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Get Ye A Copper Kettle: Appalachia, Moonshine, and a Postcolonial World

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Get Ye A Copper Kettle:
Appalachia, Moonshine, and a Postcolonial World

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Finally, the entirety of this work is dedicated to the memory of

Dolly Mae Lucas

18th March 1914—26th January 1991

Just as I am, without one plea.

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Abstract

For little over a century, the American region of Appalachia was an internal mineral colony of the United States. This internal colonization produced innumerable negative environmental and economic effects, as well as – most insidious of all – the constructed stereotype of the Hillbilly that even in the Twenty-First Century refuses to die. Yet part and parcel of that same stereotype is something found all over Appalachia, representing a freedom, an identity, and an heritage so long denied to Appalachia and the Appalachian people on its own terms: *moonshine*, the colorless, unaged corn whiskey long produced both in Appalachia and its Celtic cultural antecedents in Europe.

I use the pioneering work of Ronald D. Eller and Helen Matthews Lewis for the much-needed re-identification of Appalachia from the American Civil War onward to the 1960s as an internal mineral colony, the theoretical framework laid out by Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein's joint theories on *core-periphery relations*, and some theories on the latter's reversal by the tourism industry in the work of Dean MacCannell. However, with them, I go further: in the contemporary day and age, most if not all of the challenges Appalachia presently faces is due to it falling away from colonization and having entered into a *postcolonial* state, and that only a newfound rootedness in the facets of traditional culture can assuage, and perhaps reverse it.

I draw upon the cultural, social, and economic history of the home distilling of corn liquor – moonshine and moonshining. I show that, although found outside of the Appalachian region, moonshining should be best understood to be most closely associated with Appalachia

and the Appalachian people. Further, I deconstruct, at least partially, the Hillbilly stereotype and show that part of its makeup – the making and drinking of moonshine – should instead be understood as a component of Appalachian culture and heritage.

Chapter I

They'll Get You By the Smoke

An Introduction To Postcolonial Appalachia

But no summary in paraphrase will convey the subtle influence of industrialization upon mass consciousness.

Leo Marx, *The Machine In the Garden*

On the Eastern Seaboard of the United States is a mountain range that stretches from the states of Mississippi to Maine. These mountains are called the Appalachians. The residents of these mountains in the roughly central portion of the range are, also, called the Appalachians, and the region itself, Appalachia. The Appalachian people possess a culture that is highly singular vis-à-vis the rest of the United States. However, their portrayal and reputation by their fellow Americans has not always been positive, and indeed has frequently been rather negative. Still, it is owed to these people numerous innovations and sources of broader parts of American culture.

To understand the Appalachians, the uniqueness of their gastronomy, language, folklore, religion, and other ways of life, and how certain aspects of this culture can be used in an era of demographic shrinkage and encroaching hegemonic culture to retain a sense of rootedness and communal connectivity, one must first try to understand the region's people, and too, its often

tragic history.

There are few places like Appalachia. As Richard Straw writes, "Appalachia is a place, a people, an idea, a culture, and it exists as much as in the mind and the imagination as it does on the map."¹

But what is – *where* is – this Appalachia? One speaks of Appalachia as a region – but what manner of region? As mentioned, the mountains themselves, span much of the eastern United States. But, as also mentioned, Appalachia in the American imagination and in American culture is far smaller. Appalachia as an *economic* region, as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission of the United States government, does much of the same, but shortens its northward reach to western New York. By its own count, this makes up "420 counties in 13 states."² Then, as a cultural area one may reduce this area yet further until it covers, on maps of the United States, even less: East Tennessee, western North Carolina, Eastern Kentucky, western Pennsylvania, North Georgia, southern Ohio, the Maryland Panhandle, western and southwestern Virginia, and the entirety of the state of West Virginia.

This is a tentative agreement hammered out from writers, historians, folklorists, musicologists, and, most importantly, the self-identified mountaineers and hillfolk themselves.³ Here, the sense of *difference* from the rest of the United States is palpable, as is the deep affection and attachment to the hills and mountains – the very land itself. Luke Divers, a resident of Franklin County, Virginia, phrases it this way: "How do you describe *home*? There's an emotional quality to it, there's an intellectual quality to it, but...it's the old blood-and-soil thing."⁴

Sidney Saylor Farr is more eloquent on the matter when writing about herself and her own family. She describes it this way: "What people who live in today's transient society don't seem to understand about us mountain folks is that it's possible to put one's roots down so deeply

they cannot be satisfactorily transplanted anywhere else." Indeed, Farr compares leaving the mountains to the phantom pain an amputee sometimes feels.⁵

This kind of ineffability – how to speak about the people who live, love, work and die in the mountains, the question of how to define, map, and shape out Appalachia – becomes the realm of poets and theorists. For a literal example of the former, take the words of musician Paul Burch:

Appalachia is the Eden of American folklore that few know well but all speak of with a sense of awe and undisguised ignorance. Though the land has been pitted with 'the world's largest shovel...politicized by the Great Society, parodied by *The Andy Griffith Show*, and filmed in Technicolor by Hollywood, Appalachia is still, for American musicians, a kind of fountain of youth we always go back to, the old home place to a group of artists who represent the quintessence of American independence, genius, and madness."⁶

Here, Burch speaks to Appalachia's deep, open wounds from a century and a half of industrialization and exploitation. What Burch refers to by "the world's largest shovel" is a lyric by John Prine in his song "Paradise," summarizing in song the paradox of Appalachia as a beautiful and bountiful land used by others for their own gain. Referencing Muhlenberg County, Kentucky, at the western edge of Appalachia, the verse in question runs:

"Then the coal company came with the world's largest shovel
 And they tortured the timber and stripped all the land
 Well, they dug for their coal till the land was forsaken
 Then they wrote it all down as the progress of man."⁷

The skepticism – not to say sarcasm – around the word "progress" was noted as early as around

1922 with *Our Southern Highlanders*, Horace Kephart's sympathetic but at times somewhat sensationalized portrait of the Tennesseans in and around the Great Smokey Mountains where he also lived and worked. " 'I don't like all these *improvements*,' said an old mountaineer to me. 'Some calls them "progress" and says they put money to circulatin'. So they do, but *who gits it?*'"⁸ Kephart was noting how the area was being opened up for coal mining and other exploitation, and it is coal, in particular, that has long been the resource which has driven the Appalachian economy. For industrialization, wherever it takes place, has consequences. The industrialization of the United States brought about enormous economic and military power for the American state, eventually allowing it to become a superpower. This came at the expense of innumerable masses of laborers at the same time that a small band of industrialists greatly enriched themselves and the nation at their expense – environmentally, ecologically, culturally, demographically, monetarily.⁹

As will be seen, Appalachia ended up deeply damaged by this turn of events. For the last century and a half, Appalachia has been at the mercy of absentee capitalism and rapacious industrialization – not merely coal but also timber, ore, steel, and many others – which was eventually joined to a demeaning, Othering stereotype about the very people who lived and worked there.

Appalachia may be said to be a classic case of the *resource curse* that was formulated by Jeffery Sachs and Andrew Warner.¹⁰ Although a place often marked by mountainous, forested beauty, with a wild and witchy quality to its hilly landscape, the treasures of Appalachia have been given to America as a price in blood. Ruth Ann Musick, whose life's work was her preservation of West Virginian folklore, made poignant note of this in the introduction to her collection, *Coffin Hollow*: "West Virginia is truly a beautiful state, although its beauty may very

well be doomed."¹¹ Cataloging the damage that strip-mining, over-logging, and hunting have done to West Virginia's natural beauty, Musick remarks that "West Virginia may soon become just an ordinary state—well, *worse* than ordinary—a completely sodless, treeless, creatureless land, unless it can be saved."¹²

Musick made these observations in September of 1973. Not a few years later, a new consensus began to emerge about the historiography of Appalachia's industrialization. By then, growing number of historical articles, essays, and monographs began to address how Appalachia, a land of riches, was despoiled of its natural wealth, which was never shared back to its citizens, who were left to suffer in the wake and then turned, with popular culture, into a national byword for aggressive ignorance and ugliness. Some three years after Ruth Ann Musick's lament, John Alexander Williams produced *West Virginia and the Captains of Industry*, a pioneering work which presaged an angrier scholarship into the roots of Appalachian inequality. In it, Williams sought to question why the abundant natural wealth of West Virginia – as a microcosm of Appalachia more broadly – did not *stay* in West Virginia. His answer comes when discussing Henry G. Davis, a Maryland-born (and therefore, like many Appalachian industrialists, an outsider) millionaire who later became one of West Virginia's senators in Congress and the Democratic nominee for vice president in the presidential election of 1904. Men like Davis made their fortunes off of coal mining, timbermills and, in Davis' specific case, railroad construction by being able "to identify their private interest with the public welfare and to pursue it successfully by political means, whether or not their identification of public and private goods was correct."¹³ But, Williams hastens to add:

"In the actual event, West Virginia failed to develop a mature industrial economy.

Like...Africa, Latin America, and Asia apart from Japan, the Mountain State instead got

'derived' industrialization and a 'penetrated' economy characterized by overreliance on primary industry, low or distorted levels of growth in the manufacturing and service sectors, and a high degree of absentee ownership and/or control. In blunter terms, it developed a colonial economy and remained in the industrial age the backwater it had been in preindustrial times."¹⁴

Henry G. Davis himself is an example of what could have been, had the eponymous *Captains of Industry* made commitments to give back to the communities they drew wealth from: his name lives on as one of the benefactors, along with Steven B. Elkins, of Elkins & Davis College, a private West Virginian liberal arts college. But, as Williams notes, "no tycoon emerged in West Virginia to play the role of Hopkins or Pratt in Baltimore, Carnegie in Pittsburgh, or Mott in Flint. The boundless resources left no great universities or museums or libraries or welfare organizations or other philanthropic monuments to market the current of the golden stream."¹⁵ In other words, Williams' research made it plain that West Virginia had no tangible benefit from either the leaders of, or the technology employed by, industrialization.

What Williams details is something that fits into the theories put forth by Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein. In their book, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, Balibar and Wallerstein describe, in theoretical strokes, a specific example of what can be called a colonial economy, what they call *core-periphery relations*, which is to say, the relationship between the *core*, or economic and political hubs, with the *periphery* that serves and provides resources to it (and is, in turn, dominated and influenced by it as well). This kind of socioeconomic theory well describes the relationship of Appalachia to its absentee masters:

To the extent that peripheral processes are associated with primary production—which has in fact been historically true, although far less today than previously—then there is

constraint on the geographical relocatability of these processes, associated with environmental conditions for cultivation or with geological deposits...the concentration of core processes in states different from those in which peripheral processes are concentrated tends to create differing internal political structures in each, a difference which in turn becomes a major sustaining bulwark of the inegalitarian interstate system that manages and maintains the axial division of labour.¹⁶

Wallerstein's original theories, which Balibar would later contribute to, have been applied to Appalachia before, by Jack Walls in *Colonialism In Modern America: The Appalachian Case*, which will be discussed later on.¹⁷ Although Walls dismisses the use of the word *colony* as being a little much (even more than just being inaccurate) for the issue at hand,¹⁸ the historical and economic evidence speak otherwise. Wallerstein and Balibar's theories prove, not disprove, the colonial model.

Stated simply: Appalachia, a region not at all far from the power centers of the American establishment on the East Coast, was in fact *an internal colony of the United States*.

The uniquely American manner in which Appalachia became a colony, and the disbelief that many would hold by hearing such a thing, calls to mind a passage from *Discours sur le colonialisme* by Aimé Césaire:

To admit once and for all, without flinching at the consequences, that decisive actors here are the adventurer and the pirate, the wholesale grocer and the ship owner, the gold digger and the merchant, appetite and force, and behind them, the baleful projected shadow of a form of civilization which, at a certain point in its history, finds itself obliged, for internal reasons, to extend to a world scale the competition of its antagonistic economies.¹⁹

Césaire is speaking, of course, to the history of global European colonization – but it is hard not to miss how *American* these job descriptors sound. Although targeting European imperialism, it could – and, perhaps, should – speak to American imperialism as well.

Finding a similar sentiment about Appalachia and its relation with the rest of the United States is not difficult. Jack Weller crystallized this opinion in 1978, with his participation in *Colonialism In Modern America*. Published by the Appalachian Consortium Press – a collection of colleges such as Appalachian State, East Tennessee State, and Lees-McRae College, amongst others – this collection of essays, papers, studies, and speeches culled together editors Helen Matthews Lewis, Linda Johnson, and Donald Askins put forth the then-new idea that Appalachia as an entire region was an internal colony of the United States, and that its people had suffered unduly as a result. Weller's "Appalachia: America's Mineral Colony," contains the following passage:

"A *colony*, as I understand it, is a group of people with land and resources which are owned and/or controlled by persons other than themselves, and whose resources and productive capacities are used for the advantage of those who control them. Appalachia is simply our American example of how we use colonization powers in the economic realm all over the world. We strip the area and its people of their wealth under the guise of 'developing' them, saying all the time of course that without this development look where they'd be."²⁰

Like Paul Burch, and Kephart's anonymous mountaineer, Weller regards the notions of *progress* and *development* with a skeptical, knowing eye.

Some research into Appalachian economic injustice had been done before *Colonialism In Modern America*, such as Harry Caudill's *Night Comes To the Cumberland*s from 1963, but

literature on the topic quickly multiplied after the end of the 1970s. The material from *Colonialism In Modern America*, would soon be put to academic and historical discipline by one of its contributors Ronald D. Eller, whose landmark book *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers* remains the standard for what is now called the *colonization theory*. The results of Eller's research concurred with *Colonialism In Modern America* that grave injustice had taken place throughout Appalachian history. Reflecting on the events of the years 1880 to 1930, Eller writes: "by the Eve of the Great Depression," both the "coal miner in West Virginia" and "the hillside farmer in North Carolina" were "bound together by their common loss of autonomy and by their common relationship to the new order."²¹

However, within the discourse of the Colonial Theory, there are those who would disagree with it. For instance, Barbara Ellen Smith argues that the Colonial Theory of Appalachia, splits, rather than unites: "It divides the world into insiders and outsiders, regional residents whose land and wealth of natural resources were stolen and the external thieves who have enriched themselves at the expense of the Appalachian people ever since."²² Smith specifically mentions *Colonialism In Modern America* and *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, and admits that "Viewing Appalachia, particularly the coalfields, as a colony seems manifestly correct..." But she is unwilling to have Appalachia be separate from America or, even, other nations: "notions of insiders and outsiders dig an artificial moat around the region, separating it from the rest of the world at precisely a time when global interrelatedness has become more dense, palpable, and salient."²³ Indeed, the most she is willing to provide for the Colonial Theory of Appalachia, ironically, involves the same "world systems" (i.e., *core-periphery*) of Wallerstein – putting, in her view, Appalachia as unremarkable in a global context. She argues that this was already conclusively explored by David Walls, discussed above, in

Colonialism In Modern America. This is because, for her, "whereas the internal colony model emphasizes relations of cultural and political domination between colonizer and colonized, world systems theory foregrounds economic domination."²⁴ even though this is directly contradicted by Wallerstein and Balibar themselves.

Why Smith would want to buttress economic over cultural domination begins to make sense when it bears considering that Smith is "the offspring of out-migrants from Appalachian Virginian and West Virginia," who "came to identify with the region and her family's mountain homeplace at a young age, but also deplored the popular, exclusionary definition of Appalachian identity as 'insiders' (vs. outsiders)."²⁵ Appalachian culture, however it is defined, is not important to her, or to those in the academy who share her opinions. She is "often skeptical about...arguments for the value of Appalachian identity."²⁶

This skepticism is damaging and dangerous. Objections to Appalachia bearing a distinct identity apart from the rest of America – and therefore conjoined, unremarkably, to the rest of the world – constitute erasure. The act of being colonized is already an erasure of voice, agency, political and economic power – to deny that the colonized or formerly colonized has no distinct culture is the final act of erasing and assimilating. Smith is speaking and writing similar to how those claim not to see color in race relations (*colorblindness*) only end up benefitting the still-privileged race,²⁷ because denying that someone is different in turn denies, and then erases, their identity.

Such erasure could not come at a worse time. Traditional economies upon which Appalachia has depended have been greatly weakened. The importance of coal and coalmining has begun to wane and collapse. First with the discovery of more easily mined coal in places like Wyoming,²⁸ and then the rise of clean energy²⁹ capital has steadily fallen in kind, and

disinvestment across Appalachia leaves an impoverishing and devastating legacy. The bottom having fallen out of local and state economies, rates of opiate drug addiction, obesity, and premature death have all skyrocketed.³⁰ Drug addiction became such an out-of-control problem in Appalachia that President Barack Obama himself was compelled to make a speech about it in Charleston, West Virginia.³¹

In numerous counties across Appalachia one encounters appalling rates of poverty and desolation. Depopulation has persisted to such a degree that some authorities are forecasting a demographic catastrophe for many West Virginia counties³² to use one instance, resulting in a brain drain, and a vanishing tax base. The present situation – a domino of disasters – has become, for many, inexcusable: during his campaign for the nomination of the Democratic Party for President of the United States, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont even made poverty in the former West Virginia coalfields an actual campaign issue³³ and went on to win the primary for West Virginia,³⁴ though not the nomination, partially on the basis of promises to help both the state in particular and Appalachia more broadly.

It does not detract from the region's immense natural beauty to say it was economically exploited – it does not demean the good people who live there to say they were oppressed. This acknowledges that the problems of the past have created problems in the present. In positioning oneself with the Colonial Theory, one accepts that Appalachia, afflicted with the problems of being a colony, is now rapidly undergoing an extremely painful transition into a *postcolonial* state.

Yet what does it *mean* to be postcolonial? Some semantics arise over the inclusion of a dash in the word: *post-colonial* and *postcolonial* are considered to be two different things, although they ultimately stem from the same root cause. The term *post-colonial* strictly means

what happened after colonization, which is to say historical events, but *postcolonial* is more contentious, opening up debates about the sufferings on the part of the colonized.³⁵ As Patrick Williams and Lauren Chrisman note, nations such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand "were not subject to the sort of coercive measures which were the lot of the colonies, and their ethnic stratification was fundamentally different."³⁶ It is for this reason, that David Walls was so dubious about calling Appalachia an internal mineral colony in the first place.³⁷ So, confusingly, an independent nation, or perhaps even a region can be post-colonial (with the dash) without being postcolonial (*sans* the dash). Thus, by this logic – Walls' opinions once again very much to the contrary – Appalachia belongs, at least presently, to the latter *and* the former.

Appalachia's status *as* a postcolonial *or* post-colonial state has not been explored with any great depth. There is new and fertile territory that can, and must, be explored here. The legacies of colonialism, and therefore postcolonialism – hereafter using the term without the dash and all of its included meaning – are long-lasting and long-reaching. These same legacies are often harmful and are rarely positive. But within them one can discover ways in which cultures that endured these trials – cultural practices that have withstood immense hardship.

But too often these same cultural practices are driven to extinction. This is a product of colonization – forced conformity. Postcolonialism can be used to study a formerly colonized culture and undo the damage left behind by the retreating colonizers.

Language, for instance, has long been an increasingly endangered part of Appalachian identity. Appalachian English is laughed at in most educated circles, with its unusual grammatical constructions and large amounts of idiomatic vocabulary being harshly corrected in polite company, with the result that it is increasingly only used in home or private settings – an activity that, similar to other dialectical Englishes and non-English speaking households, is

called *code switching*.³⁸ Using Appalachian English has been noted in places such as *The Journal of Higher Education* to be a barrier to success and acceptance, even if one is already educated.³⁹ Appalachian English, sometimes abbreviated *AE*, has an associated dialectical accent, unusual and distinct from other recognizable Southern accents,⁴⁰ which is a by-word in American popular culture for backward ignorance paired with comedic ridiculousness. Too often, as Nancy Hayward points out, "The vernacular or common view...essentialized AE as belonging to poor, white, uneducated and uncultured people who engaged in scratch farming and coal mining."⁴¹ Rather like African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) the pressure to learn, and speak, Standard American English forced upon Appalachian people is a type of microaggression. Obviously, not every Appalachian has an accent, but those that do mark themselves as being somehow inferior to those in American life who do not – by the colonized pressure to conform.

Too often, this is because of Appalachian English's dialect and accent being firmly linked with the ways that the Appalachian people have been demeaned and Othered, which remains an obstacle in addition to the postcolonial economic forces well outside of their control. As mentioned in passing before, the Appalachians were repeatedly Othered in tandem with their colonization and exploitation by outside interests. In doing so, a new stereotype emerged into American culture and seared itself into the American imagination: the *Hillbilly*.

Although the residents of the Appalachian Mountains had always been on the economic and cultural fringes of the East Coast due to the accidents of isolating geography, by the time of industrialization and colonization, denizens of Appalachia began to be the butt of a national joke at their own expense. It can be argued that this began with explicitly classist reactions of what Elizabeth S.D. Engelhardt has termed "voyeurs and tourists" and "social crusaders," essentially middle-class whites who gawked at the poor, both Black and White, who lived in the

mountains.⁴² This was later translated into popular literature, such as John Fox, Jr.'s *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, which was much later given the deconstruction treatment by John Askins in *Colonialism In Modern America*.⁴³ From there, it spread to American culture more broadly. As Anthony Harkins puts it: "By the start of the twentieth century, the conflation over the previous two hundred years of rustic yokel, 'poor white,' and mountaineer images and ideas had set the stage for the emergence of a new amalgamated cultural icon, the 'hillbilly'."⁴⁴ Harkins points out that the etymology of this word, although "remarkably murky," may have, as with many other aspects of Appalachian culture, ultimately Scottish roots: "The most credible theory is that Scottish highlanders either in their native country or in the New World linked two older Scottish expressions, 'hill-folk' and 'billie' (a synonym for 'fellow' or 'companion')."⁴⁵

But for many decades afterward, the portrayal of the Hillbilly – as a stand-in for every person who dwelt in Appalachia, male or female, young or old – was anything but positive. Although at times (particularly in the music business) a proud self-moniker, the Hillbilly as he was portrayed became a synonym for the imbecilic, barefoot, inbred, aggressive, drunk, secretive, and squalid people living in a land that time forgot in Appalachia. These images became repeated over and over and eventually evolved into ubiquitous cultural stereotypes, which jumped from newspaper comics and magazine illustrations such as Paul Webb's *The Mountain Boys*⁴⁶ and Al Capp's *Li'l Abner*⁴⁷ and then soon to television and film. What these transpositions to visual media – *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Green Acres*, *Hee Haw*, *Deliverance*, on up to *Wrong Turn* became, in the words of activist James Branscome, "the most effective effort ever exerted by a nation to belittle, demean, and otherwise destroy a minority people within its boundaries" and, worse, were it any other group in the United States, it would create "an immediate public outcry."⁴⁸ Ultimately, the Hillbillies that people who live in Appalachia are

made out to be "provides middle America with a false sense of security," as Todd Snyder writes. "This narrative lies to audiences about their place within the existing social order. It tells audiences to be grateful for what they have. Things could be worse. You could live in Appalachia. You could be the Hillbilly."⁴⁹

Snyder's words are cutting and uncomfortable, as well they should be. Appalachian mountaineers, their spouses, even their children, are reduced by Othering into a negative stereotype. As Snyder noted, this is a way to feel safe about one's station and keep alive the superstructures of hierarchal capitalist supremacies. One is reminded of Alexander Saxton's famous study on that other caricature of an oppressed class Othered in American history: blackface. "Blackface minstrelsy's dominance of popular entertainment amounted to half a century of inurement to the uses of white supremacy."⁵⁰ But for the use of the stereotypical Hillbilly this "inurement," has been far, far longer for American popular culture. The image of the Darkey with bright red lips and burnt-cork face, extracted from the suffering of African-descended slaves for the amusement of Southern white audiences – with similar images of the buck-toothed Chinamen laboring on Western railroads, simian and drunken Irishmen, wide-grinning Native Americans smoking peace-pipes – may all be things of the past...but the Hillbilly, whose suffering in the hills, hollers, mines, and timbermills is more recent, yet remains.

Yet even within the hateful stereotype – constructed from the necessity, one could say, for the historic middle- and upper-class to put down other European-Americans further below their stratum – there is a key to its deconstruction, and its defeat.

As discussed earlier, there are elements of Appalachian culture – unique as it is amongst other American cultures and, indeed, the American hegemonic culture *ipso facto* – that can be used to maintain a sense of rootedness and communal connectivity. Indeed, many of these

elements of Appalachia have been turned, piecemeal, into the Hillbilly stereotype, exaggerations of aspects of mountain life which were met not with empathy, but with derision. Yet nearly all of them can be retaken, reclaimed, and have their records set straight not as hallmarks of extreme, proverbial backwardness, but instead of traditions of hardy mountaineers, whose traditions provide a vital and lasting link both to the past and to the future.

In this particular case, one may look to the crafting and consumption of unaged corn whiskey – *moonshine*.

A quick survey of the Hillbilly in pop culture reveals several commonalities, but one that invariably shows up is *a jug of moonshine* – its making and drinking is repeatedly shown to be an activity of the Hillbillies themselves. This seems to have been always a feature of Hillbilly imagery in the American imagination. When Nancy Isenberg first mentions Hillbillies in her seminal work *White Trash*, she does so with moonshine in the same breath: discussing the failed attempts in the 1890s of abolitionist William Goodell Frost to convince the public at large that the Appalachian mountaineer "formed the very trunk of the American family tree," because the American public still found "mountain whites" to be "strange-looking moonshine hillbillies, prone to clannish feuds."⁵¹ She later mentions the stereotype, popular at the time as now, of Hillbillies being belligerent and "swilling moonshine."⁵² Moonshine, the drink, was already deeply embedded in the culture of the mountaineers a full century before the term *Hillbilly* was ever thought of. When the first serious test of the present American republic after the ratification of the United States Constitution took place it was over unpaid taxes due of home-distilled alcohol in what was then the western mountains. This incident, the 1791-94 Whiskey Rebellion, which will be described in more detail in the next chapter, drew sharply divided reactions amongst the Founding Fathers – eliciting arguments about personal liberty which, two centuries

hence, have never fully been resolved.⁵³

From these beginnings, rather than an accomplice to belligerence and sloth, home-distillation of corn and grain into whiskey was a taste – more or less literally – of freedom. It was as though it had been there since before the mountaineers and their families were made into cheap human capital by industrialists, and then Othered by oppressive stereotypes.

In sum: is moonshine, like the watermelon to the pickaninny, an accessory to a visual stereotype which continues to cause untold mental and emotional harm to a disadvantaged people? Or did it, in fact, preexist before it was made into something harmful and noxious? If so – and the historical and cultural record does indeed bear this out – can moonshine be re-appropriated back to the Appalachian people, reclaimed from the perverse Hillbilly cliché? Is it possible that, out from the tangled morass of postcolonial Appalachia, can one see emerge a true, singular touchstone of Appalachian culture *in the form of moonshine*, perhaps even to join that of bluegrass music? Is it possible to scrape away moonshine's notorious history as being the drink of the Hillbilly – indeed, as being the source of so much needless violence as the drink of an illegal trade – and instead see moonshine as being a thing of craft, pride, and heritage, no less a distinctive drink, like Kentucky bourbon, French champagne, English ale, Italian wine?

Like finding diamonds in coal ash, the discovery – and rediscovery – of Appalachian moonshine means that there could be hope yet for this desperate region. One can reclaim, and correct the legends and misinformation, that surround a cultural product which, because of colonization and Othering, was instead attached to a negative stereotype. But to understand how, one must first delve further into the history of moonshine – shadowed through time, sometimes frightening, violent, and bloody, yet always rooted in, and idiosyncratically apart of, Appalachia.

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Chapter II

My Daddy He Made Whiskey

The Cultural Construction of Appalachian Moonshine

Ah, my Belovéd, fill the Cup that clears
 To-day of past Regret and future Fears:
 To-morrow!—Why, To-morrow I may be
 Myself with Yesterday's Sev'n thousand Years.

Omar Khayyám, *Rubáiyát*

In the wake of both colonialism and postcolonialism in Appalachia, the moonshine drink became attached to the Hillbilly stereotype. Nearly from the inception of the American republic and for centuries after, moonshine was thought of as a dangerous drink for dangerous people. This reputation has persisted well into the present day – and may explain some of the drink's appeal as it enjoys renewed interest in the present century. Exploring, explaining, and setting the historical record straight about moonshine will prove invaluable when rehabilitating moonshine as an invaluable and inseparable part of Appalachian culture.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the genesis of the idea linking strong, home-made alcohol and a rebellious, reckless spirit (pardon the pun), can probably be traced to the Whiskey Rebellion. This conflict, which Tindall and Shi characterize as "a show of strength in the

backcountry," was the direct result of Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton's ambitious excise tax on highly profitable liquor production.¹ The entire episode can be seen as a presage to the widespread capitalist exploitation that Appalachia would face in the next century. Already "suspicious of the new federal government" which resided in the then-capital of Philadelphia, the western farmers and mountaineers "considered the whiskey tax another part of Hamilton's scheme to pick the pockets of the poor to enrich the pockets of urban speculators."² Indeed, Joyce, discussing the attitude many of the "Whiskey Rebels" had toward this ordeal, gives voice to questions which would echo in Appalachia and across the United States for the entirety of its existence: "What business did government inspectors have visiting a farmer's property to examine his still, measure the proof of his product, and stamp a seal upon his wooden kegs?"³ Not merely money but personal freedom – the spirit and the letter of the American Revolution – was at stake. And just who were these people that were rebelling against the power of the United States government to tax them? As William Hogeland describes them:

"The perpetrators were the toughest and hardest of westerners: farmers, laborers, hunters, and Indian fighters; most were disillusioned war veterans. Expert woodsmen and marksmen, adept not only in musket drill but also in rifle sharpshooting, they were organized in disciplined militias and comfortable with danger."⁴

Hogeland's words can easily be applied to any number of rebellious mountainfolk throughout Appalachia's history, from the Civil War up to the Battle of Blair Mountain in the Twentieth Century.

Seen positively, these men became lionized as intrepid mountaineers and frontiersmen – folk heroes like Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett.⁵ Seen negatively, however, they left an indelible image as backward degenerates which, over the course of the following century, would

come to be disdained and even despised: "a notion that the people of the southern Appalachian mountains...were not just out of step with but actually were a threat to civilization."⁶ The American urbanite's exposure to the Whiskey Rebels became a starting point for the Hillbilly stereotype in the popular imagination *along with* an association with moonshine, and everything the latter, in turn, symbolized. In fact, as Tindall and Shi conclude, the Whiskey Rebellion was the very first in an endless litany of conflicts between the government and the mountaineers who continued to distill their liquor unsupervised: "an unending war of wits between moonshiners and revenue officers," which came to define both Appalachia and moonshine itself.⁷

Whiskey – moonshine – became the drink of the American frontier, its strong alcoholic content a byword for the strength and perseverance of the American frontiersman. This was part of traditions started by settlers of this part of North America, with ethno-cultural antecedents stretching back centuries. As Esther Kellner puts it: "Moonshine lore recedes into such dim past [*sic*] that we soon realize that it belongs not only to America, but to many other times and places."⁸

What is ultimately called *whiskey* or *whisky* is firmly rooted in Irish, Ultonian (Scots-Irish) and Scottish culture: the word itself comes from the Irish Gaelic *uisce beatha* and Scottish Gaelic *uisge-beatha*. Both of these are calques (literal translations) of the Latin phrase *aqua vitae* ("water of life" – that is, fortified wine), possibly coined by the physician Arnaldus de Villa Nova around the year 1300, which is *itself* apparently based on the trend of alchemists to use the prefix *aqua* to describe some novel prepared liquid: compare *aqua fortis* ("strong water" – nitric acid) and *aqua regia* ("royal water" – nitrohydrochloric acid).⁹ The knowhow for making alcohol distilled from grain was preserved, and then spread, from Late Antiquity through Catholic monasteries, so that, by 1494, in the Kingdom of Scotland, there is some of the first hard

evidence of the production of what would now be termed *whiskey*: "in the Exchequer roll of that year, in which a request is made for 'VIII bolls of malt' from which 'to make aquavitae,' "¹⁰ enough for about five hundred barrels, to a one "Friar John Cor."¹¹ As Jaime Joyce notes, "Drying the malted barley over a peat fire lent Scottish whiskeys a distinctive smoky flavor."¹²

Moonshine in the English language and English-speaking world, in its original sense, has come to mean any illicitly produced alcohol – "beverages such as rum, cordials, brandy, gin, vodka, and so on."¹³ However, in Appalachia and the American South, *moonshine* is, specifically, a liquor that has not been aged, distilled from corn, sugar, or both. It could be made under legal auspices or not. It is differentiated from *whiskey* and therefore bourbon, its immediate American cousin, because although both bourbon and moonshine are both made from corn, only the former has undergone an aging process. Joyce explains: "Moonshine is unaged— young and raw. It's clear, like vodka or gin, not amber or brown, like whiskey, which is matured in white-oak barrels to mellow the taste and give the spirit color. Moonshine has been described as whiskey without the wood."¹⁴

Some two centuries after the start of widespread whiskey-making and consumption in the British Isles, North America was inundated with immigrants from Great Britain and Ireland, who brought with them their own foodways. Amongst them, of course, was strong drink – whiskey and its Celtic variants. Joseph George Thorpe, an English minister and colonist in Jamestown, Virginia, is credited with being the first person to distill whiskey in the New World, perhaps even being the first person to discover that he "could distill a mash of Indian corn,"¹⁵ making him essentially the progenitor of whiskey-making in the Western Hemisphere.

So the reputation for whiskey as the American drink of rugged danger was earned almost immediately thanks to its presence at the fore of English-speaking settlement pressing westward

into the mountains. "Whiskey making was always a part of frontier life in Appalachia,"¹⁶ as Tom Robertson writes, to the point that "In the early years on the frontier, Americans imbibed on the average more than seven gallons of pure alcohol each year, almost four times as much alcohol per capita" for the modern drinker.¹⁷ Joseph Earl Dabney attributes a love of liberty *and* strong drink to the fact that many early settlers of Appalachia were Ultonian (from Ulster) otherwise known as Scots-Irish, who had settled in the New World following being unfairly treated by absentee landowners, unfair taxation, and religious intolerance from England: "...this time, the individual Ulsterman was making an irrevocable break from Europe on behalf of America."¹⁸ Dabney concludes that these men, particularly after they had finished the indentured servitude with which they were often brought to the New World, "were a new kind of settler, the real pioneer, who brought strong convictions to America, including a love of whiskey and a love of liberty."¹⁹ Although rather more circumspect, David Hackett Fischer in *Albion's Seed* concurs: "the distinctive backcountry beverage was whiskey. A taste for liquor distilled from grain was uncommon in the south and east of England. But it was highly developed in north Britain, and was brought to the American backcountry by the people of that region."²⁰ Hackett notes that "a change of ingredients was made necessary by the new environment. In the back settlements Scotch whiskey (which had been distilled from barley) yielded to Bourbon whiskey (which was made mainly from corn and rye."²¹ Most significantly, "Whiskey became a common table drink in the backcountry. Even little children were served whiskey at table, with a little sugar to sweeten its bitter taste."²² And what Hackett means by "backcountry" is, of course, Appalachia.²³

As the Whiskey Rebellion proved, this whiskey, aged or unaged, was very often made illicitly – that is, without government supervision and certainly without paying any government taxes. This kind of defiance is nearly as old as whiskey itself: high taxes were put on liquor

beginning in the reign of Charles II of England and Scotland in the last quarter of the Seventeenth Century, and as David W. Maurer puts it, "Nothing so stimulates the enterprise of human beings as to prohibit or penalize some activity; hence, no sooner were taxes imposed than tax evasion became popular..."²⁴

The etymology of this "enterprise," *moonshining*, and its product, *moonshine*, has, like *Hillbilly*, a dubious provenance. When speaking about the strict definition of moonshine being unaged corn whiskey (which came much later), it is transparent and colorless – like moonlight. More commonly, as Joyce notes, there is the somewhat obvious idea that it owes its name to being "a beverage made at night—by the light of the moon—in an attempt to avoid detection by law enforcement agents eager to arrest shiners and bust up their stills."²⁵ Using this logic, Maurer suggests²⁶ that it was the poet and author Sir Walter Scott which leant it linguistic popularity from his poem "The Poacher," published in 1809, which mentions in passing the same kind of activity Joyce describes: "Yon cask holds moonlight, run when was moon was none..."²⁷

So *moonshine* was from its very genesis the potation of the tough, those on the fringes of the law and the state, the rogue and the mountaineer, something strong enough to get a true pioneer drunk at the end of long days in the wilderness.

Yet whiskey – aged or unaged – was not the only drink the settlers, and later Americans of the Early Republic, enjoyed making and consuming. From at least 1820 there exists a recipe, recorded by the Pennsylvania Dutch healer John George Hohman in his *Pow-Wows*, for beer, which was probably favored amongst the Pennsylvania Dutch and the settlers of what would become Pittsburgh and the Steel Valley: "Take a handful of hops, five or six gallons of water, about three tablespoonfuls of ginger, half a gallon of molasses; filter the water, hops and ginger into a tub containing the molasses."²⁸ A story collected by Raymond Sloan in June, 1939 for the

Virginia Works Progress Administration's Writers Project, which takes place *circa* 1845 and probably in Roanoke County,²⁹ mentions two other drinks in addition to moonshine that were imbibed at a Christmas gathering: persimmon beer and cherry bounce.³⁰ The latter, a blend of cherries, brandy, cinnamon, clove, and nutmeg, was known to have been a favorite of George Washington.³¹ Well into the Twentieth Century people in Appalachia would homebrew a kind of beer using sweet and sugary ingredients, similar to the recipe found in *Pow-Wows*, using techniques that had been in families for generations, and which varied from community to community. Danny Neal, a longtime resident of Milton, West Virginia, recounts:

"When I was a youngster, we used to make *homebrew* – we would take orange juice, we would take raisins, we would add a little yeast, and a little sugar, and put it all together and let it ferment for three days, and we would usually use a five-gallon crockpot, or a *crock-jug*, a five gallon jug, and we would put a cloth on top of the jug – we wouldn't put a cork in it – and we would let it sit for three days, and after three days, you would drain the other stuff off...and then you drank [the rest]...it was mostly what beer would be considered today, yanno, it wasn't *hard* liquor. But if you drunk enough of it, it would make ya high or make ya drunk. It was just a cheap way of making some alcohol."³²

At times potato peelings were used or substituted in with the ingredients as well, and other times instead of a cloth, a balloon was put over lid of the jug "to let it breathe." It was never corked – a corked jug would explode.³³

What is key about this variety of diverse drinks that were made across Appalachia is that they were made *at home* without any outside interference from a government agency and, more importantly, never saw any government tax. This goes back to the popular idea of *moonshine* being any alcohol that is made as such. The fondness for homebrewing, whether beer or

something stronger, help more firmly affix the stereotype of Appalachians as enthusiastic moonshiners and consumers of alcohol – part and parcel of the Hillbilly stereotype.

As for whiskey – henceforth a catchall term for both the aged and unaged varieties – it took on an importance in Appalachian culture and society that places it in comparable positions to wine for many Europeans. It served many purposes. First, whiskey was often medicine: Anthony Cavender, in his book on Appalachian folk remedies, lists "whiskey" in numerous examples of both diagnostic, palliative, and (inevitably) anesthetic care for many types of ailments. As Cavender writes, "sour mash whiskey" was "a key ingredient in tinctures, toddies, and other remedies as well as a remedy itself. Southern Appalachia's enduring reputation for the production of illicit whiskey (moonshine)...conceals the fact that in the past many Southern Appalachians valued whiskey as much for medicinal as well as recreational use."³⁴ Harriette Simpson Arnow adds that "The newborn got weak toddy at birth, the mother had it stronger, the old and cold bathed their limbs in it, and so on through life."³⁵ Second, whiskey became a means of income and barter, an economic product, not only for medicinal use but also to be paid in kind for goods and services. As Appalachia descended into a cycle of exploitation and, ultimately, colonization, other means of income had to be found. To quote Tom Robertson:

"When money was scarce, whiskey was like money – an important trading commodity...in isolated mountain areas, where the roads were bad and farmland sparse, turning fruit or corn into whiskey made good economic sense: it increased the value and reduced the weight of produce. After all, it was a lot easier and more profitable to carry a few jugs or barrels of whiskey than wagonloads of corn."³⁶

Tindall and Shi clarify that "the emphasis on distilling" as an economic practice – which Alexander Hamilton and his successors in the federal government sought to tax, creating the

perpetual soreness between distiller and Revenuer which has raged ever since – "reflected a practical problem. Many farmers could not afford to transport bulky crops of corn and rye across the mountains or down the Mississippi River to the seaboard markets."³⁷ This remained true well into the Twentieth Century. Margie Hayes Lawson of Dickenson County, Virginia (as interviewed by Kathy Shearer) is far blunter on the matter: "A farm don't make no money. Grow corn and get the money in a jar."³⁸

Such was the important economic value of liquor in Appalachia. This was true before the industrialization and colonization of the region, but became even more so afterward, reaching a peak during the 1920s and the sweeping catastrophe of the Great Depression. The market for homemade alcohol was opened up and expanded by Appalachia's colonization, as it provided a means of income where, due to the nature of Appalachia's uneven economic development, money was scarce. Moonshine and moonshining was at times, along with fur-trapping, and the selling of surplus produce, the only viable economic activity to provide money for extremely poor people. This was done in frank resistance to Prohibition, the nearly decade-long nationwide constitutional ban on the production, importation, transportation and sale of alcoholic beverages. Whatever its cultural associations outside Appalachia, moonshine was at its heart an economic activity that helped fund what for many was already a very hard life: as Charles D. Thompson notes, "there was a market for liquor, and people were selling it because the money could be made and used...to shoe someone's poor little feet and to glove their hands. It was used for schooling and taking care of 'old folks back home.' It was illegal money—that much is true—but it was money made from sweat."³⁹ Within their own communities most moonshiners were, if not exactly held in high esteem, at least accepted as being decent folk. As Danny Neal recalls: "They mostly made this – for a living. They didn't have jobs...that was their living. But they were good

people."⁴⁰ Margie Hayes Lawson recounts that moonshining was her "Dad's business. That was his money, the whiskey. That was the only money he had."⁴¹ Knowing how high the stakes were, many communities would be on the lookout when agents would come to town, aiding those who might be spotted.⁴² The thickly wooded surroundings: plentiful in Appalachia, gave excellent cover for stills that need to be hidden from Revenuers. As Zell Miller, the former Governor of Georgia, recounted in his Appalachian memoir *Purt Night Gone*, the moonshiner's still "was usually along some little side branch running through a gully so choked with laurel, briars, and rhododendron that the only approach was by worming and crawling with great difficulty through the underbrush."⁴³

Because moonshine was *already* illicit before Prohibition, and was targeted by the United States government for being a product of unpaid excise, the illegality of alcohol made it doubly illicit, and doubly dangerous. Revenuers – known and loathed since the Whiskey Rebellion, but now federal agents operating under the Internal Revenue Service or the Alcohol Tax Unit of the Department of the Treasury⁴⁴ – would, and often did, come into conflict with moonshiners. This conflict has been greatly popularized and even commodified in the popular imagination, perhaps because it fits in with a broader anti-government, individualist narrative in American culture – indeed, as will be discussed later, this is perhaps part of its modern appeal and renaissance. But at the time the fear, uncertainty, and paranoia were very real, providing many Appalachian families with a story about someone's friend or relative caught up in dangerous and sometimes deadly situations. "Much folklore," Deborah Thompson and Irene Moser note, "centers around...stories of still locations and encounters with revenue agents, or revenuers."⁴⁵ Kathy Shearer in *Tales From the Moonshine Trade*, for instance, collected an especially rich collection of oral histories centered on the efforts of federal agents to shut down and destroy private distilleries in the far Southwest Virginia. Elsewhere in the same state, efforts to combat moonshiners resulted in cause célèbre such as the so-called Great Moonshine Conspiracy Trial of

1935, of which two books and a movie have since been based: *Spirits of Just Men* by Charles D. Thompson, quoted in these pages, was the non-fictional account that followed Matt Bondurant's *The Wettest County In the World* and the film upon which it was adapted, *Lawless*, directed by John Hillcoat. These and other cases, like the murder of Prohibition Agent Hunter Stotler in July of 1927 (part of a love triangle as well as a major still bust) near Boonsboro, Maryland, became contemporary sensations in the press⁴⁶ and helped cement the battle between revenuer and moonshiner in the American collective memory as something romantic and epic – and, occasionally, horrific. Ruth Ann Musick collected one particularly ghoulish bit of moonshine lore from Gilman, West Virginia that supposedly took place in the 1920s: every time a revenuer "would come around one of his stills, he would barbarously murder him and then dismember the body and cremate the remains in a furnace used to make charcoal for the stills." The evil moonshiner's spirit is said to haunt the area where he died after he slipped on a vine which hung him like a noose and snapped his neck – a lasting legacy of a time of chaos and violence.⁴⁷

Historically, these and other upheavals that were brought into Appalachian localities should be included of the same colossal failure that was and remains Prohibition, no different than the circumstances which gave rise to Al Capone in Chicago. Charles D. Thompson frames it this way:

"Alcohol had to be sold broadly in order to bring in money to the community, and consumption in cities and towns far away, where mobsters made a killing off speakeasies and where people converted denatured alcohol in their bathtubs as a form of gin, was all part of the same industry."⁴⁸

Moonshine in the Twentieth Century was a drink of danger – even in an era full of other drinks and other dangers. It was made was for taste, for medicine, and for money, an ubiquitous aspect

of community and life even for those who, especially for religious reasons, never drank or made it. It is little wonder that during the colonization of Appalachia, outsiders would not fail to notice its importance, and join it to ways of Othering the Appalachian people.

The "speed-filled drama"⁴⁹ of the film *Thunder Road* starring Robert Mitchum, which Zell Miller classes as one of many aspects of moonshiners (and their transporters – the bootleggers or *trippers*, the tradition of which eventually became the antecedent of modern day NASCAR⁵⁰) that were "glamorized in stories, movies, and songs"⁵¹ was really the exception: too often "Moonshiners were caricatured as backwoods hillbillies" with little factual regard for the dire financial straits that led many to distill and sell moonshine in the first place.⁵² This led in turn to some uncomfortable intersections of the Hillbilly stereotype and the Revenuer's quest to shut down moonshine operations, such as the exploits of C. Garland Bunting, first recorded by Steve Frazier of the *Wall Street Journal* and later turned into a book by Alec Wilkinson of *The New Yorker*. Bunting would invent outrageous characters to escape suspicion in rural communities – more times than not, he simply blended in chameleon-like with the very same neighbors of those he was actively trying to hunt. His words on the matter are deeply problematic, even if one is left impressed with his own successful track record of shutting down moonshine stills: "When you back in these ol' hick places, you got to be a hick."⁵³ The stereotype of the Hillbilly and his supposed love of moonshine becomes disconcertingly blurred.

The efforts of Bunting and other Revenuers were not always strictly about money – safety was also a concern. Poorly made moonshine, incidences of which became famous particularly in Tennessee and Georgia, became intertwined with the Hillbilly stereotype and which has since passed into something of an American legend: not only was moonshine a drink of dangerous people, it was often dangerous to drink *itself*. So it was that moonshine earned its

repute as a drink of the tough and the bravado – strong, certainly, but also, if made poorly, able to sicken or even kill the drinker. There are many anecdotes that it would often cause very harmful side effects aside from inebriation. Maurer describes it this way:

"Compared to modern legal whiskeys, moonshine is a potent, relatively unappetizing, very high-proof drink which abounds in fusel oil and several higher esters which certainly do not improve or rehabilitate the digestive tract...some drinkers testify it strikes the stomach like a coal and produces lightning flashes in the brain."⁵⁴

The last part of this passage is strikingly similar to many other descriptions of drinking even legally produced and sold moonshine, and these descriptions, independent of each other, are likely the source of the phrase *white lightning*, as imbibing moonshine struck the drinker like a bolt out of the blue – or, as Maurer puts it: "It carries a characteristic 'whang' (something like being hit hard over the head with a hollow tin club) that many drinkers enjoy."⁵⁵

Maurer asserts that moonshine essentially causes those who drink it to become unusually, even psychotically angry and dangerous: "it taps deeper wellsprings of aggression which the drinker may be surprised at possessing," eventually producing a "state of more or less homicidal torpor."⁵⁶ Reading these descriptions now may be strange to the modern reader, but then it should be noted that the effects that Maurer writes about are probably for illegally produced moonshine of dubious ingredients and distillation. Kephart, in *Our Southern Highlanders*, expounds greatly on moonshine being quite drinkable until additives are put into it to make it either taste or look better than the original finished product. The ancient trope of moonshine causing one to go blind because of inferior additives – "washing lye, both to increase the yield and give the liquor an artificial bead"⁵⁷ – may stem from this. Certainly the effects of imbibing too much, for Kephart, seem to agree with Maurer's own description: "A few drams may turn a

normally good-hearted fellow into a raging fiend who will shoot or stab without provocation."⁵⁸ Throughout the 1950s and well into the Twentieth Century, poorly-made moonshine was regarded not only as lost tax money from the federal government but an health hazard to those unwary enough to buy shoddy product: responding to increasing awareness of moonshine causing blindness and injury by unscrupulous merchants looking to make quick money, celebrities such as Edward G. Robinson and Louis Armstrong were enlisted to warn the public about drinking homemade liquor, which were joined by state health departments putting out posters and literature.⁶⁰ The reputation of moonshine as a dangerous drink was firmly implanted in the American mind.

But well-made corn liquor was still appreciated for its reliability as a strong and hearty alcoholic drink that one could make oneself. Kephart's insights into moonshining in the region he wrote about in and around the Great Smoky Mountains is telling: the "bead," a term mentioned in passing before, is, as Maurer explains, "The little bubbles that form along the meniscus of liquor when shaken in a bottle, allowing an experienced moonshiner to judge the proof and quality of the liquor with greater accuracy,"⁶¹ demonstrating even in Kephart's day a sophistication amongst those who would engage in distilling this drink. This sophistication – and the dangers of drinking a poorly-made product – are still relevant for those in the know. As John Cline, a resident of both Salem and Roanoke, Virginia, asserts: "You don't want no hooch, that shit will make you go blind. It *will* make you go blind. Every time someone brews a batch of moonshine, the first batch of it – is bad, you have to throw it out. It's non-usable, it's non-edible. The second batch afterward is okay."⁶² Of note is Cline's technical differentiation of *hooch* – like *booze* usually a slang term for general alcoholic libation – as a moonshining term. Cline was interviewed in November of 2016, but makes mention of the ancient adage, still current today,

about using a flame to determine the quality of the finished product. This method, a primitive kind of spectrometry, involves putting the liquid to a flame, and noting the color. "If you put it to a flame, and it burns clear – if it burns clear, you have good moonshine. If it burns red, green, or any other color, it's been ran through bad."⁶³ Like anything that will end up being eaten or drank, precautions of cleanliness and quality must be taken. Eliot Wigginton, collecting with his students the information on Appalachian mountain living that would eventually become his *Foxfire* series, notes in the first book, which includes an extensive section on moonshining, that one of the mountaineers had this to say on the matter: "Everything must be kept spotless. The copper inside the still should shine like gold. Barrel (or boxes) too must be kept clean. Smoke them out after each use with several handfuls of cornmeal bran set afire."⁶⁴

Such noted care in the maintenance of a still – an illegal operation producing an illegal product – returns one inevitably to the question of what moonshine *is*. Its history has given it a social construction which lingers on in the American mind today. From the times of moonshine being the stiff drink of the mountaineer frontiersman to the times of bootlegging and shoot-outs, moonshine has been thought of as being as elusive and as dangerous as the Hillbillies themselves. Yet few things are as purely Appalachian, as purely from the mountains, as moonshine: born from an idiosyncratically American ingredient, maize, it has featured prominently in the history of the American frontier, in small quests for that same American freedom and independence, and in the ongoing struggle to emerge from colonialism and postcolonialism in Appalachia. "By any standards," as Wigginton concludes his chapter on moonshining in *The Foxfire Book*, "moonshine has to be counted as one of the most fascinating mountain endeavors. Few occupations can lay claim to funnier stories—or sadder stories—than this."⁶⁵

Rather being an accessory to a tired and noxious stereotype, moonshine can instead be part of a bedrock for a renewed Appalachian identity, one that embraces moonshine's problematic history as emblematic of *Appalachia's* problematic history – an inner strength that shines through a troubled past. But to get there, one needs to navigate, as the old mountaineers once did, treacherous – but rewarding – paths ahead.

Notes and Sources

1. Tindall and Shi, 301.
2. Ibid.
3. Jaime Joyce, *Moonshine: A Cultural History of America's Infamous Liquor*, 30.
4. William Hogeland, *The Whiskey Rebellion*, 7-8.
5. Viz., Harkins, 21-23.
6. Ibid., 34.
7. Tindall and Shi, 302.
8. Esther Kellner, *Moonshine: Its History and Folklore*, 4.
9. Joyce, 12, and David W. Maurer, *Kentucky Moonshine*, 12.
10. Joyce, 12.
11. James Ross, *Whisky*, 158.
12. Joyce, 13.
13. Kellner, 6.
14. Joyce, 8.
15. Mary Miley Theobald, "When Whiskey Was the King of Drink," *Colonial Williamsburg Journal*, Summer 2008, <<http://www.history.org/Foundation/journal/Summer08/whiskey.cfm>>
16. Tom Robertson, "Moonshine On the Mountain," from Evans et al., ed., 84.
17. Ibid.
18. Joseph Earl Dabney, *Mountain Spirits*, 40.
19. Ibid., 41.
20. David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways In America*, 729.
21. Ibid., 729-730.

22. Ibid., 730, citing John C. Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*, 203.

23. Ibid., 7.

24. Maurer, 13.

25. Ibid., 14.

26. Joyce, 8.

27. Walter Scott, *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott, Vol. VII*, 144. The footnote mentions that "moonlight" is "a cant term for smuggled spirits." The line itself is apparently meant to be a complicated pun.

28. John George Hohman, *Pow-Wows, or, Long Lost Friend*, 79.

29. The uncertainty here comes in identifying the "Big Lick Mountain" mentioned in the story. If indeed *Big Lick* is meant to be a complete synonym for *Roanoke* due to the latter being originally named the former, than the story as Sloan recorded it does indeed take place in Roanoke County, Virginia, in the vicinity of Roanoke Mountain, perhaps the Clear Brook area. This is because that prior to being renamed *Roanoke*, the town of *Big Lick* owed its name to an outcropping of salt rock which game animals would enjoy licking, attracting hunters (Thomas Bruce, *Southwest Virginia and Shenandoah Valley*, 132). There is a Lick Mountain in Wythe County, in the further southwest of Virginia, however, this would seem to be outside of Sloan's area of activity in collecting stories for the WPA. Determining the place where the story – a cautionary witch-tale about carefully choosing one's future wife – took place is important to determine possible patterns of food and drink. Both Wythe and Roanoke Counties are culturally and geologically Appalachian, but only Wythe is recognized by the Appalachian Regional Commission. In any case, a note must be made here that disguising place names to protect the informant's privacy in folklore, particularly Appalachian folklore, is very common: the famous collection by James V.

Burchill, Linda J. Crider, and Peggy Kendrick, *Ghosts and Haunts From the Appalachian Foothills* (e.g., 65) and its sequel, *The Cold, Cold Hand* both do this (e.g., 82-83). See "The Cat Wife," from Hubert J. Davis, ed., *The Silver Bullet*, 109-112.

30. Davis, ed., 111: "They talked, guessed riddles, told stories, played games and drunk cherry bounce, persimmon beer and moonshine 'til hit wuz time to go home."

31. Viz., <<http://www.mountvernon.org/recipes/cherry-bounce/>>

32. Danny Neal, telephone interview by author, digital recording. Roanoke, Virginia, 23rd October 2016.

33. Ibid.

34. Anthony Cavender, *Folk Medicine in South Appalachia*, 64. Cavender's meaning of "Southern Appalachia" more or less dovetails with the use of *Appalachia* more broadly in these pages.

35. Harriette Simpson Arnow, *Flowering of the Cumberland*, 277.

36. Robertson, from Evans et al., ed., 83-84.

37. Tindall and Shi, 301.

38. Kathy Shearer, *Tales From the Moonshine Trade*, 28, interviewing Margie Hayes Lawson.

39. Thompson, xxviii-xxix.

40. Danny Neal, telephone interview by author, digital recording. Roanoke, Virginia, 23rd October 2016.

41. Shearer, 28, interviewing Margie Hayes Lawson.

42. Zell Miller, *Purt Nigh Gone*, 68.

43. Charles D. Thompson, *Spirits of Just Men*, 6.

44. Ibid., 7.

45. Deborah Thompson and Irene Moser, "Appalachian Folklore," from Edwards et al., ed., 145.
46. Tim Rowland, *Maryland's Appalachian Highlands*, 109-111.
47. Musick, 38. She notes the story was collected in 1963 from a one Richard Swick, "as told to him by an older relative in Gilman" (ibid., 183).
48. Thompson, xxv.
49. Dabney, 158.
50. Joyce, 97-98.
51. Miller, 71.
52. Joyce, 76.
53. Steve Frazier, "C. Garland Bunting Poses as Fish Peddler, Reels in Lawbreakers," *The Wall Street Journal*, 7th September 1982.
54. Maurer, 25-26.
55. Ibid., 26.
56. Ibid.
57. Kephart, 137.
58. Ibid., 138.
59. Miller, 73.
60. Joyce, 112-117.
61. Maurer, 113.
62. John Cline, interview by author, digital recording. Roanoke, Virginia, 25th November 2016.
63. Ibid.
64. Eliot Wigginton, ed., *The Foxfire Book*, 341.
65. Ibid., 344.

Chapter III

Watch the Jugs A'fillin

Appalachian Heritage, Economics, and Rehabilitating Memory

In his hand are the deep places of the earth: the strength of the hills is his also.

Psalm 95:4

Moonshine has been, historically, a necessary part of the Hillbilly stereotype of Appalachia and the Appalachians, which was formed in the American mind as a way to Other those who lived in that colonized and poverty-stricken region. This has been true as far back as the Whiskey Rebellion of 1793. This is because much of what moonshine was – extremely potent, illegal to make, the cause of deep worry and sometimes violence – dovetailed with the same perception of who the Hillbilly was. It was thought of as being a dangerous drink for dangerous people. Of course, seen another way, moonshine was a drink of freedom, by those who still yearned for it in the vanishing American wilderness. For some decades lasting into the beginning of the Twenty First Century, moonshine remained the outlaw of liquors, a thing of myth in Appalachia, the place of many American myths already. In recent years, however, a remarkable change has taken place – moonshine is becoming part of a sense of identity, part of a more general reexamination of Appalachian culture to find ways to preserve heritage and culture. Feasibly, this can serve as an anchor in an unfriendly, postcolonial world.

The Hillbilly stereotype, for one, has since at least the 1970s undergone a serious reevaluation amongst those upon which it was foisted. Harkins, comparing the changing history of the term, *Hillbilly*, with the related word *Redneck*, puts it this way:

"Like 'redneck,' 'hillbilly' was increasingly appropriated by southern mountaineers...as a marker of racial and class pride. But, unlike redneck, the term carried a strong regional specificity, representing not only southern whiteness and working-class status but also a pride in the independence and resistance of mountain-identity."¹

Harkins also points out that *Hillbilly* is more gender-neutral and less loaded with masculinity than *Redneck*, citing Kathy Kahn's 1977 *Hillbilly Woman*,² and indeed, Dolly Parton, the singer, in an interview with *Southern Living* in September of 2014, stated that she continues to wear the term proudly:

"Well, it's a compliment to me[...]To me that's not an insult. We were just mountain people. We were really redneck, roughneck, hillbilly people. And I'm proud of it. 'White trash!' I am. [...] But I'm proud of my hillbilly, white trash background. To me that keeps you humble; that keeps you good. And it doesn't matter how hard you try to outrun it—if that's who you are, that's who you are. It'll show up once in a while."³

Parton's remark that "it doesn't matter how hard you try to outrun it" may reflect Balibar and Wallerstein's concept of *pastness*, a focus on the past itself to form an identity. They describe it as "a central element in the socialization of individuals" and a "preeminently moral phenomenon, therefore a political phenomenon, always a contemporary phenomenon,"⁴ which well describes the current reinvention of the Hillbilly. Balibar and Wallerstein further point out that "The real past, to be sure, is indeed inscribed in stone. The social past, how we understand this real past, on the other hand, is inscribed at best in soft clay."⁵ Thus does the Hillbilly *of the past* become

rehabilitated to the *Hillbilly of the present*, with the understanding that the many things Appalachians were once shamed for can now be used to express independence, individuality, and identity.

The reinvention of the Hillbilly is occurring during an ongoing period when "a new generation of activists and scholars began to fervently denounce the term...and the negative connotations it held in the popular media."⁶ Yet this has not stopped *Hillbilly* from transforming into a shibboleth of comradery. Like *Nigger* and other re-appropriated epithets once used to demean and Other in the United States, *Hillbilly* has acquired a privileged position in intergroup settings – in other words, those identifying as Hillbillies may call each other the term, but those on the outside using it would be regarded as insensitive at best, insulting at worst. Additionally, despite its limited rehabilitation in this respect, *Hillbilly* still entangles within it noxious stereotypes that are still current, and still inure many outsiders to the complex problems Appalachia currently faces.

But the reversal of *Hillbilly* from an ugly slur to a badge of honor runs parallel to how moonshine and moonshining were similarly reevaluated in the communities and families that, historically, were affected by it. This is a cultural shift which, as Charles D. Thompson notes, would seem to effect Appalachia most keenly:

"Many descendants of old moonshiners are starting to disabuse themselves of the simple stereotypes still prevalent in too many media sources. They have claimed their moonshining ancestors as strong people who struggled against and overcame poverty. Through historical exhibits and cultural promotion, any guilt that people have harbored about moonshine—at least the variety made in the past when there were few alternatives—is fading away."⁷

Inevitably, this mixed legacy that such "historical exhibits and cultural promotion," as Thompson terms it, is certainly not lost on the people whose local history was shaped by the practice of moonshining. As John Reynolds for the *Martinsville Bulletin* tried to wrestle with in January, 2017: "Uncovering such history, in addition to recording or preserving it, is a challenge but the rewards are many for those of us who are often more comfortable with the past than the difficult present or uncertain future."⁸

These "rewards," can, and often are, immense. They come in the form of money – and preservation of a vanishing heritage. In January of 2015, for instance, it was reported by the *Charleston Gazette-Mail* that in Gilbert, West Virginia, a distillery had found success making legal moonshine,⁹ "in southern West Virginia with the state's blessing"¹⁰ – but remarkably, the company was a joint venture between descendants of the Hatfields and the McCoys, the feuding clans whose murderous exploits cemented for many the Hillbilly stereotype in national legend. Nancy Hatfield, spoke about the family tradition: "I come from a moonshining daddy. He used to bootleg when I was a little girl. I used to bottle it for him in the bathtub."¹¹ The fundamental concepts of *history*, *heritage*, and even *birthright* come up again and again in discussions of alcohol in Appalachia. The opening of Hawk Knob Cider and Mead in Lewisburg, West Virginia, in 2014 was done with history and heritage firmly in mind. In November of 2016, one of the co-founders, Josh Bennett – a West Virginia native – extolled the essential *Appalachianness* (if such a word be coined) of their product:

"Just like with moonshine, when anything was illegal, we were still doing it up here in the hills...It was just a farmstead practice, and if you weren't in the city where they really had their eyes on you, farmers were going to keep doing what they traditionally did for hundreds of years. It's just that simple. People were still gonna grow their orchards and

make their hard cider"¹²

Bennett's words recall a bleaker time in Appalachian history, and in a strange – and, perhaps, tragic – recursion of history, moonshine although now made legally, is in some cases serving the same function it once did: a prized commodity. Mountain Mama Distillery, located in Man, West Virginia, was founded with a stated aim to help save the town's flagging economy, part of the region-wide failure of the coal industry. This is a trend – a form of agricultural tourism – that some have pointed out can revitalize rural communities while staying true to their roots.¹³ Once again, heritage plays a key role: the recipe for the product is that of co-founder Bill Copley's grandfather – unchanged from when he was caught and jailed for operating a distillery in 1963.¹⁴ Native Appalachians like Marvin "Popcorn" Sutton often, in the marketing of their products, change very little about themselves, as they already look (or sound) the part of what the American imagination conceives a moonshiner to be: "A wizened man with a wiry beard, trademark overalls, and burning cigarette perpetually dangling from his fingers."¹⁵ Although Sutton was by all accounts genuine in his character and dress, it recalls how the line between fiction and fact when portraying Appalachia and the Appalachians – as in the case of C. Garland Bunting, previously discussed – can become blurred.

Moonshine's renaissance as a marketable product is part of a broader growing trend of agricultural tourism. While it is relatively new in Appalachia, it has thus far centered around food, not drink. Like moonshine, which a headline in *The Herald-Mail* trumpets as "going from backwoods to boutique,"¹⁶ certain foods have suddenly become extremely popular well outside Appalachia because of a celebrity, the mainstream media, or both, suddenly taking notice. Such a thing occurred when homemaking maven Martha Stewart included two recipes for ramps – *Allium tricoccum*, a North American wild onion, eaten for generations by Appalachians – in her

magazine, *Martha Stewart Living*, in April of 1998.¹⁷ Ramps began to attract more outside interest from there, until some two decades on, ramps have become exceedingly popular in cuisine far outside the Appalachian region. Richwood, West Virginia, now holds an annual "Feast of the Ransom," which attracts thousands of people.¹⁸ Similar festivals dedicated to ramps are found across Appalachia: Elkins, West Virginia ("Ramps and Rails Festival"), Cosby, Tennessee ("Cosby Ramp Festival"), and Haywood County, North Carolina. All are well-attended public events centered around *Allium tricoccum*, a food that is "inextricably linked to both the white mountaineer culture and the Cherokee culture," in Appalachia.¹⁹

Although some incidental parallels exist between ramps and moonshine – both are uniquely Appalachian, both have a very distinctive taste,²⁰ both are the center of much lore²¹ – they are, obviously, utterly different things, and festivals dedicated to either would bring people together for far different reasons. Yet there is a distinct connection between the Feast of the Ransom and Franklin County, Virginia's Moonshine Festival, first held in April of 2016: both, ultimately, bring together the fusion of economics, history – and heritage. The Franklin County Moonshine Festival itself was an outgrowth of a smaller but successful United Way charity gala from the year before called *Shine 'n Dine*. It was sponsored by large local media outlets in the Roanoke market, such as WDBJ and WROV, the latter of which once used radio bumpers advertising themselves as "broadcasting from the Moonshine Capital of the World," a phrase that is well-known and colloquial to the Roanoke area (Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains) which includes Franklin County.²² Indeed, the Festival was purposefully marketed to take the history of moonshine in Franklin County and forge it into a modern celebration of heritage and pride.²³ Drawing well over six thousand attendees, the Festival is part of a greater recognition and renaissance in the same part of Virginia which became infamous during and after the Great

Depression for the sheer amount of illicit liquor produced there. It was held very shortly after the openings of two legal moonshine distilleries in the county, Franklin County Distilleries on 11th June and Twin Creeks Distillery on 1st July, both in 2015. Regarding these new businesses, Ben Flora, the mayor of Boones Mill, Franklin County, was quoted in *The Roanoke Times* in October, 2015 as saying that moonshine was "such a distinctive Franklin County heritage product that is now wondrously legal."²⁴ Matt Hankins, the assistant town manager of Rocky Mount, where the Moonshine Festival took place, similarly told *The Roanoke Times* that "The town is turning its attention more and more to the tourist crowd...and making Rocky Mount a destination."²⁵ The opening of the distilleries was, in Hankins' words, "just one more building block in helping to make that happen."²⁶ All of this is probing cultural depths in Franklin County which stir forth strong feelings of rootedness and tradition: when he was interviewed by WFXR in Roanoke, Chris Prillaman, the owner and distiller of Twin Creeks distillery, was quoted as saying that, as the descendant of one of the men in the Conspiracy Trail of 1935, whiskey and moonshining was "something that gets in your blood."²⁷

The success of festivals in Appalachia which combine edibles (and drinkables) with history and heritage would seem to prove true Dean MacCannell's observation that "Festivals and conventions organize the economic life of entire cities around cultural productions."²⁸ In particular, part of the draw of these festivals, or really any kind of tourism throughout Appalachia, can be linked to why moonshine is undergoing a renaissance of interest as well: as MacCannell further theorizes, "Modern man has been condemned to look elsewhere, everywhere, for his authenticity, to see if he can catch a glimpse of it reflected in the simplicity, poverty, chastity, or purity of others."²⁹ The wildness of moonshine, the twilit history of Appalachia and the Appalachian people, serves as a dark allure in age of sterile, modern

sameness. Advertisers, in turn, are finding ways to turn that appeal to a national audience. For instance: Ole Smoky, which is distilled in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, not far from where Horace Kephart lived and wrote *Our Southern Highlanders*, has a friendly, rakish, anthropomorphic wolf in a suit – Gatlin T. Wolf III – as its mascot. An ad campaign features the wolf howling from a distance to people in boring and distressingly mundane situations, summoning them to a fun-looking bar and admonishing them to "C'mon, Live a Little" – a conscious throwback to moonshine being a symbol of a wilder, more untamed America.³⁰ Indeed, moonshine's notoriety for being strong and illicit is still intact. When Hardee's introduced its Midnight Moonshine Thickburger in mid-2016 with an advertisement starring actress Hayden Panettiere working over a still to produce the moonshine glaze from which the hamburger's name is derived, it was given the tagline "It's not illegal...but it tastes like it!"³¹ To that end, Joyce notes that "Some consumers respond to the word positively, associating it with American history and tradition, with danger and excitement."³² Also, one of the last components of the moonshine myth – that of it being unpalatable and perhaps even deadly – is sharply declining in tandem. The Beverage Tasting Institute describes the Ole Smoky brand on their website as: "Clear. Aromas of dusty corn meal, hominy, and polenta with a supple, dryish medium-to-full body and a corn oil and syrup and pepper finish. A solid moonshine for cocktails." The Institute reviewed this drink in 2012, awarded it 89 points and one of their silver medals.³³ Matt Bondurant, in the autobiographical concluding notes of *Spirits of Just Men*, describes moonshine as having "a clean, slightly sweet taste, hot on the back of the tongue and throat but smooth and pure tasting, hints of grain and sugar. If you get some good stuff from a guy who knows what he is doing, it is some of the most pure and clean liquor in the world."³⁴ This is all hardly the hideous Jekyll-and-Hyde potion from the Kentucky backwoods of Maurer, or the alchemical Tennessee concoction of Kephart.

Deliberately celebrating history and heritage – organizing economic life around cultural productions, to paraphrase MacCannell – functions as the reverse of the *core-periphery relations* theorized by Balibar and Wallerstein, and which indeed fit the history of Appalachian colonization so well. In the *core-periphery relations* of colonialism, capital flows outward with no enrichment for the native population. However, in the new tourism model many places in Appalachia have adopted, actual uplift is possible by the inflow of money that, unlike in the aforementioned colonial model, enriches those who produce. Heritage – studied, celebrated, and monetized – creates what MacCannell calls "a cultural production that almost magically generates capital continuously, often without consuming any energy for itself."³⁵

But even here caution must be taken. A sudden high demand for Appalachian food and drink – as happened already with ramps, and which a *Washington Post* article from March, 2016, expects to burgeon even further³⁶ – might help transition Appalachia out of more dire monetary straits, but it could, feasibly, also produce conditions that would lead to a repeat of the *extraction economy* which has caused Appalachia so much grief and destruction before.³⁷ If it is true, as Glen Facemire in *Eating Appalachia* reasons, that "Ramps...are an Appalachian natural resource. And like lumber and coal, ramps need to be managed to ensure economic, cultural, and ecological stability for the region,"³⁸ then the same can be said of moonshine or any other form of agricultural tourism. Moonshine in particular uses water, as do other distilleries, breweries, and wineries. The question of resources and resource management has to be addressed in small communities. These and other factors make the tempting panacea of agricultural tourism one that, again, should be approached objectively and with caution. Whatever the road taken, the navigation through postcolonialism, is, at every turn, a treacherous one.

But whether food or drink or craft, the sense of pride in the rootedness that sharing

heritage as a means to educate about, and preserve, Appalachian culture is an important aspect about monetizing it. Denny Trantham, a chef from Asheville, North Carolina, who was interviewed for the *Washington Post* article about Appalachian food, explained that "This is an original identity...[y]ou can't get it on Amazon. You have to have been a part of it."³⁹ Again one returns to this sense of original *Appalachianness* – there is a sense of urgency in wanting to share heritage, culinary or otherwise. Depopulation and out-migration, mentioned in the first chapter, is creating a cultural crisis. A world is being lost. Preserving and disseminating – and selling – what one can becomes equally as important as economic uplift. The more ancient aspects of moonshining, to take but one instance, are rapidly disappearing. "The gentle art of illicit whiskey making," concludes Dabney, "will be only a 'heard-of thing' recounted in the folklore and the stories of such old-timers."⁴⁰ Dabney laments the disappearance of "the corny smell of the mash tubs in the springtime, mingled with the scent of sassafras and dogwood blossoms and the ever-constant odor of the leafy, pungent woods-earth of the Appalachian outdoors..."⁴¹

Indeed, as the decade of the 2010s draws to a close, the historic narratives about homemade liquor in Appalachia begin to age. The world that was so vividly painted by the oral histories collected by Kathy Shearer have, in the places that they took place, passed into dim memory, if not oblivion. David W. Maurer's fascinating exposé is nearly a half century old. *The Foxfire Book*, while still an invaluable repository of Appalachian folklore and knowhow, finds itself in the same age bracket. And *Our Southern Highlanders* – for better or for worse, still a classic of Appalachian Studies – approaches its centenary. The decades between Kephart's mountaineers, Maurer's wicked Kentucky distillers, and the new, widespread acceptance and consumption of moonshine – having the Beverage Tasting Institute's rate a marketed brand of the stuff – constitute major changes in Appalachian history and culture. The bloody, violent, rugged

world of moonshiners and Revenuers – the harrowing narratives put to print in academia by Charles D. Thompson, Jr. in *Spirits of Just Men*, in historical fiction by Bondurant's *The Wettest County In the World* and the 2012 film by John Hillcoat that inspired it, *Lawless* – seem like stirrings of distant dreams, and sometimes nightmares. The resurrection and rehabilitation of moonshine, then, could not have come at a better time – before it, too, would have been buried, and lost to history.

The Appalachia that birthed and nurtured the distilling and drinking of unaged corn whiskey – the *water of life*, the Appalachians' Celtic ancestors once called it – suffers unduly, and apace. This postcolonial world Appalachia finds itself in is a hostile one. Finding and reaffirming the roots that carried Appalachia and the Appalachians through impossibly hard times is not merely a cheap way to cash in on a cottage industry, even if the national and global market for alcohol is perennially lucrative and easily monetized. Rather, performing language, religion, cookery, drink, and other forms of culture both tangible and intangible becomes a necessary act of rootedness in a world increasingly encroached upon by hegemony.

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Conclusion

And Never More You'll Toil

Appalachian Identity and the Postcolonial Future

When these lips shall never more

Press a kiss upon thy brow

But lie cold and still in death,

Will you love me then as now?

The Carter Family, "Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?"

Appalachia's past, its use and abuse by outside interests, is one of the more shameful episodes of American history. Yet it is rarely discussed and heard of today. Although the United States used its resources and people to fight two world wars and eventually become a global superpower, it did so at a terrible personal, environmental, economic, and ultimately psychological cost to Appalachia and the Appalachian people. It was Appalachia which provided the coal and wood to make the steel and fittings for the battleships and airplanes and bombs. But the process ruined mountaintops and denuded forests – it sickened, disfigured, and impoverished countless miners and millhands who worked to procure these resources. And never was the region allowed to become rich for the wealth it was forced to give up.

Appalachia now finds itself in the ashes of this nearly century-long process of colonization. It is now *postcolonial*. Throughout these years, the Appalachian people were

demeaned as rednecks, white trash – *Hillbillies*. These were labels and cultural constructions based on racist, classist half-truths designed to, borrowing a term from Alexander Saxton, inure the majority against their very real suffering. Even today, damaging stigmas, as has been demonstrated, still exist about language, upbringing, geography, and lifestyle. Although this oppression is both historical and contemporary, the various aspects of this constructed Hillbilly stereotype have begun to be deconstructed, reversed, and rehabilitated. Once a mark of shame and contempt, for many Appalachian-Americans – uniting in the rainbow of other American identities joined with the all-important hyphen – to be a Hillbilly is, in the Twenty-First Century, a badge of honor, an identity which has built into it centuries of independence and rugged individualism.

Why, one asks, is such a reversal possible? Indeed, why, in the quest for identity and culture in the United States, does the Appalachian *look backward* at who he used to be – to use the *pastness* of Balibar and Wallerstein? In much the same way as moonshine provides a literal taste of what America once was – wild, untamed, lawless – so too does being a Hillbilly. Recalling what MacCannell said about how *modern man must look elsewhere for his authenticity*, the consuming American hegemony has swallowed much of what once was a vibrant cultural diversity. Authenticity is in short supply. And so it is, as Isenberg explains, that, starting at the earliest in the 1940s and slowly but inexorably spreading ever since, "The positive mythology about hillbillies suited such appeals to authenticity. Beyond the image of feuding and wasting time...hillbillies also tapped into a set of golden age beliefs: they were isolated, primitive, and rough on the outside yet practiced a kind of genuine democracy."¹

As Harkins has pointed out in the previous chapter, this image was exaggerated at best, destructive at worst, ignoring as it did (and does) the persistent problems of systemic poverty and

broader societal oppression. But re-appropriating the term, and even the imagery, of the Hillbilly, has been key to undo the inferiority complex that Snyder speaks to about living in Appalachia and being Appalachian. This gives rise to a kind of quasi-nationalism, a vociferous pride in one's homeland and customs. One will recall the statements made by the entrepreneurs monetizing their heritage, trying to express a kind of *Appalachianness* in what they make and sell. It is almost if, to them, that being from the mountains, being Appalachian, and knowing and consuming the crafts that are native to it, constitute a bloodborne birthright that one inherits, rather than one is given. While they may be – and should be – shared, tastes of the mountains, are all an outsider can expect, for he can never be fully apart of them. These are the same *notions of insiders and outsiders* that Smith feared in a globalizing world. Yet Appalachians were, in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, roundly rejected globalism by planning to vote for the anti-globalist candidate, Donald Trump² – for defiance and individualism are, if writers on the matter are to be believed, inherent Appalachian traits. As Loyal Jones, former Director of the Appalachian Center at Berea College puts it, "our belief in independence and self-reliance is still strong whether or not we are truly independent. We still value solitude, whether or not we can find a place to be alone. We also value self-reliance, to do things for ourselves, whether or not it is practical to do so."³

Such fierce assertions of difference may be surprising, but in context they may be less empty boasts than they are a *cri de guerre* of a people trying to find its voice in a postcolonial world. To understand why some may use this kind of strong language, and hold these strong opinions, one can turn to a study by Michael J. Chandler and Christopher Lalonde at the University of British Columbia. In it, they discovered that, at the time of the study (1997-1998) some First Nations communities in the Canadian province of British Columbia showed suicide

rates "800 times the national average, while in others suicide is essentially unknown." Chandler and Lalonde assert that:

"...these variable incidence rates are strongly associated with the degree to which...[the] bands are engaged in community practices that are employed as markers of a collective effort to rehabilitate and vouchsafe the cultural continuity of these groups. *Communities that have taken active steps to preserve and rehabilitate their own cultures are shown to be those in which youth suicide rates are dramatically lower.*"⁴

Emphasis added. This is a startling assertion, one that carries weight for any number of communities and cultures, even those different and distant to First Nations tribes in western Canada. Ruminating on the results of Chandler and Lalonde's study, Marc David Lewis frames it as part of a more basic human need: those that kept the old ways and were actively engaged in their culture and in cultural continuity, "saw themselves as part of a larger narrative, in which the stories of their lives fit and made sense,"⁵ whereas those that did not lived as "islands clustered in the middle of nowhere. Their lives just didn't make sense. There was only the present, only the featureless terrain of today."⁶ Ultimately, Lewis extrapolates from Chandler and Lalonde, "humans need to be able to see their own lives progressing, moving, from a meaningful past to a viable future. They need to see themselves as going somewhere, as characters in a narrative, as making sense."⁷

While this may somewhat explain the power behind the words of those who take pride in their ancestors, their region, and their crafts, it could have major applications for studies, and perhaps even remedies, for postcolonial Appalachia. As discussed previously, the most difficult challenge facing Appalachia in its postcolonial state is economics – lack of jobs and lack of capital. It is for this reason, as has been seen, that many are turning to monetizing aspects of

Appalachian heritage and culture. But beyond that, is it possible that a kind of ennui, a loss of direction and a disconnection from a deeper heritage, is also to blame? Could it be that commodifying moonshine or any other tangible product of Appalachia serves a *dual* purpose for those selling it – to reimagine the self as part of something grander and bigger and older, in addition to merely making money? Certainly Joyce, in concluding her cultural history of moonshine, thinks so: "Heritage is what moonshine is all about. Moonshine is tradition. It's family. It's folk art, and people are invested in keeping the art alive."⁸ If this is true, then is what Lewis described a much bigger problem than simple lack of jobs? And could it be that a subconscious yearning for community and for heritage is what is driving a return to older aspects of Appalachian culture – not only moonshine but crafts, foods, language, and religion?

For some this would seem callow – the rampant suicide, drug addiction, and obesity rates are all, as has been seen, a symptom of grinding poverty that postcolonialism has made that much worse. However, in many ways this poverty has always existed – as Eller and others have proven, uplift never occurred in Appalachia, and its economy did not develop in the healthier ways that the rest of the United States experienced. While it is probable that alcoholism was an elder parallel to drug addiction – although homemade alcohol was ubiquitous, drunkenness was a universally despised vice, and teetotaling was very common in mountain church communities⁹ – some of the more serious problems that Appalachia now faces *with the same degree of poverty* did not exist in decades past. What changed? Indisputably, the intrusion and spread of mass media, consumerism, modern technology. With the decimation of the old ways – secularism, global fast food conglomerates, throw-away culture – Appalachia suffered a convulsion it could ill-afford. Yet it is a story that is repeated across the United States and around the world – cultures dying, snuffed out, as the cost of progress. One is reminded of Murray Gell-Man,

writing in *The Quark and the Jaguar*:

"Just as it is crazy to squander in a few decades much of the rich biological diversity that has evolved over billions of years, so is it equally crazy to permit the disappearance of much of human cultural diversity which has evolved in a somewhat analogous way over many tens of thousands of years."¹⁰

The vanishing of Appalachian culture continues, once again, through the dying-off of its older populations, its postcolonial demographic and economic freefall amongst its younger populations, its debasement and mockery throughout American popular culture and imagination, and its erasure at the hands of mass media and hegemony. To quote again, Gell-Man:

"Imagine, though, the knowledge of the properties of plants in the minds of certain tribal shamans. Many of those witch doctors are dying without replacement. The great Harvard ethnobotanist, Richard Schultes, who spent many years studying medicinal plants in the Amazon Basin, says that each time a shaman dies, it is if a library had burned down."¹¹

What is lost cannot be replaced – in the Amazon, in Appalachia, or anywhere around the world which has threatened cultures.

In attempting to study, document, participate in, or perhaps even attempt to resurrect aspects of Appalachian culture, inevitably there will be arguments as to what, and what is not, essentially Appalachian. Foreseeably these will mire any positive outcome with self-defeating arguments. For instance, one can readily agree that hard cider is Appalachian (as Josh Bennett of Hawk Knob Cidery explained) because of its history, but hard ciders as a product are manufactured and consumed in New England (Woodchuck, from Vermont), and major cideries exist in Great Britain (Strongbow) and Sweden (Rekorderlig), countries which have rich histories of apple orcharding. What, therefore, would make a particular hard cider definitively

Appalachian? In putting Appalachia on par with other cultures – in putting moonshine in the same class as French champagne, Danish mead, and so on – questions of authenticity, age, and origin need to be settled. There is an argument to be made that the way in which Hawk Knob makes their cider is comparable to the way cider was once made in Appalachia in ages past (an argument which, at least in promotional materials, they actually make). In doing so, old history can be brought into new light – old roots can be reconnected with the new – and with the discoveries, a little piece of culture is saved and celebrated. The authenticity of a product as a connector to heritage and, ultimately, identity has been written into law before: the North American Free Trade Agreement, in Annex 313 of the treaty's text, made special mention for Canadian whisky, Tennessee whiskey, and Mexican tequila as "distinctive products" which cannot be called as such unless produced in those localities¹² – perhaps, sometime in the future, the same assertion will be made of moonshine from West Virginia, Virginia, and other places in Appalachia.

But one must ultimately be careful with demanding assertions of authenticity. Arguments over cultural purity are alienating and, again, self-defeating. Appalachia is a heterogeneous region whose population is made up of descendants of numerous European countries, with a small but notable population of African-descended peoples and Native Americans. No one story could ever fit them all – nor should it. Even so, the theories of Barbara Ellen Smith once more quite to the contrary, Appalachia must be viewed, in its entirety, as something different from, yet integral to, American civilization. While Appalachia and the Appalachians are far from homogenous in any respect, it is still very much distinct from the whole of America. To deny this is to add the fuel to the fires of cultural erasure and pressured conformity to further prove the case it is the victim of internal colonization – to deny this is to damage the rootedness it needs.

Illicit distillation and moonshining outside of governmental auspices still takes place in Appalachia, as mentioned, though not nearly at the rate or the visibility as it once did. Although *Vice's* assertion with the eye-catching headline in 2015 that "Illicit Moonshine Culture Is Dead"¹³ is grossly overstating the case – moonshine busts are still common in Franklin County, for instance¹⁴ – the golden age of moonshining, as Dabney noted, has long since passed. But for many – the aforementioned ad campaigns by large food and beverage companies mentioned as proof – the broader cultural memory of moonshine is still alive: something legendary, both devilish and delicious, a symbol of wildness and wilderness. It hearkens back to a time when all of the United States was still young, and still had so much promise, fighting against the elements and wrestling nature. In the strength of the moonshine one presupposes a mythic strength of the moonshiners and, perhaps, all of Appalachia, as immovable as the mountains.

This is not some theatrical metaphor: it is a common theme when tragedy strikes. After the devastating 2016 floods in the Greenbrier Valley of West Virginia, Kin Ship Goods, out of Charleston, designed a shirt that, when sold, would have the proceeds going to the Red Cross and the United Way. It was emblazoned with the slogan *Come Hell Or High Water*, and "sold so quickly they had to briefly suspend sales."¹⁵ A similar effort came after the Great Smoky Mountain wildfires of November-December 2016, when Ole Smoky Distillery put together a benefit concert, with the Zac Brown Band headlining, with the theme of *Mountain Tough*.¹⁶ The phrase was printed on shirts sold on Ole Smoky's online store, with proceeds going to rebuilding efforts in Gatlinburg and the surrounding areas. In both of these recent cases, phrasing, and the imagery, were resolute in their resilience in the face of the tragedy that had befallen the community, linking the toughness of the mountains with the toughness of those who lived amongst them.

Yet even even when it seems irresistible to equate the historical associations of toughness, wildness, and independence that moonshine possesses into the same qualities that many in Appalachia self-identify with, asserting that moonshine is *the* pan-Appalachian cultural touchstone is folly. Appalachia cannot be reduced to one cultural product – the Appalachian people are not a monolith. A full cross-section of Appalachia and Appalachian identity would mean to dig deep into the practices of its people: the ways food is prepared and cooked, the ways its people speak and the stories they tell...the way God is praised and worshiped. And even this list is woefully incomplete. The metaphor of moonshine certainly works, but a simple solution is untenable for a place of rich heterogeneity.

Yet, this is all the more reason to search further, and probe deeper. The journey that allowed this conclusion to be made was a long, but necessary one – like any travel or hike in the mountains today. Exploring and mapping the origins, shapes, and contours of the debate and study on Appalachia as a colonized, and now postcolonial region will be a long, arduous, but categorically necessary process. Like the mountaineer of old, the time has come to roll up one's sleeves and get to work – and search, elsewhere and anywhere they can be found, all the things that make Appalachia the beautiful and unique place it is.

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