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RURAL REALITY: HOW REALITY TELEVISION PORTRAYALS OF
APPALACHIAN PEOPLE IMPACT THEIR VIEW OF THEIR CULTURE

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Community and Leadership Development in the
College of Agriculture at the University of Kentucky

By
Ivy Jude Elise Brashear

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Rosalind Harris, Professor of Sociology

Lexington, Kentucky

2016

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

RURAL REALITY: HOW REALITY TELEVISION PORTRAYALS OF APPALACHIAN PEOPLE IMPACT THEIR VIEW OF THEIR CULTURE

Appalachian people have faced stereotyping of their culture and region in popular culture, news media, and art for generations. For more than 150 years, images of the region have been extracted by outside media makers and disseminated widely, solidifying the “hillbilly” stereotype in the national lexicon. This study focuses on such images in reality television shows about Appalachia, and seeks to determine whether or not those images, and the proliferation of them, has an impact on the ways in which Appalachian people understand and accept their own culture.

KEYWORDS: Appalachia, Media, Rural, Cultural Studies, Reality Television

Ivy Brashear

4-29-16

RURAL REALITY: HOW REALITY TELEVISION PORTRAYALS OF
APPALACHIAN PEOPLE IMPACT THEIR VIEW OF THEIR CULTURE

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Date

This project is dedicated to my deeply-rooted Appalachian Family, whom I love more than rattlesnake legs, and whose love for me propels me forward in all that I do. It is also dedicated to my ancestors – known and unknown, distant and recent – who forged paths that led to the mountains, and whose journeys I continue by way of carrying their DNA within me, and whose memories I consistently try to honor through the life I live. Thank you all, for everything.



(A visual representation of family and ancestry through four generations of women on my family tree. From L to R: Great-Granny Nettie Combs, Granny Della Combs Brashear, Mother Pamela Brashear, and your researcher, Ivy Jude Elise Brashear)

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Chapter I

Introduction

Negative stereotypes about the people who come from and live within the Central Appalachian region of West Virginia, Eastern Kentucky, Southwest Virginia and Tennessee (Appalachian Regional Commission [ARC], 2009) are nothing new in popular culture, or in the collective psyche of Americans at large. In fact, these inaccurate, extractive, and harmful portrayals have existed since before America was a country. Economically elite explorers, such as William Byrd II, described the mountain settlers in ways that have lingered into the modern day – by way of hillbilly caricatures – through the generations (Ledford, 1999). A wave of local color writers followed the land prospectors into the region, and wrote fictional tales of the violent, ignorant and backward hillbilly, which added gasoline to the fire of stereotypes that was sparked by the early explorers (Lewis, 1999). Thanks to authors such as John Fox Jr., who is arguably the most famous of the local color writers, the “hillbilly” image flourished in popular culture. In fact, the stage-adapted version of Fox’s work, *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, continues to be performed annually in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, where “his memory is cultivated with an ardor Americans rarely accord a mere writer of fiction” (Askins, 1975).

For generations, Appalachian people have consistently been portrayed by outside media through the lens of 300-year-old stereotypes, which has allowed misleading, inaccurate and reductive images and ideas about a complex, diverse and complicated region to persist into modern day media coverage of the area, and also into the collective outside understanding of the region. The stereotypes that were conjured by eighteenth-

century land prospectors and nineteenth-century local color writers have permeated and solidified themselves into modern day understandings of the Central Appalachian region and of the people who call this place home – most of whom can claim mountain lineages ten generations or more deep. Media’s complicity in the stereotypical and narrow understanding of the place and its people cannot and should not be ignored.

Background

Common stereotypes and misperceptions about Central Appalachia have been consistently dispelled in recent decades by documentary filmmakers, through grassroots media campaigns, and through Appalachian Studies scholarship. This is discussed and demonstrated in *Back Talk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes*, which itself was written in response to the local-color-esque 1992 Pulitzer Prize winning play, *The Kentucky Cycle*. *The Kentucky Cycle* “is an ambitious play of epic proportions that covers two hundred years of history in Appalachian Kentucky” (Billings, 1999). It runs for six and a half hours, features more than seventy characters, and follows three inter-related families over several generations, narrating “the endless cycles of violence and betrayal among them” (Billings, 1999). *Back Talk* is filled with essays refuting the stereotypical portrayal of the region featured in *The Kentucky Cycle*, and is an example of Appalachian scholars fighting back against the tide of regional stereotypes that impact their work daily.

However, even as scholars, filmmakers and grassroots organizers attempt to stem the tide of commodified Appalachian stereotypes, outside perception of the region as a backward, isolated and violent place where the people are unschooled, unwashed and stuck in the past persist, due in large part to help from the media.

If media is the fire around which people sit to hear misleading stories about Central Appalachia, then reality television about Appalachia is like an uncontrollable wildfire, burning white-hot in the popular culture landscape. The rise of reality television shows about rural America, and most specifically, Appalachia, has been aptly tagged by some in the media as “hixploitation,” or hick exploitation. The term was coined by horror-movie aficionados to describe a particular subgenre of horror films that focus on rural places or that rely on rural-based themes or characters (Frassica, 2011). Louisville Courier-Journal reporter Matt Frassica borrowed the term to describe the rise of rural reality television shows, such as *Duck Dynasty*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, *Call of the Wildman*, *Moonshiners*, *Hatfields & McCoys: White Lightning and Buckwild*, which put on display and amplify the lives of rural people from across the country, in what Frassica deems an exploitative way.

Karen L. Cox, a University of North Carolina history professor, told Frassica that “hixploitation” TV shows are popular because the South and rural areas are “still the one place in the U.S. that people can still sort of look at and tend to still regard as somehow different than the rest of the country.” She said the shows “trade in stereotypes,” and that they set up the South and Appalachia as “a mythically rural, white, poorly educated and thickly accented region that has yet to join the 21st century” (Frassica, 2011).

Yet, rural reality television shows are very popular. In December 2012, the season finale of *Duck Dynasty*, an A&E reality television show featuring a Louisiana family that owns a successful duck-call business, had 6.5 million viewers. The show was also the top trending show on Facebook in 2012 (when the show was at the height of its popularity), meaning people were talking about *Duck Dynasty* on the social networking site more than

any other television show. The second top trending TV show on Facebook was *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, a reality television show that focuses on a child beauty queen from McIntyre, Georgia (Storey, 2012). What is perhaps surprising is that these types of reality shows are also very popular in the rural places that they set out to showcase. Sixty-three percent of all social media conversation about *Duck Dynasty* in 2012 happened in the South, according to the digital research firm Trendrr (Storey, 2012).

I don't disagree with Frassica. Television producers often enter Central Appalachia looking for prime examples of the kinds of Appalachian stereotypes they wish to showcase. Once they find a fitting description of such stereotypes, they get to work extracting images of these examples, and ship them outside the region to make a profit from them – not very unlike the way coal has been mined from the region and sent away for the monetary gain of non-Appalachians for 150 years.

The media stereotyping of Central Appalachia has been well documented by scholars since the serious and unbiased study of the region began with the advent of Appalachia Studies more than 40 years ago (Algeo, 2003; Banks, 1993). And, much has been written in the news media since this recent rise in rural reality “hixploitation” television shows that “trade in stereotypes” (Lockman, 2013; Bradner, 2013; Frassica, 2013; Jurgensen, 2011; Jonsson, 2014; Von Doviak, 2013; Deggans, 2013). Journalists and scholars bemoan what they witness as the inaccurate and stereotypical portrayals of Appalachians, how Appalachian people are being exploited, and theorize about why “hixploitation” is so popular, as well as about the impropriety of filming illegal activities. The documentation and prior scrutiny of stereotypical media portrayals of the region is invaluable. But still, very little attention has been given to what actual Appalachian

people think and feel about how they are portrayed writ large by reality television shows, leaving out a major perspective in the discussion of “hixploitation.” As a result, we know little about whether this type of biased coverage and representation impacts the way Central Appalachian people view or perceive themselves and their culture, and must rely on interpretation, estimation and speculation.

Appalachian Stereotypes in Media

Though scholars and media have largely ignored their thoughts on the matter, Appalachian people have been exploring the issue of media exploitation and its impacts on people and communities in the region for decades. In the Appalshop film *Stranger with a Camera*, filmmaker Elizabeth Barret explores the ways in which outside media “mine the images of Appalachia” just like the region’s rich resources have been mined for decades, and what sort of implications this mining of images has wrought on the place and people. While in the process of making her film, which is about the killing of Canadian filmmaker Hugh O’Conner by native Appalachian Hobart Ison (who killed O’Conner because he assumed he was making exploitative images of his tenants) she explores her own feelings about “hixploitation” perpetrated by outside media.

Native West Virginian and photographer, Roger May, explores a similar, but less deadly, incident that happened in McDowell County, W.Va., in March 2015. The incident, in which a local resident threatened two out-of-town photographers with violence because she assumed they had taken photographs of her children without her permission, made headlines across the region (May, 2015). And it further proves that we Appalachians still struggle with our long history of misrepresentation by strangers with cameras. May talks with the photographers and the mother at the heart of the incident,

and also with Appalachian media makers, to better understand the situation and to come to terms with the way he himself understands and feels about it (May, 2015).

Other Appalshop filmmakers, such as Elizabeth Barret, have explored common Appalachian stereotypes perpetuated by outside media, and used their own voices to debunk and/or address those myths for decades. In *Strangers and Kin*, a group of Appalshop filmmakers traces the history of the hillbilly image in literature, Hollywood movies, network news and pop culture, and talks with a diverse cross-section of Appalachians to demonstrate the full complexity of people and communities within the region, while addressing how stereotypes are created and perpetuated as a way to justify exploitation of the region's resources and people. More recently, a group of West Virginia high school students made a short film responding to MTV's *Buckwild*, a reality television series about West Virginia young people, as part of the PBS Student Reporting Labs program. Student filmmakers spoke with federal and state legislators, local and nonlocal high school students, an actor who is a West Virginia native, and local law enforcement, all of whom had negative reactions to *Buckwild*, characterizing it as offensive, misleading, exploitative and inflammatory (Richwood High School, n.d.).

Appalachians don't just create their own media about their place and way of life to debunk what outside media has been perpetuating for generations, they are also adept at *responding* to media portrayals, either pre- or post-production. In 2003, the Center for Rural Strategies, based in Whitesburg, Ky., launched a successful national media campaign to prevent CBS from developing and airing a newly proposed reality TV show: *The Real Beverly Hillbillies*. The show would have cast an eastern Kentucky family to "recreate" the famous fictional 1960s television show, *The Beverly Hillbillies*. CBS

claimed no intention of perpetuating stereotypes, but “Rural Strategies and thousands of others across the country said the network was going too far in setting up rural America for ridicule based on intentional stereotyping” (“Campaign to Stop the Real Beverly Hillbillies,” n.d.).

Personal Battle Against Media Stereotyping

My entire life, I have resisted, fought against, and been confused by negative and misleading media portrayals of my home region of Central Appalachia. I have always seen newspaper or national media reports about eastern Kentucky that consistently focused on the negative aspects and challenges facing my place. Yet, I could look around myself at my community and see a very different picture, and know a completely different reality than the one portrayed in the media. This juxtaposition proved to me that a disconnect existed.

To this day, I continuously question media representations of my home region and am skeptical of media reports about it, in large part because I was raised to think critically about those representations. My mother was one of the young people involved in the production of *Strangers and Kin*, and my father was never shy about pointing out the media’s false representations of the region and its people. I was told from a very young age about how the media often came into Appalachia with preconceived notions about the region and people, and how these preconceived notions led to misrepresentations of my culture, my people and my place. They also led to oversimplification of the problems the region has and must deal with, and a perpetuation of hackneyed stereotypes – all things I knew to be very complex, multi-layered and diverse in origin and solution.

I have always been hyper-aware of how the media portrays us, and in turn about how these portrayals influence non-Appalachians' views of the region. But this was how I was raised. I had parents who fostered in me a deep cynicism about media's relationship with my place – a cynicism and relationship I have been exploring since I was a young girl through many varied means, including academic study and in practice when I was a journalist at two eastern Kentucky community newspapers.

I have not been so hyper-aware, however, about what other Appalachians who may not have been raised to think critically about media portrayals of the region would think about these same representations that I often found to be reprehensible. In thinking about the rise of “hixploitation” reality TV shows that specifically focus on Appalachia and other similar rural places, I began to wonder about other Appalachians' views and thoughts about this renewed push to “mine Appalachian images,” especially since many of my Appalachian family members and friends consider themselves fans of such TV shows. How could they overlook what I considered to be outlandish and harmful misrepresentations of the region and its people, and watch these shows for pure entertainment value, knowing non-Appalachians would not know the difference between reality TV and actual reality?

In talking with family members who watch some of these shows regularly, consider themselves fans and actually enjoy the shows, I have found that they seem to separate themselves from the portrayals in “hixploitation” TV shows by accepting the fact that the types of people featured in the shows do exist in their communities, but they themselves are not like them. They are not “crazy” or “wild,” but educated and well read – different. Some have told me they enjoy the shows because they showcase certain

aspects of everyday Appalachian life, including fishing and hunting, and they can identify with those aspects of the characters featured, while still knowing that what's featured in the shows is far from reality.

I wondered if Appalachians outside my extended family would think and feel the same way about “hixploitation” reality shows. I wondered if they too would separate themselves from those portrayals by classifying the characters as “other.” I also wondered how these types of portrayals would make them feel about themselves or if they would make them view themselves or their culture in a different or negative way. But mostly, I wanted to give voice to their thoughts on “hixploitation,” since it is their culture – *my* culture – that is being exploited. I wanted to know what my fellow eastern Kentuckians had to say about these portrayals, and how they made them feel. What was their impact on internal and external perceptions? Was I – and others like me, who make a habit or career out of studying media about our own culture – the only one who felt these shows were harmful to the place and her people in very tangible ways?

So, as Elizabeth Barret and Roger May followed their curiosity about Appalachians' relationship with media, I set out to do the same. What I found through my study astounded me, in personal and professional ways. I have made discoveries within myself that have been surprising, and I have connected some dots between culture, representation and economy that needed connection. I entered this study with my own preconceived notions, and I end it with an evolved vision, perception and understanding of who I am, who my people are, where I come from, and my relationship to the place and people, and the forces that press upon both.

This process has been a journey – one that I hope will have an impact on eastern Kentucky and Central Appalachia and its often strained relationship with the media. I also hope this journey will help to expand the discussion about media representation and the very real implications it has for those being represented. Extraction, by its very definition, is violent: “the action of taking out something, especially using effort or force” (Jewell & Abate, 2001). And violence, of any kind, leaves marks. Over our decades-long relationship with media, images of our place have been taken from us – extracted – and sent to far away places, and they have created a profit for the media-miners who’ve been coming in and out of our region in cyclical boom and bust patterns over generations. And, as I’ve discovered through my study, psychological scars have been left behind – whether we realize it or not. Scars that have shaped the very fiber of who we are as a people, in a truly bizarre symbiosis that simultaneously weakens and strengthens us, hinders us and pushes us to rise above, blinds us, yet forces us to see.

It was clear to me that I had limited capacity to complete a comprehensive study in terms of including many geographic locations where many different types of people would be recruited to participate. Because of this limited capacity, I decided to limit my study to one community in eastern Kentucky. I will discuss that community in the following chapter.

Chapter II

Community of Study

In order to determine the impact that media, and more specifically, reality television shows about Appalachia, have on Appalachian people, I needed to talk with real Appalachian people. I wanted to hear their perspectives and understand their realities

– how they viewed their culture, how inaccurate, misleading or stereotypical media portrayals of Appalachia made them feel, and whether or not they thought the impact of Appalachian reality shows represented something other than entertainment value.

Perry County, Kentucky was chosen as the geographic location where this study would take place. This choice was made for several reasons. It is an archetypal eastern Kentucky and Central Appalachian county, which means it possesses – among other things – the following: long history with coal mining and other forms of extraction; high population living in poverty; most families living in the county can trace genealogy within the county back several generations; and, rich local cultural past and heritage. Perry County is also home to an award-winning weekly newspaper (The Hazard Herald) and television news station (WYMT-TV), and has been the focus of numerous media reports and portrayals about the region for decades. Therefore, making the county’s relationship with media historical and consequential.

Perry County is also my home county, where I was raised and lived the majority of my life on land that was first owned by my great-great grandfather, James Nicholas Brashear, 30 years before the Civil War. My roots in Perry County stretch back five generations; my roots in Central Appalachia stretch back ten generations. My maternal family still lives on that same family land, at the head of the Left Fork of Maces Creek. My paternal family lives just ten minutes away, across Pratt Mountain, in Big Branch – where my Dad grew up, and his sisters and brother still live. All this to say that I am very rooted in this place, and so, as well as it being a well-reasoned decision to chose Perry County for my study, it is also very personal.

I don't see this personal connection as a liability in carrying out this study, however. In fact, it was a great asset to me – both for the purposes of this study, but also because it helped to deepen my own understanding of my place and the forces that are constantly pressing against it. Having this personal connection also allowed me access within the community that I might not have otherwise had because I did know people within my community of study who became gatekeepers for me, and who increased my level of access within the community in ways that would not have been possible for me had I been a stranger to the community.

Those gatekeepers were instructors at Hazard Community and Technical College (HCTC), located in Hazard, Perry County's county seat of government. I wanted to conduct focus group interviews at HCTC because I felt I would find a representative cross-section of Appalachian life among the student body, and I wanted to be sure to listen to and collect a diverse set of opinions for this study to make sure the results were as balanced as possible. What is meant by "a representative cross-section of Appalachian life" is that the students who typically attend HCTC are people who have lived in the region their entire lives, or whose families moved away from the region, but later returned; people whose roots are very deep in the region; people who are fresh out of high school, or who are at varying stages of life and are returning to school to start a new career; people who grew up very poor, or come from very poor families, or people who come from middle class or more affluent families; people who served in the military, or whose family members have served, and people whose families are connected in some way to the coal industry.

Over a period of two weeks in January and February 2015, I conducted seven focus group interviews in seven different classes at HCTC. These seven classes connected me with 84 research participants, ranging in age from 18 to 57, with the average age of participants being 24. Further demographic data can be found in Tables 1 and 2 below:

Table 1

Total Number of Participants*	Men	Women
84	33	48

*3 participants did not complete demographic surveys

Table 2

County of Residence*	Number of participants living in county
Perry County	59
Leslie County	4
Letcher County	2
Breathitt County	1

*2 participants each listed “Kentucky” or “United States”; 1 participant left this question blank

I conducted focus group interviews in six English classes. Two of those classes were English writing classes, two were English 101, one was developmental English, and one was developmental reading. I conducted the seventh focus group interview in an Appalachian Literature Survey class, which was listed as Humanities 250.

I feel it’s necessary to provide background and historical information about Perry County, Kentucky to lend some context about the community highlighted in this study. That information is provided in the following sub-section of the “Community of Study” chapter.

Perry County, Kentucky

To fully understand why Perry County was chosen as the community of study, and to understand the power and cultural dynamics that exists in the region today, one must know something of the history of the place and demographic background. Perry

County is deep in the eastern Kentucky coalfields, in the heart of Central Appalachia. The county was formed in 1820 after citizens of Floyd and Clay Counties, who were “praying for the erection of a new County seat out of parts of each county” (Johnson, 1953, p. 1), presented a petition to create the new county during the regular session of the Kentucky General Assembly in 1819. Legislation was passed to form the county the following year (Johnson, 1953). Perry County’s county seat, Hazard, was first settled in the early 1800s by Elijah Combs, who was “a progressive man and may well be called the Founder of Hazard” (Johnson, 1953, p. 11).

The city has been a transportation hub and trading post almost from the beginning, likely because of its location on the banks of the North Fork of the Kentucky River. A post office was established in 1824, with Elijah Combs, Jr., serving as postmaster. The post office brought county residents into town, as well as people from surrounding counties. It also spurred the establishment of stores where travelers passing through would trade goods and services (Johnson, 1953).

Until the early 20th Century, Hazard and Perry County were little more than an outpost on the way to other places. But when the Louisville and Nashville Railroad line was extended through the county by way of Jackson in Breathitt County, a stop was created in Hazard, and coal became easily exportable from the county (Combs, 1976).

Coal was discovered in the county by Christopher Gist long before the county’s formation (Johnson, 1953). Gist was an accomplished land surveyor who worked for the Ohio Land Company, and later became a close advisor and employee of President George Washington (Jeffers, n.d.). However, it wasn’t until coal became a prized commodity for

steel-making and electricity generation that it began to be mined in earnest in Central Appalachia.

Perry County quickly became one of the region's major coal counties – a distinction that persists to this day – thanks to vast coal reserves within its borders, and ease of transport created by the railroad. This new, booming industry brought high-paying, steady jobs to Perry County, resulting in the development of entire towns in which people working in the coal industry lived. These developments conditioned the integration of Hazard and Perry County into the national economy, and solidified its place as a coal-producing giant. The industry also brought with it an increasing number of immigrants from far-away countries, serving to diversify the ethnic make up of the region and to fuse aspects of different cultures with historical Appalachian cultures.

Though coal production created privilege in Perry County – boosting the economy, building up the county seat, lifting some out of poverty – decades of extraction, propped up by corrupt absentee company owners and local politicians, has left the county at or near the bottom of nearly all quantifiable measures of quality of life. Today, Perry County's total population is 27,597, with 96.4 percent being white, and 27.5 percent living in poverty. Median household income sits at \$32,302 (United States Census Bureau, 2014). Coal is still a major industry in the county – it is currently the second largest coal producing county in Kentucky, with 6.6 million tons of coal mined in 2015 (Kentucky Energy and Environment Cabinet, 2015). However, the industry continues a precipitous decline in the region, due largely to broad national economic market forces, mechanization and the depletion of Central Appalachian coal deposits.

The industry employed just 812 people in Perry County in 2015, and the 6.6 million tons of coal mined in the county in 2015 is an 11.5 percent decline in production from 2014 (Kentucky Energy and Environment Cabinet, 2015). The highest employing sectors in Perry County today are healthcare and education services; utilities, trade and transportation; and, state and local government and K-12 education (Kentucky Center for Education and Workforce Statistics, 2014).

With all of these historical and modern-day realities in mind, and being from the region and having understanding of cultural nuances, and knowing that Appalachian people are still dealing with the cultural and societal ramifications of being an oppressed people from an oppressed place, it was very important for me to make ethical considerations before embarking on my study, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter III

Ethical Considerations

Special considerations have to be made when researching Appalachian people because of the region's negative history with misrepresentation in news and entertainment media and with extraction. For decades, Appalachian people have dealt with the ramifications of the proliferation of stereotypes by media, which are largely assumed to be "outsiders." I designed my study with this knowledge in mind.

I knew that I would be seen as an "outsider" by the participants, even though I was born and raised in eastern Kentucky, just miles from Hazard in Viper, Ky. I would be entering those focus group interviews, however, as a representative of an outside university, and I would be asking for the participants to willingly divulge their thoughts and opinions about their place, families, communities, and their relationship to and with

media portrayals of their region by perceived “outsiders.” It was not an easy position in which to find myself. I knew I had to take care in entering the spaces in which focus group interviews, and in asking the participants to tell me everything they knew about culture, place and identity.

These are not necessarily easy questions to ask of any particular ethnic or cultural group, but knowing what I know about Appalachia’s history with perceived “outsiders,” I knew the questions would definitely not be easy to ask in rooms full of Appalachian people who would most likely be skeptical of my presence from the very beginning.

However, being from the region did give me a head start in these discussions. I was able to interpret social cues, and enter the focus group interviews with a better understanding of how to talk to the participants, and have a conversation with them, Appalachian to Appalachian. For instance, I was able to code switch upon entering the spaces where focus group interviews took place. The type of code-switching to which I’m referring is described by National Public Radio’s Gene Demby this way: “... [M]any of us subtly, reflexively change the way we express ourselves all the time. We’re hopscotching between different cultural and linguistic spaces and different parts of our own identities – sometimes within a single interaction” (Demby, 2013). I carry with me always the accent and dialect of Appalachia and southeastern Kentucky. However, when I’m in different spaces, such as professional or academic settings, my accent and dialect subconsciously change, and I find that they become less pronounced without me even noticing. When I spoke with participants during focus group interviews, my Appalachian accent and dialect became more pronounced – sometimes instinctively, sometimes intentionally. It was one way that I was able to better relate to the participants and show

them that I was similar to them. I believe my learned ability of code-switching – a “skill” that could be considered by some as a micro-aggression inflicted upon Appalachians by the dominant culture – made participants more comfortable with me, and therefore, more willing to share their thoughts and feelings with me. I also tried to make participants more comfortable by sharing my own personal stories about being an Appalachian. For example, when discussing family traditions with participants, I was able to share what my own family traditions are, or when we discussed discrimination based on our accent, I could share similar stories about being made fun of for talking with a long “i” sound. This helped me tremendously when conducting focus group interviews. In each session, I entered the room and could almost feel the skepticism from the group, and a sense of the participants trying to figure out what my motives really were. However, after talking with the participants for several minutes, those feelings that were hanging in the air around us disappeared, and I was able to create a space that was open for conversation.

I was also very considerate about exploitation of the participants before starting my study. A major theme of my study pivots around the idea of media exploitation of Appalachia and Appalachian people through extraction of images. I did not want to add to this harmful legacy by helicoptering into the region, extracting information from a specific set of Appalachian people, and then using that information for my own gain without any consideration for the people who provided me with my data. Or, as Roger May put it, “I don’t want to be another taker in a long line of takers” (May, 2015).

To prevent the perception of being exploitative, I was very intentional throughout my study in making sure I was upfront and honest with participants, and with the gatekeepers who provided me access to the participants, about the goals of my study, and

about my intention to make the study a living document that will someday be returned to the community of study in some way. I have never had any intention of exploiting the participants or the information they provided to me. Instead of extracting information from the region, taking it out of the region for my personal gain, and never returning with it or any benefits it may produce, my promise to the participants, the gatekeepers and the community is to reinvest the information back into the community for the prosperity and posterity of the community.

Many pieces of literature informed my study in some way, and helped to shape the overall understanding I was left with at the end of my data collection and analysis. I will discuss the literature used to shape my study in the following chapter.

Chapter IV

Literature Review

Scholarly literature about perceptions created in a particular group of people based on media coverage of that group is sparse, or otherwise, hard for me to find. When searching for literature about Appalachia, specifically, one can find literature about Appalachian culture and possible reasons for Appalachia's high poverty rates. Plenty has been written in Appalachian Studies about Appalachian people and their relationship to media representation. However, this literature does not focus on discovering how media portrayals affect Appalachians' perceptions of culture and themselves. Much is said about the relationship between the place and media portrayals of it, and how those portrayals perpetuate stereotypes and have created myths about – and false images of – the place and the people. But it is said, for the most part, without the voice of Appalachian people, making the correlation between the perceptions created among Appalachian people about

their culture and the media's coverage of the region harder to come by. As a result, my literature review centers around media ethics, case studies about Appalachian's and their perception of their culture in general, and media coverage of reality "hixploitation" television shows. It is important to explore the origins of the "hillbilly image," and the reasons why it persists into modern day. I start my literature review there.

Back Talk from Appalachia (1999) is possibly the quintessential collection of academic response to stereotypical portrayals of Appalachia. The book's essays seek to counter more than 300 years of Appalachian stereotypes by responding to *The Kentucky Cycle* over five sections. Those sections cover the history of Appalachian stereotypes, the ways in which stereotypes show up in literature, personal stories of confronting stereotypes, activism in Appalachia, and direct responses to *The Kentucky Cycle*. The book helps to explain from where the most persistent Appalachian stereotypes originate, and in doing so, illuminates patterns relevant to the most recent rise of "hixploitative" reality television shows about Appalachia.

"Appalachia," writes Ron Eller in the book's forward, "continues to languish backstage in the American drama, still dressed, in the popular mind at least, in the garments of backwardness, violence, poverty, and hopelessness once associated with the South as a whole. No other region of the United States today plays the role of the 'other America' quite so persistently as Appalachia" (p. ix). He continues:

As Americans have sought to redefine themselves as a people, Appalachia has become a Janus-faced "other." Throughout much of the nineteenth century Appalachia represented a geographic barrier on the frontier, "a strange land inhabited by a peculiar people" – a people who were at once quaint and romantic and yet a burden to American success.

Appalachia has always represented a barrier. A barrier to the West, and a barrier to the American ideal of progress. Representations of the place and the people as a barrier did not appear out of thin air; they were created over centuries of exploration and extraction. Images of the region were first extracted during a time of great transition in America, when the Westward expansion started in the hills and hollers of the region. Katherine Ledford describes the journey of John Lederer, who was an early explorer of Appalachia. Lederer described the region as dangerous and uncertain. He focused on the landscape, not the people living there, and described it – in accounts of all three journeys he made into the region – as “inaccessible and dangerous” (Ledford, 1999). Ledford explains that “anecdotal representations of the Appalachian Mountains is culturally significant, systematically chosen information that signifies both an attempt to mediate a local experience ... and a desire to negotiate larger social and political encounters through the landscape” (p. 53).

Ledford also explains that stereotypical images about Appalachian *people* surface when “exploration of the region’s natural resources for economic gain became less of a passing remark and more of a reason for serious pause” (p. 55). During William Byrd’s exploration of the region in the 1720s and 1730s, the landscape and the Appalachian Mountains were described positively, and as being full of riches. But, the “Appalachian settlers became the physical transference of social and economic unease,” and were described by Byrd in negative ways. Byrd recognized the immense economic potential of the region’s resources, and reflected the social and economic anxieties of the “privileged, landholding elite” of which he was a part. Those anxieties manifested in a fear that the settlers would benefit from the land on which they lived, and would therefore increase

their social, economic and political power, which would challenge the status of the “privileged, landholding elite” (p. 55). “The result,” Ledford says, “is a first step toward the hillbilly stereotype, a characterization that has, on one level, been used to justify economic exploitation of the mountains and mountaineers for over two hundred years.”

The “hillbilly stereotype” resurfaces in the nineteenth century through the works of local color writers, beginning in 1873 with Will Wallace Harney’s *A Strange Land and Peculiar People*. “... [A]t the height of local color writing and the reification of the myth of Appalachia,” writes Ronald Lewis, “Strategic sections of the region were in the throes of a wrenching industrial transition. No section of the mountains was affected by this process more dramatically than central Appalachia,” (p. 32) where coal mining was in its infancy in the late nineteenth century. Coal mining would soon grow into a behemoth of an industry, fueling the American industrial revolution, and later, two world wars, before beginning its slow, decades-long decline toward death.

It is telling, and important to remember, that stereotypical images of Appalachia are recycled in all forms of media during times of great economic upheaval and transition. First, at the start of the industrial revolution. Then again during the Great Depression and mine wars era of the early twentieth century. In 1964, the region was “discovered” again when President Lyndon Johnson announced the War on Poverty from a coal miner’s front porch in Martin County, Kentucky. When Appalshop filmmakers produced *Strangers and Kin* in the 1980s, they were responding to a new wave of Appalachian rediscovery led by stereotypical images extracted from the region during a national economic recession. *The Kentucky Cycle* was produced in the early 1990s, when globalization was rapidly increasing, and sucking dry many rural places across the

country. And the rise of reality television shows about Appalachia began in 2009, one year after the start of The Great Recession. At the end of her essay, Ledford concludes that “when we find hillbillies today in movies, newspapers, and plays, their presence still reflects the nation’s struggle over the uneven ground of economics and class” (p. 64).

The idea of Appalachian stereotypes being perpetuated by media is made clear in “Violent Appalachia: The Media’s Role in the Creation and Perpetuation of an American Myth.” Andreescu and Shutt studied the facts about violence in the region, and how the violent stereotype of Appalachian people was born out of media coverage of feuds and labor wars. Through their analysis of this media history, they found that stereotypes perpetuated by the media disguised Appalachia’s real economic, political and social exploitation, and that the highlighting of these stereotypes by local elites, corporate capital and the media they controlled shifted attention from the actual causes of the problems the region faced (Andreescu & Shutt, 2009).

Oversimplifying Appalachia’s problems creates division between people with opposing views, preventing them from coming together to talk about the real issues, which leads to inaction on the problems that Appalachia faces, as Willie Davis of the Daily Yonder points out in a piece reflecting on a conference about Appalachia’s economic transition: “Creating a dichotomy . . . encourages people to pick teams. When that happens, people stop listening to anyone on the opposing side. If acknowledging reality is political, then people who don’t share those politics feel free not to do it” (Davis, 2014).

Some scholars use oral history, interviews with residents or personal stories as their method of data collection. One such article collected oral histories from people in

the Melungeon community of Central Appalachia, with Melungeons being described as “a group who settled in the Appalachian Mountains as early as 1492, of apparent Mediterranean descent” (Podber, 2003). In this study, Podber contends that media use by Appalachian people has not been studied. By collecting oral histories from Melungeon people, he hopes to identify how their use of electronic media has “informed their identity,” with the overall aim being a contribution “to the understanding of the impact the Internet had on the residents of rural Appalachia.” After collecting these histories, he concluded that the Internet allows Appalachians to connect to each other and to the world and can unify isolated groups living within Appalachia.

Through a series of focus groups, participant observation, interviews and a survey of 630 adults living in the county of study, Susan Keefe attempts to determine what people in one Appalachian community think about their culture because “few studies examine cultural identity in the region” (Keefe, 2000). She examines “the construction of mountain identity” through the lens of globalization because the county she chooses to study has been adversely affected by globalization during the 30 years prior to her study. She concludes that the Appalachian “sense of common identity has emerged over generations and across social class systems” (Keefe, 2000).

Because my topic and my study are so personal to me, and because I am a native Appalachian, and because I fully acknowledge my personal bias about my study and topic, I found it necessary to discover how other scholars accomplish self-acknowledgement in their work. Stephen Fisher’s account of personal struggle with acceptance of his Appalachian heritage was beneficial because he outlines a different perspective of what it means to be “Appalachian.” He was born and raised in Charleston,

West Virginia, but “acquired very few of the traits commonly attributed to rural Appalachians... what I did learn was the importance of money and status and a fear of ‘hillbillies’” (Fisher, 1999). This establishes the diversity of views of people from and living in the region, and also relates to the ways in which I held preconceived notions about what Appalachians would think and feel about media portrayals of their place and culture prior to my data collection. This also connects back to the knowledge that images of Appalachian have historically been used to divide along lines of class and status, and those division happen even within the Appalachian culture itself.

Still others examine their own experience with Appalachian images and stereotypes, including personal stories about times when people have made “redneck” jokes, the difference between Appalachian images in the media and those from family past, and the ways in which the Appalachian accent and dialect automatically differentiates one from those without the accent or dialect in not so positive ways (Giardina, 1999; Shelby, 1999; Wilkinson, 1999).

Literature about media and journalists’ own bias has been helpful in framing the reasons for ethical lapses in media coverage. Armstrong and Collins surveyed University of Florida students enrolled in general education classes about what level of credibility they thought their local newspapers had verses what level their student newspaper had (Armstrong & Collins, 2009). Through using hierarchical linear regression, they found that the more interest one had in the content of a news story, the more likely they were to find the news source credible. This is applicable to a study about the media’s influence on Appalachia because it outlines the correlation between credibility and personal interest in news media. The result Armstrong and Collins found about the level of personal interest

in media driving whether or not one finds that media source credible is interesting in relation to my own study. It brings up the notion of popularity of reality TV shows about Appalachia, and could be a reason why fans of those shows would have the false impression that they reflect true reality of life in Appalachia.

Journalists often use anecdotes about individuals to illuminate a broader issue. This has particular relevance in coverage of Appalachia because coverage of issues affecting Appalachia is frequently laced with unnecessary and stereotypical anecdotes. David Craig points out that prior research finds that anecdotes can confuse readers about what the broader issue being covered actually is (Craig, 2003). He uses three ethical evaluations to analyze anecdote use in coverage of three subjects that can be controversial: human embryo research, physician-assisted suicide and HMOs. He specifically chose stories that used “colorful and powerful” language, and analyzes them using three ethical evaluation methods: one he designed himself, communitarian media ethics and relationship-oriented feminist ethic, all three of which suggest that “news coverage should address topics at the individual level and within broader contexts as well” without relying too heavily on anecdotes (Craig, 2003). After his analysis of the ethical implications of anecdote use in news coverage of these issues, Craig concludes that anecdotes can be used while avoiding ethical issues. This applies to my study because reality television shows about Appalachia are almost wholly dependent on “colorful and powerful” images of a place that are most often misrepresented, bombastic or out-right false. In this way, they confuse viewers about the true reality of life in Appalachia.

Linda J. Kensicki takes a similar, but different approach in terms of her topic. She evaluated 100 news stories from the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times between 1995 and 2000 about pollution because both cities have high rates of air pollution; 100 stories about poverty from the New York Times and the Albuquerque Journal because New Mexico had the highest poverty rate from 1995 to 2000; and 100 stories about incarceration from the New York Times and the Houston Chronicle because Texas has the largest prison system and high incarceration rates (Kensicki, 2004). She analyzed the articles to determine how they represent individual and nonprofit organization action surrounding the issues and what those individuals and organizations are doing to help the issue. Her research raises questions about readers' ability to gain understanding of broader, societal aspects of poverty, pollution and incarceration, and this reader confusion is a direct result of neutral news coverage that doesn't mention the efforts of nonprofits and individuals to improve these issues. She concludes that this type of coverage increases reader apathy (Kensicki, 2004).

Renita Coleman and Lee Wilkins conducted a study about the way journalists reason ethically in order to place ethical reasoning into a larger context. They determine through this study that journalists are generally strong ethical thinkers and perform better ethically even when they are faced with professionally focused ethical problems (Coleman & Wilkins, 2004). Even though their study finds the public opinion doesn't consider journalists as high moral thinkers, their moral reflection equals or exceeds members of other professions (Coleman & Wilkins, 2004).

The disparities between rural and urban areas have been well documented, but Beaudoin and Thorson analyze the disparities between the media's impact on social

capital in urban and rural areas. For the sake of my topic, I will focus on the findings they determined about rural areas. They found that newspapers have a high impact on social networks in rural areas, and that local TV news had no impact on social capital. Meanwhile, network TV news had a positive impact on social capital in rural areas. Perhaps most beneficial for my own study, though, are their findings about entertainment TV. Entertainment TV, they found, had a negative and more harmful impact on social networks and volunteering in rural areas and that this negative impact extends to social perceptions, interactions and pro-social behaviors (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2004). The study did not focus on reality television shows, but it can be inferred that they would have a similar impact on people living in rural areas, especially if the show is about the place where they are from or about a group of people from their home.

These last four pieces of literature are important to my study because they demonstrate the power that media has in shaping public perception of any given issue, place or group of people. Whether the representation is displayed through entertainment television, including reality TV, or through print or broadcast news media, it is clear that these portrayals greatly influence the ways in which the public understands issues, regions of the country, or groups of people. Media plays a highly influential role in shaping the ways in which people see and understand the world around them, including the ways in which any given group of people sees itself and its culture and how they and their culture relate to the broader country and world, which is the crux of my study.

My literature review helped shape my study and my own understanding about the kinds of studies similar to my own that have already been conducted. It was also helpful

to learn about the ways in which media influence peoples' perceptions. The literature review led me to refine my theoretical framework, discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter V

Theory

Cultural Studies Theory is about the meaning of culture. This theory deconstructs and analyzes the term "culture" in order to define its meaning, which leads to deeper understanding of culture as a social construct.

Stuart Hall says that culture is a set of "descriptions through which society makes sense of and reflects their common experiences" and that it is a "development of common meanings," and is a concept established through common understanding within a specific community (Hall, 1980). Further: "Culture is not a practice: nor is it simply the descriptive sum of the 'mores and folkways' of societies... it is threaded through *all* social practices and it is the sum of their inter-relationship."

Media can be understood through the cultural studies lens in distinct and specific ways. Hall says the meaning of culture "organizes and regulates social practices, influences our conduct and consequently has real, practical effects" (Hall, 1997). He says the meaning we prescribe to culture is "produced in a variety of different media; especially . . . in the modern mass media" (Hall, 1997).

Hall contends that media representation of an event is constructive of it, meaning that representation of an event, topic, types of people or situation is "one of its conditions of existence, and therefore representation is not *outside* the event, not *after* the event, but *within* the event itself" (Hall, 1997). Since representation is the "way in which meaning is given to the things depicted," the ways in which media cover topics, types of people,

situations and events ascribes some meaning to those things that is transferred onto and into an individual, community or society at large.

This theory was instrumental to my study. It provided me with an over-arching frame by which to analyze reality television shows that exploit Appalachian and rural people. I looked for ways in which “meaning is given to the things depicted” in those reality TV shows (Hall, 1997). Holding true to the idea that media coverage of an event, a place or a people always has an impact on the culture of those being depicted, and including reality TV shows in media coverage, it stands to reason that “exploitative” reality TV shows will have some impact on Appalachian people and the ways in which they see themselves and their culture.

Framing theory also informed my study. Dietram A. Scheufele asks how framing can be used to “broaden our understanding of media effects” and suggests framing should be viewed from a “metatheoretical perspective” (Scheufele, 1999). Framing theory is similar to cultural studies because, as Scheufele points out, “the framing and presentation of events and news in the mass media can... systematically affect how recipients of the news come to understand these events” (Scheufele, 1999). I sought to determine whether this had an impact not just on non-Appalachians view and perception of the place, but whether those “systematic affects” were felt among Appalachians as well.

Both cultural studies and framing theory provided me with the tools for exploring media’s impact on culture, something which both theories emphasize. These implied a multi-method ethnographic methodology. I have found that through my multi-method ethnographic study, media coverage of Appalachia has had a direct impact upon how southeastern Kentuckians view their culture in complex ways.

Chapter VI

Methodology

I wanted to learn through my study what Appalachian people who come from diverse backgrounds thought about the ways in which they were portrayed in the media. However, so much media about Appalachia has been created over the region's long history and relationship with the world outside its borders – everything from literature, print news articles, movies, fictional television shows, broadcast news specials, documentaries – that this ultimate goal quickly became overwhelming. I needed to be as specific in my study as possible, which meant I needed to be focused in my approach.

Media about Appalachia is created and extracted from the region in waves of popularity. The hillbilly image will be popular for a short period of years, then it will fall out of favor as ratings slump, or as another familiar trope or stereotype about another place comes back onto the scene. Economic unrest in the country also plays a role. As I was starting my study, the rise of “hixploitation” through reality television was at its peak. To use a popular Appalachian colloquialism: “One could not swing a dead cat in 2012 without hitting a reality TV show about Appalachia.” By my own count, from 2009-2014, there were at least 12 reality TV shows airing on various television networks that were focused on rural places, the bulk of those being centered around Appalachia or Appalachian people. It seemed that asking modern day Appalachian people about their experiences with and connection to the most modern of television genres – especially since that genre had been consistently and overwhelmingly featuring portrayals of Appalachian people over a period of at least 5 years – made the most practical sense.

Once I had narrowed my study to asking about reality television shows, it occurred to me that some participants might not be familiar with any of the reality shows about their place. They may not watch reality TV, or they may not own TVs, or have access to cable television or the Internet that would allow them to see the shows. It could've also been true that they may have watched more popular reality TV shows, such as *Duck Dynasty* or *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, but they may have never seen an episode of a reality show located in Appalachia. In order to ensure that everyone in each focus group interview I conducted had some point of reference for Appalachian reality TV shows, I chose to focus their attention on three reality TV shows that were about Appalachian people and/or places: *Buckwild*, which followed the exploits and adventures of a group of 20-somethings in West Virginia; *Call of the Wildman*, which centered around a man who calls himself "Turtleman," who removed small creatures (e.g. raccoons, possums) from peoples' homes with his bare hands; and *Hatfield & McCoys: White Lightning* (hereafter referred to as *White Lightning*), which was about the present day descendants of the infamous families trying to work together to start a moonshine business in eastern Kentucky.

To ensure that all focus group participants knew which reality shows I was including in my study as focal points, and that they had a point of reference for them, I decided to show YouTube clips of each of the three chosen reality shows interspersed as I conducted each focus group interview. I was able to show clips while carrying out the majority of the focus group interviews, but was not able to complete this part of my methodology for some of them due to time constraints and technological difficulties, in which cases, I asked participants to indicate if they had seen *Buckwild*, *Call of the*

Wildman, or *White Lightning*, or any other reality television shows about Appalachia by show of hands.

I was only with each HCTC class of participants for exactly one hour, as per my arrangement with class instructors prior to entering their classes to conduct focus group interviews. In each class, I was not able to start my focus group until the instructors of the classes had completed necessary regular duties (e.g. taking up homework assignments, making class announcements, etc.). This cut my time with participants by approximately 10-15 minutes for each focus group interview. In some focus group interviews, I had to allow time at the beginning of each session for participants to complete the written survey I developed for the study, and to sign Internal Review Board permission forms. This also limited the time I had with participants to actually ask questions.

I also began each focus group interview with questions about Appalachian culture – how participants defined it, what they saw as signifiers of it, how they understood it and perceived of it, and their relationship to and with it. This line of questions, while important to my overall study, took about half of my time with participants to complete, and sometimes longer, making the need for me to ask questions about reality TV portrayals and perceptions of those portrayals more urgent than making sure the clips of the three reality shows were played, especially since introducing and playing them required approximately ten minutes of the remaining time I had with participants.

Technological difficulties were also a factor in whether or not the clips of reality TV shows were played during focus groups interviews. In one class, for example, the computer in the first space where the focus group interview was taking place was locked and could not be unlocked by the instructor, forcing us to relocate to another space.

Moving to another space was not an option for other focus group interview sessions, even though the equipment available in those spaces was insufficient to project the reality TV show clips to the entire group of participants.

These unforeseen complications, however, did not diminish the depth, breadth or richness of the data collected from focus group interviews. As it turned out, most participants were already familiar with the three shows on which I had chosen to focus. Either they had seen the shows because they were fans of them or they were curious about them, or they knew about them and the premise of each respective show, or they had seen other reality TV shows about Appalachia. Because of those factors, not being able to show the clips in some of the focus group interviews was not a barrier to data collection for this study, and it did not hinder the data collection in any way.

Data Collection and Storage

This study is about determining whether or not reality TV portrayals of Appalachian people, and media representations of Appalachia more broadly, has an impact on the way Appalachian people view or perceive their own culture. Therefore, it was important that I establish in each focus group interview how the participants described their own Appalachian culture so I would know if the reality TV portrayals impacted those understandings of culture in any way.

To do this, I developed a list of questions that would help me analyze how participants defined, understood and felt about their culture. These questions were asked at the beginning of the focus group interviews, and included such questions as “Tell me what it’s like to live where you live?” and “What are some family traditions you have that are very important to you?” (Appendix A). These questions provided a baseline

understanding of Appalachian culture from the participants', and was vital in understanding responses to the questions about media representation of the region.

I then asked questions about media representation and whether or not it affected participants' understanding or perception of their own culture. These questions were designed to help collect information about the impact reality TV shows and media representation of the region had on the focus group participants. I asked such questions as: "How do these shows make you feel about the place where you live?" and "Do you feel like you can relate to these shows?" (Appendix A).

I also developed a written survey for participants to complete. I did this because I recognized that some people in the room may be more willing to provide information to me in written form than verbally in a group of their peers. I wanted to be inclusive of all learning and sharing styles, and of people who tend to be more introverted than extroverted. I also included in these surveys demographic questions so I could determine how many men and women participated in the focus group interviews, the age range of participants, where each participant lived, and how long they've lived there. No names or identifying information were included in these surveys (Appendix B).

It was important to me to keep participants' names and any identifying information confidential for two main reasons. First, throughout the process of this study, I tried to remain as conscious of information extraction as possible. The region has suffered a long history of people and entities who live outside the mountains coming into the hills and extracting not only natural resources, but also images and information. I did not want to add to this exploitative legacy. Even though I am from Perry County and my roots still run deep there, I understood that I would be seen as an outsider coming into the

region from an outside university. I felt that keeping participants' identities confidential would let them know I was not there to use their names and information for my own gain, and that I had no intention of exploiting them and their opinions. I felt it was a show of respect because I was placing a boundary around their privacy, and showing respect to people in Central Appalachia is a very important cultural value. I also thought that by keeping participants' identities confidential, it might make participants more willing to be candid in their answers to my questions.

I did not ask for the participants' names during the focus group interviews. If someone said their name during the focus group interview, I removed it from my transcription. I do not identify the instructors who allowed me to enter their classes. The only place in which any names appear anywhere in this study is on the Internal Review Board permission form participants were required to sign. I am further ensuring the confidentiality of participants by only storing all data collected on my own personal computer, flash drive, and in my private Google Drive.

In order to identify participants in transcriptions, I developed a coding technique. I conducted seven focus group interviews over two weeks. I identify each focus group interview in its transcription thusly: "Focus Group 1, Week 1," and so on. When transcribing, I identified each participant who spoke as such: "M 1, FG 1," or "F 1, FG 1," and so on. "M" or "F" signifies whether the participant talking was a man or a woman, the number next to "M" or "F" tells me which man or woman was speaking. I numbered each participant by the order in which they first said anything. "FG" and the corresponding number next to it identifies which focus group the participant was in. This was necessary to me once I began identifying themes across all focus group interviews

because I compiled focus group data from different focus group interviews into separate document files. As one more measure to ensure data from each focus group interview was easily identifiable when that data were compiled together, I assigned each transcription a different font, and kept a font key to make sure I would know which was which (Appendix C).

I have stored all data for this study in three secure places. First, I have kept it all on a flash drive that only I have access to. Second, I stored it on my personal computer, which can only be accessed by me. And, third, I have stored it on my secure, password protected Google Drive. I did this as a precaution so that I would have my data stored in at least three places in case I lost access to any one storage mechanism or device. Once my data analysis and thesis are complete, I will remove all data from the Google Drive and my personal computer, archiving the only record of it on the flash drive.

Focus Group Description

I decided to collect my data through focus group interviews for several reasons. I wanted this study to rely on qualitative data because it is my opinion that much nuance is lost through quantitative data collection, and for this study, I am very interested in the nuance of Appalachians' relationship to media. I was also very interested in participants' own experiences with media, which is something that would likely be lost through quantitative data collection. And, since the central question of this study is whether or not Appalachians' perception of themselves and their culture is shaped or changed by media portrayals of Appalachia, I felt I would gather more accurate data to address that question through qualitative methods.

Once I had decided to use qualitative data collection, I had to decide which method was best for my study. I wanted to understand what a varied cross section of Appalachian people thought about their relationship with media portrayals of Appalachia. I wanted to understand whether Appalachian people thought in a differently about those portrayals, and whether there were common themes present among various different kinds of people. I also wanted to be able to access a good number of Appalachian people to better validate the themes that would arise. For these reasons, I chose to conduct focus group interviews.

Focus group interviews provided me with access to a significant number of various different types of Appalachian people. Over the course of the seven focus group interviews I conducted, I was able to identify themes that were present in each session, which suggested to me that these were common themes across Central Appalachian culture and the Central Appalachian experience.

I was also able to better understand the participants' relationship to media representation through their responses in the focus group interviews in a way that can't be quantified through numbers. I could pick up on nuances in responses that would have been missed had I not been in the room. I could interact with participants on a face-to-face basis that is critical when seeking respect and understanding from Appalachian people. I also feel the responses I received from participants were so much more rich, deep and complex than if I were to simply rely on quantitative methods. This was proven to me when I compare responses I received on my demographic survey to responses received through focus group interviews. The responses in the demographic survey are very truncated and to the point. They are very matter-of-fact. However, the responses I

received during the focus group interviews were longer, which allowed participants to fully express themselves, and to clearly state their opinions and make points. The focus group interviews also allowed participants time to think about their responses in a way that perhaps they would not allow themselves in a quantitative data collection. I was able to witness, for example, participants evolving in their opinions at times, and having conversations with their peers while thinking critically about media representation – conversations they perhaps had never had before. In these ways, I was watching a really powerful discussion take place in real time that provided me with valuable insights. I would not have been privy to such insights had I not been in the room with participants to foster and facilitate such peer-to-peer conversations.

It should be noted that three of the four instructors of the seven classes at HCTC in which I conducted focus group interviews chose to sit in while those interviews were being conducted. Those instructors did sometimes add commentary, but chose not to do so at other times. Their commentaries were not used in my data analysis, even though two of the three instructors were native Appalachians. This study was not designed to include their commentary, and that's why I excluded it. I did not detect a difference in the response rate or depth of responses from the participants when the instructor remained in the room versus when the instructor left the room. Their impact – either positive or negative – on the collected data is minimal.

The ways in which participants in different classes responded to questions is interesting to note. While overarching themes presented themselves across all focus group interviews, the ways in which participants discussed certain topics varied distinctly depending on which class they were in. Participants in the English writing classes and the

Appalachian Literature Survey class were more familiar with and willing to talk more about Appalachian stereotypes. In both developmental English classes, participants seemed to be more proud of their way of life and less ashamed by the stereotypes. They were more willing to shrug those characterizations off than participants in other classes. Participants in the English 101 classes were very open about describing their culture and talking about stereotypes, but the range of their responses fell somewhere between those from the other English classes, the developmental classes, and the Appalachian Literature class. I can only make assumptions about why the responses in different classes were so varied and distinct. It could be because of many different factors. I only mention it because it was an interesting thing of note, and to say that participants' responses could have been influenced by their coursework, their economic class, the fact that their instructors were in the room, or because they wanted to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear.

Regardless of all other factors, the data collected from focus group interviews are incredibly valuable – both for the purposes of addressing my research question, but also to me personally. I am an Appalachian person who has constantly sought a more complete understanding of what it means to be “Appalachian,” and who has constantly tried to define my own relationship to the region, the people and the culture. In the following chapter, I will delve deeper into the data through an analysis that garnered interesting results.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data collected through the focus group interviews provided very interesting, complex and sometimes surprising results. Some things that were said by

participants were not new ideas or opinions about media representation of eastern Kentucky and Central Appalachia, even though the particular medium I chose to focus on in this study – reality television – is relatively new. In fact, the themes about media misrepresentation that presented themselves in the data are themes that have been identified by Appalachian scholars, media makers and people for decades.

It was interesting to see that the opinions and perceptions of the Appalachians who participated in the focus group interviews do match the scholarship about media representation of the region. It was also interesting to see that little has changed in the perceptions of media representation by Appalachian people, compared to the perceptions presented by Appalachian people in *Strangers and Kin* 32 years ago, and by those Appalachians working against the production of *The Real Beverly Hillbillies* in 2003. I found that ideas and feelings about the unfairness of misrepresentation in media remain somewhat consistent among Appalachian people throughout modern history.

I found through data analysis that the Appalachian participants in the room were affected deeply in some way by the representations they saw in reality TV shows and in other forms of representation about the region and their culture. I also learned much about the ways in which Appalachians view their culture outside of media portrayals about the place. I will share those insights in the following chapter.

Chapter VII

What is Appalachian Culture?

It was important to determine how the focus group participants view their culture overall in order to determine whether or not reality television shows about Appalachia have any sort of impact on their cultural self-perception.

I asked a series of questions in each focus group interview to address those questions and determine how the participants defined their culture. Overarching themes of Appalachian culture as defined by the focus group participants in this study became very apparent through the focus group interviews. In the next chapter, I will discuss the themes about Appalachian culture that I analyzed from the focus group interviews.

Jobs, Opportunity, Coal

As the coal industry continues its slow death in Perry County, and in the region at large, it takes some of the hope of eastern Kentuckians with it. This sentiment was clear among focus group participants. In fact, the notion that coal was the only opportunity eastern Kentucky communities had for work and stable jobs was mentioned in every single focus group interview I conducted, as well as the notion that there were very little opportunities outside of the coal industry. “There’s no opportunity here at all,” said one man. He continued: “It’s either you’re a coal miner, which is done – you can’t find a job in that – [or] you’re working in one of the 20 Dollar Stores in Hazard. There’s nothing to do. That’s the truth – there’s nothing to do.”

As many participants pointed out, coal has always played a significant role in the region’s way of life as captured by the following sentiment from one woman:

Most people around here, when they went out of high school, instead of going into college, they had other priorities, you know. They had to be able to take care of themselves, so the easiest thing to do was to go to coal. Their fathers’ done it, their grandfathers’ done it, their great-grandfathers’ done it – that’s all they know.

And even in the face of the industry’s collapse, the region is still dependent upon, and in support of the industry, according to participants.

However, there was a definite sense of worry and fear of the unknown when the topic of the industry’s decline was broached. Participants were convinced the industry’s

decline meant the death of their communities, and were afraid that without coal mining, more people would leave the region to find work elsewhere, and eastern Kentucky communities would be abandoned, as a woman pointed out to me:

Well, you just think: If the coal mining industry keeps going like it is, you know, in ten years, what is Hazard going to be? It's going to be a ghost town, you know, so whatever you're majoring in – like, if you're not in the medical field, or you're not doing a certain job, then there's no point in being here.

In one focus group interview, I asked “How does it make you feel . . . that you have to go other places to find jobs – that you have to leave to find those?” one participant was quick to answer:

I like small town, but most small towns are dying, like, economically. Like, coal mines and stuff – a lot . . . of our big jobs here are going out, so we don't really have what we need here. I don't really know what we need, but . . . I don't know what we could bring in to save that.

The feeling of dread about eastern Kentucky communities dying was palpable in each focus group interview. It's a feeling of losing a way of life, while being powerless to prevent the loss in any meaningful way. One participant put it this way:

I just feel like tradition's dying. We're not getting sucked into the rest of the world because we won't let it come in here, but we're trying to go to it through the Internet and everything else. . . . But local traditions are dying. We ain't like we used to be. It hurts my feelings. It hurts me bad.

Family

Family is essential to life in eastern Kentucky, while also being a bit of a burden at times. According to the participants, it is considered more important and more noble to take care of your family, live close to your family, and provide for your family than almost anything else. This could be immediate family (e.g. spouse, children) extended family (e.g. mother, father, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc.), or the extended family of a spouse (e.g. in-laws). However, it was also true that participants felt

family was a burden because of the loss of autonomy that comes along with living close to them. As one participant said:

It's real important that they're (family) close to you. They can help you, but ... you come outside, and you're arguing with somebody, or there's something going on, they're going to know about it. It's good to have them around when you need them, but . . . at times, you don't want them in your business.

Participants also agreed throughout all the focus group interviews that the individual helps their family, and their family helps them – with childcare, money, house renovations, etc. – and every aspect of an individual's life – from work to leisure to child rearing to religious practice – feeds back into the larger, extended family. One participant summed it up well: “People around here are raised that when you get old enough, you have kids, you take care of your kids, they're going to take care of you, and you're going to take care of your family.”

These deep familial connections feed into deep connection with and understanding of ancestry and genealogy. Knowing family history is paramount, as is the pride felt in that history and ancestry. Participants spoke fondly, affectionately and lovingly of their ancestors and the stories they knew of them. The struggles those ancestors had faced – as subsistence farmers, not coal miners – are something of which the participants are very proud, and carry with them as a badge of honor that should be praised and lifted up as the mark of a “good person.” There was no shame among the participants when talking about how “their people” worked hard and cared for their families and lifted themselves out of poverty. There was only pride.

One thing of note about these discussions of ancestry is that participants tended to talk about ancestors who were subsistence farmers, instead of their family's relationship to coal mining. This detail stuck out to me because of the way media perpetuates the idea

of coal mining being central to life and families in the region. While the industry is, in fact, a significant piece of Appalachian culture, and is seen as an identifying characteristic of a way of life in the region by Appalachian people, it is not the most significant aspect of life for many, as seen in the way it was discussed by participants in my focus group interviews.

One woman described knowing about her ancestry thusly:

That makes it more interesting, too, when you hear about your grandparents' mom, and [your] dad's mom and dad: what they done, and how they lived, like, their culture and stuff. How they had to do everything on their own, and then there wasn't stores where you could go and get what you needed. You had to work for it. Like, my Mamaw – which is her mamaw, too – she always gardened. She loved the garden. She didn't like buying vegetables and stuff out of the store because they didn't have much money. So, they'd go get 'em a roll of bologna and cheese from the little store down the road, and she gardened all the time. But, my Mom – there's something on the Internet that she goes to, it's some kind of family tree, and it pulls up everybody that we're kin to, and just the stories she's told me about my Papaw's papaw is insane . . . but the history of the family is real interesting.

Knowing how the participants chose to describe their ancestors reveals much about how they see themselves and their people within the cultural context of Appalachia. It also reveals a lot about the collective past of the place, which feeds into the collective definition of Appalachian culture.

The pride participants feel for their ancestors is a pride in place and past that I, too, feel and carry with me. All of my ancestors come from very humble beginnings. They were farmers, loggers, coal miners, teachers, housewives, carpenters. They came from France and England and Ireland with little money to their names, and made their way into eastern Kentucky through Maryland, Virginia, Tennessee and North Carolina, and for nearly 200 years, my people have remained in the hills and hollers of the Central Appalachian Mountains. On my maternal side, they were subsistence farmers, barely

making it through the Great Depression with meager means. On my paternal side, they were farmers and loggers, scratching out the same meager existence as my maternal side, waiting for the rains to come so they could float their logs down to the Kentucky River, then up the Ohio River to the sawmill. Knowing this heritage is crucial to knowing who I am and where I come from. I have great pride within myself, knowing I come from these amazingly strong and resilient people. Hearing the participants in focus group interviews talk of their own people in this same proud way, I knew what it must have meant to them to claim such a heritage because I know what it means to me. All of us Appalachians don't have much in the way of material things, but we do have resilient and proud lineages from which we can always draw strength and purpose.

And I understood from the way the participants talked about their ancestors, that many of them did, in fact, draw strength and purpose from those ancestors' experiences and lives. They romanticized the hard existence of their ancestors, and talked longingly of how their family members' had a strong work ethic and provided for themselves and their families with meager means. They admitted that they strove to be that self-sufficient and sustainable for themselves and their families. One participant even said that he learned to "work hard and make something of yourself" from those ancestors, and that was the way he was trying to live his life.

Eastern Kentucky Compared to Other Places

Participants often chose to talk about what Appalachian culture was and wasn't in comparison to other places. These discussions led to some interesting results.

Crime

Crime was mentioned in every focus group interview. Participants differentiated eastern Kentucky from other place, specifically cities, by saying that there was a lack of “real crime” in eastern Kentucky, and that vigilante justice was still commonplace in the hills. Interestingly, participants would often talk about how they could leave their doors unlocked at night and not worry about being robbed in the streets. However, they would follow those statements by saying that people in the mountains often took justice into their own hands. In other words, when someone in eastern Kentucky is wronged by another person, the former carries out their own form of violent justice against the latter. Participants also pointed out that they felt one reason why crime rates were so low in eastern Kentucky was because of vigilante justice. People were less apt to create trouble with other people because they feared retaliation. A woman said:

If I live in an area like this where you’ve got a lot of people that just shoot guns for fun – not even have them for protection, but just, ‘I feel like I might want to shoot 15 of these guns today,’ there’s not a big chance you’re going to go out of your way to make somebody angry.

It was widely accepted among participants across all focus group interviews that this was the case and a way of life in eastern Kentucky.

This idea of either harboring no crime, or harboring those who will engage in vigilante justice is a common trope of rural places that has been perpetuated by media for decades. The trope is that rural places are so isolated, that there is either no “real” crime, like in the fictional town of Mayberry from *The Andy Griffith Show*, or that vigilante justice is carried out on a regular basis by violent outlaw heroes, like the infamous story of the Hatfield and McCoy families or the fictional television show, *Justified*, based in Harlan County, Ky.

Love of Place

In each focus group interview, it was apparent that participants were very aware of the economic and social challenges the region faces, such as high rate of drug abuse rates, lack of opportunity, and the coal industry's collapse. These challenges were widely accepted and acknowledged by participants throughout the focus group interviews as existing in eastern Kentucky. Even though these challenges were accepted and acknowledged by participants, it did not diminish their love of place. In fact, I found that through the acceptance and recognition of the challenges, participants actually embraced their love of place more.

One woman put it this way: “[Living in eastern Kentucky] is definitely not the lifestyles of the rich and famous. But, you know, to me, I think everybody should see it like this: I put my pants on the same way as everybody else; I’m not better, and I’m no worse. That’s the way I feel.” Another woman said this about this paradox:

I love it regardless of [whether] my mom and dad, or family get in my business because if I need ‘em, they’re going to be close. But, in the city . . . you need your family, it’s going to take them a while to get there. But here, they’re just a few minutes away. Regardless of the situation of them getting in your business, I still want ‘em to be there when I need ‘em. Like, it’s always going to be home because that’s where you was raised, where your heart’s going to stay.

Almost every participant who spoke to me over all seven focus group interviews expressed to me their deep love of place. This, too, is a key aspect of Appalachian culture. We are salt of the earth people who claim proud and hard-working heritages, and who love the place we’re from more than any other place we’ve ever lived or visited. Many participants talked of how they “could never live anywhere else,” or as one man put it: “I’ve been to places that don’t have mountains, and I just go crazy. It’s too much sun, too much air.” One woman put it this way: “I think that’s what’s instilled in all of us,

you know: Our comfort is here.” Still another said this about her love of place: “I love to be up in the mountains in the summer when it’s warm. They’re too beautiful not to be in.”

Participants even seemed quite defensive at times about their place. For instance, some participants spoke of how the coal industry was dying and how tragic and difficult that reality was for so many, but almost in the same breath, they would talk about how certain mining practices, such as mountaintop removal, made land more usable for other industries or for tourism. Or, participants would talk about how there were little job opportunities for them in the region, but simultaneously speak about how beautiful the area is and how they love living in their place. There was a clear recognition of the challenges, or the more negative (or what the participants felt might be perceived as negative) aspects of life in eastern Kentucky, while at the same time, there was a very real defense of the status quo and a lamenting of a quickly changing way of life. The sense I got from this air of defensiveness was that it was okay for people living in the region to talk about the challenges its people faced, but it was not okay for someone not living there to have those same discussions because those people – those outsiders – could not truly understand life in the mountains.

I feel this defensiveness, too, when talking about my homeland, and therefore feel I can understand it. For so long, we Appalachians have been told what our place is by outside media: dirty, poverty-riddled, backward, less than, “coal is bad.” We have had to constantly fight back against stereotypes about our place and about us as people, where ever we go and with whomever we talk. Being defensive about our place, in spite of the very real challenges present within eastern Kentucky’s borders, has become almost

instinctual. For me, it is a reflexive response that is ingrained within me, that I make without even knowing its happening. I can imagine this is true for others, as well.

Appalachian Accent and Dialect

With this defensiveness of Appalachia comes a defensiveness about the Appalachian accent and dialect. There was simultaneous derision and pride felt about the Appalachian accent among focus group interview participants. Seemingly every participant had stories to tell about being, away from the mountains, and being either made fun of because of their accent and the way they talk, or of being misunderstood because of it, such as the stories of one woman:

I get a lot of comments about my accent when I'm out of Kentucky. I've been to Florida – I had somebody tell me that I have a Southern drawl. . . . In Florida, of all places, they said I have Southern drawl. . . . I have to, most of the time, repeat my name because they can't understand what I'm saying. It was actually here in Kentucky where this happened. It was in a museum – no, it was in Ohio this happened. And I was ordering something in this museum, and they made me repeat myself. And I slowly had to say it so they could get what I was saying. I mean, it was crazy.

I found this to be a common experience for Appalachian people. We know what it's like to be judged, criticized or discriminated against because of our accent. I know the sting of that, too. I have stories about it, too.

Participants were proud of the way they talked – of their accents and dialects and colloquialisms – making it clear that this was one of the ways in which they were unique compared to other people, places and cultures. As one woman said, “It's like we have our own language.”

There was also an implied sense that focus group participants felt distinct pride in the way they talked as compared to the way people who live away from the mountains talk. It is a way that they are “in on the joke,” if you will, when people from cities or

other places can't understand what they are saying, or don't know that "pop" is another word for "soda." Their accent, the way they talk, and the distinct dialect they use sets them apart from people living outside the region, and they liked being set apart from others in this way.

One man told the following story about his aunt who moved away to New York City with her husband, then returned to Knott County, Ky., after he died with her five children:

Y'all talking 'bout how they say different words. My aunt, she went to New York, New York with her husband, and he died. And we had to bury him up there and everything. But she brung her kids back here – they had five of 'em – and they'd never been out of New York, New York. Brought 'em down here, and they lived with us for a long time 'til she got back on her feet, cause, you know, she couldn't make it up there. And, we'd ask if they want pop – they didn't know what it was. So, they drunk water for like three weeks. Finally, we got fed up with 'em just setting around, I said, 'Come on – we having a hog killing today. Come watch a hog killing.' And they called it a pig. I said, 'We're gonna put that hog up on here and we're going to kill it, and that's what you're going to eat.' And I believe I turned 'em vegetarian. They wanted to sit down on the porch, or the couch – they didn't know what a couch was – they called it a sofa. They didn't know what corn on the cob was, didn't know where it come from. They just thought it come out of the can.

Throughout the story, the group of participants joined in on laughing at the cousins from New York who didn't know that hogs and pigs are different, or that a "couch" is also a "sofa." It's clear from this reaction, and the points in the man's story where he says he "turned them vegetarian," or that his cousins "drank water for like three weeks," that Appalachians feel they are superior to outsiders in this way because they are in on the local culture, and the local accent and dialect. They know what a pop is, and that corn is grown in gardens on cobs, and they may not have public transportation or live in brick apartment buildings, but they do know those things – they do have knowledge and culture that outsiders do not have.

However, with that pride in place and culture and dialect, comes the other side of embracing differences: shame and embarrassment. Participants discussed the feeling that talking in their native tongue was not “proper (their word),” and that saying words like “ain’t” or pronouncing words in their distinct dialect, made them seem less intelligent or ignorant. They told stories of being told these things by teachers throughout their educational experience. It was as if they had been told their entire lives, in some form or fashion, by teachers, parents, or other authority figures – and yes, even the media – that to talk like an Appalachian is be less than, and that they needed to change the way they talk to be seen as equals to those who speak with “proper.” Some, such as Appalachian author Silas House, would say that the way participants said they understood their dialect and accent as different and improper is socially constructed discrimination propped up by the media: “The media has taught us [Appalachians] that dialect and bad grammar are the same thing” (S. House, personal communication, April 16, 2013).

Participants were keenly aware that keeping their native way of speaking was opening themselves up to ridicule when they weren’t in the mountains. And even though there was wide understanding among participants that the way we talk is not necessarily considered “proper” – even though I inferred that some participants thought and felt themselves as a little less than for speaking the way they do – they almost always said they patently refused to speak any other way, and were offended that people were ridiculing them for the way they talk. The following exchange between a man and woman helps to illustrate this:

Woman: It really upsets me when you have someone from here on the national news, or on a program or something, and they’re speaking well, and they [the producers] throw subtitles on it. I mean, it’s not like the guy on “Waterboy” that you can’t understand, you know?

Man: They're speaking well to you, though. Maybe other people do have a hard time.

Woman: But, I mean, how many different ways can you say things, you know? Not everybody has the same monotone voice with the same features. It's the English language.

Although some participants expressed that they were ashamed or embarrassed by the way they talked, on the whole, participants made it be known that they were just as proud of the way they talked as they were of their ancestors' stories of survival. They considered it just as much a part of their culture as anything else discussed in the focus group interviews.

Impact of News Coverage about Appalachia

Participants across the focus group interviews mentioned the drug epidemic in eastern Kentucky as something that is a challenge the region faces. In fact, the majority of people in each focus group session said they had been personally affected by drug addiction. Either they themselves had struggled with addiction, or they had family members or friends who had. At least one of the older participants said they moved to eastern Kentucky to care for a child who had become addicted and needed their help to manage breaking that addiction. Drug addiction was not a major focus of any of the focus group interviews, but because it was mentioned by at least one person in each interview, I felt the epidemic clearly had an impact on the participants' lives and the way they viewed their communities.

The discussions and mentions of the drug problem in eastern Kentucky illustrates an interesting underlying aspect of the focus group interviews. The participants in the interviews were very aware of the region's challenges and problems. In other words, they

were very familiar with more negative aspects of the region. Those more negative aspects have also tended to be things that news media have focused on when covering stories about the region. Participants could talk at length about poverty in terms of “people being on the draw” and dependent on welfare, SNAP benefits or disability benefits. They were well versed in the fear of the unknown that comes with the collapse of the coal industry. They could talk a lot about the drug epidemic and what it was doing to communities, and how the lack of opportunities available to them in the region was sometimes emotionally and mentally crippling.

However, participants were much less aware of (or, at least, didn’t mention to me) the more positive aspects of their communities: assets, such as art, music and local foods; or the good economic things happening, including small business development or increased high-speed broadband internet access. Participants were quick to talk about the region’s natural beauty and how tourism efforts were a good thing, but rarely mentioned any of the other markers of economic or cultural place-making success that are happening in their communities. They instead told me about the things I am inferring they have heard and seen talked about in the media, or by powerful local, state or federal politicians. And those things tended to be negative.

I came to understand that the Appalachian participants in my focus group interviews tended to believe what they were told about the region by news media. I understood this to be the case if the media source was a well-respected outlet, such as the New York Times or ABC, and if the frequency at which the stories were told was high. Their lived experience with such challenges should not be overlooked or diminished here, because those experiences also help to shape their understanding and perception of the

community around them and the culture in which they live. However, the impact that news media coverage of their place and their communities has on their understanding of place and culture should also not be overlooked because it was very present, whether the participants recognized that in themselves or not.

Justice, Fairness, Right and Wrong

Participants had a very keen sense and awareness of right and wrong, and also of fairness, justice and economic equity, or lack thereof. In the majority of focus group interviews, participants spent significant time discussing the ways in which workers in eastern Kentucky are treated differently than workers elsewhere.

The fact that workers in eastern Kentucky are paid less than workers in the same job in other places definitely drew the ire of participants. I was told stories about nurses, oil drillers, police officers, even managers at Wendy's making more money in other places than what workers in those same fields and jobs make in eastern Kentucky. I was told by each person who brought it up that this disparity was unjust, unfair and not acceptable. The following story from a woman helps to illustrate this:

My sister, she worked here in the hospital for 20 years. So, when she met her husband now, she moved to Ohio, and she's getting \$20 more than what she was making here for 20 years. She got 20 more dollars an hour at the same job. And I don't know if it's just that [the employers] think you're in this little box here, and they don't think you're worthy enough to give you that pay – and I think you are worthy enough to get that pay. I think that, you know, if somewhere else is getting that kind of money for the same kind of job, the same kind of hours, you should get it, too. And here in eastern Kentucky, it's just like, the employers just don't want to come off that money. . . . They don't think we need anything more.

Later in the same conversation, two other women had this exchange:

Woman 1: There's an injustice [in terms of pay equity with other places].

Woman 2: Yeah. If [the workers] have had the same background and the same experiences that I have had, and went through the same learning levels that I had to go through, they don't know more than me; they're equal to me.

Participants felt they were treated unfairly. This feeling of being treated unfairly made them upset that the same educational attainment and professional experience would not guarantee them the same pay as workers receive in other places. They said this made them feel discriminated against – not only by the company or entity for which they worked, but also by people living outside the region. As one woman said, “Everybody looks down on everybody in eastern Kentucky because we don't make as much [money].”

Participants felt as if people in other places looked down upon them and thought less of them because they make less money working similar jobs. This led them to feel a sense of helplessness and frustration at their lack of being able to change this situation for themselves, which also meant they were unable to change the perceived idea that others had of them because of their lesser pay for the same work. That feeling of frustration and helplessness helped stoke the fire of recognizing the injustice of their own inequality and misrepresentation.

I came to understand this sense of justice and fairness for all as an aspect of Appalachian culture. The participants clearly felt that no person should have any higher social standing than any other person, least of all when it came to being equal in the workplace. To put it in Appalachian terms: “We don't get above our raising or too big for our britches,” and no one is better than anyone else for any reason. We are all equal in our humanness, and should be treated as such, just as we should treat others in this manner.

It's an aspect of Appalachian culture that stretches back generations, to a time when small communities of two to three subsistence farming families dotted the region, living on hillsides deep in valleys and in hollers nestled at the foot of mountains. Life consisted of farming, canning food, raising and caring for animals, cooking and cleaning, walking to two-room schoolhouses and playing with many brothers, sisters and cousins. To this day, those times are thought of by those who lived through them as a time when life was simple and when every person in the community was on the same level as every other person. As my Great Aunt Annalee Brashear told me during an oral history I collected from her, "Those were good times. Nobody was better than anybody else" (personal communication, March 27, 2016).

In the same vein, participants said they lived in a place where neighbors help their neighbors, even if they are strangers to one another. As an example, one woman said the following: "I live right next to the gas station, and people break down there, or they'll run out of gas, and they'll pull off [the road]. You know, I go out and there's a stranded vehicle in my driveway, I'm like, 'Well, you know, let me run down and get you some gas, or my husband will run down and get you some gas.'"

There is a sense that helping others is the right thing to do in communities, and this banding together as a whole community in order to lift each other up runs throughout Appalachian history. Since the early days of the United Mine Workers of America, to the fight against inaccurate and false media portrayals, people in Appalachian communities have come together to fight common injustices. This is true even in my own familial history.

Each of my parents learned from their mothers what it meant to take care of and love your fellow Appalachians, especially those less fortunate than they. My maternal grandmother, Della, was known to feed any child that came to her doorstep hungry. She would even let them stay in her home if they had no where else to go. My dad learned from my Granny Hazel that all people were worthy of love because that's the way in which she spoke of, and treated, others, having reportedly never said a bad word against another person in all the time she was alive. She would also never allow her children to speak ill of anyone. Even though they were not raised in wealthy households, my parents knew the virtue and the value of giving what little they had to those in need, and of recognizing that they were no better than anyone else – virtues they have passed on to me, and that I can only imagine have been passed on to countless Appalachians for generations.

Coming and Going

There is a strong sense of transience for people living in eastern Kentucky. Many of the participants told stories of migration. Either they themselves were born in the region, but their families moved away and then later moved back, or they were born somewhere else, but later moved to the region because their parents' families were still living there. They also told stories of moving away after high school to work, but later moving back home to be close to family, or because they realized it's where they actually wanted to live; or, they had family members who moved away to northern cities, but later returned home to live after a major life event, such as a divorce or job loss. The following exchange between three women helps to illustrate the transience:

Woman 1: But then you realize that a lot of places you go – like in Ohio and Indiana – and then you realize that all your family that moved from here, they

move into a little community where everybody is, so they call it Little Hazard, Little Perry County. You know, there's a place in Columbus where basically all of them that came from Hazard and eastern Kentucky, they all live in one little community.

Woman 2: That's not always the case. Like, in my dad's family, I have an uncle that's in Indianapolis, I have an aunt that's in Carrollton. I have another aunt that's – I don't remember. I haven't seen her since I was 2-years-old. She moved. They all left. And then I had an aunt – she moved to Ohio. She moved back, and she lives right in front of me now.

Woman 3: You've got one in Florida, too.

Woman 2: Yeah, one in Florida. Down in Florida.

The cycle of leaving and returning is almost an inherently understood way of life in the mountains, and the internal push and pull of what it means to leave or stay seemed to be very present in participants' minds. When discussions of leaving versus staying in the region surfaced, participants were ready to voice their opinions on both options, and weigh those options against each other in real time, giving the impression that thoughts of going versus staying are constantly circulating within the participants' minds. The following statement from one man helps to illustrate this:

I'm probably definitely going to move as soon as these kids graduate and get out of high school. ... I actually enjoyed Lexington. A city like that, you know, a smaller city, not so huge. I mean, I loved it. But, of course, like I said, the fast pace of lifestyle sort of caused me to have to come back to Hazard, and you know, now, I've got my sister that I have to wait for her to graduate, and then my [inaudible] has to go through school, we don't want to have to pull him out, so yeah. Probably leave.

Interestingly, this constant weighing of the options of staying versus going seemed to create an incisive understanding of the differences between eastern Kentucky and other places. Participants all seemed to know, or had thought about, how other places were better or worse than eastern Kentucky. As one woman put it:

I would love to stay here, but the route that I'm taking and the degree that I want to peruse shows that I'll probably have to go somewhere else whether I want to or not. It's like there are jobs [in eastern Kentucky], but they're not the jobs that you wanna go for. If there were more jobs created here to help people stay – which would be lovely – but they're not, and they're dying out slowly. So, it's like you're having to get a degree, get educated, and feel all good about yourself, but you want to stay, but then, you're like, downgraded for that in your mind, because you're like, "I can't stay because they don't have this, this, and this for me. I have to go somewhere else to get this, this, and this, and other things that may be needed."

One of the most often mentioned reasons for staying, or for returning to the region, was loneliness. In other words, moving away from the region meant leaving your friends and family behind. The idea of being in a new place where other people were different than you, and where you would have no community, meant that you would be alone in that place. That was a scary prospect for some participants. As one man said, "Sometimes, it's hard to go it alone somewhere. . . . I mean, it's going to be a lot different than having your family and having, like, 300 friends you can go and hang out with right, like, in your community. Because you ain't gonna have none of that no more. You'll be alone."

When I tried to delve deeper into the topic of leaving versus staying, the reactions I received from participants were very mixed. Some wanted to leave the region and never return. Others wanted to stay and never leave. Some wanted to leave for school or work, and then come back someday. Still others were unsure about either prospect. No one set of participants with any of these views was more dominant than any other – there was an even distribution of opinions. There was a good consensus among participants, though, that eastern Kentucky was not the place for young people because of the perceived lack of opportunity and leisure activities. There was also consensus that many are pushed to leave by forces beyond their control, such as the lack of opportunities and recreation, but

also an internal feeling that staying would make one feel as if they are not as good as someone who leaves, as was pointed out by the woman on page 64, who talked about being forced to leave because the job she wanted to pursue was not available to her in eastern Kentucky.

Despite this constant push and pull felt by the participants about leaving or staying in eastern Kentucky, participants expressed that living in eastern Kentucky was better than living in other places, mostly because it is the only place that feels like home. It was the very things that they described to me as being major facets of their culture that keep them in the place, foster a deep love for and dedication to it, and make them want to stay and consider it the best place for them to live. Things that participants mentioned as aspects of their cultural that made them want to stay in eastern Kentucky included: Closeness of family and friends; sense of community; love for and appreciation of tradition, ancestry and a particular way of life; the perception that there's less crime in the region, and that the people are friendlier; neighbors help their neighbors; and, the persistent pulse of justice and fairness that is an undertone to all aspects of life in the region.

With this understanding of culture in mind, I moved on in my focus group interviews to discuss representations of Appalachian people and/or Appalachian places in reality television shows, which I will discuss in the following chapter.

Chapter VIII

Representation in Reality Television

Throughout the focus group interviews, I was constantly amazed and enlightened by what participants had to say about their culture and way of life. But some of the most

exciting discussions with participants happened when the conversation switched to reality television representations of their place and of Appalachian people.

It should be noted that of the three reality television shows I chose as the core of discussion in the focus group interviews, participants were much more familiar with *Buckwild* and *Call of the Wildman* than they were with *White Lightening*. In fact, when I mentioned *White Lightening* in the focus groups, participants often confused it with the dramatized cable miniseries titled, *Hatfields and McCoys*, that aired on the History Channel in March 2012. However, when I pointed out that I was not talking about the miniseries, but was instead referencing the reality TV show, most participants were simply unfamiliar with *White Lightening*. I think this is most likely due to two major reasons. First, at the time of my focus group interviews, *White Lightening* was the newest of the three reality TV shows I chose to discuss, having been on the air for less time than the other two shows. Second, *White Lightening* began its run on the History Channel in 2013, toward the end of the rural reality television boom, and did not achieve the same level of popularity as a result. Both of those factors are the most likely reasons why participants in the focus group interviews were not familiar with *White Lightening*.

That being said, the fact that participants were not familiar with *White Lightening* did not detract from the overall understanding that participants had about Appalachian reality shows. If they were not familiar with *White Lightening*, or with the other two core reality TV shows, they were familiar with other, similar shows about Appalachia or Appalachian people. As previously discussed, over the five-year period between 2009-2014, which I would argue was the height of the rural reality television craze, there were 12 reality television shows about rural places in circulation on various cable television

networks – and those were just the shows that I counted; it is not a comprehensive count. I say this to say that participants were very familiar with the rural reality television genre.

When discussions of that genre began, participants had much to say about their opinions and perceptions of the shows, and also the implications and ramifications for themselves personally, and for their communities and the region, but most especially for those living outside the region.

Reality Television as Fiction

There was overwhelming consensus among participants throughout all focus group interviews that reality television, regardless of its subject matter, was little more than fiction masquerading as reality. Participants said time and time again that what is portrayed in reality TV shows about Appalachia – particularly the three core shows chosen for this study: *Buckwild*, *Call of the Wildman*, and *White Lightning* – is not representative of the majority of people and life in the region. They also seemed to be in agreement that much of what is portrayed in the shows is staged, or dramatized by producers in a false way to make the depicted situations seem more exciting than they would actually be in real life.

There was a very clear understanding among participants that the producers of the reality TV shows were purposefully seeking out and exaggerating long-established stereotypes about the region in order to make a profit from the images they extracted. They saw this as exploitative of the region as a whole, and more acutely, of the people being featured in the shows, even though participants had also decided the stars of the shows were participating to make money themselves. As a man pointed out, he felt as if

the television producers were “using the people. I mean, it’s just a way to make profits. I mean, they’re using people, and that’s not right.”

One woman put it this way:

People love to see that side of here. They love to make fun of that. People love to see the crazy, the stupid, the simple-minded people on those TV shows because it gets them good ratings. . . . it’s what gets good ratings. They want to go, “Oh, my suspicions were right about those people.” They want to think, “I knew those people were dumb, or I knew those people were this,” and they can see it because there it is on TV with these real people portraying a part.

It’s also worth noting that participants pointed out several times that there was no difference in reality TV shows about Appalachia, and reality TV shows about other places. Participants even drew comparisons between *Buckwild* and *Jersey Shore* – two MTV reality television shows with similar storylines about groups of young people partying a lot – claiming that the only difference between the two shows was the location. While participants did say producers targeted Appalachia because of the “hillbilly” stereotype, they maintained that Appalachia was not being singled out because all reality shows were made to make money, and stereotypes make money.

Anger and Frustration about Reality TV Portrayals

It became clear that focus group participants felt disdain – and sometimes what can only be described as disgust – toward Appalachian reality TV shows, the people who create them, the television networks that air them, and sometimes even the people featured in the shows. This was largely because they felt the shows were exploiting the worst of Appalachian stereotypes to make money. In the process, those shows were perpetuating a false image of who Appalachian people are, which only served to deepen misperceptions and misunderstandings about the place. Participants linked the deepened misunderstandings and misperceptions to the continued discrimination they and their

family and friends have encountered, or must endure, when they leave the region for any reason. The opinion of one man helps to illustrate this point:

Honestly? I hate those shows. I feel like it sets a standard for the way everybody else sees us. Like, 'Call of the Wildman' – goodness. I mean, really. Everybody sees us like this guy. Or like, when you see 'em interview somebody on TV, they find the most illiterate person in the furthest part of the mountain... And he's up there with no teeth, no shoes on, and they're just flaunting him on television, just showing how bad the area is. It's awful. I hate that. I hate it.

One woman echoed his point, "I hate those shows that exploit, like, the worst stereotype."

And another man said he thought *Call of the Wildman* was "all fake," and that the show "makes us look like we're stupid, hillbilly hicks, or something." Another woman had this to say: "I don't think they do those shows a lot right. Especially that Turtle Man. You ever seen the Turtle Man? See where he lives? People don't live like that around here. I mean, they might be one or two, but... He makes all kinds of money. And still lives in that shack? Come on, now." These kinds of opinions about Appalachian reality television shows were prevalent among participants across all focus group interviews.

The fact that profits were being made from the exploitation of old Appalachian stereotypes angered participants. It's also a familiar anger that I myself have felt and had to deal with for as long as I can remember when encountering false or misleading interpretations of my place by the news and entertainment media, and sometimes, even through media that claimed to be documentary (Sawyer, 2009).

The anger felt by focus group participants about the profit-mongering aspects of Appalachian reality television shows was quickly followed by a sense of frustration that the images and stereotypes being portrayed would be perceived as representative of the entire population of Central Appalachia. Participants knew that people living outside the

region would make assumptions about eastern Kentucky and about Appalachian people based on the portrayals presented to them through reality television shows featuring the place, and as a result, the participants felt the portrayals unnecessary, harmful, inaccurate and hurtful. What one woman said helps to illustrate this point:

In some of those shows, there are plenty of people that I could probably walk down my little holler and find some like that, but they portray us like that's everyone here. There is no one different than that here. ... And generalizing and saying that everyone is that way. Because very rarely is there anyone on those kinds of shows that is different from those people.

One woman was upset with the way foraging for ginseng root was portrayed in a television show about wild herb and root foraging in eastern Kentucky. Her husband was a forager, and at the time of the focus group interview, had just started teaching their three-year-old son about it, just as his father had done with him when he was a boy. In the show she had seen, the practice was portrayed as an illicit activity that only criminals and “outlaws” participated in for the purpose of illegal trade. She said the portrayal made foraging seem like a lowly activity, as if it was something bad, harmful or negative. But for her and her husband, foraging was a long-standing family tradition, and a way in which they kept this piece of their heritage and culture alive. They were passing foraging down to their son, as one would pass along any family tradition: as an important piece of their culture that should be remembered and respected by the next generation. So, for this woman, seeing an inaccurate portrayal of something she considers to be an important piece of her heritage, family tradition and culture, was very insulting and profane, and felt for her like a personal attack. For her, knowing that people who knew nothing about Central Appalachian foraging would see this inaccurate portrayal of the practice, was very hurtful, in an almost helpless sort of way, because there was little she could do to

reverse the perceptions that would be spread about this important aspect of her family traditions and culture.

Inaccurate Representations and the People Who Create Them

The participants told me over and over when discussing reality television shows about Appalachia that they believed people such as the characters presented in the shows did actually exist, but that they were not an accurate representation of the majority of people living in the region. They also said they believed the people featured in the reality television shows were being taken advantage of by the producers of those shows. For the most part, participants were not necessarily angry that these people – like the young adults on *Buckwild*, or the wild animal trapper on *Call of the Wildman* – were being featured by the television shows. They were angry because they felt those people were not only being misrepresented by outside television producers, but also because they felt the entire region was being misrepresented based on the way that some people in the mountains chose to live their lives, and then expose those lives on national TV. One woman put it this way:

I think that a lot of people on those shows are actually a lot smarter, and they act a lot different than what they do when they're in front of a camera. Because that's what people want to see. They want to see us with no teeth, barefoot, stupid.

In other words, participants felt the actions of the people on the shows, who represent an actual, but small portion of people who live in the region were being mistaken by outsiders as the way all people in the region lived, behaved and existed. It wasn't that the TV producers were making up false stories about people in the region, per se, it was more so that they were presenting one type of person as the archetype for all Appalachian people. And it created – on top of feeling angry, taken advantage of,

frustrated, hurt and offended – a feeling of indignation toward the shows and the people who make them, as one man pointed out:

I mean, it upsets me that there's really no good in [the reality television show producers], you know what I'm saying? But, I just don't see how that's good. Distorting the view of everybody in the country that this place is a scum bucket. I hate that.

I understood that the feeling of indignation that participants had toward reality television show producers harkens back to the Appalachian cultural more of fairness and being treated with respect, dignity and equality. Participants felt the reality television shows – and more specifically, the people who create the shows – have treated them unfairly, and given the world the wrong impression about them and their place. Furthermore, participants said reality television portrayals oversimplify the lives of Appalachian people to the point where those lives are only ever understood by people living outside the region as warped caricatures born of long-standing stereotypes and strained imaginings about the place and the people who call it home.

People who do not live in Appalachia do not necessarily understand the nuances of the place and people, meaning they would not necessarily be able to identify the characters in the shows as being a small fraction of actual people living in the region. It would be far easier for people living outside the region to see the reality TV portrayals of Appalachia, and assume that all people in the region were like those characters. Participants were clear that reality television representations of the region present one specific aspect of a person's character and life, when in reality, that person is a multi-faceted being with complex feelings, emotions and attitudes about the life they are living – just as Appalachia itself is a multi-faceted, complex place that is often oversimplified in the media. One woman said this about it:

I think reality TV shows always [try] to get the views. They show the bad side of places. They do have truth to it, but they put more stuff to show the bad parts than they do the truth. So, they kind of ... do tell the truth about, like, some of the stuff we do, but to get those good views, they have to do something negative to make it interesting. And that's not right. I think if somebody came to Kentucky, and actually see how we live, it'd open their eyes to what these reality shows are really trying to do.

Stereotypes

Many participants mentioned that the wrong impressions and misrepresentations created by Appalachian reality TV shows hinder the ability of the region to be taken seriously in the broader American culture because they continue the long “tradition of using rural stereotypes to make profits for the entertainment industry” (Lockman, 2013).

Among other stereotypes, the reality television shows are misrepresenting the region as a place where young people have wild parties every night and make swimming pools in the back of coal trucks; where men are toothless and catch wild animals with their bare hands; and, where century-old family feuds persist into the modern day and are amplified when those families join forces to make moonshine. Participants felt these images and perceptions were harmful because, as one participants put it, “they give the wrong impression about what we are, and who we are, and the things that we do.”

There was a specific strain in this notion when participants mentioned it during focus group interviews. Participants want themselves, their place, and all the people who live there to be seen by people living outside the region as no different than anyone else living in this country. Participants agreed that they do have a distinct culture and way of life that is different from other places, but felt frustrated and exasperated by the idea that they are understood to be beneath other places based on perceptions and stereotypical images being perpetuated by reality television shows about the place and people. “Just

because [people living outside Appalachia have] seen that show, they think they know everything,” said one woman. “Even though they don’t because they’ve never lived it. They don’t know.”

Participants want to be seen as people who are hard working and reliable, who care deeply about their place, their communities and their families, who are committed to morals and doing the right thing, and who are working hard every day to provide for their families – just like so many other American families across the country. They desire and yearn for this understanding from people who live outside the region, yet they feel they will never have it as long as television producers continue to commodify and peddle Appalachian stereotypes as reality.

There was desperation in the focus group interviews when participants talked about the feeling that Appalachian people are portrayed the way we are in the media because that is the way other people want to see us. Desperation, because this has been the case in the media for generations, and participants felt helpless to change this status quo. So, the producers of such television shows seek out Appalachian stereotypes and amplify them in order to exploit the images outsiders have already internalized as reality about the region. “Watching those shows,” one man said, “can be sort of like culture shock without actually experiencing the culture for yourself.”

In other words, producers play directly into Appalachian stereotypes to make a profit they know they can make because those stereotypes are exactly what the public wants to see about a region that has long been mythologized as a dark, bloody, dangerous, violent, ignorant, isolated place harboring little more than toothless, drunken, ill-speaking oafs with little education and even fewer prospects or hope for the future.

This is especially the case in these economically trying times when the coal industry is at its weakest, most vulnerable point – an aspect of Central Appalachian life that has, coincidentally, been amplified and mythologized by the news media ad nauseam since 2014, as popular culture began its slow descent from the peak of Appalachian reality television.

Power of Stereotypes

Participants did sometimes wonder aloud in focus group interviews whether or not negative portrayals of their region were keeping outside industry away, and with it, jobs and improved economic prospects. Participants began to vocalize that if outside companies were seeing more favorable portrayals of the region instead of the stereotypical reality television portrayals of the region, it could be possible they would relocate to eastern Kentucky. It was hard for them to say for certain, but participants definitely understood and agreed that the more negative images being extracted from the region were certainly not doing them any favors economically.

However, there was a small contingent of participants who thought the negatives that came along with reality television show portrayals of Appalachia could be turned into positives. The popularity of some reality TV shows, such as *White Lightning*, could spur people living outside the region to travel to the locations where the shows were filmed as tourists, the same way fans of certain movies and fictional television shows sometimes travel to locations where those movies or shows were filmed. If this did begin to happen, participants said, it could actually help to dispel myths and stereotypes created and perpetuated by the reality TV shows. Actually being in eastern Kentucky and

experiencing the place for oneself is quite different than basing your understanding of it on perceptions formed from watching reality television shows.

But it was indeed a very small number of participants who felt that way, and more often than not, participants were apt to blame the public for the heightened popularity of Appalachian reality TV shows just as much as they blamed television producers for making the shows in the first place. They understood that the viewers were the people making the shows popular, and causing the proliferation and mass distribution of such shows. “[Outsiders] don’t want to see the reality,” said one man. “They just want to see the *Buckwild* – everybody getting drunk and fighting. I mean, that’s what’s interesting. That’s what the people find interesting anyways.”

Participants said the hillbilly stereotype has already been solidified in the national imagery as existing solely in eastern Kentucky and West Virginia, therefore the public at large expects to see that stereotype in reality TV shows about the region. This was the case even though rural people exist in every state in the country, and are most often very similar in nature to rural people in Appalachia in many ways.

Participants knew that Appalachia is known, in the worst annals of stereotypes about our place, for hillbillies – violent, ignorant, wild hillbillies – in a way that other rural places are not, and never will be, known. They connected this public knowledge and understanding directly to the historical media extraction and exploitation of Central Appalachia. They knew that those past inaccurate and dramatized portrayals were the direct ancestors of the newer, flashier, inaccurate portrayals of Appalachian people seen in reality television shows. They also knew that these newer, flashier stereotypical images would not be multiplying so quickly if the producers of Appalachian reality television

shows were not making so much money off of their popularity. And television producers only make money from their products – TV shows – if those products are consumed by mass quantities of people. As the participants posit, people who are not from the region are drawn to the difference in lifestyle and culture represented in Appalachian reality television shows, almost in the same way people used to be drawn to sideshows in turn of the 20th Century circuses: as a form of human oddity.

No one wants to watch a reality show, participants said, about people who are just like them; they want to see the extremes of human behavior, and more than that, they want to see the exaggerated extremes. Or, as one man said: “Nobody wants to see the hard-working coal miner that goes home and eats taters and soup beans at night time, and goes to bed and goes to work the next day. ... Nobody wants to see him go underground and dig out the coal,” Viewers simply aren’t interested in the true reality of Appalachia.

If the public’s only exposure to Appalachia was reality television shows about the place, participants said, then the public would not, and could not, ever understand the far more complex, nuanced and challenging reality of Appalachia. Reality television shows about the region were far too limited by the parameters of decades-old stereotypes to ever be able to fully interpret those realities with dignity and respect.

For the most part, participants did not believe viewers of Appalachian reality television shows would dig deeper to teach themselves about the complexities of the region. And since the public was watching Appalachian reality television shows with such abandon, increasing ratings, producers kept making and disseminating them widely, cashing in on the stereotypes about an entire region of people who live very real and complex lives.

Chapter IX

Changed Perceptions

I learned much from the participants about how the shows impacted their perceptions of Appalachia and themselves. By determining the various emotions participants connected to the reality television shows, I was better able to discern the relationship between them and the portrayals of Appalachia in reality television shows. I was also able to interpret what the implications of that relationship are. Participants displayed a range of emotions when talking about Appalachian reality television portrayals. I will discuss the emotions and reactions I noticed emerging most often.

Embarrassment and Shame

Participants said they felt embarrassed and ashamed by reality television shows about Appalachia. This was mostly because the region and the people who live there were being portrayed inaccurately, as caricatures of old Appalachian stereotypes. Participants also said they were embarrassed by the actions of the Appalachians featured in the shows – actions that they deemed outrageous, arrogant, and/or exaggerated. As one woman said: “What they’re doing is not only embarrassing one person – it’s all of Kentucky. It’s representing all of us, and it’s embarrassing ... for all of us to go out of Kentucky and everybody, like, looking at us, and commenting on us. It’s showing a bad side of Kentucky. I think it’s embarrassing to go out and somebody comment and ask me about something that they hear on the TV. I mean, it’s ridiculous.”

While they felt, for the most part, that the Appalachians in the shows were being taken advantage of by the television show producers just as much as the producers were taking advantage of the region as a whole, they did agree that the cast members of the

reality TV shows did have agency over their own decision to be a part of the shows. Because of that, they felt the cast members knew what they were getting themselves into, and knew what was being asked of them, and the participants felt as if the cast members sold out their region and their people to make a little bit of money. They were embarrassed and ashamed about the way those cast members acted because those images were being propagated as the ways in which all Appalachians behaved, which participants were quick to point out, was absolutely not the case.

Self-Consciousness

In the same vein, participants said the portrayals made them feel self-conscious about leaving the region, and being perceived by people living outside Appalachia as walking stereotypes. This self-consciousness is tied directly into the lived experiences of so many of the participants in which they had been mistreated, or otherwise made fun of, when they had been outside the region. They were not keen to face questions from people living outside the region about things they had seen on a reality television show, and they feared the shows would make inane and offensive questions about being from eastern Kentucky more prevalent – a prospect that made them feel exasperated.

Angry

Alongside feeling embarrassed, ashamed and self-conscious, participants felt angry and defensive. They felt angry because their home region was being willfully and purposefully misrepresented and stereotyped for no other reason than to make a profit for a handful of television executives and the cast members of the reality TV shows. Participants felt as if the reality television shows were making fun of them and their way of life, and that the people who watch the shows would also be making fun of them and

their way of life without knowing much more about Appalachia than what was being presented to them in the reality television shows.

Defensiveness

These feelings of anger led participants to feel defensive in the face of Appalachian reality television's barrage against them. They felt the reality television show producers were misrepresenting them, their way of life, and their home region by amplifying hackneyed stereotypes about Appalachia. They also said they felt that those stereotypical misrepresentations were actually more about making fun of Appalachian people than showcasing any sort of reality – even a distorted reality – about the place and people. Participants felt that this aura of public ridicule trickled down to the viewers, which only served to spread more misinformation about Appalachia, and increase the level of ridicule its people face from the public at large.

Participants certainly felt as if people outside the region had no right to misrepresent them and their place. By doing so, any and all who engaged in the spread of the misinformation – television executives and producers, cast members of reality TV shows, viewers – were complicit in the metastasis of Appalachian stereotypes that poison outsiders' opinions of the region and the people who live there. Participants said over and over again that they would urge anyone who's opinion and understanding of Appalachia and Appalachian people had been formed by watching reality television shows to actually come to the region for a visit, and learn for themselves what the region was really all about in terms of culture and way of life, and the kinds of people who actually call the place home.

Participants said that by not trying to understand the region's complexities and people and culture for themselves, viewers of Appalachian reality shows were left with nothing more than the one dimensional portrayals presented to them by reality TV shows and other forms of media. Because of this, participants felt Appalachian reality television shows actually deepen and strengthen stereotypes, misperceptions and misunderstandings about the region. The level at which those stereotypes are strengthened and deepened makes it more difficult for those public misperceptions to be reversed or dispelled, which led participants to feel helpless to change the public's perception and understanding of Appalachia in the face of such a long history of the hillbilly image.

The damage, as it were, has been done over generations of exploitation and extraction of Appalachian images by news and entertainment media, the participants said, and they carry with them a definite sense that there's little they can do to repair it. "The damage has been done for quite some time. I mean this is just how we've been perceived," one man said. "The only way to change anything is if people stop allowing the exploitation of ... where we're from." Participants also said they felt that as long as the hillbilly image was propagated through the media in various ways, formats and variations, it would always persist and serve to shape the region's interactions and relationships with the outside world.

Important

Despite all these feelings of resentment harbored by participants toward Appalachian reality television shows, there was a small contingent of participants who felt important in the wake of the reality television shows' popularity. Even though the reality television shows are inaccurate and misleading at best – blatantly stereotypical and

economically harmful at worst – some participants were a little bit grateful for the attention the region was receiving because of the reality television shows. They felt proud that television producers chose to focus on their region and their people, even if they chose to focus on it through the broad brush of stereotypes. They felt that a spotlight was being cast upon the region and the challenges it faces through the shows, and thought that perhaps some good would come from that attention in the end, maybe in the form of some people digging deeper into the truth about the region that the reality television shows always seem to gloss over. The following exchange between two women and one man is a good example:

Woman 1: We're finally getting some recognition. The good or the bad, you know, whatever.

Woman 2: Makes you feel important.

Woman 1: I'd rather it be good recognition than the bad, but...

Woman 2: But, just because they use Kentucky, or they're viewing, I guess, makes you feel important because they used your hometown, your state.

Man 2: Like, the Hatfields and McCoys. After everybody seen that on TV, they was, like, people come from all around to come here and just look at cemeteries and places where they shot each other. So, it actually brought people here. Maybe even made some of them realize that we ain't just a bunch of people up here jumping in the back of trucks and catching turtles and coons and whatever, shooting at each other. That we're actually kind of nice people, you can talk to each other, you know, you can throw your hand up, everybody'll wave back. Somebody sitting on the front porch and you're lost, all you gotta do is pull over and they'll tell you, "you know, go down the road, such and such."

Fear

Perhaps the most interesting emotion and reaction that participants told me they felt was fear. Some participants told me they were afraid it would be harder for them as parents to instill pride for their place, culture and heritage in their children because of the

negative images being disseminated through reality television shows about Appalachia. They felt that those images, over time, could make their children feel like the rest of the country sees them as stupid or less than, and they feared those feelings would make their children begin to feel ashamed of where they're from, and internalize a feeling that their culture and way of life is inferior to other cultures and ways of life. One woman put it this way:

It's hard to teach your kids to have pride in themselves and their place when they see people seeing them being stupid. I've got a seven-year-old, and we try to teach her how to be proud of who she is, all of her family, where she come from and everything that they put into it, but . . . it's hard to do that . . . I mean, they can be the smartest, brightest, most successful, talented person there is, and as long as the world sees them as stupid, you can't teach 'em any different – or, it's harder to teach them any different. . . . You know, she's very proud. But, I'm worried that when she gets older, when other people start actually mattering or meaning something to her, that it's going to change, and . . . it's going to be harder to keep her pride.

Participant Reality Television Shows

In each focus group interview, I asked participants what kind of reality show they would make about Appalachia or eastern Kentucky if they had the chance. I was curious about the ways in which they would chose to represent themselves, their region and their communities to the world. I was not surprised to hear participants say they would feature more positive aspects of their culture and life in the mountains. It was fascinating to hear the aspects of life participants felt important enough to showcase. It also revealed a lot to me about how the participants viewed their culture.

Participants said they would feature or highlight local businesses, nice houses and how people actually live instead of the ways in which life in Appalachia is depicted in reality television shows. Others said they would feature Appalachian foodways – how we garden and grow our own food, and the ways in which we prepare it and preserve it for

winter, such as one man, who said, “You could probably do an entire episode of one of those Food Network shows on eastern Kentucky food.”

Some participants said they would highlight people within the community that are trying to revitalize the local economy, or showcase people who represent who we truly are: hardworking, generous with time and labor to help others within the community, academic – there are colleges and universities in eastern Kentucky from which many people get degrees. One man said it this way:

Actually, I think it would make a good show to feature a bunch of people that are trying to revitalize the community because you know, this has been a dying community for a while, and it’s starting to make a comeback because people are trying to bring it back, and I think that might be a good show to show the people that are trying to bring this community back. My bosses are some of those people, and they’re all very interesting people. I know some people at the college here that are trying to help bring the community back. Most of the people that are trying to bring this community back are very interesting people.

Still other participants said they would make their own reality television show more of a documentary for educational purposes to teach the world outside the hills about what Appalachia is like beyond the stereotypes. One woman said, “You’d have to just do like a tour and interview families and, you know, generations of families that live in the same house, or the same holler, and places like that. You can’t really do, like, an actual series or show or something. It would just have to be like a documentary type thing.”

Some participants even said they would highlight coal mining and how it’s been such an integral piece of our local economy, life and culture. Instead of focusing on the industry’s collapse in the region, they would showcase coal miners who are going back to school after being laid off from the mines. And many said they would simply like to showcase all the diversity that exists in the region, but that is often overlooked by national news media and the entertainment industry.

One man said simply, “I’d probably make a show about my Papaw.” When I asked him to explain, he said this:

Cause he’s the man. He’s like – he’s just – he’s starting to get older now, so he doesn’t do it, but he’s always been about gardening, and stuff like that, and providing, and he’s, like, a mechanic. He can just do everything, and he takes care of my grandma now. I respect him a lot. That’s why I’d make a show about him.

This, to me, was a beautiful thought. Even when Appalachian people are presented with the idea of making a reality television show about anything, we harken back to our ancestry and our family as the perfect examples of our culture and way of life. This further highlights the importance of family in our culture.

Finally, one man told of several things he would make an Appalachian reality show about, and his answer includes almost every aspect of Appalachian culture as it was defined to me by the participants. I include it here to demonstrate that even when Appalachian people are not explicitly speaking about, or describing, their culture, it is woven into all of our thoughts:

I’d show the good parts about eastern Kentucky. Like, how nice people are, and how we got a college here. I mean, it ain’t no big thing, but you can get an education and make something out of yourself. That’s why we’re here. I mean, we wouldn’t be sitting here paying money if it wasn’t any good. And like, I’d include like, not only my family, but my neighbors. Show how we help each other out, I mean, everything. I work in a funeral home. I have since I was in seventh grade. That’s what I’m going into, and I’d include that because you can get a family in there that ain’t got no money, and we’ll put out there [to the public] that they need donations, and just like random people will come in and if they give 5, or they give 500 dollars, just every little bit helps. And they may not even know them people. I mean, that’s just the kind of people we’ve got around here. I mean, you can stand out here at a red light with a bucket for a volunteer fire department that’s not even in this community – it can be in another county or somewhere – and people will stop and give you 50 cents or a dollar, and that adds up, you know. We’re all about helping each other. And every one of us are what everybody considers poor. We’re not big rich, but we’re happy. And I mean, that’s really what I’d rather be all my life as to be big and rich and be stuck up in the city, is to live down here and be happy, you know.

Chapter X

Limitations

There was not much racial or ethnic diversity in the focus group interviews. There were only a total of four people of color in the focus group interviews, and the remainder of participants were white. This is clearly not a comprehensive representation of life within the region, which limits the responses I was able to collect. It's also true that not every participant among the 84 who completed Internal Review Board consent forms shared their opinions, thoughts and/or experiences during the actual focus group interview. Some participants spoke far more than others, some spoke very little, and others did not speak at all. This limits the scope of what was said in the interviews to the opinions, thoughts and experiences of a small number of participants, which is a common issue when conducting focus group interviews. However, I anticipated this limitation, and in an attempt to curb it, created a survey that asked questions about culture and representation that each participant except for three of them completed (Appendix B).

I was also limited by the structure of the college classes in which I chose to conduct focus groups. Each class I visited was one hour long, which would have been the time I allotted for focus group interviews at any other location. However, because I was entering regularly scheduled college classes, a significant amount of time in each focus group interview was dedicated to normal activities and routines practiced in each class, such as collecting homework assignments and making announcements. Because of that, some time that could have been used for the focus group interview was lost. I could not ask participants to make up that time by staying a little later because it was likely that time would conflict with other classes they needed to attend.

I was certainly also limited by technological difficulties in some of the focus group interviews, which meant I was not able to show the clips from Appalachian reality television shows in some of the interviews, as I had previously hoped and that I had included in my research design. While this turned out to not be a major issue in my focus group interviews, if the study were to be repeated, it would behoove the researcher to make certain the technology available to them in the room(s) where the focus group interviews would take place could support their needs.

Chapter XI

Addressing My Own Background and Worldview

I feel it's necessary for me to address my own bias connected to this study. I have made my close connection to my topic and to the community of study clear throughout this thesis. However, what I have not yet discussed are the biases I carried with me – unintentionally and somewhat unknowingly – into this study from the very beginning.

I was surprised at how similar, and also how different, the participants' definitions and my definitions of our same culture were. I later understood my surprise at the similarities and differences as my own bias coming through in my data collection.

My own privilege caused me to assume that participants would define Appalachian culture within the parameters of how *I* define Appalachian culture. I was raised by parents who were knee-deep in the Appalachian cultural revival of the 1970s and 1980s. My parents surrounded me with Appalachian cultural artifacts, such as hand-woven egg baskets, wedding-ring quilts made by great aunts, and hand-hewn dulcimers made by legendary Appalachian luthiers. They weren't used for the practical purposes for which they had been traditionally made. Instead, they were put on display and presented

as sacred cultural talismans of who we are as people. I grew up listening to my mother's Jean Ritchie albums, and hearing the story of how my dad's dad once took Jean on a date. I was later lucky enough to meet her, sit on her porch, and listen as she played for me the traditional folk song, "Barbara Allen."

My parents exposed me to Appalshop documentaries about my region's past and present – about our artistic cultural lineage, and our people's activist leanings. My mom took me to hear readings by George Ella Lyon at the Harry M. Caudill Library in Whitesburg, Ky. I was enrolled in Montessori School at Hindman Settlement School where I sat on James Still's lap during lunch, and had access to the school's cultural programming. It took me many years to understand that the Appalachian upbringing I had was vastly different from, and very atypical than, the upbringing of the majority of my peers, and in reality, the majority of people living in Appalachia.

It is my own privilege that made me feel as if I would have a different, more refined, or deeper understanding of Appalachian culture than the participants in my focus group interviews. It is my own naiveté that I thought participants would describe Appalachian culture the same way I would: in terms of literature, art, music, or traditional hand crafts. In fact, I am still confronting my own Appalachian privilege, and coming to terms with what should be simple truths for me to grasp. For instance, not everyone in Perry County knows that Jean Ritchie – a world-renowned folk singer and Appalachian ballad preserver – is from Slab Town Holler, just miles from the county seat. In fact, not even everyone living within the ARC-defined Central Appalachian region self-identifies as Appalachian. I saw a glimpse of this on the demographic surveys I asked each participant to complete. One question asked participants to tell whether or not they

identified as “Appalachian.” Many said they did, but only because they lived in the Appalachian Mountain range. Geography, not culture, is how they understood the term “Appalachian.” These particular responses proved two things to me: Most people do not self-identify as Appalachian, and it was my folly to not allow the participants to self-identify themselves. Instead, I presented them with a dichotomy, and lost the richness of knowing how they would describe themselves.

Realizing that I carried this bias was an eye-opening experience for me. It allowed me to remove a bit of a veil of privilege from my mind that I previously carried without really noticing it before. I felt that I was somehow more in tune with what it really meant to be an Appalachian person with generations-deep roots in a place. It’s a reflection of the divisions and privileges of class, as well as those connected to my upbringing. I was raised in a middle-class home for much of my childhood, whereas much of my peers and neighbors were living in working class homes, or households living with low income or dealing with poverty. My background gives me no more claim to Appalachian culture than any of the participants in the focus group interviews, or any other person living in Appalachia, nor does it afford me any special privilege to define what Appalachian culture is or means to any other Appalachian person. But because of my atypical upbringing, and my unearned status in a middle class family, I went into the focus group interviews carrying blind privilege – just as media makers often enter my home region carrying blind assumptions about the stereotypical aspects of Appalachian culture they hope to find.

There are overarching themes and markers of Appalachian culture that present themselves in things like food, familial relationships and sense of community; but, not

knowing about, or not having an appreciation for, the region's artistic, musical or literary legends does not exclude one from an ethnic and cultural identity. It's also true that each individual person who is a part of a particular sub-culture – as those living in Central Appalachia are – has unique experiences and relationships to their culture that are diverse and complex. Those diverse and complex relationships to one's own culture help to shape that person's understanding of the larger culture into which they fit, or of which they claim to be a member.

Culture is, after all, “threaded through *all* social practices and is the sum of their inter-relationship” (Hall, 1980). Some people of the same culture have different social practices than others, and any culture is made up of lots of different types of people. Culture is constructed by how those varying cultural practices and many different types of people are woven together into a “sum of their inter-relationship.” Culture, therefore, is not monolithic. Least of all Appalachian culture, which has been influenced by many different ethnic groups, cultures and images for nearly as long as people have lived in the region.

Most participants in the focus group interviews shared my own beliefs and understandings about media misrepresentation. I came to understand that those feelings of surprise were connected to preconceived notions I carried about what others would think of reality television portrayals of Appalachians when I first began this study. I did not realize that I carried those preconceived notions with me into the focus group interviews. However, they became clear to me soon after the first focus group interview I conducted.

The bias I carried about my own people was something I kept identifying throughout the process of gathering data for this study. I allowed myself a period of self-reflection after each focus group interview, during which I had to come to terms with harboring biases and preconceived notions about Appalachian people that I kept noticing within myself. As I noticed this, and as I wrestled with my own understanding of place filtered through these biases and notions, I grew in my understanding of my people and my place, and in my appreciation of Appalachia and the people who share my regional identity.

The appreciation and respect I have for the people of my region has also increased through this study. I now see my own people in a more complex and true light. A deeper admiration for them grew in me – one that was shaped and informed by a deeper understanding of the commonalities that bind me to my fellow Appalachians – commonalities in culture and experience, and love of place and community. Commonalities that always were there, but that I was blind to understanding fully until having actual conversations with many different types of Appalachian people who are removed from my everyday work as a community and economic developer.

I have remained close to the data in my study. As scholars and students, we are taught to remain objective in our study of human social interaction, and of the social world. We are told to keep a distance between us, the research, and the participants who provide for us the data that inform the studies we conduct because getting too close could skew the data. But I come from a place where human connection and integration into community is quite literally the fabric of life. I come from a place where those connections and interactions define your standing within a community, but also who you

are. Closeness to others and to the stories of the place, and of your past, and of the collective past of the community is not just about physical location and geography. It is also not simply based on the fact that we live nestled and tucked between the bottoms of ancient mountains carved by ancient seas that hold us so tight open air makes our chests constrict. Closeness for us Appalachians is a way of life. It is who we are as a people and is a defining marker of our culture.

Closeness is in my very composition as a human being, and therefore, I could never be anything but close to the research I've conducted, the data I've collected, the participants who've fueled it all, and the results of my study. Knowing this now, realizing it through my data collection, recognizing it within myself and my culture through data analysis, I am not surprised that this study – to which I am now so intrinsically tied – has helped me to grow as an Appalachian in ways previously unimaginable. I hope my own personal growth as an Appalachian person is clear throughout this study, and that it presents itself in such a way that will be enlightening for other Appalachian scholars.

So much of the Appalachian experience is about relationships: those within families and communities; those between outsiders and insiders; those with media; those between the people with power and the people without power; those of native Appalachians who live outside their place, yet feel the constant pull of it, knowing they can never really separate themselves from it. And so, to truly understand the region, one must understand the relationships that define and govern it, including how those relationships present themselves within the people of the place. As I am a person of the place, I hope that my relationship to this study, and my relationship to my place that was

strengthened and deepened through this study, adds to the collective understanding of the Appalachian experience, and deepens the idea of what it means to be Appalachian.

I hope this study will add to the discourse about Appalachian peoples' experience as Appalachians, but also their relationship with the rest of the country. I hope it will now be more evident what everyday Appalachian people think and feel about the media portrayals about them and their place, specifically the more recent reality television portrayals, and that their voices and actual experiences can now be added to the scholarship about media's relationship with Appalachia. I want nothing more at the end of this study than to make sure those voices are heard and appreciated and respected for the value they add to the discussion about and understanding of Appalachia as a distinct culture and ethnic identity.

Chapter XII

Conclusion

Before sharing my final thoughts and policy position, I would like to explain how the theoretical framework I chose to use and the literature I focused on worked together to inform this study.

Theory and Literature Review

Cultural studies and framing theory shaped this study in key ways, which became clear to me as I conducted focus group interviews, and later when I was analyzing the data collected from those interviews. Cultural studies theory explains that culture is partly constructed by how news and entertainment media represent that culture. Media portrayals about a particular culture or sub-group of people are constructive of that culture or sub-group because representation is "one of [the culture's or sub-group's]

conditions of existence” (Hall, 1997). As stated earlier in this thesis, “representation is not *outside* the event, not *after* the event, but *within* the event itself” (Hall, 1997).

Cultural studies theory worked in tandem with framing theory as I traveled through my study. Framing theory states that the ways in which mass media present ideas or events will “systematically affect how recipients of the news come to understand those events” (Scheufele, 1999). In other words, if the media has consistently framed stories about Appalachia through the lens of poverty and drug addiction, for instance, recipients of those images – whether they live within the region or not – will begin to believe that those must be the only realities of Appalachia.

Therefore, media representations of Appalachia – whether stereotypical, biased, or neither of those – do prescribe some meaning to Appalachian culture writ large. According to cultural studies and framing theory, those same representations, which have been recycled generation after generation since the first white settlers came into the region more than 300 years ago, have also helped to *construct* Appalachian culture. Appalachian people now live within a culture and ethnic sub-group whose very existence has been shaped and molded by media representations of our place. Appalachians have consistently been told who they are and what their culture is by news reports, documentaries, television sitcoms, and now, by reality television shows. As cultural studies framing theory state, the people and the culture are inextricably tied to those media representations. They have shaped not only the meaning and understanding people living inside the region have prescribed to their culture, but also how people living outside the region understand Appalachian culture.

This was evident when talking with participants, who would often share with me stories about their beloved ancestors working hard on subsistence farms, while in the same breath telling me about how the majority of people living in eastern Kentucky were lazy and cheating the system by unnecessarily remaining “on the draw.” On one hand, participants had a very clear self-defined image of Appalachian culture; but, on the other hand, they were consumed by images of Appalachian culture that have been cultivated by outside media for decades. They could not separate in their minds the images mined by outside media from what they knew to be true and real about their place. The linkage between this reality I was witnessing and cultural studies and framing theory became evident: Media representations of Appalachia have, in some part, constructed and shaped Appalachian culture.

I began to understand from this that the power media has over perception is real, and is alive and well in eastern Kentucky. The participants were telling me things I know to be constantly reported in the media about the region – especially since 2014, when stereotypical and reductive coverage about Appalachia 50 years after the start of the War on Poverty was at its peak (Williamson, 2014; Lowrey, 2014). And while the reporters can cite data about poverty rates and high rates of public assistance used by Appalachian people, they often ignore the complexities of why those challenges exist, and the many dimensions of economic development currently underway in the region that can provide much hope for increased opportunities and a higher quality of life that many participants seemed to lack.

The tactics used by journalists in this coverage of Appalachia are familiar and often used when national media outlets disseminate coverage of the region. I know from

Craig (2003) that anecdotes in media coverage tend to confuse readers or viewers about the complexities of serious challenges, and Kensicki (2004) found that news coverage of events and challenges in a particular place is often neutral, and that neutrality tends to obscure the more positive aspects of issues or challenges, such as the work of nonprofit organizations to alleviate those challenges (Craig, 2003; Kensicki, 2004). I also know that Armstrong and Collins found that the level of interest people have in a news story tends to determine whether or not those people find the news source credible, and if the media source's credibility is high, people are more apt to believe what it reports (Armstrong & Collins, 2009).

Appalachian people have high interest in stories about their place when they see those stories in national media outlets, such as The New York Times. But, because these stories often rely on stereotypical or biased anecdotes – or because they remain neutral in their coverage – Appalachians are not recognizing the complexities of the issues being discussed, such as poverty or drug addiction. I found this to be true when talking with participants in focus group interviews. Time and time again, they would talk with me about drug addiction, for example, as if it was a social problem and not a systemic one. Or they would demonize those living in poverty and accepting public assistance because the media has so often told them that people who accept public assistance are lazy and unwilling to work for a living. The media has also consistently refrained from delving into the complexities of poverty in Appalachia, giving the impression to those living outside the region that everyone living inside the region are either poverty-stricken or “welfare queens,” two characterizations that the participants were quick to say did not describe them.

In thinking about my theoretical framework and the literature I chose to inform my study, it's clear that media has an undeniable impact on the ways in which Appalachian people understand and perceive their culture. It's also true that this impact goes beyond people living in Appalachia, and that it has impacts on how others see and understand the region and its people, as well. However, when returning to my original research question of whether or not reality television portrayals of Appalachia would have an impact on the ways in which Appalachian people understand and perceive their own culture, the answer is a bit more complex, a finding that I will discuss in the next section.

Final Thoughts

When I started this study, I wanted to determine whether or not Appalachian peoples' perception or understanding of their culture changed when confronted with so many exaggerated portrayals of their culture in reality television shows. I'm not sure that I'm clearly able to answer that question at the end of this study. I went into it thinking there would be some sort of negative shift – a preconceived notion that people would suddenly understand their culture differently, and in a negative way, because of how outside media chose to portray it. That assumption quickly disappeared as I talked with Appalachian people in focus group interviews. It wasn't that participants felt more negatively about their culture after seeing the reality television portrayals of it. In fact, in most cases, participants were actually emboldened in their pride for Appalachia and eastern Kentucky, and of being from the region, and for their culture. They were defensive and protective of that culture, while standing firmly against the tide of Appalachian reality television shows that sought to bastardize it for monetary gain.

While news and entertainment media has had impacts on Appalachian people, and the culture from which they come – impacts that I believe run very deep in the collective psyche of the people – Appalachian reality television shows have not, in my estimation, changed Appalachian people’s perception and understanding of their culture in a negative way, as I once had wondered and assumed. It’s not that the reality television portrayals didn’t have any impact at all on how the participants’ felt, or on their opinions about media representation. It’s just that those feelings and opinions are not new for the participants, or for any Appalachian person, for that matter.

So much of who we are as Appalachian people, and so much of how we define our culture and what our culture is, is inextricably linked to news and entertainment media representations of our place. When thinking about the influence that media has on us as Appalachian people, the way we see ourselves and our culture, and how we relate to that culture, it’s difficult to determine where our collective memory and experiences separate themselves from the media portrayals of our place.

Stuart Hall would say we can’t have one without the other. Meaning, part of what makes Appalachian culture distinct and what we know it to be – either as insiders or outsiders of the region – are the news and entertainment media portrayals and depictions of it. As Cultural Studies and Framing Theory posit about how culture is constructed, the make-up of Appalachian culture has definitely been defined in some part – some significant part – by how the media talks about it and portrays it to the outside world. Ron Eller felt similarly about it, when he said in *Back Talk from Appalachia* that “how we see ourselves, as individuals and as a region, is shaped in part by how others see us” (p. xi).

So much of what was discussed in my focus group interviews with Appalachian people were issues and aspects of life in eastern Kentucky that have been talked about almost on a constant loop in the media for years, and sometimes, decades. I found that the issue I was trying to investigate – whether or not Appalachian people’s perception of their culture changes in light of reality television portrayals – wasn’t so much that the reality television portrayals ushered in new feelings or opinions within the participants about misrepresentation and their culture. What was more true, was that the reality television portrayals reopened old and deep wounds cut into our collective Appalachian psyche many years ago when we first saw the images that had been stripped away from us being reflected back to us in black and white ostentatious melodrama on the evening news – a gussied up local color story masquerading as universal fact. Wounds that were inflicted upon us through the systemic bastardization and misrepresentation of our place and our ancestors that began nearly 300 years ago.

Those wounds exist within us as Appalachian people, whether we recognize it or not. They are woven into our culture and who we are as a people just as tightly as our sense of fairness and justice. And they are never allowed to fully heal because the media continues to misrepresent the region and its people in waves of “rediscovery” that have happened in cycles since the very first settlers crossed the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky in the 1700s. So, when reality television came to the region to take more stereotypical images away from us, it did not create new wounds that made us rethink who we are; it simply tore open those old ones from which we Appalachians are always left to bleed and wait for a new scar to appear, like a perpetually unfinished and vulgar tattoo chronicling our fight against the media’s institutionalized distortion of our culture.

In that very violent way, we are inherently tied to media representations about our place. But as I analyzed the focus group discussions, I was constantly left wondering about something else: Are the participants only focused on certain issues within the region because of the media's almost incessant coverage of Appalachia's supposed, or actual, challenges for decades? Over and over, in the focus group interviews, participants were bringing up issues such as the coal industry's decline, drug abuse and high rates of dependence on public assistance programs in the region. Each time these issues were mentioned and discussed (sometimes at length), I could not help thinking that one of the reasons participants were focusing so much on these issues was because they had been conditioned by the media to think the region was helpless without coal, overrun with drug addicts and filled with lazy people who leached off of government public assistance instead of finding work for themselves. The media had been constantly telling them that those issues were persistent, and seemingly insurmountable problems, for years. I end this study feeling as if those media portrayals, reports and coverage have led to Appalachian people feeling – either blatantly or subconsciously – as if our place truly is unworthy of anything more than what we've been given and what we've been told that we are.

Images – especially stereotypical ones – of a place and a people are powerful things that are often controlled by powerful people and entities because “stereotyping cultures is one tactic dominant cultures use to implement control” (Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008). Those images shape understanding of places and people, and over time, if they are shown, perpetuated and consumed enough times, by enough people, they begin to have an impact on the subjects' perception of themselves. According to Cooke-Jackson

and Hansen (2008), "...when media producers erroneously attribute characteristics of a minority of a group to the whole subculture, stereotyping becomes problematic. Stereotypes usually fail to reflect the richness of the subculture and ignore the realities from which the images come. This action can result in social injustices for individuals who make up that subculture. . . . When groups internalize negative stereotypes, it becomes difficult for members of the subculture to value themselves or the unique aspects of their culture" (p. 186).

It is my belief that over more than 50 years of modern day inaccurate and misleading media coverage, and over more than 300 years of Appalachian stereotype extraction and commodification, Appalachians have internalized the misperceptions and stereotypes about their place in a way that makes them feel inferior. Central Appalachia has been made fun of and derided as less than for generations in popular culture, in the news media, by comedians, by reality TV shows, by national politicians, and the list goes on. There is a constant tide of negative images coming out of our place about how our people are inferior that are procured, produced and propagated by outside forces. We have just now started, in the last 30-40 years, to reclaim our heritage, our culture, our place and our power, and tell our own stories in a way that is true and real to us, and that beats back against that ceaseless tide of negative imagery that flows like sludge from a slurry pond onto and over ever good thing that we try to create.

Appalachians have pushed back against those images for decades. They have blasted the media makers who captured – or threatened to capture – inaccurate or misleading images with counter-campaigns designed to beat back against the inaccurate portrayals (e.g. *Strangers and Kin*, the Campaign to Stop the Real Beverly Hillbillies, the

Richwood High School PBS Student Reporting Lab). They have reclaimed and retold their own stories through organizations such as Appalshop, the Center for Rural Strategies and The Highlander Research and Education Center. They have waged tiny battles with distant relatives living in Northern or Western cities and towns. They have written reams of op-eds and letters to the editor in response to major national newspaper coverage. They have even killed to protect the images of their neighbors that they thought would be taken and later used against them (Barret, 2000). And so, as much as our story and our culture is defined by the media portrayals about it, and how those portrayals have had an impact on our collective self-worth, it has also been defined by the fight against inaccurate, misleading and stereotypical portrayals. This fight is one that must be maintained and sustained, because as Ron Eller points out, “confronting stereotypes, understanding the motivations and ideologies that generate them, is an important initial step toward self-determination – toward empowerment and the ability to shape an alternative future” (p. xi).

I found this agency to describe our own culture in the focus group interviews I conducted. Participants told me over and over again how the reality television portrayals of their place and people made them angry, and how they wanted the world to know that not everyone living in eastern Kentucky traps wild animals for a living, makes moonshine, or parties every weekend with a group of wild and crazy friends.

When I asked the participants questions about media representation, it was as if no one had ever given them space before to talk about this issue, and they had a lot to say. They wanted people who don't live in eastern Kentucky to know and understand that there are colleges in the region, and hospitals, and honorable people who work hard for a

living. They stood in defiance of the inaccurate or false images extracted from their place because they knew those images taint the minds of those living outside the region, and give them a false idea of who we are as people and how we live our lives in a place that we love more than any other place, and they feel the sting of injustice and discrimination in that. They wanted outside people to come to the region for a visit, so they can feed them local delicacies that are made from food grown in their gardens and explain to them that “pop” is just another word for “soda.”

The focus group participants knew that people in every place in America have a different way of living, and that their own way of living is different from many of those other ways of living, and they know that’s OK; they just don’t want to be judged based on the actions of a few who chose to give their lives to reality TV, and who don’t represent the majority of Appalachian people. As an Appalachian person who has thought critically about my region’s relationship with media for many years, I’ll admit that that’s all I’ve ever wanted, too.

I have learned through this process that there is Appalachian culture without the inaccurate, false, or bombastic portrayals of it, but at this point in our history as a distinct ethnic group of Americans, the definition of our culture has been shaped in so many ways by who has told our story, how that story has been told, and how we relate to those many different variations of our story. And we simply cannot remove ourselves from that. We can only work in tandem with it to tell a more complex and broad-based story of who we know ourselves to be, while continuing to hold onto what we know to be true about who we are – as individuals, as communities, as families, and as a people.

Policy Position

The notion of reclaiming our complex and broad-based story is essential to the future of Appalachia. Central Appalachia is now dealing with perhaps its most significant economic shift in more than 150 years as the coal industry continues its precipitous decline. It is no coincidence that the start of the Appalachian reality television show craze coincided with the start of the decline of the coal industry. As I have made clear in this study, the story of our place has been constructed by people in positions of economic or political power for 300 years, and the stereotypes that make up that constructed story have been recycled in times of great economic strife, upheaval, or transition.

As evidenced by the rise of rural and Appalachian reality television shows, and by the wave of stereotype-laced news stories from national outlets that were published in 2014, we have just lived through another recycling of our story, and we are left no better off than before this cycle. With each retelling of our story, there comes a period of outpourings of concern about what will be done to “fix” or “help” Appalachia. Some of that concern is genuine and sparks real and lasting change; most of it does not, and in fact, does more harm than good. Through my research, and my work as a community developer, and my lived experiences, I am left wondering about the missing pieces in these cycles of retelling the Appalachian story.

I find that the truth of the matter is we as Appalachian people have never been allowed to tell our own stories in a way that puts our complexities and diversity and real reality on full display. Not on a national scale, and not amongst ourselves. While stories about who we really are as people and about all the good economic transition in the wake of the coal industry’s collapse do exist, there just aren’t enough to combat 300 years of

painful and erroneous retellings of false narratives about a rich culture and a complex place.

Therefore, we need to reclaim our stories and reconstruct the narrative of our place and who we are as a distinct culture and a diverse people. We need to collect the stories of Appalachia that we know to be true and real – stories such as those the participants in this study shared with me. Stories about hog killings and fried lettuce; about the pros and cons of living close to family; about the ravages of drug addiction, but also how we're working together to solve that problem; about wage inequality and job opportunities; about how much we want to stay in our place, and about what it would take to make that a reality. We need to tell the stories of our past and our present, and we need to be sure we are not allowing them to be co-opted by those in power who would use those stories to continue our economic oppression.

Now, perhaps more than ever before, we must begin to tell a different narrative about Appalachia. Not just because we're tired of other people getting it wrong so often; but, because we cannot hope to transition the region's economy into something that is equitable and just for the most people if we are living under the shroud of other people's idea of who we are. We know who we are; we just need everyone else to know that, too. And perhaps the most critical aspect of retelling our narrative is that we must believe in who we are, and believe that who we are is worthy and deserving of so much more than what we've been given and what we've been told we are for 300 years.

The stories we tell and adopt about who we are are vitally important. They help us construct a narrative that becomes the foundation of our culture and way of life – as individuals, but also as communities and ethnic groups. Stories are powerful cultural and

economic tools, and it matters who tells them and in what way they are told. It is essential in this critical moment of economic transition Appalachia faces that we make sure we are reclaiming our own story and reshaping our own narrative. By doing so, we can force media to tell our stories differently, in a more complex and diverse way. We must also hold media accountable if they continue to recycle stereotypical stories about our place.

If we don't reclaim and retell our own stories, we leave this important aspect of economic transition up to other people, and there is 300 years of evidence proving that other people do not have good track record of telling Appalachia's story in a respectful, complex and meaningful way. We simply cannot afford to allow others to keep telling us who we are. We have the power to describe that for ourselves, and we must exercise it, for the sake of our region's future.

Appendix A

Focus Group Guide

Icebreaker:

[Topical to time when focus group is conducted.]

Questions about Culture:

- Tell me what it's like to live where you live. Describe it to me.
 - o What kind of food do you eat?
 - o What does it look/smell/feel like?
 - o Do you live close to family?
- Do you like living where you live? Why?
- What are some family traditions you have that are very important to you?
- Have you ever lived anywhere else? Why did you come back home?
- Where do you see yourself living in ten years? Why?
- Do you feel like living here makes you unique? Why or why not? In what ways?
- Do you feel like the place where you live is a unique place? Why or why not? In what ways?

SHOW YOUTUBE CLIPS OF SELECTED REALITY TV SHOWS

Questions about the reality TV shows:

- Have any of you seen any of these TV shows before?
 - o Why did you want to watch the show(s)?
- If you haven't seen any of them, why not?
 - o If you chose not to watch them on purpose, why?
 - o Would you watch them after seeing the trailer?

- What do you think about these show? Why?
- Do you feel like you can relate to them? In what ways?
 - o If you don't feel like you can relate, why not?
- What do you think about the way these shows represent eastern Kentucky?
 - o Do they get anything right? Is there any bit of truth to it?
- How do these shows make you feel about the place where you live?
- If you could create a reality TV show about the place where you live, what would it be about?

Appendix B

Age: _____ Gender: _____ County where you live: _____

How long have you lived in that county?

If you're not originally from eastern Kentucky, where are you from?

How long have you lived in eastern Kentucky?

Are you the first person in your family to go to college?

If you have a job right now, where do you work?

Do you consider yourself to be "Appalachian?" What does being Appalachian mean?

Have you ever watched any of the following reality TV shows: "Call of the Wildman"; "Hatfields and McCoys: White Lightning"; "Buckwild?" – How often have you watched them?

Would you consider yourself a fan of any of those shows? Why?

Appendix C

Focus Group 1, Week 1: Georgia

Focus Group 2, Week 1: Rockwell

Focus Group 3, Week 1: Calibri

Focus Group 4, Week 2: Arial Black

Focus Group 5, Week 2: Bangla Sangam

Focus Group 6, Week 2: Consolas

Focus Group 7, Week 2: Futura

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