Although McMillion Sheldon had a directorial vision and often acted as a curator of content, she remained highly attentive to the needs and feedback of the community, always operating in the spirit that this was *their* film, not hers. In this way, *Hollow's* approach to co-creation serves as an

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<sup>268</sup> *Hollow*, "It's time to come back," directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon.

<sup>269</sup> Cizek et al., "We Are Here."

excellent model for other filmmakers who wish to engage with communities, especially those with a history of under- or misrepresentation in popular media. However, it is worth noting that *Hollow* is at heart a director-led project, in which McMillion Sheldon took the desires and feedback of the community seriously but was ultimately the one who constructed the story and chose the content of the final film. By no means does this exclude *Hollow* from being a co-creative documentary, as co-creation is a wide spectrum of practices; I simply mean to call attention to where *Hollow* falls on this scale.

*Hollow* also serves as an effective model for creating counter-narratives of a group or region. Hall argues that in order to truly challenge a dominant regime of representation, one cannot simply replace negative images of a group with positive ones; they must instead go “inside the image,” taking the very stereotypes which are used to harm and complicating them.<sup>270</sup> *Hollow* does just this: Residents of McDowell County do not deny the issues – drug abuse, poverty, lack of infrastructure and struggling educational systems – that are so often used to demean their county, but their stories prove that they are not the stereotypical “hillbillies” or “rednecks” that popular media makes them out to be. *Hollow* takes precisely the images that have for so long been used to harm McDowell County, opening them up, as Hall would say, “in such a way that they become uninhabitable for very long.”<sup>271</sup> In doing so, *Hollow* movingly challenges stereotypes associated with McDowell County – and Appalachia at large – and encourages audiences to consider both the place and its people in a new light. By including a wide variety of complex and multifaceted participants, who coexist in the same place in a multitude of ways, *Hollow* transcends the binary of positive vs. negative images of Appalachia. Instead, *Hollow* portrays McDowell County with nuance and sensitivity, opening up space for a

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<sup>270</sup> Hall, *Representation & the Media*, 21.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*

variety of representations and perspectives – good, bad, and everywhere in between – on what it means to live in Appalachia.

### **Our Stories, Our Terms: Participation in *The Appalachian Retelling Project***

Early in the conceptualization of this thesis I decided I would produce my own co-creative documentary project, both as a companion to the written document and an example to be studied itself. More than a simple homework assignment, I saw this project as an opportunity to learn more about co-creation by getting hands-on with the methodology and to do work I was passionate about: revealing Appalachia as I and much of my community saw it, as a place that was complex, multifaceted, at times troubled, and often beautiful.

As a filmmaker, I knew that video would play a role, but I was unsure what overall form the project would take. Would it be a linear film? An interactive, like *Hollow*? Something with a physical form in the community itself? But as I considered my options, the world changed: We were suddenly in the throes of a pandemic that left few safe options to interact with others, and aside from weekly trips to the grocery store and carefully distanced outdoor activities, our lives moved entirely online. As is often the case, though, the limitations that constrained so much of our lives also became a source of creativity, and I was able to conceive of what became *The Appalachian Retelling Project* (or *ARP* for short): It would exist wholly online, and it would have to rely primarily on user-generated content. With people spending more time on their computers than ever before, the idea felt doable, even exciting, and I entered Summer 2020 with a plan to launch the project before my classes resumed in September.

Although I will explain *ARP*'s creation in further detail in the following section, it is helpful to provide a sense of its form today. *ARP* currently exists as a Squarespace website ([www.theappalachianretellingproject.com](http://www.theappalachianretellingproject.com)) with a blog-like layout. The homepage features the project's most recent uploads and links to an About page, all the project's content (titled Stories),

and more information on myself, the project, and how to make a submission. Each submission exists as its own blog post and may feature text, photos, video, or audio; all the posts are viewable in chronological order and users may choose which posts to view and in what order. At the time of this writing, *ARP* contains 54 posts from over 20 contributors (there is no limit to how much content one person can send in) and averages around 300 website visits per month.<sup>272</sup> Social media also plays an important role, as each new post is featured on the project's Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts; I also use social media to engage with the project's followers, share content written about or relevant to *ARP*, and as a means to solicit new content for the project. Currently, *ARP* has over 700 "likes" on Facebook, nearly 280 Instagram followers, and over 60 Twitter followers. The stated goal of *ARP* is to challenge stereotypes of the Appalachian region through collective storytelling, especially by sharing stories that would likely not be featured in popular media. Anyone is eligible to contribute to the project, and the website's submissions page contains several prompts for contributors to consider, such as "How have you or someone you know found fulfillment in this region, when the media tells us that in order to be successful we have to leave?" and "What diverse communities exist in Appalachia?"<sup>273</sup> However, nearly any piece of content will be accepted to the project, regardless of how directly it speaks to existing stereotypes of the region.

While *The Appalachian Retelling Project* takes quite a different approach to documentary from *Hollow* (both out of necessity and directorial vision), it, too, contains several co-creative elements, which I will unpack below.

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<sup>272</sup> Elon Justice, *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, <https://theappalachianretellingproject.com>.

<sup>273</sup> "How to Submit," *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, revised Sept. 30, 2020, <https://theappalachianretellingproject.com/submit>.

## **Crowdsourcing and Community: *The Appalachian Retelling Project's* Approach to Co-Creation**

As I began to plot what form *The Appalachian Retelling Project* would ultimately take, the ideas of collective storytelling and a multiplicity of voices were the cornerstone of my process. I was inspired both by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's charge that "there is never a single story about any place" as well as my own experience growing up in Appalachia's rich storytelling culture.<sup>274</sup> Storytelling was a pillar of my upbringing in Eastern Kentucky: My father often took me to locations significant to our family or to Appalachian history as a whole to teach me the history of those places; at family gatherings, even my more reserved relatives would come alive at the opportunity to tell a story about generations past. This practice was often unconscious, yet it surrounded me at every turn. As Appalachian writer Silas House phrases it in an essay for *The Bitter Southerner*, "In Appalachia, we tell our stories not only on front porches and around kitchen tables but also in the aisles of the local Walmart and the waiting rooms of hospitals. We tell tales in our gardens while we hoe beans or far back in the deepest coal mines."<sup>275</sup> Often, these stories are not told singularly; the telling of one story triggers a succession of many more. I aimed to work within the spirit of this collective storytelling culture as I prepared to launch *ARP*. Thus, *The Appalachian Retelling Project's* approach to co-creation is primarily community-based, both by encouraging community members to contribute to and provide feedback on the project and through my own status as a member of the Appalachian community.

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<sup>274</sup> Adichie, "The danger of a single story."

<sup>275</sup> Silas House, "Forward From Roger May's *Testify* by Silas House," *The Bitter Southerner*, accessed March 25, 2021, <https://bittersoutherner.com/roger-may-love-letter-to-appalachia>.

### *Co-Creative Methodology #1: Co-Creation with a Community*

Throughout the creation of *ARP*, I attempted to solicit feedback from the community concerning how they would feel most comfortable engaging with the project. As a filmmaker, I naturally gravitated toward video: My initial idea was that I would video a handful of individuals, each of whom would tell a story on a particular topic, and that members of the community could then film their own videos in response with a new story on that subject. However, I quickly learned that this approach was unpopular with the broader community. As I asked both those in my immediate personal network and those I had begun interviewing if they felt my initial strategy would be successful, I consistently received feedback that I would get very few submissions that way. A family member, who is deeply involved with initiatives to spark hope and pride in our hometown, suggested that she knew several individuals who would be interested in getting involved in my project but would feel uncomfortable filming themselves. As I spoke with more people in the community about my idea, there seemed to be a consensus: Video could certainly be an option, but I needed to provide multiple ways to engage with my project. I thus decided to make my submissions criteria much more open-ended, allowing for the contribution of written stories, poems, photographs, videos, and audio such as interviews or music. In this way, I aimed to make participation as accessible as possible, giving participants the agency to tell a story in whichever way felt most natural to them.

In addition to the structure of *ARP* itself, I also aimed to make the initial video portraits I created more participatory than some traditional documentaries. Although I had decided to open submissions to a variety of multimedia content, I still wanted to create a few initial “kickoff” videos with members of the community as a way to give the audience examples of the kinds of stories I was interested in. As I considered who to reach out to about participating in these initial

videos, I thought specifically about popular stereotypes of Appalachia as degenerate, uneducated, hopeless, and lacking in diversity, and I began brainstorming individuals who could speak directly to the inaccuracy of one of these stereotypes. I reached out to ten individuals throughout the Appalachian region, in each case stating directly the stereotype that I hoped our interview would counter; of those ten, five agreed to participate. Before each interview, I came up with a list of questions that I submitted to the participant for approval, asking if there was anything they did not feel comfortable discussing and if there was anything I had not asked that they would like to cover. The interview process itself was also quite open-ended; although we did discuss the questions I had prepared, I also encouraged participants to go on tangents, tell stories, and discuss whatever else came to mind that they might like an audience to see. In all, interviews ranged from around 45 minutes to nearly two hours in length. After the interview was complete, I asked each participant to send me any photographs or home video footage that was relevant to our conversation and began editing the interviews into mini-documentaries, each between four and eight minutes long. Once I completed a draft of a video, I sent it to the participant for approval before scheduling its release on the *ARP* website; only one participant requested minor changes. Through this process, I aimed to give those I had interviewed as much agency as possible in the way they were portrayed on camera. Though these “kickoff” videos, in which I controlled the camera and made the edits, were certainly more akin to traditional documentary portraits than a co-creative media project, I still wanted each participant to feel that they had the final say on the media that was created about them and to honor the topics that they most wanted to talk about.

*The Appalachian Retelling Project* best exemplifies participatory media-making through its submissions process. Following the launch of the initial five mini-documentaries, I opened

*ARP* to submissions which could be made via email or a Dropbox folder. On the website's submissions page, I briefly frame the project in terms of existing stereotypes and explain why the audience might contribute: "Everyone has a story, and it's time that Appalachians get to tell their own. All too often, mainstream media narratives depict our region as uneducated, out of step with the rest of the world, and in need of saving by someone else. We can start to shift that narrative - but it starts with sharing new stories that challenge the ones we've heard before."<sup>276</sup> Below this initial paragraph are more detailed instructions on contributing to the project, including prompts for consideration ("When is a time that you or someone you know in Appalachia has shown resilience or ingenuity in times of hardship?" "What's an example of a portrayal of Appalachia in media that got it wrong?") and suggestions for forms a submission could take:

- Make a short documentary-style video
- Write a poem or short narrative essay
- Take or collect a series of photographs, providing captions for each
- Interview or have a discussion with a grandparent or other relative
- Take a selfie video
- Perform a song and explain its meaning
- Create art and take photos or a video documenting and explaining it<sup>277</sup>

However, I also wanted to make it clear that contributors should not feel stifled in the ways they chose to engage with the project; any topic or media form (within a few boundaries) was fair game. *ARP*'s submissions page mentions the open-endedness of contributing several times, such as in this excerpt located below a list of prompts for subject matter: "These are just a few ideas to get you started, but don't feel limited to these topics. If your story provides a new perspective on

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<sup>276</sup> "How to Submit."

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

Appalachia - one that contradicts the typical stereotypical images we see in media - you're on the right track."<sup>278</sup>

Although my goal was to keep the content of submissions as open as possible, I also realized that it would be necessary to set a few hard boundaries regarding the types of submissions I would publish. Thus, before opening submissions to the general public, I made a list of content that was unacceptable. This included any submission that used overly vulgar language or was sexually explicit; demeaned any other individuals or political, social, religious, or other groups; reiterated harmful or stereotypical narratives about other groups or Appalachians; or was overtly racist, sexist, or derogatory toward the LGBTQ+ community. I also reserved the right to reject submissions that fell outside these categories on a case-by-case basis if I felt they would be inflammatory or otherwise demoralizing, as I did not want my project to devolve into a space for political screaming matches. I initially kept these boundaries to myself and did not post them on the website; however, after receiving a submission which violated one of these standards in September 2020, I made explicit on the submissions page that not all contributions would be accepted:

While we aim to share as wide a range of voices as possible, please note that there are some limits as to what we will publish. These include stories that degrade any other person or group of people, push stereotypical or harmful narratives about any group of people, or use excessively vulgar or derogatory language. This is a place in which all Appalachians deserve to be respected and heard, so do your part to keep it that way!<sup>279</sup>

Aside from the incident which sparked this addition, however, no other submissions have violated the project's standards.

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<sup>278</sup> "How to Submit."

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

After setting these boundaries and officially opening *The Appalachian Retelling Project* to submissions, I aimed to make myself as available to the public as possible as they created content to contribute to the project. Although I wanted participants to feel they had complete control over what they sent me, I also realized that some people would appreciate guidance and suggestions as they worked. To make my availability known, I regularly promoted the project's email address on the *ARP* website and social media channels, as well as encouraged the audience to direct message me on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter with any thoughts or questions about submissions, *ARP*, or anything else they would like to discuss. Several people reached out through these channels to clarify how the submission process worked; a few asked if certain topics would be acceptable. However, most participants worked on their own and did not consult me before submitting a story.

Once I received a written submission, I acted as an editor, correcting spelling and grammatical errors and occasionally rewording sentences for clarity. However, I aimed not to substantially change written submissions as I wanted them to retain the author's voice and intended meaning. When I received photographs, I provided brief captions (if one was not already provided) that explained who or what was in the picture. I did not alter video submissions in any way since they were already completed movie files; I did, however, provide brief captions beneath the videos to summarize them, as well as full transcripts of the videos for those who were hearing impaired or did not want to use audio when viewing the website. Overall, I saw my role as a curator and editor rather than a co-creator: Each piece belonged to the person who created it, while I corrected errors, provided context where needed, and promoted the finished product.

While all the content accepted to the website does indeed provide new insight into life in Appalachia, I did find that open-endedness tended to result in content that did not expressly achieve my goal of creating counter-representations of Appalachia. Many responses, for example, recount the history of a family without digging further into how that family's experience did not conform to stereotypes; others were simply humorous stories about childhood that, while entertaining, did not necessarily add anything to the conversation about Appalachian stereotypes in a meaningful way. Still, I accepted these contributions because I felt that *any* story about Appalachia created with the intent to provide new light on the region was progress over the tired and stereotypical narratives proliferated in popular media. Furthermore, I realized that submissions' lack of pointedness toward counter-narrative reflected more of a failure on my part as a director than on any of the project's contributors, as I needed to more explicitly state how submissions could combat Appalachian stereotypes.

With this lesson in mind, I introduced a new avenue for participation in November 2020: the "Appalachian Talk Back" series. By this time *ARP*'s rate of submissions had declined substantially (I received six submissions from four contributors in October, compared to 13 submissions from 13 contributors in August) – a trend I believed may have been due to the time commitment and mental burden required to create an entire standalone submission. Thus, my goal with this series was both to encourage participation by making engagement with the project easier and to more directly speak to existing stereotypes and media representations of the Appalachian region. I sought to lower the threshold for participation with this series by posing a single question each week on the project's social media channels, which the audience could then answer briefly in the comments. After multiple weeks of posting questions, I compiled the responses I had received into a single post which would be featured on the website. I also

tailored questions in this series to themes of Appalachian stereotypes, Appalachian representation in media, and the effects of these phenomena on Appalachians through prompts such as “When did you become aware of Appalachian stereotypes?” and “What’s the worst portrayal of Appalachia you’ve seen in media?”<sup>280</sup> Overall, Appalachian Talk Back has been quite successful, as most questions receive at least three responses (and in a few cases I have received upwards of 50 responses on a single post), and the responses themselves tend to be quite thoughtful, diverse, and uplifting in tone. By lowering the bar for engagement with *ARP* and by more explicitly asking for contributions that speak to Appalachian stereotypes, this series has been perhaps my most successful attempt at balancing participant control with my goal of creating counter-narratives of Appalachia.

Finally, an opportunity for a different sort of co-creation within the Appalachian community arose in February 2021. Through an acquaintance who works in news media throughout much of Appalachia, I was put in touch with Ashton Marra, the Digital Managing Editor of 100 Days in Appalachia, a West Virginia-based news organization published in partnership with West Virginia University, West Virginia Public Broadcasting, and the Center for Rural Strategies in Whitesburg, Kentucky. 100 Days in Appalachia reports on a variety of topics relevant to the Appalachian region and beyond, from the region’s opioid epidemic to the coal industry to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also includes content that does not fall strictly under “hard news,” such as book reviews, a photojournalism project highlighting the diversity of

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<sup>280</sup> @appalachianretellingproject, #AppalachianTalkBack Post 2, *Instagram*, November 10, 2020, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CHad\\_NNsx-M/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CHad_NNsx-M/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link); @appalachianretellingproject, #AppalachianTalkBack post 5, *Instagram*, December 7, 2020, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CIgHUtZs1Zm/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CIgHUtZs1Zm/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link).

life in Appalachia, and even more lighthearted content like a video that reveals the origins of the famous West Virginia pepperoni roll.<sup>281</sup>

When I spoke with Marra, neither of us had an agenda for our conversation; we had simply been put in touch by a mutual contact who recognized we had a similar interest in combatting Appalachian stereotypes. As I learned about the work of 100 Days in Appalachia and spoke more about my *Appalachian Retelling Project*, we agreed that we were working in quite similar areas of thought and began to brainstorm areas in which we could collaborate. Marra mentioned that 100 Days had recently launched a weekly email newsletter, called the *Creators and Innovators Newsletter*, which is guest hosted by a different Appalachian artist, maker, or creative each month. Topics for discussion in the newsletter were wide-ranging, Marra said, as previous hosts had covered everything from cross-cultural recipes to Appalachian folklore.<sup>282</sup> As we ended our conversation, she said to reach out to her if I was interested in hosting the March newsletter.

I emailed Marra a week after our chat with an idea: I could use the newsletter to discuss the stereotypes of Appalachia I had been researching, promote the work that *ARP* was doing to combat these stereotypes, and encourage more people to contribute to the project. She liked the idea, and we approached the month of March with a plan to become collaborators. I would create the written content of the newsletter, which would be edited by a team at 100 Days in Appalachia and finally approved by me before being sent out each Thursday in March. We felt that the arrangement would be mutually beneficial: I could grow my audience and encourage new

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<sup>281</sup> 100 Days in Appalachia, *100 Days in Appalachia*, accessed March 25, 2021, <https://www.100daysinappalachia.com>; 100 Days in Appalachia, "Pepperoni Roll," *Facebook*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/1291299044274901/videos/1887925484612251>.

<sup>282</sup> 100 Days in Appalachia, "Newsletter," *100 Days in Appalachia*, accessed March 25, 2021, <https://www.100daysinappalachia.com/newsletter/>.

submissions, while 100 Days would ultimately own the content that I wrote and host the archived newsletters on their site. (It is also worth noting that I was compensated for my work.)

Each week during my time hosting the series, I wrote about one of the four stereotypes covered in the first chapter of this thesis – degradation, violence, displacement, and whiteness – and provided several historical and popular media examples of each, especially those for which I could provide an online link. Next, I linked to several posts on the *ARP* website that I argued worked as a counter-narrative to that week’s stereotype. Finally, I provided prompts, including both questions previously listed on the *ARP* submissions page and questions written specifically for that week’s newsletter, to encourage new submissions to the project. In addition to editing my work and sending out the final newsletters, 100 Days also heavily promoted my series on the organization’s Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts, encouraging viewers to view my latest newsletter and sign up for the series as a whole. Although I ultimately performed the majority of the creative work on this series, the process still felt quite collaborative between myself and the 100 Days in Appalachia team, and the final product benefitted both of our missions in combatting stereotypes and showcasing content from the Appalachian region.

This collaboration also marked a shift in my approach to co-creation, both with potential participants from around the region and with other organizations. Unlike on the *ARP* website, in which I made clear that any type of content was acceptable, throughout the newsletter series I provided prompts that were highly specific and intended to counter that week’s discussed stereotype. Though I certainly would have accepted content that did not fit into these categories, my *Creators and Innovators* series marked a departure from my “anything goes” approach and was an experiment in what kind of participation might occur if I curated prompts around weekly themes. (This was, however, a bit of a failed experiment, as I gained many new social media

followers from this series but unfortunately received no new submissions.) In addition, the newsletter series was my first open collaboration with another organization in Appalachia. Working with Marra and the 100 Days team allowed me to consider the benefits of this sort of collaboration, such as having a different set of perspectives off which I could bounce my ideas and gaining access to a new audience; it also sparked my imagination about other arts, media, or social justice organizations with whom I might want to collaborate in the future, and what forms those collaborations could take. Finally, collaborating with another group was simply fun: Getting to know and working with others who are passionate about the same issues I am was a rewarding and enjoyable experience.

*Co-Creative Methodology #2: Co-Creation as a Member of a Community*

Like *Hollow*'s McMillion Sheldon, I, too, grew up in the heart of Central Appalachia. Although I moved away from the area for my undergraduate studies and have primarily lived outside the region for most of my adult life, I consider being Appalachian a pillar of my identity and believe my upbringing there has had an enormous influence on my attitude toward others and the world at large. It would only make sense, then, that my status as an Appalachian would impact my approach to creating *The Appalachian Retelling Project*.

First and foremost, my upbringing in Appalachia was the primary source of my decision to act largely as an editor and curator rather than to become a co-creator more heavily involved in creating pieces for the project. Having been hyper-aware of Appalachia's negative media coverage for most of my life, I also recognized that the vast majority of these negative portrayals came from individuals and organizations that had no long-term experience living in the region. While many stories might have been factually correct, I felt that they lacked the humanity that was so crucial to truly understanding the region's culture and the experience of living there.

Representations of the region created by Appalachians existed, certainly, but these were comparatively harder to come by – and even then they tended to come from a more professionalized sort, authors and filmmakers who had been formally trained in how to choose and craft a story. I was not aware of many opportunities for untrained, everyday folks to decide what stories from their own lives they would like to tell, especially in their own voices and without extensive editing on the part of a director. I wondered if allowing Appalachians this opportunity might result in something powerful, if not in the stories themselves then at least in the chance to speak. Though I will not deny that the COVID-19 pandemic also played a role in this decision, as physical presence with the majority of my participants was not an option, the pandemic felt more like a push to pursue an approach I was already interested in rather than a constraint that held me back from what I truly wanted to do.

As mentioned above, while I wanted the majority of the project to be built around user-generated content, I still felt it was wise to create a few initial “kickoff” videos both to populate the website and to give the audience an idea of the types of stories I was looking for. Here, my Appalachian upbringing played a role in that I was able to tap into my pre-existing network around the region as I planned to create these videos. I had been able to secure a grant through MIT’s Transmedia Storytelling Initiative to purchase some necessary equipment including a lighting setup and a hard drive to store video footage, but I did not have the funds to purchase a camera itself. As a result, I reached out to Ronnie Hylton, Channel Manager of Pike TV, a local access channel in my hometown where I had spent many summers working during my undergraduate years. Hylton agreed that I could borrow a station camera without charge for 24- to 48-hour periods if I could work around Pike TV’s filming schedule (which, due to the pandemic, was much emptier than it would be typically). Hylton knew my work from my years

at Pike TV, but he also knew most of my family, creating a sense of trust that led to his decision to trust me not only with expensive station equipment, but also his own personal DSLR camera – a gesture I found incredibly kind.

My existing network also played an important role in the selection of participants for my “kickoff” videos. As I brainstormed topics I wanted to explore as counter-narratives to Appalachian stereotypes, I also devised a list of potential interviewees. Some were people I or my family knew personally; others I did not know but were doing work I felt was important to highlight. Of this list, I reached out to 10 people, five of whom agreed; of those five, four came from my personal network. (Of the five who said no, four were individuals I did not know personally; one was a classmate from high school who lived with healthcare workers and did not want to create a risk of COVID exposure. \*) Iman Ali, who spoke about her experience growing up as a Muslim in Appalachia, was a friend from high school. Lauren May, creator of the cooking blog *Must Love Herbs*, was a frequent customer at my mother’s antique store in my hometown of Pikeville, Kentucky. Jordan Laney, a lecturer at Virginia Tech who offered a critique of *Hillbilly Elegy*, was a friend-of-a-friend whom I had met entirely by chance at a coffee shop in Pikeville just a few months before the pandemic began. And Rusty Justice, co-owner of a tech startup that hired former coal miners as coders, was my own father. Having a personal connection to this group certainly made it easier to access them, but I also selected them because I felt it was important that the majority of those I interviewed did not hold “official” titles that qualified them as experts. Rather, they were the experts of their own experience,

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\* I should speak a bit about my COVID protocols as I conducted the in-person interviews. All interviews except one took place outdoors (the fifth one took place in a large TV studio because there was not sufficient outdoor space at the location). I remained masked the entire time and participants wore a mask both before and after their interviews. I remained at least six feet away from the interviewees at all times and wiped down equipment like microphones before and after they were used, wearing gloves while I did so. With these precautions in place I felt confident that the risk of COVID transmission was minimal; still, I absolutely understood my classmate’s hesitancy and respected his decision not to participate.

simply telling their stories. Having this built-in network also made selecting participants for these stories much easier, as my decision to approach them with these topics came from my personal knowledge of their lives and not from a database or Google search.

Finally, my status as a member of the community in Appalachia aided me in growing my audience after the website's launch and promoting my work around the region. Appalachia has a strong culture of caring and support for its own; a win for one Appalachian is often considered a win for the community at large. I certainly experienced this in the opening months of *ARP*, as people I had never met contacted me through email and direct message to congratulate me on my work and to offer their help in any way they could. One week after my project launched, Erinn Williams, a columnist at the *Corbin Times-Tribune* in Corbin, Kentucky (and the author of the project's first submission), messaged me via Facebook Messenger to ask my permission to feature *ARP* in her column. "I felt obliged to give your initiative a nod this week in my column," she wrote. "I would love to encourage others to use their voices in a productive way to honor our home."<sup>283</sup> Excited, I agreed, and two days later I received a link to her article and was astounded by what I read:

If there ever was an initiative for "us," let me tell you, this is our shot folks. I was floored at how incredibly cool this entire movement is. I surfed the social media page for the group, and then visited their website. There were clips of diverse people with the same heart, our heart. These people grew up like we did, and were proud of it, as we all should be.

In the top right corner of the website was the most glorious sight I've seen in awhile -- a beautiful gray box with the words "submit now" appeared. The beauty of all this information, the entire project is ours. Yep. Stories submitted from people like you and me, that's the meat of the meal.

Naturally, my fingers just shy of catching fire typed a story in a record twelve minutes. I attached a photo of my grandparents' house and hit the submit button. Today that story

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<sup>283</sup> Erinn Williams, Facebook message to author, August 3, 2020.

was shared with others, and I feel in my heart those who read it understood. Why? How do I know this? Because my story is theirs, and theirs is mine. This is our Appalachia, and it's our duty to tell our stories.<sup>284</sup>

A few weeks later, a similar situation occurred when Tipper Pressley, North Carolina-based creator of the Appalachian culture blog *Blind Pig & the Acorn*, asked if she could write a feature on the site, too. Others shared my posts on social media, with multiple people even going so far as to describe it as a “movement.” I was shocked that so many people I had never even met were so excited about my work, yet I also understood the reasoning: Success for one of us was success for all of us. The Appalachian community at large was willing to rally behind another Appalachian they felt was doing positive work, even if we had never met. I feel confident in saying that this project would not have met as positive a response if I had been from outside the region; others likely would have been skeptical of my intentions and unwilling to participate. But, as another member of the community simply trying to do something positive, my work was accepted and celebrated not just in my community but throughout the entire region – a reception that was truly humbling to experience.

Overall, my approach to co-creation throughout *The Appalachian Retelling Project* focused more on elements of participation and crowdsourcing than on the community-embedded approaches used in *Hollow*. However, my goal to lift up the many voices of Appalachia and to strive toward a more just portrayal of the region certainly operates within the co-creative spirit. Furthermore, my understanding of the Appalachian region as someone who grew up there played a role in every choice I made, as, like McMillion Sheldon, I wanted this to be the community's project, not just my own.

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<sup>284</sup> Erinn Williams, “THE PREACHER’S DAUGHTER: Taking back what’s ours,” *The Times-Tribune*, August 5, 2020, [https://www.thetimestribune.com/opinion/columns/the-preachers-daughter-taking-back-whats-ours/article\\_0946807f-2754-5f15-8bc7-851f97124110.html](https://www.thetimestribune.com/opinion/columns/the-preachers-daughter-taking-back-whats-ours/article_0946807f-2754-5f15-8bc7-851f97124110.html).

## **“Appalachia’s where my heart is”: Counter-Narratives in *The Appalachian Retelling Project***

With such an open-ended structure, it is unsurprising that *The Appalachian Retelling Project* features a wide range of topics, from recollections of family histories to critiques of popular media about Appalachia. Although the project’s submissions page offers a host of prompts – intended to encourage participants to discuss certain topics that could function as counter-narratives – the actual counter-narratives that have emerged from the project are different from the topics I might have expected. Still, it is possible to sort *ARP*’s counter-narratives into three loose categories, which I will explain below.

### *Counter-Narrative #1: Celebrating Appalachia*

By far the most common type of counter-narrative to emerge from *ARP* is a celebration of Appalachian culture, history, and people. Much popular media on the region portrays Appalachia as a place of shame and hopelessness, a place to escape. However, *ARP* counters these notions by featuring content created by individuals with a strong connection to and love for Appalachia and its people, even if they acknowledge it is far from perfect.

*ARP*’s oldest piece of content is a video I created focusing on my father, Rusty Justice. Titled “Finding Success in Appalachia,” Justice discusses his work as an entrepreneur and small business owner in Appalachia, especially his success with Bit Source, a Kentucky-based tech startup that hired former coal miners as coders in 2015 and subsequently received much national media attention. Justice acknowledges that living and creating opportunity in Appalachia is a challenging task, but that he could not imagine living anywhere else: “Appalachia's where my heart is. It's my home. I love the people of Appalachia. I couldn't stand the thought of being somewhere else. It's a challenging place, but it's probably, for me, the best place. It's where I fit.

It's hard to define, but it's where I feel complete. It's where I feel safe. It's where I feel loved. It's where I feel challenged.”<sup>285</sup> Furthermore, Justice credits any success he has had in his career to his Appalachian upbringing, saying that the culture of support in the region enabled him to go after his goals:

Oh, I think this region is why I've had any success that I've had in throughout my life. I've been very fortunate in my life. I've gotten to travel a lot. I've gotten to experience a lot, because I always felt like I was standing on a solid foundation. I knew that no matter what came my way, there was a place where people cared about me, that celebrated my achievements – that my achievements were their achievements. And I feel the same way. Their achievements are my achievements. When someone from here succeeds, it makes me happy. I can't explain why, but that's just a common thing in our culture here. We kind of are fractious. We will fuss and fight with each other. But when one of us goes out and succeeds, we all celebrate it. It's why I love this place.<sup>286</sup>

Although Justice understands the difficulty that life in Appalachia can pose, he celebrates his connection to the culture and people of the region, which he believes has helped him succeed.

Many other participants similarly celebrate their connection to the place and people of Appalachia, often expressing a desire to spend their lives there. In a submission titled “Why I Never Left Appalachia,” Tipper writes that as a young adult she often felt stigmatized for her choice to remain in North Carolina, as others thought she should not live so close to her family after getting married or that she would be unable to earn enough money to support her family. However, she always felt that living in Appalachia was the right choice for her, a reasoning she explains in her essay:

I love Pap and Granny with all my heart and soul—who else would I want to live by? They've been there to supply every need from borrowing a cup of sugar to offering medical advice about a sick girl.

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<sup>285</sup> Elon Justice, “Rusty: Finding Success in Appalachia,” *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, July 27, 2020, <https://theappalachianretellingproject.com/stories/rusty-finding-success-in-appalachia>.

<sup>286</sup> “Finding Success in Appalachia.”

Money makes it easier to live in many ways, but money doesn't make you any richer in the ways that count most.

Random reasons I never left Appalachia and never will:

A childhood memory of a bumblebee sitting on the corner of my sweater as I stood in Big Grandma's flower garden waiting on Mamaw to walk me back to her house. Playing in the yard on summer evenings with strains of music coming from the windows flung open to catch the coolness of the breeze. Competing for the coveted 8th Grade History Award and winning it. Teenage years of cruising town and trying to be as cool as everyone else. Pushing a stroller with two baby girls in it down a gravel road that always led me home. Walking alone in the woods listening for and hearing the voices of those who have long since gone.<sup>287</sup>

Others, like Blake and Rachel, have moved away from the region but feel a deep desire to return. In a submission titled “The Beauty of Appalachia,” Blake writes that he grew up feeling ashamed of where he was from and moved out of the region as soon as he graduated high school. However, he has become tired and frustrated by city life, as he notices a lack of community that was so integral to his childhood. He goes on further to write that he wishes to return to the place he once wanted so badly to leave:

While there is great opportunity elsewhere, I yearn for the beauty of Appalachia. My wife and I recently had the opportunity to visit where my Grandfather was reared. Whilst the younger me would have derided the lack of cellular coverage and thirty-minute trip from what I once considered civilization, I found myself content. I stopped thinking about politics, pandemics, and violence. I'd like to imagine this is the feeling my Grandfather awoke to each day. My wife, without prompting, expressed the same feeling.

I had opportunities that my Grandfather never had. I was afforded the ability to attend college, and graduated with a law-degree three months ago. I've visited beaches and traveled across the country. Today, many figuratively have it all, and aren't truly content. They, too, miss the beauty.<sup>288</sup>

Rachel, on the other hand, writes in her essay “Kentucky is My Fate” that she recently moved to South Carolina to take a job there and does not immediately intend to return home.

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<sup>287</sup> Tipper P., “Tipper: Why I Never Left Appalachia,” *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, August 17, 2020, <https://theappalachianretellingproject.com/stories/tipper-why-i-never-left-appalachia>.

<sup>288</sup> Blake M., “Blake: The Beauty of Appalachia,” *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, August 4, 2020, <https://theappalachianretellingproject.com/stories/blake-the-beauty-of-appalachia>.

However, as the essay's title suggests, she feels a deep pull toward her home in Kentucky and believes that she is one day "fated to return."<sup>289</sup> Although Rachel has previously felt shame over her Appalachian heritage, often attempting to hide her accent as she attended college out of the region, she now recognizes Appalachia's claim on her as something positive and revels in her unspoken connection to the land and to the generations before her:

I don't say "fated to return" reluctantly. This is something I've always known, even when I denied it. I am on loan, seeing the world, gathering stories and experiences before ultimately returning home to Kentucky.

There is a special resilience that comes with being Appalachian. You grow up proud, surrounded by the walls of mountains and hills, distrusting anyone who doesn't turn "oil" and "foil" into a single syllable. We are descended, whether by blood or spirit, from coal miners who went on strike against the men from the North who exploited their labor. We know our worth, we know that our home is beautiful and sacred, and we know that one day, we are fated to return.<sup>290</sup>

Finally, some participants celebrate their connection to Appalachia by showcasing the region's unique traditions and practices. In a video titled "Combatting Stereotypes Through Cultural Traditions," Lauren May, creator of the Appalachian cooking blog *Must Love Herbs*, emphasizes the impact that her childhood spent gardening and cooking – both deeply-held traditions in Appalachia – with her grandparents had on her life. May feels that being Appalachian is core to her identity and that it is part of everything she does, as she says in her video's opening lines, "Appalachia is my history. It's my history 200 years back. I feel like Appalachia *is* me. And it's my family, and it's my friends, and it's my home. And it's my garden, and it's my food. It's everything about me."<sup>291</sup> May has long been aware of Appalachia's negative

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<sup>289</sup> Rachel P., "Rachel: Kentucky is My Fate," *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, September 29, 2020, <https://theappalachianretellingproject.com/stories/rachel-kentucky-is-my-fate>.

<sup>290</sup> "Kentucky is My Fate."

<sup>291</sup> Elon Justice, "Lauren: Combatting Stereotypes Through Cultural Traditions," *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, July 29, 2020, <https://theappalachianretellingproject.com/stories/lauren-combatting-stereotypes-through-cultural-traditions>.

media representation and aims to combat stereotypes of the region through *Must Love Herbs*, featuring traditional Appalachian dishes often accompanied by stories of her family and upbringing in the region:

I have seen a lot in the media of how Appalachia is portrayed, and it's wrong. It's not what we are. It's not how we live. It's not a true portrayal of everybody. [...] And I wanted to, with *Must Love Herbs*, shine a light. We have wonderful traditions and we have wonderful recipes and people. I want to show them that we are cultured, and that we are people that are worth coming here and visiting and seeing all of our heritage. And maybe somebody who has said that we are hillbillies, and they've said it in a negative connotation, will say, well, that's a good thing. It's a wonderful thing. They have a wonderful culture and they're wonderful people that would give you the shirt off their back. And I hope that I can somehow show that just a little tiny bit with me.<sup>292</sup>

Susanna, a contributor from Sandyville, West Virginia, also stresses the importance of Appalachian traditions in her submission “Split Dogs and Skunk Funerals.” Susanna writes of tall tales, a comedic storytelling practice that began in the days of the American frontier and is still common in Appalachia today. Susanna opens her essay with a tale of a dog who ran so fast he accidentally cut himself in half on a lawn mower blade, later reflecting on the importance of the storytelling practice to both the region’s culture and herself personally:

Tall tales, usually called lies in West Virginia, are part of Appalachian storytelling heritage. I wondered if the tradition of lying was dying out, but a few years ago I attended a farm auction where the bidding was heavy on a wooden ironing board. A man near me said, “You know, I once had a dog who was such a good hunter that all I had to do was show him a skinning board and he would bring me a coon or a possum just the right size for the board.” I knew immediately where he was going—this was a tall tale I knew and often told along with The Split Dog. I sat back and listened, glad to know that the old stories are indeed alive and well, and that people are still telling them.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> “Combatting Stereotypes Through Cultural Traditions.”

<sup>293</sup> Susanna C.H., “Susanna: Split Dogs and Skunk Funerals,” *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, August 28, 2020, <https://theappalachianretellingproject.com/stories/susanna-split-dogs-and-skunk-funerals>.

Contrary to popular media portrayals of Appalachia, which often position its culture as deviant or peculiar, May and Susanna are proud of Appalachia's traditions and wish them to continue for generations to come.

*Counter-Narrative #2: Showcasing Appalachian Diversity*

A second theme that emerged from *ARP* was a focus on the experiences of people of color, those who practice religions other than Christianity, and women in the region. These posts challenge the notion of Appalachianness as something synonymous with being white, Christian, and male.

Several contributors shared their own experiences as Appalachians of color, especially in immigrant communities. In a video titled "Navigating Identity as a Muslim Appalachian," Harvard student Iman Ali reflects on her upbringing as the daughter of Pakistani immigrants and practicing Muslim in the small town of South Williamson, Kentucky. Ali emphasizes that she identifies first and foremost as a Kentuckian and that growing up in Appalachia is integral to her identity. Though she recognized from a young age that the majority of her classmates were white, Ali says that she never felt a divide between herself and others she grew up with:

In my class, I was the only Muslim student and I was one of two, I believe, women of color in my whole class. And...I wish that I could, like, genuinely just describe how – and I'm not going to say this right – how un-special I felt, almost, you know. I didn't feel like the kid who could speak a different language. I didn't feel like the kid whose mom wore headscarf or the one who brought ethnic food to lunch. I felt so a part of my group, my friends...there was never a moment where I was like, I feel like I'm being cheated out of something, or I feel like something isn't being met to a certain standard because of the background that I am or the beliefs that I have.<sup>294</sup>

While Ali's childhood experience in Appalachia was largely positive, she also admits that feeling like a minority in the region can be an isolating experience:

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<sup>294</sup> Elon Justice, "Iman: Navigating Identity as a Muslim Appalachian," *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, July 30, 2020, <https://theappalachianretellingproject.com/stories/iman-navigating-identity-as-a-muslim-appalachian>.

I've heard this phrase that Appalachia is not a monolith. We aren't all white. We are all Christian. And as much as I want to say, you know, like, absolutely, we're not a monolith. Like, look at me. I'm Appalachian and I'm neither one of those things. Sometimes it's really hard to believe that. Sometimes when I walk outside and I look to my left and I look to my right, or I go to Wal-Mart and there's a hundred people who are all a certain race...it's hard [not] to think that, is there anybody else like me besides the four people that live in my house?<sup>295</sup>

Ali goes on to recount a racist encounter she recently experienced in her hometown, in which she heard a man exclaim that he “effing hate[s] foreigners.”<sup>296</sup> Ali was immediately distraught by the incident, troubled that someone could be so cruel to members of their own community. Ali also says that this encounter made her recognize that she might be considered a “foreigner,” despite having been born in the United States and spent the majority of her life in Kentucky. Ali explains her reaction further:

Being told that someone effing hates something *that I'm not even*, that really stung me. I think to who the “foreigners,” quote unquote, are in my life. They're my mom or my dad. They're my grandma. They're some of my classmates. My father has been a physician in this town, I mean, literally since I've been born. Growing up, I could count how many soccer games, how many academic meets, how many PTA meetings he was able to go to. And honest to God, it was zero. He never was able to come to stuff. He was taking extra E.R. shifts. He was working night and day in the clinic. He opened a Suboxone clinic to help the opioid epidemic in Kentucky. And these are the people that you effing hate, the people that are trying to keep you alive day and night. My mom, who works at a food shelter every single week, providing meals, you know, providing company. These are the people that you hate?

[...]

For me, when Kentucky or the South is painted as only white, I feel so erased. I feel as if the contributions that my parents have made to our small community go unnoticed. You are silencing an entire community that's very happy here. That's very accepted here. That would love to raise their children here and their grandchildren here... Of course, there's a majority. There always is. But we have to challenge ourselves to be more curious. We should want to learn about who is there that I'm not thinking of.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> “Navigating Identity as a Muslim Appalachian.”

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

Ali's open and honest account of her experience provides true insight into the life of an Appalachian of color. Ali holds Kentucky dear to her heart, yet heartbreakingly realizes that not all those in her community view her and her family as one of their own.

In a written submission titled "Reconciling My Immigrant Roots and Appalachian Upbringing," Krishna, too, wrestles with these issues as he reflects on his upbringing in Pikeville, Kentucky. Krishna is the son of Indian immigrants to the area and grew up experiencing both Indian and Appalachian traditions, a mixing of cultures that at times left him feeling out of place:

Sometimes I feel guilty. I wonder if I have any right to claim to be part of this Appalachian culture. I remember lighting Diwali fireworks as Pikeville's autumn leaves burned into their own festive colors. I remember my mother serving food that was always too spicy for my friends from school, and never really knowing the answer to why I don't eat beef. But I also remember the increasingly infrequent passing of coal trucks before my house, and the stunning growth of the hospital and the university, and how the natives were here before all of it.<sup>298</sup>

Though Krishna recognizes that his experience may be unlike many of his peers, he concludes with the realization that he does not have to choose one identity over another:

Change is inevitable, and culture is too adaptive, encompassing, and resilient to be represented in just one face. I remind myself that no perfectly composite person exists who can speak for an entire culture and tell me I do not look the way they do. Home can be a face like mine, just as much as it can be a face like LJ or Patrick, Katie or Noor. Memories of my first dance, my first play, my first clumsy slip into a creek, and the people with whom I shared these moments, if not the threads of my genealogy or the complexion of my face, keep this belief alive.

I will never be one thing or the other. Perhaps I am several identities at once, something novel altogether. And that's okay.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Krishna A., "Krishna: Reconciling My Immigrant Roots and Appalachian Upbringing," *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, August 13, 2020, <https://theappalachianretellingproject.com/stories/krishna-reconciling-my-immigrant-roots-and-appalachian-upbringing>.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

Like Ali, Krishna’s candid assessment of his identity provides insight into the experiences – both positive and negative, and sometimes conflicting – of Appalachians of color. Both participants grapple with doubts that they do not fit in, yet ultimately reach the conclusion that Appalachia belongs to them, and they to it, just as much as anyone else.

While Ali and Krishna reflect on personal experiences, the video “Showcasing Black Appalachian History” highlights the work being done to bring to light the history of Black Appalachia as a whole. William Isom II and Dr. Enkeshi El-Amin are two members of the team spearheading Black in Appalachia, a project of East Tennessee PBS in Knoxville, Tennessee. Black in Appalachia sprung from a PBS documentary Isom created on a historically Black college in Eastern Tennessee, leading to the team’s recognition that much of Black Appalachian history had not been well documented. Isom saw this lack of official history as an opportunity to grant visibility to people of color throughout the region:

This work is really important because it doesn't exist. Like, we're creating stuff from scratch in lots of ways. The narratives and the stories and the materials are there. But they've never...been considered. It became really apparent, like, there was all this stuff that people had in their basements. And they would have everybody's business in tubs in their basement, or in their garage. And after seeing that, you begin to, like, recognize the need.

There's kind of this analogy that I like to use. There's like these two mountains, and one mountain is the official narrative. It's the courthouse records. It's even in academia. It's the official record. And this other mountain you have is the vernacular history, it's the oral history. And in the middle, like here in Appalachia, that's where the holler is at, where the two mountains meet. And...in topography, that's where you find the most biodiversity, is in the holler. So by holding up the vernacular history as just as valuable as the official narrative, that's where we're going to find the most biodiversity in narrative, and the most richness of stories that we can make available and carve out that space.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Elon Justice, “Black in Appalachia: Showcasing Black Appalachian History,” *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, July 28, 2020, <https://theappalachianretellingproject.com/stories/black-in-appalachia-showcasing-black-appalachian-history>.

Because Black Appalachian history has rarely been given an “official” status, El-Amin believes many people of color in the region struggle to identify themselves as Appalachian:

[F]or Black people who are native to the region, they know that they belong here, but they still have a complicated relationship with the region, and with calling themselves Appalachian even... Black Appalachians have a difficult time claiming that identity. [...] And some of them are open to dealing with that struggle...and figuring out what does it mean to be Black and Appalachian. And I think that, like, we are seeing the term “Affrilachian” and some people feel like, “OK, that's me, that's for me. I can claim Appalachianiness.” And so to me, that's really important.<sup>301</sup>

Thus, El-Amin sees the work of Black in Appalachia as an opportunity both for Black folks in the region to claim Appalachianiness and for Appalachia as a whole to recognize the importance of Black folks to the area:

[T]he work that we're doing with the Black in Appalachia initiative is just so, so important because I think it's important to reimagine Appalachia... We've had one narrative for a long time and honestly, it sort of, like, cheats the region of all of its complexities, right, all of the nuances. Like, we don't have to be just one thing. And I think part of the mission of Black in Appalachia is to really pull from some of the stuff that we've been collecting, some of the stories that we've been collecting along the way, some of the data that we've been looking at, and...make connections to present day life in Appalachia and really create a space, a virtual and sometimes a physical space, for Black people in this region that affirms for them that, like, you belong here, but also to let everybody else know that they belong here as well.<sup>302</sup>

By uncovering these lost histories of Black Appalachians, the Black in Appalachia team is proving that people of color have a long legacy in the region, despite “official” narratives that attempt to erase them.

Other submissions focus specifically on the experiences of women in Appalachia, highlighting the importance of women to their communities and families. Most importantly, these stories release Appalachian women from the subordinate positions given to them in popular

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<sup>301</sup> “Showcasing Black Appalachian History.”

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

media, as they are often resilient, resourceful, and leaders in their family and community structures. In her submission titled “An Appalachian Education,” Kate writes of her grandmother’s influence in her community and on the following generations of women in her family. Kate’s grandmother, Leelah, met her grandfather Russell in medical school in the 1940s, an era during which being a medical student was nearly unheard of for women. Leelah was not afraid to stand up for herself or to use unconventional methods to do so, traits best exemplified in Kate’s humorous anecdote: “Always a force to be reckoned with, my grandmother once pulled an epic stunt on a reporter. She was displeased with how the media had been portraying female medical students (imagine that!) and so she casually slipped a kidney from a cadaver into his equipment bag. As I said, she was not a lady to be taken lightly.” Though Leelah eventually decided to drop out of medical school to start a family, she instilled the importance of education within her 11 grandchildren, nine of whom were women “born with genes ready to take on the world.” All adults now, the women of Kate’s family have taken their grandparents’ lessons to heart and gone on to become “entrepreneurs, tech innovators, business owners, educators, and physicians. We work hard, help others, and always remember the lessons taught to us by two remarkable people.” Kate concludes with the knowledge that her grandparents are proud of the strong women they have raised, writing, “We are the granddaughters our grandparents dreamed of, and we aren’t finished yet.”<sup>303</sup>

In his submission titled “Frankie Sue Best,” Masoud also writes of an extraordinary Appalachian woman to whom he was close. Masoud moved to the United States as a young man and met Frankie as he sought help for his university entrance exam. Soon after, Frankie took in Masoud as her own, and he lived with her for seven and a half years as a student. Masoud writes

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<sup>303</sup> Kate L., “Kate: An Appalachian Education,” *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, August 7, 2020, <https://theappalachianretellingproject.com/stories/kate-an-appalachian-education>.

of all the qualities that made Frankie such a special woman to know: “Not few are the words to describe Frankie’s beautiful qualities, but they include caring, friendly, happy, optimistic, intellectual, helpful, and a faithful individual. Yet the one word that would collectively describe her best is ‘loving.’”<sup>304</sup> Masoud explains that Frankie was unconditionally kind, even to those who were difficult to be kind to: Every year she baked a birthday cake for a racist neighbor who did not speak to her once she took in Masoud, and many years later the neighbor apologized for his actions. Masoud closes by acknowledging the impact knowing Frankie had on his own life:

The time I spent with Frankie Best was truly the most positive and rewarding experience that occurred during my time at Prestonsburg Community College and the University of Kentucky. I thank God for knowing her and his will to cross my path with hers. After 22 years since her passing, I still miss her immensely.

The United States of America is a beautiful and resourceful country, but if I had to select the most beautiful thing in America, I would choose Frankie. She truly was my loving American mother.<sup>305</sup>

In sharing the life of Frankie, Masoud celebrates an Appalachian woman who was strong, kind, and made an impact on all who knew her.

Contributor Doug also tells the story of a strong Appalachian woman in his family, albeit in a different tone. His submission, titled “My Mother at Christmas,” is the humorous (but true) story of an unfortunate mishap at Christmas in 1935, when his mother was seven years old. Doug’s grandparents, Martha and Jim, had seven children and raised many other members of their extended family, so money was often scarce. However, Doug’s mother, Louise, desperately wanted a new doll for Christmas. On Christmas Eve, Martha and Jim decided to forego some of their groceries for the week and instructed the company store to deliver them a wrapped doll instead. Doug reveals what happened the next day:

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<sup>304</sup> Masoud M., “Masoud: Frankie Sue Best,” *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, October 13, 2020, <https://theappalachianretellingproject.com/stories/masoud-frankie-sue-best>.

<sup>305</sup> “Frankie Sue Best.”

Early Christmas morning Jim had the fires all going and Martha had fixed a fine breakfast. Louise gulped her breakfast down in anticipation of an early opening of her baby doll. After many delays (on purpose) it could not be put off any longer. Martha sat down in her rocking chair in front of a blazing fire and lit her clay pipe. Jim walked over, took the small package and handed it to Louise. “This is for you, honey.”

Louise was shaking so hard she could hardly pull the bow loose on the string. “Why did they have to use so much paper?” she wondered.

Finally it was all unwrapped. Jim’s eyes were watering. They did not water near as much as Louise’s did as she looked at the unwrapped ten pack of Red Horse Chewing Tobacco that had mistakenly been delivered to the wrong home. Jim cried. Louise cried. Martha puffed her pipe, rocked and just smiled.

“How can you sit there, Marthy, and laugh at that little thing while she cries so hard?”

Martha just puffed her pipe and chuckled. “I’m not laughing at her, Jim. I was just thinking of that poor old coal miner who by now has unwrapped his Christmas gift.”<sup>306</sup>

Though humorous, this story reveals important aspects of the family dynamic and Martha’s roles as wife and mother. While one might expect Martha to be the one in tears, it is her husband who is most visibly upset; Martha even has the wit to make a joke about the unfortunate situation. While these details are small, they are still powerful when juxtaposed with popular portrayals of Appalachian women who are meek, subordinate, and miserable. Doug’s story furthermore provides insight into the Appalachian family structure, in which women are often matriarchal figures with great influence over their families.

### *Counter-Narrative #3: Speaking Back to Stereotypes*

A final theme that has emerged from *ARP* is that of directly speaking back to and critiquing harmful media portrayals of Appalachia, and of Appalachian stereotypes more broadly. In addition to critiquing these stereotypes, many participants go on to name the real-

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<sup>306</sup> Doug K., “Doug: My Mother at Christmas,” *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, August 11, 2020, <https://theappalachianretellingproject.com/stories/doug-my-mother-at-christmas>.

world effects of Appalachia’s negative media reputation, both on themselves personally and their communities at large.

Virginia Tech lecturer and researcher Jordan Laney does just this in a video titled “*Hillbilly Elegy & Appalachian Representation*.” While Laney agrees that the problems discussed in *Elegy*, such as poverty, drug abuse, and difficult family dynamics, certainly exist in Appalachia – and in nearly every community in the U.S. – she takes issue with what Vance presents as the root of these problems: laziness and a lack of desire to leave the region. Laney describes Vance’s stance:

I mean, in Vance's words, Appalachia's problem is “lazy men,” unquote. And that if we worked harder, we could leave. And that's very similar to the story that Diane Sawyer told in 2009 with *Hidden America: Children of the Mountains*, that if you grew up here, you should leave.

[...]

*Hillbilly Elegy* works from...what we call a culture of poverty model, that poverty is something that's inherited, something that's a genetic trait. Which led to the eugenics movement, which led to countless individuals in – I know Virginia, specifically from my own work – being institutionalized and sterilized against their will, or without even knowing, because they were economically disadvantaged. So...it comes from this place of like, believing that poverty is something that is just inherent and that people are lazy and don't want to work hard.<sup>307</sup>

In addition to following the same lines of thinking that enabled historic atrocities such as the eugenics movement, Laney goes on to explain other ways in which *Elegy*’s portrayal of Appalachia is harmful: “[T]elling this story of a white, male place filled with lazy white males impacts policy. It erases women. It erases people of color. It erases all of the hard work being done [here].”<sup>308</sup> Laney concludes by offering suggestions as to what more accurate and helpful portrayals of Appalachia could look like:

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<sup>307</sup> Elon Justice, “Jordan: *Hillbilly Elegy & Appalachian Representation*,” *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, July 31, 2020, <https://theappalachianretellingproject.com/stories/jordan-hillbilly-elegy-appalachian-representation>.

<sup>308</sup> “*Hillbilly Elegy & Appalachian Representation*.”

[T]here are so many people with amazing stories about resilience, and stories about what the region does well without romanticizing it, but without painting it as a place that has given up. But rather, you know, showcasing it in its diversity...and then the systems and structures in place revealed. Like systemic poverty, looking at school systems, looking at health care, looking at mental health. If these issues were revealed rather than this one narrative of “just work harder,” I think it would paint a truer picture of the region and a picture that would actually help.<sup>309</sup>

Laney’s deconstruction of *Hillbilly Elegy* challenges the dominant regime of representation in Appalachia, unpacking the misconceptions that these portrayals perpetuate and the effects they have on the region.

While Laney describes the effects of Appalachian representation on the region at large, contributor Kara writes of its effects on her own life. Though Kara believes she was always peripherally aware of Appalachian stereotypes, she realized how prevalent they were while taking a course in Appalachian Studies at the University of Kentucky. She recalls in particular that many of the documentaries on the region she watched in the class felt negative, one-sided, and were shot in black and white, adding a sense of depravity to the images. “I remember feeling the need to write and speak defensively for my home in my essays and class discussions,” Kara writes. “‘Outsiders’ was a common theme in the class. Appalachia, tucked away in the hills, did not want ‘outsiders’ coming in to their world. Well, perhaps for good reason.”<sup>310</sup> Kara also writes of her own experiences encountering others who believed these stereotypes, recalling an encounter with a physician she met in Northern Kentucky while travelling as a medical sales representative:

I listened to his meanderings on Eastern Kentucky for a while, all the time my “blood boiling.” He summarized his thoughts with, “There is a reason Kentucky has its name – all the area West and North of Lexington is the Kent part and all that Eastern area is the ucky – the yucky of the state.” The thoughts that ran in my mind! I professionally said,

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<sup>309</sup> “*Hillbilly Elegy* & Appalachian Representation.”

<sup>310</sup> Kara B., “Kara: Learning About Appalachian Stereotypes,” *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, December 2, 2020, <https://theappalachianretellingproject.com/stories/kara-learning-about-appalachian-stereotypes>.

“And where are you from?” His response was Indiana. I said, “But you have been to Eastern Kentucky?” He responded no. I collected my things and on my way out the door said, “Well, all you have stated then is a lie because you haven’t been there to see it with your own eyes and experience the so-called yucky.”<sup>311</sup>

Kara concludes her essay by speaking directly to Appalachian stereotypes and her love for the area: “The stereotype that media portrays really has an effect. The readers/viewers believe what they read and see. Yet, they have perhaps never been to our land. Appalachia isn’t perfect by any means, but there is a lot of good in that ‘yucky.’ A heritage – one I am certainly proud to call my own.”<sup>312</sup> By providing examples of the effects of stereotyping in her own life, Kara proves that these images are not harmless; by calling them out as incorrect and harmful, she begins to take away their power.

Finally, much of the focus of the Appalachian Talk Back series, in which I pose questions to the audience via social media, is on Appalachian media representation and the effects of stereotypes. The first compilation post on the *ARP* website from this series collects answers to three questions, asking participants when they became aware of themselves of Appalachian, when they became aware of Appalachian stereotypes, and what they perceive to be the most common stereotype of Appalachia. One participant, going by the initials A.M., writes of their realization of themselves as Appalachian stemming from a negative media representation of the region: “[M]y college sociology class showed PBS’s *People Like Us* about class in America and the poorest person in the documentary was from my county.”<sup>313</sup> Another participant, Madi, recalls becoming aware of Appalachian stereotypes at a young age, also stemming from negative media representation: “The first time I remember being truly aware of how others portrayed us is

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<sup>311</sup> “Learning About Appalachian Stereotypes.”

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>313</sup> “Appalachian Talk Back: Recognizing Appalachianness and Taking Account of Stereotypes,” *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, November 24, 2020, <https://theappalachianretellingproject.com/stories/appalachian-talk-back-recognizing-appalachianness-and-taking-account-of-stereotypes>.

when 20/20 did their Children of the Mountains Special. I think I was in 8th grade.”<sup>314</sup> The request to describe the “Appalachian stereotype” received especially thoughtful responses from a number of participants. Kristina succinctly phrases the Appalachian stereotype as “code for white with a low income,” while Hannah describes stereotypes she has encountered personally: “I’m from West Virginia. I’ve been asked if I lived in a trailer, had sex with my cousins, collected welfare for most of my childhood, had parents who were related before marriage, was a coal miner’s daughter, came from a Republican voting family, spent my childhood barefoot, and whether I had gotten pregnant by 16.”<sup>315</sup> A.M. responded to this question as well, noting the shift in perceptions of Appalachia during the Trump era: “For me it has been fascinating, yet demoralizing, to watch the culture’s stereotype of Appalachia shift from deserving-but-ignorant poor to hated deplorables who are destroying our democracy with ‘their’ voting patterns.”<sup>316</sup>

The second compilation post in this series focuses on Appalachian media representation more specifically, asking participants their thoughts on some of the most well-known films, TV shows, and books on the region and to provide “the worst portrayal of Appalachia [they]’ve seen in media.”<sup>317</sup> Many participants spoke of their distaste for *Hillbilly Elegy*, likely due to the release of the book’s film adaptation just over a month earlier. One respondent, TJ, writes not only about portrayals he takes issue with but about the impact of popular media on the region:

It’s analogous to the portrayal of inner cities - nearly always in caricature. It’s also presented as devoid of diversity. Appalachia is much more than white, but one would never know it to watch the countless reports, shows, and movies about this region that extends from Mississippi to Maine. Although, we’re really just talking about Southern and Central Appalachia because no one really talks about the Northern portion. These depictions - like the *Hillbilly Elegy* adaptation - love the spectacle of poverty in

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<sup>314</sup> “Recognizing Appalachianness...”

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> “Appalachian Talk Back: Media Representation,” *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, January 11, 2021, <https://theappalachianretellingproject.com/stories/appalachian-talk-back-media-representation>.

Appalachia. They love to exploit the issues faced here much in the same way they've exploited the issues of the inner city. It's a sick kind of voyeurism.

I live where *Deliverance* and portions of *Elegy* were filmed. Neither film – or any of the countless others – led to help for the people of this community in need. No support of our nonprofits on the front lines of the opioid epidemic, abusive homes, food security, environmental justice, or cultural preservation. No real acknowledgement of the plight of not only white people but also the Indigenous, Black, and Hispanic communities who have called this region home as long as or MUCH longer than anyone else.<sup>318</sup>

Other posts in this series consider the effects of Appalachian media representation and enduring stereotypes of the region. One question in the series' third post asks if members of the audience ever code-switch between Appalachian dialect and a more “proper” American accent; everyone who responded said yes. One participant, Ann, says she often felt the need to tone down her accent at work to sound more “professional”: “Felt that I had to for my job. Didn't want to sound like a true ‘hillbilly or hick’ when I was on the phone with big insurance companies. Mostly I changed my accent to sound more proper, not always my words. I was especially careful in how I pronounced numbers and medical terms.”<sup>319</sup> Another respondent, Selma, recalls in her youth hearing many members of her community change their accent as interacted with those from outside the region, likely due to a feeling that they would be looked down upon:

As I was growing up, we knew people who had relatives that lived up North and would come to visit. The kids would try to sound like their relatives who were in to visit. The same when they went to visit their relatives, they would always try to sound like they were from those states. It didn't matter where it was, they'd try to sound like them. We never went anywhere so we never tried to sound any different.

I think they felt they had to do it because we were less than. There was no work around here, everyone was poor, everything was hard. We couldn't go shopping in town like the people who worked in the factories. [...] Anywhere away from here was better than what

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<sup>318</sup> “Media Representation.”

<sup>319</sup> “Appalachian Talk Back: The Appalachian Experience,” *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, February 8, 2021, <https://theappalachianretellingproject.com/stories/appalachian-talk-back-the-appalachian-experience>.

we had because we had dirt roads and people worked in the mines, which was a dirty job. We just weren't quite as good as those other people who lived in other places.<sup>320</sup>

Responses to other questions reveal a sense of frustration that stereotypes of the region continue to be perpetuated and believed by outsiders. A response to the question, “How do you feel about being Appalachian?” contains this sentiment: “Pride, frustration that my family didn’t value therapy and that outsiders can’t see how exploitative our political economy is. [...] There’s good and bad but a lot of good.”<sup>321</sup> Another, asking participants to describe Appalachia to someone who has never been there, received this response: “Eastern KY may have its faults, but you’re not going to find a more supportive group of people. Due to our history we have a bit of wariness about outsiders, but once you prove that you’re not here with less than positive intentions, you get adopted as family easily. And most families will go above and beyond for one of their own - adopted or biological, doesn’t matter.”<sup>322</sup> While not quite as directly speaking back to stereotypes and their effects, these responses still expose the way that Appalachia’s representation in media has impacted those who live there.

Though the topics discussed in *ARP* vary quite drastically from one contribution to the next, they are unified by a sense of pride in and respect for the place they call home and the people who live there. While many acknowledge the challenges that can come with living in Appalachia, from lack of job opportunities to doubts of belonging, all those who participate unabashedly claim Appalachia as their own. These submissions reveal the diversity of experience in Appalachia and work to counter notions of the region as a place worthy of shame and derision.

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<sup>320</sup> “The Appalachian Experience.”

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> “Media Representation.”

## **Conclusion: Co-Creation and Counter-Narrative in *The Appalachian Retelling Project***

*The Appalachian Retelling Project's* approach to co-creation is largely participatory: Though I acted as a “director” in the sense that I coordinated the project, created the initial series of videos to populate the website, and continue to offer prompts and engage with the audience on social media, I do not play a major role in the content submitted to the project by participants and perform only minimal curation of the submissions I receive. This is unlike the more director-led approach of *Hollow*, in which McMillion Sheldon was the ultimate author of the film’s content, but it is also not the totally balanced “equal, shared discovery process” in the center of the co-creation spectrum.<sup>323</sup> Rather, *ARP* might best be described as a more participant-driven project, in which I formulate baseline rules for participation as a director but leave many of the subsequent decisions to the participants. In keeping the rules for participation quite open-ended, contributors have a great deal of freedom in the subjects they wish to speak about and the media forms they choose to engage with, creating a collage of stories and perspectives on what it means to live in and be from Appalachia. *The Appalachian Retelling Project* thus offers an alternative to single-authored narratives of Appalachia and empowers Appalachian people to actively shape the stories of their communities rather than relying on media “made for or about them” by professional media-makers both in and out of the region – whose intentions may or may not be aligned with their own.<sup>324</sup>

While keeping criteria for participation loose allows for a myriad of topics and viewpoints to enter conversation with one another, this approach does come with some tradeoffs. Because I decided not to play an active role in the shaping of most of the content on the website, many submissions tended to veer away from a focus on counter-narrative, instead delving into

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<sup>323</sup> Cizek et al., “We Are Here.”

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

personal and family histories. Cizek and Uricchio write that this is a common risk in co-creation: While a co-creative approach may allow for a plurality of voices to enter conversation with one another, it can also “lead to a lack of high-quality storytelling or muddled decision-making processes that threatens editorial control and artistic integrity.” They elaborate:

From an artistic perspective, with co-creation, “the risks are totally incoherent narratives,” said Jennifer MacArthur, a documentary producer. She believes that results become so generalized and non-specific that they are “outside of anybody's shared experience or understanding [and] don't resonate at all.” Tabitha Jackson, director of the Documentary Film Program at Sundance Institute, moderated a panel on the Art of Co-Creation at the 2018 Skoll World Forum. She identified the tension of authorship at Sundance, where “we're supporting the independent voice, and there is something to a singular, identifiable, distinctive voice that we value in the arts.”<sup>325</sup>

In the case of *ARP*, that lack of editorial control resulted in my goal of creating many individual counter-narratives only being partially realized.

Many of the stories that participants did intend to function as counter-narratives take the approach that Hall terms the “positive/negative strategy” – simply replacing negative images of Appalachia, such as poverty and drug addiction, with more positive ones, like tightly-knit family and community structures.<sup>326</sup> This strategy is not completely ineffective; indeed, Hall writes of its benefits:

This approach has the advantage of righting the balance. It is underpinned by an acceptance - indeed, a celebration – of difference. It inverts the binary opposition, privileging the subordinate term, sometimes reading the negative positively... It tries to construct a positive identification with what has been abjected. It greatly expands the range of racial representations and the complexity of what it means to 'be [in a group]', thus challenging the reductionism of earlier stereotypes.<sup>327</sup>

However, this strategy is not the *most* effective way to undermine a dominant regime of representation about a group because it does not escape the positive/negative binary common in

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<sup>325</sup> Cizek et al., “How to Co-Create.”

<sup>326</sup> Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other,’” 273.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid, 272.

representation, creating two poles at which an imagined member of a group might fall but no room for those who exist in between. Hall explains:

The problem with the positive/negative strategy is that adding positive images to the largely negative repertoire of the dominant regime of representation increases the diversity of the ways in which 'being [in a group]' is represented, but does not *necessarily* displace the negative. Since the binaries remain in place, meaning continues to be framed by them. The strategy challenges the binaries - but it does not undermine them.<sup>328</sup>

While many of the individual stories on the *ARP* website do not escape the positive/negative binary, it is important to understand how *ARP*'s stories function as a whole – how they might work *collectively* as a form of counter-narrative. Although many individual stories simply attempt to replace negative images with positive ones, as a whole, they constitute a dynamic, multifaceted, and diverse portrait of life in Appalachia. Participants in the project come from a variety of ethnic, religious, educational, and economic backgrounds, with differing interests, values, and goals. Some have moved away from the region, while others have never left their hometowns; some gladly accept the mantle of “hillbilly” while others believe it is a derogatory term. In this way, *The Appalachian Retelling Project* enacts a more substantive and significant counter-representation – one that transcends the positive/negative binary and creates a wide field of representation in which Appalachian identity can encompass a multiplicity of people, lifestyles, and beliefs.

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<sup>328</sup> Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other,’” 273.

## Conclusion

For over a century, the Appalachian region and its people have been systematically misrepresented in popular media. Using common tropes including its status as a degraded and helpless place, Appalachian culture as inherently violent and barbaric, Appalachians as a displaced people, and the region as homogenous and devoid of diversity, Appalachia remains positioned in the public eye as a place that is “other,” a space outside the norms of middle class white America. This positioning has effectively allowed governments, organizations, and the public at large to ignore and exacerbate urgent issues facing the region – from lack of infrastructure and job opportunities to an opioid epidemic and heightened suicide rate – while simultaneously pinning issues plaguing the entire country, such as the nation’s deep social and political divide, on Appalachia. The need for new representations of Appalachia which challenge these harmful narratives is great, a necessary first step in solving these problems.

In this thesis, I sought to explore the value of co-creative documentary in creating new counter-narratives of Appalachia. Framing my study through Stuart Hall’s notions of representation and counter-representation, I assessed two documentaries, both focused on the Appalachian region, that took differing approaches to co-creation – Elaine McMillion Sheldon’s *Hollow*, which employed a deeply community-embedded approach, as well as co-creation across disciplines, and my own *Appalachian Retelling Project*, which primarily utilized methods of participation and crowdsourcing – and determined the types of counter-narratives that emerged from these documentaries. After unpacking these projects’ approaches to co-creation and assessing their strength as counter-narratives, I would like to turn now to a few lessons I have learned from my study.

*Lesson #1: Co-Creation as a Route to Counter-Narrative*

*Co-creation* is an umbrella term, encompassing “a constellation of media production methods, frameworks, and feedback systems” that offer alternatives to the single-author vision, allow communities to have a hand in the media-making process, and attempt to reframe the world “through a lens of equity and justice.”<sup>329</sup> Co-creation allows for a myriad of perspectives to enter the production process and does not privilege one party’s version of the story above all others; it emphasizes the need both for time and for relationships to form, and for the final project to emerge from these processes rather than the other way around.<sup>330</sup> Co-creation also allows for the formation of complex narrative structures that defy traditional storytelling models, allowing for a multiplicity of voices to speak on a topic rather than constructing a grand argument.<sup>331</sup>

Because of its commitment to deep time and listening, its grounding in a concern for social justice, and its ability to form complex and polyvocal narratives, co-creation is a powerful strategy for the production of counter-narratives that go beyond the limitations of the positive/negative binary – that, in Hall’s framing, go “inside the image” itself to create a space in which many different lives and perspectives can be represented from within a group. This can be seen in the case of Appalachia in both *Hollow* and *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, as both projects foreground a diverse range of people, stories, lives, and life experiences throughout Appalachia, asserting a multi-vocal and multi-sided representation of the region. These projects ultimately transcend the region’s negative stereotypes, common in popular media representations, as well as their equally limiting “positive” counterparts, creating a portrait of

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<sup>329</sup> Cizek et al., “We Are Here.”

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

<sup>331</sup> Cizek et al., “How to Co-Create.”

Appalachia that allows for the multiplicity and complexity of everyday human lives and experiences.

*Hollow* and *The Appalachian Retelling Project* offer different approaches to co-creation in documentary, each project with its own goals and vision. Rather than arguing for the superiority of one approach over the other, I would instead like to discuss the affordances and drawbacks of each, as these are important considerations for documentarians attempting work in this domain.

In *Hollow*, McMillion Sheldon worked closely with residents of McDowell County throughout the pre-production and production periods, asking for their feedback on her decisions as a director and for their input in the form of workshops, participatory video, and community projects that became part of the final film. In post-production, the entire team fostered close collaborations as they worked to design an interactive documentary in which all media elements, from visuals to sound to UX, played crucial roles in the experience. While these processes were deeply collaborative and co-creative, it is important to note that McMillion Sheldon remained the ultimate authority on all parts of the film, deciding which content would be included and which would be excluded from the final narrative. This greater degree of directorial control brings with it several affordances: *Hollow* is a beautifully-designed experience with a coherent narrative, despite its non-linear nature. Furthermore, McMillion Sheldon's directed storytelling and curation of content allowed for the creation of several strong counter-narratives about McDowell County and Appalachia as a whole. *Hollow* confronts common stereotypes associated with McDowell County – poverty, for example – head-on, successfully going “inside the image” to complicate notions of what Appalachian poverty even means. *Hollow* also allows for a multiplicity of perspectives on the issues discussed in the film, allowing participants to voice

conflicting opinions and often placing these pieces side by side. This success was made possible by McMillion Sheldon's ultimate control of the narrative, achieved by guiding participant interviews toward discussions of stereotypes as well as curating a wide variety of content into coherent narratives around these themes.

While *Hollow*'s approach to media-making certainly resulted in a compelling and often moving experience, it is important to note that it is not an approach without trade-offs or challenges. As McMillion Sheldon noted in an interview, it was at times difficult to balance the desires of the community with what she saw as her responsibility as a documentary filmmaker, exemplified in her inclusion of pieces that featured negative impacts of coal mining: She recalled that many viewers were "squirming in their seats" as these pieces played at *Hollow*'s McDowell County screening, but she ultimately felt it would be "irresponsible to the documentary tradition within Appalachia" not to include them.<sup>332</sup> Furthermore, designer Soyk emphasized the messiness of working across disciplines as the team created the final media project, noting that despite their attempts at total collaboration the process occasionally felt "siloe" and that it took many months for the team to get on the same page and collaborate smoothly.<sup>333</sup> Finally, a greater degree of directorial control naturally results in a lesser degree of control for members of the community. Though residents of McDowell County had ample opportunity to get involved in the creation of *Hollow*, they had less control over how their suggestions and material would be used. McMillion Sheldon interviewed over 75 participants, many of whom shot their own video, during the 6-month production period; around 30 participants' portraits were included in the final film.<sup>334</sup> Furthermore, much of the community video shot by participants was curated around

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<sup>332</sup> Elaine McMillion Sheldon, interview by author.

<sup>333</sup> Jeff Soyk, interview by author.

<sup>334</sup> "Hollow: Our Lessons Learned (Part 1)."

certain themes and topics. While I do not mean to suggest that there is anything inherently wrong with this approach – including such a large amount of content would result in a lengthy and undoubtedly unfocused story – it is still worth noting that doing so means that many perspectives and potential storylines are excluded along the way. *Hollow*'s approach grants stronger and more cohesive narrative and experiential elements, but does sacrifice some community and participant agency in the process.

*The Appalachian Retelling Project*, on the other hand, utilizes methods of participatory media and crowdsourcing, relying almost entirely on the generation of content from the project's audience. While I did create the project's initial five videos, continually provided prompts and engagement on social media, and ensured that all included content met the projects pre-determined standards, I did not act as a director in the curatorial sense; any submission determined to meet the project's standards was published regardless of topic or its intent to challenge pre-existing stereotypes of the Appalachian region. This approach has led to a lack of focus in several of the project's individual narratives, as many submissions simply recount family histories or entertaining anecdotes without any sort of pointedness toward creating counter-narratives. Thus, *ARP*'s overarching narrative structure and its function as many individual counter-narratives of Appalachia are both much weaker than those seen in *Hollow*. Collectively, though, *ARP* does challenge the positive/negative binary by representing multiple aspects of everyday life in Appalachia from a wide range of people, also allowing participants to voice opinions that conflict with one another and thus weaving a complex narrative of what it means to be Appalachian.

Furthermore, unlike *Hollow*, *ARP* is an ongoing web project that will not culminate in a "final" film or interactive experience, meaning that more voices and stories may always be

added, and that new modes of participation and engagement with communities in Appalachia can be incorporated over time. While a comparatively small portion of *ARP*'s audience has actually contributed to the project, I have received a great deal of feedback suggesting that simply having the option to participate is empowering to many members of the community. While *The Appalachian Retelling Project* has thus far been less successful at creating many compelling counter-narratives of the Appalachian region, it nevertheless plays an important role in encouraging Appalachian people to recognize and challenge stereotypes of themselves, and in empowering residents to celebrate and share their stories with others in the region.

*Lesson #2: Co-Creation and "Insiderness"*

It is also worth noting the unique role that McMillion Sheldon and I both inhabit in our work as documentarians in Appalachia – as a sort of intermediary between “insider” and “outsider.” McMillion Sheldon and I have taken similar paths in life: We both grew up in Central Appalachia and later moved out of the region for school and career opportunities; we even both attended graduate schools in the Boston area to learn more about documentary film. However, we each have remained close to our communities in Appalachia and rely heavily upon our identities as Appalachian people. We both, then, occupy an interesting middle space somewhere between inside and outside: We have a deep understanding of and connection to the Appalachian region, but also have spent much of our lives living and working in non-Appalachian, urban cultures and with people who know quite little about the area. The unique space that we occupy played an important role in both *Hollow* and *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, allowing us to consider how the same set of images would be seen by two radically different audiences. McMillion Sheldon hints at this in her interview, as she recalls her constant consideration of how *Hollow* might be seen by outsiders, despite the film ultimately being a project for the

community.<sup>335</sup> Without her extensive time spent outside the region, working alongside journalists and media-makers who were creating much of the negative content about Appalachia that she aimed to combat, McMillion Sheldon likely would not have been able to challenge these stereotypes so effectively; she may have even unintentionally created a representation that worked inside existing definitions and stereotypes of the region.

In the case of *ARP*, my cognizance of *who* was creating the majority of the media representations that contributed to Appalachian stereotypes was crucial in my decision to pursue co-creation. I realized that the vast majority of Appalachia’s representation in popular media was created not just by outsiders, but by outsiders who rarely bothered spending the time or effort on gaining a deeper understanding of the region and its challenges. Cases in which Appalachian people were given the opportunity to discuss these issues from their own points of view and without heavy editing on the part of a director were rare. My understanding of these issues in Appalachian media representation prompted me to consider new methods of telling stories about the region – those that gave the people who lived there real agency in the telling of their own stories – and ultimately led to my choice to make *ARP* a participatory project. Occupying this “middle space” thus allowed both McMillion Sheldon and I to consider our work from a variety of perspectives, to give residents of the region more control in the telling of their stories, and to challenge an outside audience’s notions of what it means to live in and be from Appalachia.

Of course, co-creative projects such as *Hollow* and *The Appalachian Retelling Project* are certainly possible regardless of the director’s status as an “insider”; as Jackson reminds us in Cizek and Uricchio’s *Collective Wisdom*, everyone is an outsider in some way.<sup>336</sup> Like co-creation itself, it might be best to consider “insiderness” as a spectrum on which an individual

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<sup>335</sup> Elaine McMillion Sheldon, interview by author.

<sup>336</sup> Cizek et al., “Media Co-Creation Within Community.”

maker or participant occupies a position that shifts over time or in relation to different issues.

After all, those from significantly different cultural backgrounds and geographic locations may be able to relate to problems in Appalachia, such as systemic poverty and lack of infrastructure, better than those who are physically located nearby or within the region itself. The success of a co-creative project within the Appalachian region or elsewhere is not predicated on the director's demographic so much as it is their ethical orientation; commitment to investing time, listening deeply to those whom their project affects, and building relationships; and dedication to making the world a more just place to live.

The position as “insider” or “outsider” is further complicated by the affordances of the internet and the increasing interconnectedness of the digital world. This was made apparent in many of the submissions I received in *ARP*: several submissions came from participants who no longer lived physically within the Appalachian region but who remained deeply connected to their roots there. They lived, worked, and in some cases married outside of Appalachia; they had adapted to new cultures, traditions, and ways of speaking. And yet for many of them, Appalachia was their first and forever home, a place that would always be a part of them. Even if they could not visit the mountains frequently, participating in *ARP* online was a way to assert that connection to home. Other outlets exist online as a way to affirm that connection, to maintain a balance between “insider” and “outsider” status.

One of the strengths of co-creation is how well it lends itself to the showcasing of multiple perspectives and the messiness of positions like these; not only “insiders” need apply. Anyone could contribute to *The Appalachian Retelling Project*, whether they had lived in the mountains all their lives, moved away decades ago, or simply visited to see friends and relatives. Co-creation can hold enough space for all these positions to enter conversation with one another,

representing the same place or issue through a variety of perspectives that add up to a more nuanced and complex whole.

*Lesson #3: Iteration and Plans for the Future*

The final lesson I have learned from my study is the importance of iteration in co-creative work. Cizek and Uricchio emphasize iteration as core to the co-creative process, even going so far as to say that “iteration is the outcome” of co-creation. Co-creation means being open to continuously experimenting, learning, and adapting as “new information, new views, and new people...enter the process at different stages” of the project. Often, this means that “impact, distribution and feedback all co-exist in a loop” – the implementation of one idea can trigger a response that fuels the project’s next iteration.<sup>337</sup>

In *Hollow*, McMillion Sheldon iterated on the ground by changing her approach to community engagement throughout the production process, beginning with formal workshops and switching to more casual modes of engagement when the events felt too formal and stiff. In post-production, the team iterated through many different narrative structures and formats before settling on the film’s ultimate form.<sup>338</sup>

My work with *The Appalachian Retelling Project* over the past year could be considered the project’s first iteration, one marked by the constraints of pandemic life and the need for digital connection. However, as I prepare to transition from graduate student to full-time media-maker and vaccines begin to make possible the transition to a post-pandemic world, I have begun to consider how I might apply the lessons of this work to the project’s next phase.

When I launched *ARP* last summer, I wanted to take a participant-driven, “hands-off” approach to the submissions process. I made this choice for several reasons: I was not aware of

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<sup>337</sup> Cizek et al., “How to Co-Create.”

<sup>338</sup> “Elaine McMillion-Sheldon case study: *Hollow*.”

many projects that allowed Appalachian people to speak without extensive directorial intervention; I was curious what type of content I might receive if I left participants to their own devices; I also launched the project with a concern that getting more directly involved through curation would make the project less co-creative. While this approach was quite successful for a few months, participation fell off sharply once the initial excitement died down, and newer attempts to revive this level of participation have been unsuccessful. Since last summer, I have deepened my understanding of what *actually* makes a project co-creative: It is less about the degree of director involvement and more about the degree of trust, respect, and listening that occurs throughout the process. With this lesson in mind, in the project's next phase I would like to move toward the director-led end of the co-creative spectrum, working more wholly alongside participants to create content from beginning to end. Although I will likely keep the submissions process as it currently stands as an option for participants to pursue, I would also like to begin reaching out to individuals, groups, and organizations and inviting them to contribute, together determining the content and form of the stories they tell. In doing so, I hope to expand the content on the *ARP* website into currently untapped forms including music, artwork, and audio-based storytelling; I will also work to guide participants more directly with the goal of creating more robust and expansive counter-narratives through prompts and discussions.

In addition, I intend to more actively extend my network throughout the region, asking those I already know or have worked with for introductions to others who might be interested in participating, asking *those* individuals if they know anyone else who might be interested, and so on, creating a "snowball" effect of participation. I would also like to begin reaching out to organizations throughout Appalachia, such as church groups, cultural clubs and activities, and media and arts-based organizations, as a way to encourage engagement. Participants from these

groups would certainly be welcome to contribute content related to these organizations – a member of a quilting club, for example, may be interested in speaking about the history of quilting in their family – but they would not be required to speak about subjects related to their organizations; this is simply a method of reaching previously untapped groups of people.

Another approach I would like to pursue as we move toward a post-pandemic world is that of directed events, such as storytelling nights, workshops, and other virtual or in-person gatherings. In an early (pre-pandemic) conceptualization of *ARP*, I considered hosting a series of storytelling nights throughout the Appalachian region, each centered around a different topic, that I would film and post online. As the world begins to open up again, a series such as this might be feasible: Similar to an open mic night, each gathering would focus on a different prompt or topic, such as Appalachian folklore or family traditions, and anyone who wished to speak could sign up for a time slot. While anyone from the community would be welcome to attend these events in-person, I would also film or audio record these events and post them individually or collectively on the *ARP* website. I am also interested in hosting or co-hosting storytelling, media, and arts workshops throughout the region, perhaps partnering with existing organizations or individuals with expertise in these areas. These workshops could provide prompts to help participants generate story ideas, teach skills in media-making and art, and perhaps lead to deeper collaborations between myself and these organizations. These events would be intended to result in new contributions to the project, although those who participate would not be required to do so.

In a similar vein, I would like to pursue new collaborations, projects, and series with existing organizations throughout Appalachia that would be of benefit to all parties involved. After working on the *Creators and Innovators* newsletter with 100 Days in Appalachia, I

realized how generative these sorts of collaborations could be, as the series brought together two groups with differing expertise but similar goals. I would certainly be open to another collaboration with a journalism source, but I am also interested in working with many other groups, such as arts organizations; cultural and social justice organizations, especially those which are BIPOC-led; and existing media organizations throughout Appalachia. Though I have not reached out to any of these groups as of yet, I am very interested in the work of groups such as Black in Appalachia (whose leaders William Isom II and Dr. Enkeshi El-Amin I interviewed for one of my initial videos last year), Expatalachians (a news source for Appalachians no longer living in the region), and Humans of Central Appalachia (a photojournalism project similar to Humans of New York). Though I would certainly want any projects we pursued to arise organically from our conversations, I could imagine photojournalism projects, mini-documentaries on Black Appalachian history, and more work centered on the experiences of those who have left the region emerging from these collaborations.

Ultimately, interventions such as these would mark a shift from *ARP*'s current highly participant-driven approach and toward one which is more balanced between director and participant control. After the work of the previous year, I believe this new positioning would be the most generative spot for my project on the co-creative spectrum and one in which participants and *ARP* itself could flourish. Of course, because "impact, distribution and feedback all co-exist in a loop" in co-creation, this next phase would not be the project's final step; it would inevitably lead to a new iteration based on the findings from this work. However, becoming more involved as a director is certainly a prospect that excites me, and I am eager to see *The Appalachian Retelling Project* evolve into its next phase and beyond.

In addition to modifying my creative process, in future iterations of this work I would also like to consider how *ARP* might be able to intervene in the larger discourse around media made in and about Appalachia. This, of course, requires gaining an audience beyond those who live in the region and extending my reach to scholars, media makers, and a more general audience across the U.S. and the world. After a suitable period of time spent creating a number of portraits and projects that both individually and collectively challenge dominant representations of Appalachia, I would like to present differing combinations of these stories at conferences, festivals, and other events at which this work is relevant. I could imagine, for example, creating a physical installation that allows for a variety of stories and media formats to be showcased; another idea is to create an interactive or linear documentary focused on one subset of the topics that are covered in *ARP*, such as migration in and out of the region or resilience and ingenuity in the face of hardship. By crafting the content created through *ARP* into more distributable formats, I hope to gain a larger audience comprised of individuals from around the world, and to make a lasting impact not just within the Appalachian community but in the very regime of representation that has caused this community such harm.

### **Final Thoughts**

The problem of Appalachian media representation is something that has troubled me for most of my life. At a young age, I discovered that others saw my home as something it wasn't – a place of shame, hopelessness, and derision. As I grew up, I realized that this perception was having real effects on the people I knew and loved, from a general sense of inferiority to more serious consequences like substance abuse and the inability to support their families. Further research into the issue as an adult revealed its more insidious and systematic effects, like a persistent lack of infrastructure and the ease with which national issues can be pinned on us

“hillbillies” in the mountains. Recognizing this problem, and seeing its ongoing effects on my community, has been a frequent source of anger and frustration in my life – an anger exacerbated when books like *Hillbilly Elegy* allow men like J.D. Vance to profit from a place that has already endured more than its fair share of exploitation. Recognizing the severity of this problem can be discouraging, but my desire to change it has driven me to a lot of unexpected places – to MIT, to this thesis, to *ARP*. Though the challenge remains as great as ever, I realize that recently my anger has become tempered with a new feeling: hope.

The response to *ARP* since its launch has been a true bright spot in an often distressing pandemic year. Seeing so many people, not just from my immediate community but from the Appalachian region at large, rally behind this endeavor has been an enormous source of hope that moving the needle on this issue is possible. *ARP* has reconnected me with friends, teachers, and mentors from my hometown, but it has also allowed me to meet others across the region who are just as passionate about this problem as I am – people I never would have met without this project. I have heard from so many in comments, DMs, emails, and phone calls who feel empowered by this project’s mere existence, even if they never decide to contribute. Being involved in *ARP* over the past year has allowed me to understand just how important it is to allow people the space to speak for themselves – especially when others have been speaking over them for so long. I am incredibly grateful to have this opportunity to give Appalachians a small chance at regaining that voice.

Stuart Hall writes that the struggle for meaning in representation is unending, a war that is never finished. Even if a dominant regime of representation is toppled, the victor will not reign forever; new meanings are always entering the fray. While I know that fixing Appalachia with some sort of “good” meaning is impossible (and ultimately unhelpful), undermining its current

media reputation as a place of desolation, backwardness, and misery is essential to solving the urgent problems faced by those who live and want to remain in the mountains. I hope to take the lessons I have learned from both this thesis and *The Appalachian Retelling Project* to move forward in this struggle for meaning. I have learned through this thesis the value of co-creation as a tool in this battle, not only in challenging stereotypes themselves but in empowering others to join the fight. By enabling both “outsiders” and those within Appalachia to understand the region and themselves in new ways, and to challenge these tired narratives that continue to place blame on people who have been scapegoated and taken advantage of for generations, I hope that real progress can be made in solving the systemic challenges that stand in the way of Appalachians’ opportunities, happiness, and lives, and that my work can be part of that change. Appalachia and its people have given me so much; it would be an honor to give it that in return.

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